

GRADUATE PERSPECTIVES OF COLLEGE READINESS:  
THE IMPACT OF THE EARLY COLLEGE HIGH SCHOOL

by

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## CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Inequity and disenfranchisement continue to persist within our public education system. The educational journey for students of color, low socioeconomic status, and first-generation college students are riddled with barriers and obstacles not faced by others (Dowd & Bensimon, 2015). As a result, students of color and low socioeconomic status students are underrepresented in advanced course work and institutions of higher education. College completion rates of students of color are below the national average and below that of their White classmates. The National Center for Education Statistics (2017) assessed the graduation rates of students who attended bachelor's granting postsecondary institutions for the first time. The National Center for Education Statistics study found students of color obtain college degrees at a slower pace and at a lower percentage than the national average. Of the students who attended, only 40.6% complete their degree within 4 years. Disaggregation of the data by race reveals gaps in college completion rates with 45% of White students, 21.4% of Black students, and 31.7% of Hispanic students graduating.

Further, degree attainment impacts earning potential and has an effect on economic outcomes of the community. Prosperity and economic growth directly relate to postsecondary education (Carnevale et al., 2010). According to Tierney and Duncheon (2015), studies have indicated low income students are six times less likely to earn a bachelor's degree by age 25 than their affluent peers. The cycle of limited educational opportunities and degree attainment in a community perpetuate a cycle of poverty and educational disparities (Carnevale et al., 2010).

In 2002, the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation joined with other philanthropic entities in support of our nation's public high schools (Shear et al., 2008). A collective goal of the philanthropists was the redesign of high schools and the creation of new innovative

high schools. The stated purpose was to empower schools to provide a rigorous academic program that reaches every student, including those of poverty and minority descent, while providing a solid foundation for college readiness and career success. Their influence and infusion of resources provided educators an incentive to rethink the design of high schools. Those who participated in the new initiatives worked to redesign high schools into small learning communities, expand school choice, and open new schools. The belief that small size would promote effective schools and personalize the student experience set class size per grade level to be less than or equal to 100 students (Shear et al., 2008).

The early college high school (ECHS) was designed specifically to disrupt the inequities that have infiltrated our high schools. As part of the design, ECHS focuses on building and establishing relationships between the students and the educators by providing students with rigorous curriculum and motivating students to attend college. A key focus of the ECHS is to prepare students of color to succeed in college by expanding access to more rigorous courses while providing structured academic support systems (Lee & Smith, 1999; Quartz et al., 2017).

Research on the ECHS model has shown positive influences on both college eligibility and college readiness (Edmunds et al., 2017) The McCauley (2013) revealed students who attended ECHSs performed better academically than their peers and were more apt to persist in higher education. Other researchers have found additional benefits for students attending ECHS, including, but are not limited to, a positive impact on the college enrollment for both 2-year and 4-year colleges, greater likelihood to enroll in a 4-year college, an increase in degree attainment and high school graduation and/or completion, and a reduction in the need for college remedial courses (Chapa et al., 2014; Gates Rice, 2011;

Hertzog & Chung, 2015; Texas Education Agency, 2019). The ECHS model has the potential to improve graduation rates and improve student preparation for highly skilled careers (Glick, 2006). What encourages educators and legislators is the report that the ECHS model has the potential to impact specific subgroups who had statistically struggled to attend and succeed in college (Cowan & Goldhaber, 2015), such as students with economically disadvantaged backgrounds, English language learners, and students of minority descent (Barnett et al., 2015).

### **Statement of the Problem**

Early college high school provides students the opportunity and resources to participate in college courses much sooner than their traditional peers. As early as age 14, when students enter the ninth grade, students begin to take college courses. It is during these early years of adolescence that students experience rapid growth and changes physiologically, cognitively, and psychologically. In addition, a student's social interaction grows in complexity as they expand their experiences, take on new roles, and develop multifaceted interpersonal relationships (Benner, 2011). The complex development of students during this critical time period draws attention to the question of their college readiness.

Erickson (1968) described adolescence as a period of identity crisis and early adulthood or late adolescences as a period when individuals make choices based on their values, goals, and beliefs as a result of exploring their options and through personal experiences. The ECHS model places its students in a developmental and academic paradox between that of a high school student and a college student. Developmentally students are high school students but are asked to complete rigorous course work, independently keep up with grades and assignments, and communicate with teachers not directly connected to the

high school. Students are encouraged to explore careers and 4-year college options, yet some students are asked to consider a specific bachelor's degree plan as early as the 11th grade.

ECHS students are eligible to attend college, yet they are not necessarily *college ready*.

Conley (2008) defines college readiness as a student's individual level of preparation to enroll and succeed in a college course without the need for remediation. The measure of success is contingent on completion of general education courses with sufficient proficiency that allows the student to continue in the course sequence or subsequent level within a particular subject (Adzima, 2017; Conley, 2008; Conley & Fe, 2013). Measuring student proficiency through cognitive assessments is the primary indicator of college readiness used by policy leaders, school leaders, college board, ACT, and institutions of higher learning. The above definition provides a narrow view of college readiness and does not consider the complexities of developing college readiness and the vast array of contributing factors. Other scholars have begun expanding the definition of college readiness to include non-cognitive attributes such as college knowledge and contextual skills (Conley, 2008), academic tenacity (Dweck et al., 2014), self-regulation strategies, and time management (Hofer, 2007). Thus, a more expansive understanding of college readiness is defined as a combination of skills, knowledge, and habits of thought necessary to succeed in college-level courses (Chlup et al., 2018).

Castro (2013) argued that policy approaches to college readiness fail to consider the larger racial and socioeconomic contexts and structural inequities and in response suggested re-norming broader assumptions of what it means to be college ready in the United States in order to be both race conscious and equity minded. Traditional definitions of college readiness often support a deficit model that places the burden on students and families to fill

in the gaps. The students and families are considered culpable for low academic performance due to their lack of knowledge and skills and the perception that parents and students do not value or support education (Yosso, 2005).

### **Research Purpose and Research Questions**

The purpose of this research was to explore the gap between college eligibility and college readiness from the perspectives of recent ECHS graduates to provide insight and understanding of how ECHS and institutes of higher learning support or fail to support student success. Findings from the study could provide educational leaders and policy makers insight and understanding of challenges, needs, misconceptions, and experiences of traditionally marginalized students in order to inform their decisions as they work towards the educational success of all students. The research questions that guided this study were,

1. What are students' self-perceptions of their own college readiness?
2. How do students who participated in an early college high school define college readiness?
3. How did early college high school experiences impact, promote, or hinder student preparation for college?

### **Significance of the Problem**

There is a change in the demographic landscape in the United States, which is also reflected within U.S. schools. In 2017, the National Center for Education Statistics reported school children ages 5-17 who were White declined from 62% to 52% from 2000-2016. During that same time period, the Hispanics student population grew from 16% to 25%. Students living in poverty, in 2014, was highest amongst Black children (37%) followed by Hispanic children at 31%. Since 2003, the number of economically disadvantaged in Texas high schools increased by 19%, rising from 32% in 2003 to 51% in 2016. Despite the rise in



economically disadvantaged students, Texas has witnessed a 5% increase in high school graduation rates from 2003 to 2016. Despite these gains, in September 2017, Watkins with the *Texas Tribune* reported 60% of all students who enroll in community college were not considered college ready. In addition, according to Watkins, only 15% who take a remedial math course will move on to pass a single college-level math class.

The U.S. Department of Education (n.d.) reported that one third of the students entering college will require some form of remedial education when they begin college. In an Inside Higher Ed article, Tate (2017) reported that of the students who entered college in 2010, 58% completed a degree or certificate within 6 years. Disaggregation of the data revealed a gap in completion rates by race with 62% White, 63% Asian, 38% Black, and 45% Hispanic students completing their degree within 6 years.

Hispanic dropout rates in 2015 were higher than those of Black and White dropouts (NCES, 2017). In 2015, high school completion increased for White, Hispanic, and Black students, yet the completion rate for Hispanic students continued to lag behind both the White and Black completion rates (NCES, 2017). With changing demographics anticipated in Texas, educational leaders and policies makers must lead the way in providing innovative ways to improve the educational pipeline for all our students.

Significant differences in wages exist between individuals with an associate degree compared to those who had only some college credit (Gittell et al., 2017). Those with an associate degree have higher wages than those with some college, and wages reflect relative productivity. A greater number of associate degrees would boost labor quality and productivity. Individuals with higher levels of education are apt to adopt, implement, and create new technologies needed within the workforce (Panda, 2017).

The degree attainment rates in Texas mirror the nation's inability to keep up with the anticipated and projected workforce needs (U.S. Department of Education, n.d.). According to Kelly and Whitfield (2017), Texas significantly relies on recruiting college degree holders from other states to support its growing job market. The influence of education on the workforce, economic growth, and personal income are increasing (Mollick & Mora, 2012). Education is a strong predictor of the labor market, employment, and employee productivity, and in turn, a strong indicator of economic growth (Bhorat et al., 2014; Panda, 2017).

The foundation of the ECHS model is grounded in two major initiatives: (a) ensuring that the education received in high school results in students being college ready and (b) ensuring that postsecondary education results in a degree completion or certificate with genuine economic value (Shear et al., 2008). In 2015, the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board launched an initiative called 60X30 that set goals of improving outcomes regarding college and career readiness. The primary goal was to get 60% of Texans age 25-34 to obtain a degree or certificate by 2030. The focus of this specific effort was to ensure Texas public schools are providing an educated and skilled workforce that has the capacity to support economic growth and vitality within the state and local communities (You & Potter, 2014). The Texas Education Agency (2020) has adopted and expanded the ECHS model to directly impact college and career readiness for student who have traditionally not attended college.

The access to a rigorous curriculum and the opportunity to attend college through the ECHS model has proven to be an improvement to the traditional high school setting. Students who attended an ECHS are more likely to graduate high school and are significantly more likely to enroll in a two-year and 4-year college than non-ECHS students (Berger et al.,

2014). Twenty-two percent of the students who attended an ECHS obtained a college degree, mostly associate degrees, compared to the 2% of non-ECHS students. The ECHS model has provided leverage to the students who have had the opportunity to participate.

The influence of education on economic growth underscores the importance of increasing college enrollment and college readiness for students, particularly the rising minority student population. Much debate has surfaced over the past several decades as to how best to prepare and measure a student's readiness for college (Adzima, 2017). More must be done than solely preparing students to be successful on academic assessments that measure college readiness. Schools have begun to expand how they prepare and assess students for college readiness by including non-cognitive attributes such as college knowledge and contextual skills, academic tenacity, self-regulation strategies, time management, and skills and habits of thought necessary to be successful in college-level courses (Chlup, 2018; Conley, 2008; Dweck et al., 2014; Hofer, 2007). The expansion of college readiness fails to take into consideration the history, knowledge, and culture of communities alienated, ignored, and/or marginalized by mainstream society (Yosso, 2005). Students from these communities have a unique set of experiences, skills, and strategies that are valuable and integral to their educational journey.

Students of color enrolled in ECHS have demonstrated success in situations that had once been inaccessible (Cowan & Goldhaber, 2015; Barnett et al., 2015). Students without access to an ECHS remain subjected to the status quo system of public education that has traditionally marginalized and denied access. As the ECHS model continues to expand and as demographics of Texas continue to change (You & Potter, 2014), policy makers and educators must have a full understanding of the attributes of college readiness and the

complexities of the influences associated with what students must do to be ready to succeed in college. Considering the design of the ECHS and the reported success of its students (minority, low-socioeconomic status, and those who have not traditionally attended college), the conceptional and theoretical definition of college readiness is prime for revision, exploration, and reevaluation.

### **Organization of the Study**

Chapter One provided background information and a rationale for the current study, the statement of the problem, significance of the problem, and the research questions. The literature review in Chapter Two is an investigation of college readiness in the context of ECHSs and lays the groundwork for a new conceptional framework. Chapter Three includes the methods used to select participants for the study, how the data were collected and analyzed, data reliability, and researcher positionality. Chapter Four provides the perspectives of the participants' ECHS experience, findings from the cross-case analysis, and the emergent themes. Chapter Five focuses on the results of the data, the limitations of the study, and implication and recommendation for practice and future research.

## CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

### Context

For decades, the governing bodies at the local, state, and national levels have worked to define and continue to refine their definition of college readiness with the aim to increase degree attainment and completion. Despite these efforts the U.S. Department of Education (n.d.) reports that one third of the students entering college will require some form of remedial education when they begin college. In an Inside Higher Ed article, Tate (2017) reported that of the students who entered college in 2010, 58% complete a degree or certificate within 6 years. Disaggregation of the data revealed a gap in completion rates by race with 62% White, 63% Asian, 38% Black, and 45% Hispanic students completing their degree within 6 years.

According to You and Potter (2014), the Hispanic population is projected to drive the population growth in Texas over the next two decades. Shifting demographics will shape the future of Texas' work force and influence efforts to improve educational outcomes. If degree attainment indicators do not improve amongst the Hispanic population, Texas will begin to see an overall decline in educational attainment at all levels. The educational capacity of Texas' workforce will decline, thus limiting the types of jobs and companies Texas can attract. Texas could experience a decline in social and economic growth because of an increase in unemployment and poverty rates.

Texas' public-school system adopted the Advancement Placement program in the 1950s to provide high school students a rigorous academic experience with the intent to further prepare them for college (Texas Education Agency, 2020a). If a student in an advanced placement course scored high enough on a final exam, they would be awarded college credit. The integration of college and high school has continued with the adoption of

dual credit courses (Texas Education Agency, 2020b). With a passing grade, a student enrolled in a dual credit course will receive credit in both high school and college without a required end of course exam. Advanced placement courses were designed to improve college readiness but have a history of marginalizing students of color (Solórzano & Ornelas, 2004). Public and private schools use the SAT and ACT scores as indicators of college readiness yet these traditional measures of merit are closely aligned with income rather than a student's academic ability (Serna & Woulfe, 2017). With the minority population projected to increase, it is vital that educational institutions and legislator understand college readiness from the perception of minority students.

This literature review begins with a focus on students' self-perceptions, creations of the ECHS model, and Texas' expansion of the ECHS model to improve college readiness amongst minority students. Next are definitions and methods used to measure college readiness. Finally, the chapter concludes with a discussion of three conceptual frameworks centered on understanding college readiness within the context of an ECHS.

### **Students' Self Perceptions**

A student's mindset has an influence on their college and career readiness. Nagaoka et al. (2013) described academic mindset as a set of attitudes, beliefs, and one's perceptions of their approach to learning towards an academic goal. In their review of college readiness literature, Nagaoka et al. found a student academic mindset strongly influences the engagement of students in academic behaviors, perseverance at difficult tasks, and their ability to apply various learning strategies.

A key contributor to mindset, particularly the concept of malleable intelligence, is Dweck (2000, 2006). She researched the effect of a fixed mindset and growth mindset on students' academic achievement. She found students who value effort are said to have a

growth mindset and that a growth mindset could be cultivated in students through the learning process. Through cultivating a growth mindset, one can increase a student's efforts and lead students towards learning new things and getting smarter (Dweck, 2000, 2006).

Self-efficacy is an individual's self-perceptions, judgement, or convictions that they can organize and execute a course of action required to deal with prospective situations containing many ambiguous, unpredictable, and often stressful elements, including academic tasks at designated levels (Bandura & Schunk, 1981). One's mindset or perception of their own efficacy can affect their choice in activities, how much effort they expend, and how long they will persist in the face of difficulties. Students with a high degree of self-efficacy are more likely to persevere at a given task and are more likely to get back on track when faced with adversity (Bresó et al., 2011; Pajares, 1996).

In 2014, the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation published a manuscript by Dweck et al. about academic tenacity. They defined academic tenacity as non-cognitive factors that promote long term learning and achievement, some of which were previously discussed. The non-cognitive factors were placed into three broad categories: mindset and goals, social belonging, and self-regulation and self-control (Dweck et al., 2014). As part of their collective work, they identified key characteristics of a tenacious student. A tenacious student is not derailed by intellectual or social difficulties and seeks out challenges. They also remain engaged over time long periods of time to complete tasks and can postpone immediate pleasures in pursuits of a long-term goal. Tenacious students have a sense of belonging to the school community and are able to connect academically and socially. Additionally, these students see school as relevant to their future. Students with academic tenacity exhibited behaviors and characteristics consistent with college and career readiness skills.

Social belonging amongst adolescents is a critical component of their social structure particularly with their peers. In addition, research has shown that quality relationships with teachers influence student academic success (Engels et al., 2016; Roorda et al., 2011). When students perceive and feel they are part of an academic community, they are likely to believe they have the ability within to improve and succeed. When a student believes they are connected to the school community, the student adopts the belief that effort will increase their ability and competence, believes that success is possible and within their control (Nagaoka et al., 2014). Additionally, students who have a sense of belonging will see work as interesting or relevant to their lives and will be much more likely to persist at academic tasks despite setbacks. Students who are connected to the school community will exhibit the kinds of academic behaviors that lead to school success (Dweck et al., 2014; Nagaoka et al., 2013).

Ethnic, racial, and cultural backgrounds are also an influence on college and career readiness. For some, “pursuing their college aspiration was a means of exerting agency against racial/ethnic or class stereotypes” (Welton et al., 2014, p. 215). Racial and social class struggles were used as a motivator to secure increased opportunities (Welton et al., 2014). The historical treatment of minority students by educational institutions can create tension for students as they navigate maintaining their identity within their culture while adopting, what other consider White culture, aspects of an academic culture (Ladson-Billings, 1995).

### **Creation of the Early College High School Model**

In 2002, the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, along with other philanthropic entities, came together in support of the United States’ public high schools (Shear et al., 2008). The philanthropists’ collective goal was to redesign high schools and create new



innovative high schools. The purpose was to empower schools to provide a rigorous academic program that reached every student, including those of poverty and minority descent, while providing a solid foundation for college readiness and career success (Shear et al. 2008). Their influence and infusion of resources provided educators an incentive to rethink the design of high schools. Those who participated in the new initiatives worked to redesign high schools into small learning communities, expand school choice, and open new schools. Class size per grade level were encouraged to be less than or equal to 100 students with the belief that small size would promote effective schools and personalize the student experience (Shear et al. 2008).

The Early College High School (ECHS) was designed specifically to disrupt the inequities that have infiltrated U.S. high schools. A key focus of the ECHS is to prepare students of color to be successful in college by expanding access to more rigorous courses while providing structured academic support systems (Lee & Smith, 1999; Quartz et al., 2017). The foundation of the ECHS is a partnership developed between the state, local, and Institute of Higher Education (IHE) around five core principles (Barnett et al., 2013).

1. Commitment to serve students underrepresented in higher education.
2. Create and sustain reciprocal partnership between local, state, and IHE.
3. ECHS and IHE, in partnership, develop an academic program that allows students to earn up to two years of transferable college credit.
4. ECHS develop a comprehensive support system to develop academic and social skills necessary for college completion.
5. ECHS, IHE, and community create conditions to advocate and support policies that advance the ECHS movement.

The ECHS model has shown evidence of positively impacting both college eligibility and college readiness. The McCauley (2013) revealed students who attended an ECHS performed better academically than their peers and were more apt to persist in higher education. Other benefits for students attending ECHSs include, but are not limited to, positive impacts on college enrollment for both 2-year and 4-year colleges, students are more likely to enroll in a 4-year college, an increase in degree attainment, an increase in high school graduation and/or completion, and a reduction of the need for college remedial courses (Chapa, 2014; Gates Rice, 2011; Hertzog & Chung, 2015).

The ECHS model has the potential to improve graduation rates and improve student preparation for entry into highly-skilled careers (Glick, 2006). What encourages educators and legislators is the report that the ECHS model has the potential to impact specific student populations that have statistically struggled to attend and succeed in college (Cowan & Goldhaber, 2015), including students from economically disadvantaged backgrounds, English language learners, and racially diverse students (Barnett et al., 2015).

### **Texas Adaptations of the ECHS Model**

For the purpose of this study, an ECHS is a school that provides students, who have traditionally not attended college, an opportunity to earn a high school diploma and 60 college credit hours. Since the inception of the ECHS initiative, several models and adaptations have been developed. In partnership with IHEs, some ECHSs have been built on the college campus allowing students direct access to college faculty, student experiences, and college resources such as writing centers, math labs, advisors, and career services just to name a few (Barnett et al., 2013). Some schools have been created as stand-alone campuses and are neither on a high school nor college campus. Students who attend these schools have access to college course work from visiting instructors, embedded instructors, or a bus takes them to

the IHE for course work. Other ECHS are located on a traditional high school campus and utilize a school within a school model. Students who attend these ECHS have access to traditional high school programs (i.e., sports, band, drama) and are often bussed to the IHE to attend college courses.

Texas has adopted four early college models as a part of the larger college and career readiness school model (CCRSM; Educate Texas at Communities Foundation of Texas, 2019; Texas Education Agency, 2020d; Texas Education Agency and Educate Texas at Communities Foundation of Texas, 2019). Each model has a specific focus of study with a common expectation that these schools focus on students that are typically underserved. The first model—Texas Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (T-STEM) school—focuses its effort on increasing the number of students interested in pursuing careers and post-secondary with a STEM focus. Additionally, the school is charged with working with post-secondary institutions to align curriculum to meet the needs of local, regional, and the State’s future economic development projections.

The second model, a traditional ECHS, focuses on blending high school and college coursework (Texas Education Agency, 2020d). While attending this model students can earn a high school diploma and earn up to 2 years of college credit. A primary focus of this model is to provide students, a no cost, college experience with embedded support to promote college success.

The Pathways to Technology Early College High School and the Industry Cluster Innovative Academy both focus on providing students a curriculum that prepares students for current and future workforce needs (Texas Education Agency, 2020d). These two models target the needs of industries by providing opportunities for students to acquire industry

credentials, degrees, and certifications. The major difference between these two models is the Industry Cluster Innovative Academy partnership with Tri-Agency Workforce initiative. The Tri-Agency Workforce initiative, passed under Texas House Bill 3, required commissioners from the Texas Education Agency, Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board, and the Texas Workforce Commission to develop strategic plans to address the current and future workforce needs across the state of Texas (Office of the Texas Governor, 2020). The Industry Cluster Innovative Academy model focuses on preparing student to enter key industries, identified by the governor, that are paramount to the expansion of businesses within the state of Texas. These industries include biotechnology and life science, petroleum refining and chemical products, and energy to name a few.

The four models are built around the five core principles utilized as a foundation of the development of ECHS (Texas Education Agency, 2020d). The Texas Education Agency has developed a set of blueprints for each of the ECHS models. Within these blueprints are a set of outcome-based measures (OBMs) that guide the development of these schools within Texas. The OBMs complement the five core principles of ECHS design but vary slightly with each Texas model. A key OBM within the blueprint is the expectation of the recruitment of students who have not traditionally attended college. Other OBMs include leadership sustainability, partnership agreements with ECHS and IHE, curriculum and student supports, college and career readiness indicators, and school design. The creation of these models has provided access for minority students to college resources, college knowledge, and connecting students to the next phase of life (Song & Zeiser, 2019; Texas Education Agency, 2020d; Texas Education Agency and Educate Texas at Communities Foundation of Texas, 2020).

Early College High School students are provided the opportunity and resources to participate in college courses much sooner than their traditional peers. As early as age 14, when students enter the ninth grade, students begin to take college courses (Benner, 2011). During the early years of adolescence, students experience rapid growth and changes physiologically, cognitively, and psychologically. In addition, a student's social interaction grows in complexity as they expand their experiences, take on new roles, and develop multifaceted interpersonal relationships (Benner, 2011). The complex development of students during this critical time period draws attention to the question of their college readiness. The ECHS model places its students in a developmental and academic paradox between that of a high school student and a college student. Developmentally, students are high school students but are asked to complete rigorous college course work. ECHS students are eligible to attend college yet are not necessarily college ready.

### **Current Definitions of College Readiness**

Since 1899, the College Board (n.d.), a non-profit organization, has been influential in connecting K-12 schools and institutions of higher education to answer the question of college readiness. As the administrator of the SAT and Advance Placement (AP) program, the College Board has an instrumental role defining and measuring college readiness. According to the College Board, a student is college ready when they have the knowledge, skills, and behaviors to complete a 4-year college course of study successfully without remediation (Camara & Quenemoen, 2012). College Board (n.d.) developed a framework of key competencies of college readiness that can be taught as early as elementary school.

ACT (2020) is another non-profit organization that has increasingly gained influence in assessing and determining college readiness of high school students. College and career readiness is defined by ACT (2019) as a student without the need of remediation and the

ability to acquire the knowledge and skills needed to enroll and be successful in first-year courses that is credit bearing at a postsecondary institution (Clark, 2015). Postsecondary schools would include 2-year, 3-year colleges, and trade and technical schools.

The Texas Administrative Code (2007) defines a college ready student as, “One who has the knowledge and skills necessary to begin entry-level college courses with a reasonable likelihood of success and does not require developmental education” (para. 1). Texas legislators, in HB3, defined college readiness as

the level of preparation a student must attain in English language arts and mathematics courses to enroll and succeed, without remediation, in an entry-level general education course for credit in that same content area for a baccalaureate degree or associate degree program. (Texas Education Code, 2013a, §39.024, para. 1)

Conley (2007) defines college readiness as “the level of preparation a student needs to enroll and succeed—without remediation—in a credit-bearing general education course at a postsecondary institution that offers a baccalaureate degree or transfer to a baccalaureate program” (p. 5). All definitions emphasize a need for no remediation or developmental coursework as a measure of college readiness (ACT, 2019a, 2019b; Camara & Quenemoen, 2012; Clark, 2015; Conley, 2007; Texas Education Code, 2013a, 2017). Only one definition, HB3’s, specifies a required level in math and English language arts to be college ready (Texas Education Code, 2013a). The College Board’s (n.d.) definition expands beyond the acquisition of knowledge and skills to embrace student behaviors. The preparation for college readiness is not limited to math and English language arts, but is influenced by behaviors, skills, and knowledge not directly related to academic accomplishments.

## **Assessing College Readiness**

Texas has developed its own college readiness assessment called the Texas Success Initiative Assessment (TSIA; College for All Texans, 2020). The TSIA was designed to evaluate if a student is prepared for reading, writing, and mathematics at the collegiate level. The TSIA is required for all students entering college in Texas, unless an exemption is granted utilizing another college readiness standardized assessment, such as the SAT, ACT, and State of Texas Assessments of Academic Readiness. Students who do not meet the college readiness criteria are required to participate in intervention course work to improve their skills and prepare them for success in college-level courses.

The Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board and the Texas Education Agency worked in collaboration to develop a set of cut points for TSIA and established a set of waivers and exemptions to the TSIA if a student met qualifying standards on the SAT, ACT, STAAR (Texas Education Code, 2013b). The ACT, STAAR, and TSIA each assess the content knowledge learned over a course of time (ACT, 2019a). The SAT, on the other hand, utilizes content knowledge to assess cognitive skills. The SAT is considered closely aligned with socioeconomic status rather than what is learned over time (Frey, 2019; Sackett et al., 2012).

Texas is in the process of developing a comprehensive system to outline the qualifications to be college and career ready (Texas Education Agency, 2020c). By utilizing these standardized tests as an indicator for college readiness, the state assumes that through the acquisition of these qualifications a student will be college and career ready. Additionally, standardized tests set a precedent that these tests are the only indicators of college and career readiness. Even the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board recognized that test scores are not the only indicator for college and career readiness

(Educational Policy Improvement Center, 2009). The final standard in the Texas College and Career Readiness Standards, Cross Disciplinary Standards, highlights a series of skills that are assumed to be taught within the context of the core subjects. These skills are classified into two categories. The first category is key cognitive skills, which outline behaviors that are essential for success in entry level college course. Examples of these behaviors and skills are intellectual curiosity, reasoning, problem solving, academic behaviors, work habits, and academic integrity. The second category is foundational skills which consist of key competencies needed by a student. These include a student's ability to apply knowledge and technology across curriculum by utilizing skills to read, write, research, and analyze data at the collegiate level (Educational Policy Improvement Center, 2009). The skills and characteristics outlined within this standard are consistent with other key factors found within the literature. To be ready for college does not only mean building students' content knowledge and academic skills, but also fostering a host of noncognitive factors—set of behaviors, skills, attitudes, and strategies that are crucial to students' academic performance and persistence (Conley, 2008; Nagaoka et al., 2013).

Cognitive assessments are the primary method used by policy leaders, school leaders, College Board, ACT, and IHE in determining students' college readiness. Content knowledge is a key part of the equation of college and career readiness but given that more than 48% of students do not complete a 4 year-degree by their sixth year, much more needs to be considered. In addition, students of color—62% of Black students and 55% of Hispanic students—do not complete their degree within 6 years (Tate, 2017).

The definitions in this section provided a narrow view of college readiness and do not consider the complexities of developing college readiness and the vast array of contributing



factors. Chlup et al. (2018) defined college readiness as a combination of skills, knowledge, and habits of thought necessary to be successful in college-level courses. The current policy approaches to college readiness fail to consider the larger racial and socioeconomic contexts and structural inequities and in response suggests broader assumptions of what it means to be college ready in the United States and to be re-normed to be both race conscious and equity minded (Castro, 2013).

### **Conceptual and Theoretical Frameworks**

Early College High School students are on a fast track to college and degree completion. The hybrid nature of being both in high school and college creates a unique environment to explore the gap between college eligibility and college readiness. Students at ECHSs have access to attend college courses even if they have not met all the college readiness requirements. For example, a student may take, and be successful in, a world language college course, such as Spanish, without demonstrating college readiness as measured on a standardized college readiness exam. The model has demonstrated success in key academic indicators and additionally has improved post-secondary access for its students (Barnett et al., 2013; Barnett et al., 2015).

To explore the gap between college eligibility and college readiness, three frameworks were utilized to report the experiences of students of ECHSs. The first framework is a four-facet model of college and career readiness developed by Conley (2007). This framework has been adopted by many ECHS as a model to guide teachers and leaders to prepare students for college (Barnett et al., 2013). The second framework is centered on student development theory and the seven vectors developed by Chickering (1969). The use of the seven vectors provides a road map that can help one determine where students are in their development as a college student. Both Conley's (2007) and Chickering's (1969)

frameworks have provided insight into college readiness and student development from a dominate culture perspective. To expand one's understanding of college readiness for student of color, a third framework—Community Cultural Wealth developed by Yosso (2005)—was used. This framework provided a lens for a strength-based perspective in understanding how students of color access and experience college.

To be effective in educating the whole student, one must understand the various skills needed to be college ready. These skills are noted in Conley's (2007) four keys of college and career readiness. Yet knowing these skills alone does not help if one fails to understand how they are developed within students. The use of Chickering's (1969) seven vectors provide insight into how these skills are developed within a college student. Knowing how these skills are developed in students requires a breadth of understanding of the complexities of the lives of the students from a variety of perspectives and cultural contexts. The use of Community Cultural Wealth provides insight and understanding of college readiness development from the perspective of students of color.

### **Conley's Model of College and Career Readiness**

Conley (2008) developed a four-facet model of college and career readiness. At the core of his model is key cognitive strategies. Conley considered this the foundation to a student's ability to learn content from a variety of disciplines. Strategies such as reasoning, interpretation, precision, accuracy, problem solving, proof, and research all support college and career readiness.

The second area, key content, consists of "big ideas, key concepts, and vocabulary that create structure of various disciplines and subjects" (Conley, 2008 p. 26). This facet is where a student makes "necessary academic preparation to be academically qualified to

attend college” (Welton et al., 2014, p. 199). Key content is also where students are developing competence and obtaining academic achievement (Chickering, 1969; Chickering & Reisser, 1993; Soland, 2017). The importance of content and vocabulary have been used to lay the foundation of the current college and career readiness standards at the local, state, and federal level.

The third facet of the model is academic behaviors. These academic behaviors *transcend content areas* and play an integral role in the academic performance of students (Conley, 2008; Nagaoka et al., 2013). Academic behaviors are a mesh of cognitive, metacognitive, and noncognitive skills that influence the success of students. Some academic behaviors include completing assignments on time with accuracy and precision, participating in class, engaging in work, regularly attending class, and studying (Educational Policy Improvement Center, 2009; Nagaoka et al., 2013). For Conley (2008), the metacognitive process by the students was a key element to the development of academic behavior. A student’s educational path and decision-making process is impacted by self-awareness, self-monitoring, and a student’s self-control. As students increase their awareness, knowledge, and thinking about academic behaviors, other important skills begin to surface, such as self-management, time management, study skills, stress management, group study skills, taking notes, and communication with authority figures (Conley, 2008).

The fourth facet of Conley’s (2008) model is contextual skills and awareness. Contextual skills reference a student’s ability to navigate academic norms, social norms, and utilize their leadership skills in different settings. This would include one’s ability to interact and communicate with individuals from diverse cultures and backgrounds within the context of various social groups such as peers, professionals, professors, and anyone else they

encounter. Awareness within the literature was often referred to as college knowledge. This is the idea that students have an understanding of the admission process, eligibility requirements, financial aid options, and cultural differences between high school and college in both the stated and unstated norms (Chlup et al., 2018; Conley, 2008; Welton et al., 2014). The contribution of Conley's (2008) model is commonly referenced within the literature but does not fully encompass the depth of influences that attribute to college and career readiness. This model neglects to provide a large enough lens to capture and address the rapid changes taking place in early adolescents nor the cultural perspectives of minority students.

### **Chickering's Model of Student Development**

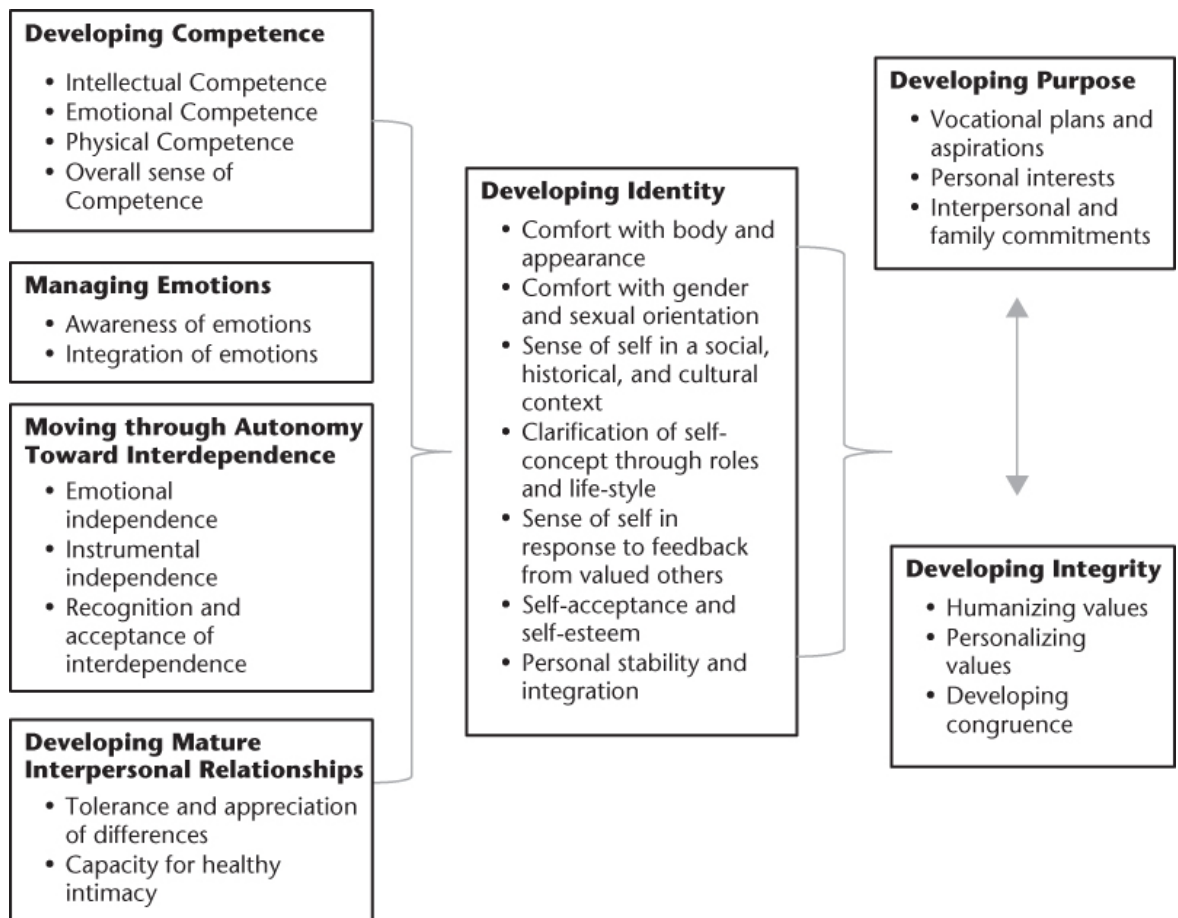
Chickering's (1969) seven vectors of identity development was the foundational framework used to conceptualize student development for college age students. Chickering's work is an expansion of Erickson's (1968) fifth stage of development specific to college students. Erickson's fifth stage, Identity vs. Role Confusion, takes place during adolescence from the ages of 13–19. This is a time of rapid physical changes coupled with an intensified awareness of individual and social influences. These influences are exasperated during high school and college as students encounter pressure and persistence from many dimensions to define who they want to become and what they want to do.

The seven vectors represent a series of states that a student experiences as they develop as a college student (Chickering, 1969). Each vector in Chickering's theory is interconnected and interdependent with each of the seven vectors. No one vector precedes another vector, yet some vectors are dependent on others to reach full attainment. The establishment of identity was a core-developmental issue college students tackled

(Chickering, 1969; Chickering & Reisser, 1993; Patton et al., 2016). Students move through vectors at different rates and multiple vectors can influence the development of a student's identity at the same time (Chickering & Reisser, 1993). Figure 1 provides a graphic representation of Chickering's seven vectors.

**Figure 1**

*Chickering and Reisser's Vectors*



*Note.* From *Student Development in College: Theory, Research, and Practice*, by L. D. Patton, K. A. Renn, F. Guido-DiBrito, and S. J. Quaye, 2016, p. 300. Copyright 2016 by Jossey-Bass.

## Yosso's Model of Community Cultural Wealth

Community Cultural Wealth framework arises out of the five tenets of critical race theory. Critical race theory in education challenges the dominant discourse on race and racism through the examination of how educational theory, policy, and practice used to oppress certain racial and ethnic groups (Solórzano, 1998). The five tenets are (a) the centrality and intersectionality of race and racism; (b) the challenge to dominant ideology; (c) the commitment to social justice; (d) the centrality of experiential knowledge; and (e) the utilization of interdisciplinary approaches. Through the application of these tenets, critical race theory shifts the center of focus from notions of White, middle class culture to the cultures of communities of color (Solórzano, 1998).

Communities of color have been and continue to be subjected to deficit thinking. There are spoken and unspoken assumptions that students and their families are responsible for poor academic performance. With possibly the best intentions, schools attempt to fill the void they perceive students of color have with forms of cultural knowledge they deem valuable by the dominant culture (Yosso, 2005). The use of the Community Cultural Wealth framework can offer a lens to identifying, analyzing, and challenging distorted perceptions of communities of color. Yosso's framework outlines six types of interdependent and overlapping forms capital that build on one another as part of the Community Cultural Wealth. The six forms of cultural capital are aspirational, navigational, social, linguistic, familial, and resistant capital. A summary of Yosso's definitions of each form of capital (Yosso, 2005; Yosso & Burclaga, 2016) follow:

- *Aspirational capital* refers to an individual's ability to hold on to and maintain hope and dreams, even in the face of real and perceived barriers.

- *Linguistic capital* includes the intellectual and social skills attained through communication in multiple languages and/or language styles (including communication through art, music, poetry, theatre, and dance). Students come to schools with a repertoire of storytelling skills that may include memorization, attention to detail, dramatic pauses, comedic timing, facial affect, vocal tone, volume, rhythm, and rhyme. Allowing students the ability to communicate via visual art, music, or poetry provides them the ability to communicate with various audiences (Yosso, 2005).
- *Social capital* can be understood as networks of people and community resources. This would include peers and other social contacts that students use to help them gain access to college and resources available with social institutions (including scholarships, navigating institutions, and key contacts within the community).
- *Navigational capital* refers to skills in maneuvering through social institutions. Historically, this implies the ability to maneuver through institutions not created with communities of color in mind.
- *Familial capital* refers to those cultural knowledges nurtured among *familia* (kin) that carry a sense of community history, memory, and cultural intuition. The concept of familial includes immediate family, aunts, uncles, grandparents, and friends who are considered a part of an extended family.
- *Resistant capital* refers to those knowledges and skills fostered through oppositional behavior that challenge inequality. The source of this capital comes from parents, community members, and the historical pursuit of social justice within a community. (Yosso & Burclaga, 2016, p. 2)

The use of the Community Cultural Wealth framework could provide educators and leaders a lens to better understand the experiences and perceptions of student of color in their access to and experience in college.

### **Working Towards a New Conceptual Framework**

College and career readiness have a complex mixture of cognitive and non-cognitive skills that are obtained via countless measured and unmeasurable variables. A student's journey to college and career readiness does not occur with one set of specific events or the acquisition of knowledge, rather it is a series of developmental experiences coached within the context of social interactions with professors, peers, authority figures, family, and extended family. College and career readiness absent of the consideration of cultural influence does not take into account the diverse perspectives and experiences of the lives of the students, particularly students of color.

Developing competence is fundamental to student development and a key to cognitive abilities and content knowledge. Developing competence is both a cognitive and non-cognitive endeavor. Table 1 aligns the two frameworks under the umbrella of developing competence cognitively, non-cognitively, and physically. The table shows an overlap between Conley's (2008) key facets and Chickering's (1969) seven vectors. There are three vectors that do not directly link to Conley's (2008) key facets and are items that should be considered in relationship to college and career readiness.

The categorization of college and career readiness skills as well as student development vectors fails to recognize the complexities associated with the development of college and career readiness. With Conley's (2008) framework there is a clear list of skills and abilities needed for college readiness and with Chickering's (1969) framework there is a guide to help one understand the web of student development.



**Table 1***Developing Competence*

Competence	Conley (2008)	Chickering (1969)
Cognitive	Cognitive	Developing Competence
	Problem Formation	Intellectual Competence
	Research	
	Interpretation	
	Communication	Interpersonal Competence
	Precision and Accuracy	
	Content Knowledge	
	Structure of Knowledge	
	Technical Knowledge and Skills	
	Non-Cognitive	Skills and Techniques
	Ownership of Learning	
	Learning Techniques	
	Knowledge and Skills	
	Postsecondary Awareness	Developing Purpose
	Postsecondary Cost	Establishing Identity
	Matriculation	Developing Integrity
	Career Awareness	Developing Mature Interpersonal Relationships
	Role and Identity	Managing Emotions
	Self-Advocacy	

Absent from both frameworks is a clear consideration of the influences of culture as it pertains to college readiness and student development. I propose an expanded college and career readiness framework that takes into consideration the influence of culture. By using the Community Cultural Wealth framework as a filter to interpret the complex integration of

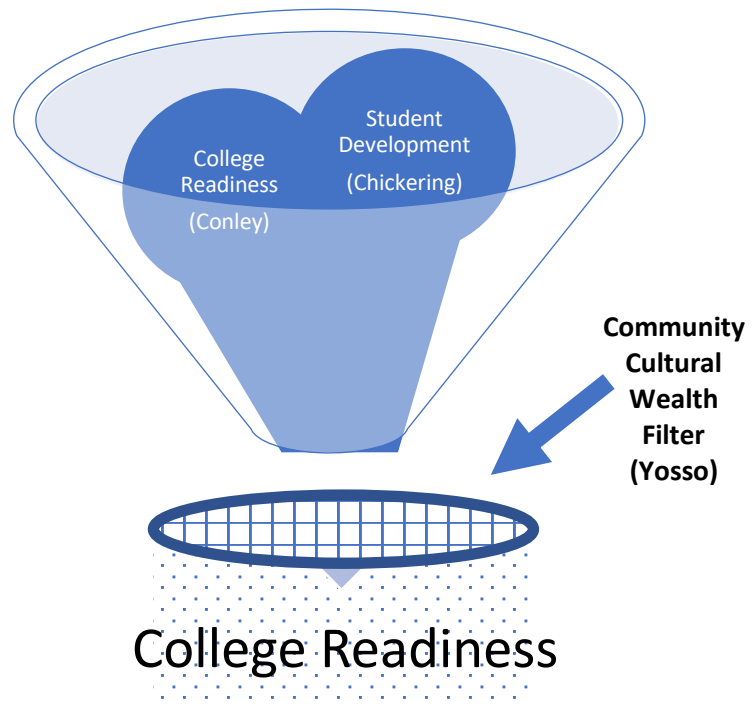
the college and career readiness framework and the student development framework, one should be able to have a more inclusive perspective of college and career readiness. As a result, one could have a better understanding of how schools, colleges, and programs empower students to access their strength, talents, and individual experiences to improve college and career readiness.

In Figure 2, merging Conley's (2008) college readiness framework and Chickering's (1969) student development theory demonstrates the interdependence of the two frameworks. The interconnection of skill development arises out of the development of an individual. One cannot acquire skills without experiencing some form of development. The various parts of each framework are funneled through the Community Cultural Wealth filter. Through this filter a new understanding of college readiness will be offered for consideration.

The influences of college readiness are extensive in nature and what has been presented is a portion of the influences on college readiness. Families, instruction practices, teacher professional development, curriculum, program pathways, and counselors are other influences on a student's college readiness. Academic performance may qualify a student for college, but it does not necessarily prepare them to be successful. As Texas continues to refine college and career readiness standards, they need to consider ways to systematically influence the educational pipeline to embrace strategies and best practices that support, with greater intensity, college readiness that takes into account the cultural assets of minority students and influences of non-cognitive skills.

**Figure 2**

*Community Cultural Wealth Perspective of College Readiness*



## CHAPTER THREE: RESEARCH DESIGN

### **Purpose of the Case Study**

The purpose of this research was to explore the gap between college eligibility and college readiness from the perspectives of recent ECHS graduates to provide insight and understanding of how ECHS and institutes of higher learning support or fail to support student success. The information gathered from the study was analyzed for insight and understanding of how ECHS and IHEs support or fail to support student college readiness. Findings from the study provide educational leaders and policy makers insight and understanding of challenges, needs, misconceptions, and experiences of traditionally marginalized students in order to inform their decisions as they work towards the educational success of all students. The research questions for this study follow.

### **Research Questions**

1. What are students' self-perceptions of their own college readiness?
2. How do students who participated in an early college high school define college readiness?
3. How did early college high school experiences impact, promote, or hinder student preparation for college?

### **Research Design and Rationale**

The guiding questions of this case study intended to gather information about the experiences and perceptions of students who have attended an ECHS in the state of Texas. To understand the nature of the research questions and respond to the purpose of the study, a qualitative case study approach was employed. Using a case study approach allowed for an in-depth understanding and appreciation within a real-life context (Crowe et al., 2011, Yin, 1994). The nature of the research questions explored the perceptions and experiences of the

participants within a real-life context. The case study allowed for a focus on the insight, discovery, and understanding from the perspectives of those being studied.

Attending school is a lived experience centered around a process of engaging in education. Acquiring an education has the potential to expand our knowledge of the world around us, develop perspective of life, and influence our individual social constructs. I believe, along with Merriam (1988), the perceptions of the participants in a case study can make a significant impact and contributions to the practices of education and the collective knowledge of the educational process and experiences of students at an ECHS. As students journey through their education, they face numerous social interactions that allow them to develop multiple realities of experiences (Merriam, 1988). This study was an exploration of how participants interpreted their experiences, how they constructed their worldview, and what meaning they attribute to their experiences.

Through this case study, I sought to comprehend how participants perceived their experience at an ECHS impacted, both positively and/or negatively, their perceived college readiness. An interpretive perspective was used to describe, understand, and interpret participants' self-perceptions of college readiness and the impact or non-impact of the ECHS experience. The descriptive data obtained from the participants was used to develop conceptual categories. These conceptual categories were then used to illustrate, support, and/or challenge theoretical assumptions and/or add to existing theories related to college readiness (Merriam, 1988).

### **Research Setting and Participants**

The target participants for this study consisted of students who graduated high school from an ECHS in Texas and who are currently attending a 4-year institution. The preferred candidate was an individual who graduated from an ECHS in Texas within the last 18

months prior to their participation in the study. A secondary candidate would be an individual who had graduated more than 18 months prior to their participation in the study and had not yet graduated from a 4-year institution. I used multiple recruitment methods for this study. The first method made use of public record directory information from three public universities in Texas. Participants were contacted via an email regarding the study, provided information regarding study, and were asked to fill out a short demographic survey if they were interested in participating in the study. Utilizing criterion sampling, participants who met a predefined criterion and shared an ECHS experience were considered for the study (Moser & Korstjens, 2018). The second method utilized social media posts to identify participants who were interested in participating in the study. The third method, a function of the interview protocols, asked participants to provide suggestions of other individuals who may be interested in the study. Merriam and Ebrary (2016) described this strategy as network or snowball sampling. Snowball sampling uses participants in the study to assist with identifying other potential participants who meet the study criteria (Merriam & Ebrary, 2016). This was done by asking participants in the study for names of others within their community who they felt would be interested in participating.

### **Data Collection**

The primary method of data collection was two in-depth, semi-structured, one-on-one interviews with each participant. A list of questions was used as a guide during the interview and a narrative interview approach was infused. A narrative interview is a *conversation* led by the researcher to guide participants through their individual story of events, experiences, or life journey (Kelly, 2010). Though the conversation participants were able to share their experiences using their voice to describe emotions and experiences, this method provided flexibility to ask questions that may only arise because of the nature of the conversation and

emergent details shared by the participants. Interviews are one of the best methods to use when a researcher wants to gain understanding of a participant's views, experiences, or conceptualize an aspect of social life (Kelly, 2010).

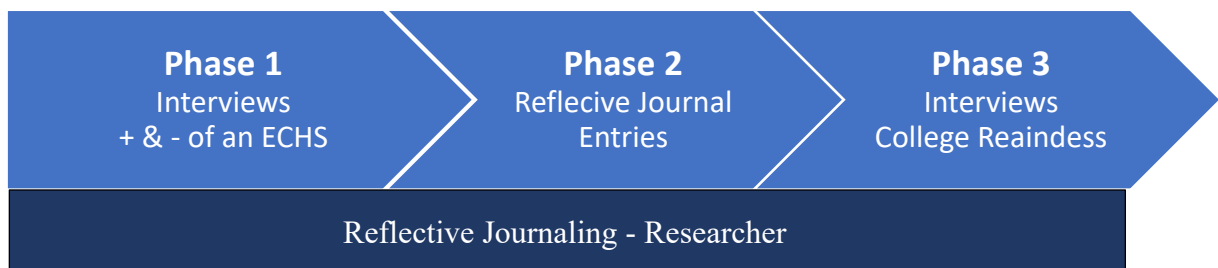
Along with the interviews, each participant was asked to participate in no more than four reflections journal prompts during the study. The use of journals is an effective research strategy to capture the thoughts, beliefs, and behaviors of participants in the study (Bashan & Holsblat, 2017; Janesick, 1999). The prompts aided participants in the reflective process and encouraged deep reflection regarding their experiences at their ECHS and the perceived impacts or non-impact on their own college readiness. Participants were provided the option to write additional journal entries that supported their expression of their experiences and perceptions related to the research questions.

### **Timeline and Data Collection Focus**

Data were collected over a 6-month period, beginning November 2019. Figure 3 delineates the three phases of data collection.

**Figure 3**

*Phases of Data Collection*



Phase 1 began with qualitative data collection focused on participants' experiences at an ECHS and the perceived positive or negative impact on their college readiness at a 4-year institution. During Phase 1, the first of two interviews with six individuals was conducted. A self-developed semi-structured interview protocol was used to support a narrative interview

approach (see Appendix A). A list of questions was developed and utilized as a guide for the interviews. No specific wording or order of questions was followed during the interview process. This allowed me to respond directly to the participant's situation, to the emerging worldviews of the participant, and to new ideas related to the topic (Merriam, 1988). Each interview was recorded using a digital recorder, and the duration of the first interview was 20–60 minutes. The recording of the interviews was transcribed and prepared for data analysis.

During Phase 2 of the study, I made modifications due to COVID-19 interruptions. I had initially planned for each participant to complete a minimum of four separate journals entries between their first and second interview (see Appendix B). However, due to COVID-19, participants were only provided three journal prompts. Recognizing my own difficulty adjusting to lockdown orders, closure of business, and the adjustment to online learning for educational institution across the nation, I chose to pause this portion of the study until I felt I, as well as participants in my study, had learned to adapt to the continuously changing situation. Given the nature of this extraordinary situation, I chose not to follow up, as planned, with participants via email or text messages to obtain journal responses. I received a total of six journal responses. Journal entries allowed participants to capture and examine their thoughts, beliefs, and behaviors and are a powerful research strategy to capture data from participants (Janesick, 1999). Journaling has the potential to provide detailed information of emotions, perceptions, and connections to current context. The use of journaling allowed participants to document and reflect on their experiences.

During Phase 3 of the study the second of two interviews were conducted. The focus of these interviews was to gather qualitative data focused on participants' own self



perceptions of college readiness. A self-developed semi-structured interview protocol was used to support a narrative interview approach and followed the same process as the first interview (see Appendix C). Each interview was recorded using a digital recorder and the duration of the second interview was 30–60 minutes. The recording of the interviews was transcribed and prepared for data analysis.

In addition, I used memoing in the form of a reflective journal through each phase of data collection and during each stage of data analysis. My reflective journal includes items related to the research process, my perceived interaction with participants, and my thoughts and interpretations of the data. According to Janesick (1999), the use of a journal is a powerful research technique as it provides the researcher the opportunity to

1. refine their understanding of their role of the researcher through reflection and writing,
2. refine the understanding of the responses of participants in the study, and
3. view journal writing as proprietorship by which individuals become authorities of their own thinking and reflection patterns, and indeed their own understanding of their work as qualitative researchers.

As the primary research instrument, keeping a comprehensive reflective journal throughout the entire research project is a form of checks and balances. The data collected in the reflective journal were used to critically address the researchers' *self* and provide a resource for data triangulation during the analysis stages.

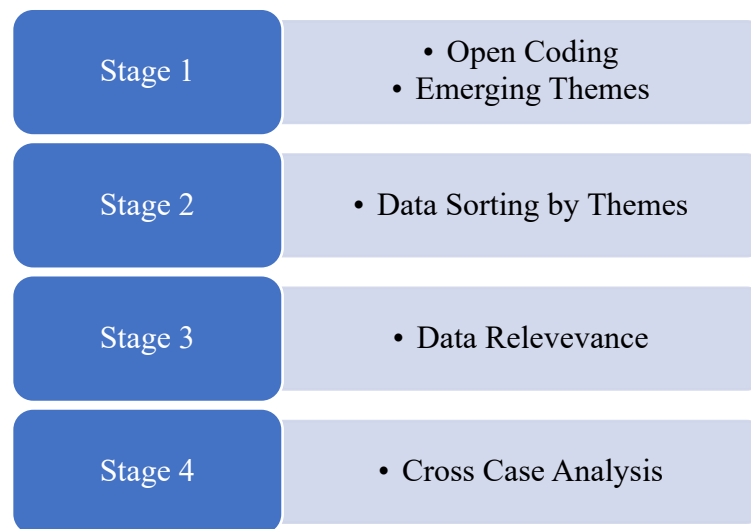
### **Data Analysis**

Data were analyzed using a four-stage process outlined in Figure 4. The process of data was non-linear and did not follow a sequential order. As data were collected and new

themes emerged, there was movement back and forth between the stages as needed. It was expected that each stage would be repetitively visited during the data analysis process.

**Figure 4**

*Stages of Data Coding and Analysis*



During Stage 1, the transcriptions from the interviews were analyzed using open coding. Items on the transcripts that appeared to answer the research questions or were identified as useful to the study were noted and pinpointed (Merriam, 1988). Codes and notes used during the initial analysis were categorized to identify emerging themes.

During Stage 2, data were sorted and categorized by themes. Computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software was used to allow data to be sorted, filtered into files, coded, and categorized to be easily retrieved (Merriam, 1988). Data were consistently reviewed and examined to determine its relationship and contribution to the research topic. During this stage, analytical coding was used to interpret and reflect on the meaning of the data collected (Merriam, 1988).

Stage 3 focused on identifying what data were relevant to the research question. During this stage other phenomena that surfaced was analyzed through triangulation to

determine if there was a common relationship to the research topic or if there were potential areas for further research.

During Stage 4, a cross-case analysis was used to identify similarities and differences across the cases. A cross-case analysis allowed for the emergence of themes and categories that conceptualized the data of each case (Merriam, 1988). Data sets were analyzed for patterns that related to the research questions. A constant reassessment of codes was conducted throughout the research to ensure that themes and codes were being utilized as intended.

### **Researcher Positionality**

As the primary instrument to collect and analyze data, the potential of unanticipated biases is plausible. The concept of reflexivity was utilized to bring to the forefront any possible influence on the phenomena being studied and how the research process affects the researcher (Merriam, 1988). The use of reflexive practice provides the reader a better understanding of how the researcher perspective shaped the interpretation of data and the method by which the data were collected (Yin, 2016). To account for possible research bias, a reflective journal was kept throughout the research practice to provide checks and balances and provide a place for the researcher to critically reflect on bias in the data collection and analysis.

As an educator for over 21 years, I bring a set of skills and experiences that influences my perspective on all participants in the study. Throughout my career, I have had the opportunity to work in schools in various communities with mixed levels of educational supports and opportunities. From these perspectives, I have developed my opinions regarding effective and ineffective practices that support the formation of college readiness. I currently work at an ECHS in Texas and have spent the majority of my administrative career at the

high school level. As an assistant principal of an ECHS and the primary instrument for data collection, there was a potential that participants in the study would not provide accurate data. It is plausible that participants may have been intimidated to provide accurate accounts of their perspective and others may attempt to seek affirmation by providing responses perceived to be in line with my known or assumed ideology.

As described by Merriam (1988), qualitative methods are inductive in nature and focus on process, understanding, and meaning, using the researcher as the primary instrument of data collection. This research study was designed to mitigate biases. The collection of data was accomplished using a variety of research methods. Triangulation of data was used to support findings and to eliminate individual assumptions and biases related to the data.

### **Reliability**

By design, various methods of data collection were deployed to allow for cross checking of research findings. Triangulation of data was utilized to identify common themes between various participants. The use of direct quotations from participants highlighted their experiences, opinions, feelings, and knowledge. In addition, quotes were utilized to support triangulation of data and personal experience and perceptions (Merriam, p. 105). Respondent validation was utilized in the second round of interviews to confirm themes and emerging phenomena found in the data during phase one and two of the study (Merriam, 1988).

A research log was utilized to create an audit trail of research methods. The log included methods for communicating with participants and any obstacles that infringed on the research objective. Any key decisions made within the study were documented in the log as well as rationale for the adjustments made during the study. The research log was used to record challenges, problems, concerns, issues, or ideas encountered during the data collection process (Merriam, 1988).

## Summary

The demographic landscape of the United States is changing and there continues to be significant disparities for degree obtainment among minority students. The ability to keep up with the anticipated and projected workforce will be unsustainable, if there is not an improvement. Traditional definitions of college readiness often support a deficit model placing the blame on students and fails to consider the racial and socioeconomic contexts and structural inequities that are found among school systems and communities. I shared how Texas has expanded the ECHS model to improve college readiness and degree attainment amongst minority students. In addition, I explored definitions and methods used to measure college readiness and discussed the need for a new conceptual framework for college readiness. A qualitative multi-case-study was used to explore and understand the perceptions of former graduates from an ECHS in Texas. The findings from the analysis of this data are provided in Chapter Four. Chapter Five is a discussion of these findings and implications for practice and future research.

## CHAPTER FOUR: RESEARCH FINDING AND ANALYSIS

### **Research Purpose and Questions**

The purpose of this research was to explore the gap between college eligibility and college readiness from the perspectives of recent ECHS graduates to provide insight and understanding of how ECHS and institutes of higher learning support or fail to support student success. This study was guided by the following research questions:

1. What are students' self-perceptions of their own college readiness?
2. How do students who participated in an early college high school define college readiness?
3. How did early college high school experiences impact, promote, or hinder student preparation for college?

### **Perspectives of Six ECHS Graduates**

To explore these questions, I recruited six ECHS graduates to participate in this study and share their perspectives on their ECHS experiences. In presenting these results, I first developed individual case narratives for each participant to examine the impact of the ECHS on their college readiness. Each participant offered different viewpoints of the ECHS experience. Differences were categorized by gender, race, school structure, relationships, and individual growth. All six ECHS graduates had similar experiences including attending an ECHS all 4 years of high school and each graduated with an associate degree.

### **Participant Overview**

Participants graduated from their ECHS between 2016 and 2019. Five of the six participants attend public 4-year colleges with the one attending a private 4-year college. Four of the six participants were females and two were males. Racially, three students were Hispanic, two students were Black, and one student was White. Three participants attended

an ECHS that shared the campus of a traditional high school, often referred to as a school within a school. The remaining three ECHS were stand-alone campus located on a college campus or walking distance to a college campus. All six participants attended their ECHS all 4 years in high and each of them earned their associate degree.

Each student participated in two individual interviews and provided written reflections. I used computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software to analyze this data to develop individual case study narratives and conduct a cross-case analysis. To present the findings, I first share the individual case narrative for each participant in order to humanize the student experiences and authentically include the words of these students. Following these narratives, I used Yosso's (2005) Community Cultural Wealth framework to share the findings from the cross-case analysis.

### **Monica's Narrative**

Monica grew up in a Dallas/Fort Worth area suburb. She first learned of an ECHS opportunity when she was in middle school, though she heard from other students that ECHSs did not have dances or sport teams. Initially she did not want to attend an ECHS because she was an athlete and wanted to continue to play softball. She thought attending an ECHS would cause her to miss out on traditional high school activities such sports, dances, and the prom. Monica eventually did decide to attend an ECHS and was part of the third or fourth cohort of students at her ECHS. By the time Monica started her ECHS, the school held dances and allowed students access to sports at partnering traditional high schools.

**Table 2***Summary of Participants*

Participant	Race	Year Graduated ECHS	ECHS Type	College Status	College Type	Degree	Degrees Obtained
Monica	African American	2017	Schools within a School	Graduate Student	Public	Psychology	AA, BS, MBA May 2020
Beth	White	2018	Schools within a School	Undergraduate Student	Private	Public Policy Economics	AA, BS December 2020
Melissa	Hispanic	2016	Stand Alone	Undergraduate Student	Public	Psychology	AA, BS December 2020
Reggie	African American	2019	Stand Alone	Undergraduate Student	Public	Political Science	AA
Christine	Hispanic	2019	Schools within a School	Undergraduate Student	Public	Wildlife, Sustainability, Ecosystem	AA
Eddie	Hispanic	2018	Stand Alone	Undergraduate Student	Public	Cyber Security	AA



Monica, a Black female student, describes herself as an individual who is determined to be successful. She likes to prove she is capable of performing at a high level despite her age. Monica graduated in the top 10% of her class with an associate degree and was accepted to both private and public colleges in Texas. The private university was her dream school, and she had anticipated receiving scholarships and financial aid. When the financial assistance did not come through, she decided to attend a public institution because it was more affordable.

Monica graduated from her ECHS in May 2017 with both her high school diploma and associate degree. She stated her 4-year college classified her as a junior and she was already thinking about graduate school before graduating from her ECHS. Within 2 years, Monica graduated with an undergraduate degree in psychology. She is currently working on completing her master's in business administration. She will complete her degree by the age of 21, an accomplishment she is still wrapping her head around.

Monica describes her family as hard working and determined. She holds fast to a family belief that they are not bound by any circumstance. She describes her family as one that bounces back from difficulties and constantly pushes towards a goal. Monica describes herself as a compassionate individual who wants to help others. In fact, Monica would offer tutoring to her classmates when she noticed they were struggling. As an ECHS student, she was hired by the partnering college to tutor students in Biology, English, and Algebra.

When Monica thinks about her ECHS experience she often thinks of the good times she had with her friends and teachers. Monica wished her ECHS had focused more on life skills such as conducting yourself professionally, managing finances, the loan process, doing your personal taxes, and sharing resources about job placement. As a soon to be 21-year-old

master's in business administration graduate, Monica does not regret attending an ECHS, but she does wish some things would have been different.

### **Campus Structure and Culture**

Monica described her ECHS as small with a class of 100 students. She mentioned that her class started with an "enrollment of 120 and 20 people *dropped out*. Some people dropped out before school even started. Here, Monica implied, "drop out" refers to students who left the ECHS program to attend a traditional high school. The demographics of Monica's ECHS was primarily made up of Black and Hispanic students, with only one or two White students.

Monica's ECHS was located in a traditional high school in the ninth-grade center, and ECHS students and traditional students would interact until classes began. She described her classes as separate from the rest of the traditional high school in space she called a "little dungeon." Within this space, freshman and sophomores would rotate between classes during the school day. Professors from the local community college would come to the ECHS campus to teach courses during her ninth and 10th grades, during 11th and 12th grades her ECHS bussed students to the community college to attend classes there.

Beginning Monica's freshman year, her ECHS required students to adhere to a strict dress code. The dress code policy matched the traditional high school, yet her ECHS required student to wear an iron on patch on their shirts. Monica said that the patch distinguished ECHS student from traditional student on the high school campus and also distinguished them from traditional college students while on the college campus. Monica did not like the use of the patch and felt that it ostracized her and other ECHS students from their friends that were going to the regular high school. ECHS students also had to pay \$10 per patch.

From freshman year to senior year, Monica recalled the ECHS drilling her and her classmates about the college application process. A key focus of her campus was making sure all students seized the opportunity to get 2 years of college out of the way. Monica describes the first year of her ECHS as a bombardment of TSIA (college readiness exam) camps, SAT practice and workshops, college fairs, and information on how to dress professionally. Monica's ECHS placed student in a remedial class if they did not pass TSI. The community college did not have any specific programs to support ECHS students according to Monica. The ECHS focus on metrics such as SAT scores, STAAR scores, scholarships awards, graduation rates, and college acceptance rates fueled an atmosphere of competition. Monica portrayed her ECHS as a school big on performance with the intention of being the best in the district, county, and state. For Monica it was clear that at her ECHS, "They just wanted us to get into college."

Monica expressed that her ECHS did not foster a safe place for students. She explained that many of the staff members were focused on asserting control over the students and some teachers were not able to connect with the students. She felt that the staff was big on scare tactics with the students. For example, Monica recalled staff saying, "If you don't perform, the school is going to close down next year. You're not going to get your 2 years of college for free." She felt these statements were bizarre and she disagreed with criticizing students in this manner using scare tactics. Monica and her friends often "felt like minions" because her ECHS often made all the decision and all they were expected to do was perform and meet the desired metrics. Monica wished the ECHS would have provided her more opportunities to make sound decisions on her own.

At Monica's ECHS, there was a myth that circulated that every student experienced a mental breakdown once a semester. According to the myths, the stress of all the class work, group assignments, athletics, social life, part time jobs, and anything else happening to a high school student would become overwhelming and the student would break down. The students gave the mental breakdown experience a name, the "collegiate cry." Monica explained that she bought into this myth and had several collegiate cries. She recalled experiencing a collegiate cry the day she realized she would not be able to attend the college of her dreams.

To reinforce and emphasize the student mindset, the ECHS developed a motto that students and staff would say: "We are the brightest and the best." Monica thought that some might find the slogan arrogant or egotistical, but for Monica it was a statement of pursuit. The pursuit of being the brightest and the best at whatever you are trying to achieve. Monica shared that this motto reinstated with what her family had instilled in her. "No matter how grueling and arduous the process may be, that is ultimately the goal, and that it's something that my family has always esteemed and will always continue to esteem in our (siblings) lives." The alignment of these values supported Monica during her ECHS experience.

## **Events**

During the summer before Monica started her ECHS she participated in a bridge program. She described it as a 2-week demo where students were able to experience what the ECHS was all about. During those 2 weeks, Monica and her new classmates were provided insight on what they needed to study for the TSIA and to take the TSIA. Different speakers came to their classes and talked to them about how to be successful in the program. She shared about current students speaking about the difficulty of the program and how the difficulties of the program would probably make you cry. A student in the grade level ahead

of her shared how she managed her assignments while playing softball. Monica connected to this student speaker and felt that she could adopt a similar system for herself. The student speaker explained her entire calendar systems and how she used planners. Monica recalled thinking to herself, “I can do that.” Monica felt that hearing from others her own age was helpful. The collective stories she heard from her peers helped her prepare for both her ECHS and 4-year college.

Monica felt her ECHS did a good job bringing in community members that could educate them on controversial topics such as discrimination, sex education, and different topics teens struggle with, specifically from minority communities. Monica recalled a session on emotional intelligence that helped her identify ways to address difficult situations without inciting further issues in the process. Monica found them “very helpful, helping us to just not only understand how we felt but how to deal with that (emotion).” Learning additional skills to further convey her emotions enhanced Monica’s emotional intelligence.

Being bussed to the college campus her junior and senior year of high school helped Monica feel comfortable engaging with community members who did not have the same cultural and ethnic backgrounds that she did.

Honestly, I feel like that’s probably one of the better ways to, I guess, help people to be more, not only like cognizant but like accepting of other cultures because you’re actually in it and you’re learning how to engage with different people while you are doing that.

During her junior and senior year, Monica was hired by the community college to tutor other community college students. In this role, she interacted with diverse groups of students. For

Monica the ability to be actively engaged with others from various background brought a greater sense of cultural awareness than any programs and seminars offered by her ECHS.

The annual cultural fair at her ECHS was something Monica looked forward to. All the students in the school were assigned to teams for the semester. Each team was tasked with developing a report and presentation on a specific culture from Asia, Europe, and Latin America. Upper classmen were given the option to pick a fantasy realm such as Marvel Universe or Hogwarts. “I love seeing everyone’s creativity, and I love seeing like how people would convey their understanding of things that aren’t necessarily familiar to them . . . at least not at first, but like, they showed that they learned.”

### **Skills**

While at her ECHS, Monica recalled adopting methods of organization to be able to handle her schedule. She shared that her ECHS stressed being organized and planning. She described her method of organization as methodical and structured. She has been following the same system she learned in ninth grade when she first started the ECHS. Monica’s ECHS experience provided her the opportunity to learn and practice skills that she continues to use and plans to use when she begins her career. Monica explains:

I took that (skill) with me every step of the way, every year, every semester, like how to manage my time, how to keep things prioritize all that I learned at my high school and best of that I will take with me into my career into like just balancing work and life and everything in between.

Monica’s ECHS encouraged organization through workshops that would offer tips to help them be more successful in school and beyond. While at her ECHS she learned the importance of managing her time.

The ability to speak in public was another skill valued at the ECHS. Many of the projects she completed in high school required some type of speech or presentation that was given in front of the class. The projects and opportunities for public speaking supported the development of Monica's confidence to be able to communicate effectively with others.

### **Peers**

Monica had developed close relationships with the same group of peers from kindergarten to the eighth grade, but she noticed a divide occurred when she made the decision to attend her ECHS. When she would walk the hallways of the traditional high school, on her way to the ECHS building, she would pass her peers. Their greetings were polite, but different. Monica felt like her peers treated her differently, particularly her softball team. When attending games or practices, her teammates—once close friends—would give her a hard time because she attended her ECHS. Monica had homework to complete that kept her from joining her teammates outside of practice. Monica mentioned that she felt peers looked at her as a part of “some elitist group.”

Monica perceived the culture of competition at her ECHS was a hinderance. She was driven to stay in the top 10% of her class, which strained relationships with her classmates as they competed to be at the stop of her class. She considered the school a model of capitalism and felt the ECHS fostered “the dog eat dog” type mentality. The competition between her classmates did not stop Monica from seeking guidance and assistance from her peers to complete assignment and projects. Her ECHS encouraged her to seek the assistance and guidance from her peers, something that Monica continued to do through her undergraduate and graduate studies.

Monica maintains close relationships with at least 10 of her classmates from her ECHS. The unique experience at her ECHS facilitated strong bonds between them. Out of her group of friends, one is currently in a master's program, another graduated from college and is working at a Marshalls department store, and the others are no longer in college. Monica and many of her close classmates choose to attend the same university where she was able to keep her community intact. The regular movie nights, hanging out, and checking in with one another provided a safe space for her to "air out dirty laundry" and speak freely. She attributes her community of friends as a support system that prepared her to be ready for college and supported her while in college.

### **Faculty**

Monica felt that the leadership at her ECHS was really selective with who was able to teach the students. She sensed that the teachers selected were individuals who shared similar experiences to the demographics of the school. For Monica, that helped her connect with her teachers and learn from their shared experiences. Monica felt some of the staff members were more equipped than other to support students. She got the impression that a few of the teachers were there to collect a paycheck and others were there to assert their authority. Monica recalled having several counselors during her ECHS years who were highly focused on standardized scores, scholarship offers, and college acceptance. Once those metrics were met, "they would wash their hands" of us.

Monica attributes the ECHS experience to helping her to develop a strong sense of self-sufficiency. The faculty and staff would provide guidance and encourage her to take initiative to complete specific tasks. "They were really helpful in helping us to foster a greater sense of independence and not kind of caudle you through classes." The faculty and



staff would tell students what they needed to do and if the student choose not to adhere to the guidance it would result in consequences that would affect their ability to be self-sufficient or independent.

### **Self-Concept**

Monica's identity was directly influenced by her academic success. A source of Monica's motivation was a "fear of failure and pride." Monica did not like the feeling of losing and the "hyper competitive environment" of her ECHS fueled her fear of failure and motivated her to get good grades. Monica did not want others to label her a "slacker." Monica established a high standard for herself that others noticed, and she did everything she could to maintain it.

Monica had been actively engaged in college coursework since the age of 14, an accomplishment not possible for many students. Reflecting on her ECHS experience, Monica wished that her ECHS was not so focused on letter grades. Monica explains,

I've been coming to terms with the fact like grades are so arbitrary. They (ECHS) kind of focus on grades a lot, to the point where a lot of people felt that their value or, I can only speak for myself, but I felt like for a while my value was based on my grades . . . I wish that they did a better job of like helping us understand . . . you're so much more than this letter that is on a report . . . you have other talents other skills that you know could be very useful one day, and I wish they help us to explore some of those other skills.

As Monica contemplated her next steps, she shared her awareness of her transition from being a student to entering the work force.

I've always been Monica, the student. I haven't really thought about who's Monica outside of school. So even though I'm done with it . . . I'm having to kind of rediscover who I am and what my interests are outside of that, and that's been an interesting transition . . . I'm excited to explore the different parts of myself that I neglected for the sake of completing my assignment on time and making sure they're done like to the highest degree possible.

### **Transition to a 4-Year College**

Monica had the impression that if you are in the top 10% of your class you would receive several scholarships and colleges would be throwing money at you. She felt her ECHS led her to believe that with all her academic accomplishment and being a minority student, universities would want to give her money. She thought her GPA and class rank was the ticket to the college of her dreams. She took the SAT and ACT four times trying to get the best possible score. Monica thought that with her solid exam scores and class rank that she had done enough to get a full ride to attend her desired university. When she was not awarded enough scholarships or financial aid, Monica did not understand what was going on. Realizing her family income was too high for her to qualify for certain scholarships or federal financial aid was a huge wake-up call. She was offered \$20,000 in scholarships but realized the cost to attend the school of her dreams would be closer to \$70,000. Monica ended up attending another public university rather than her first-choice institution because it was more affordable.

Monica did not feel nervous going to her 4-year college. Rather, she felt ready and prepared to continue her education. She described her transition as a "natural step." She did not fear failure, because she had a belief in herself that she would be fine. She entered her 4-

year college with a mindset that she would learn and adjust to an environment where people were different and had different perspectives. While Monica’s ECHS provided classes and seminars about diversity at college and in the workplace, attending a primarily White institution for the first time was “a bit of a culture shock.”

Monica wished her ECHS would have prepared her or provided her a prep course for the GRE or MCAT—focusing on graduate level options—since she was entering college as a junior.

### **Family**

Monica’s family influenced her decision to attend the ECHS. “My mom and dad basically forced me to do it, I was in the eighth grade at the time.” Monica attributes her academic preparedness to her parents and describes her parents as strong motivators. Monica recognized that many of her ECHS peers did not have that type of parental support. Monica’s family was a strong support system throughout her ECHS experience and continued to be a strong source of support in her graduate studies. When Monica realized that she would not be able to attend the college of her dreams, her mom was quick to provide her the reassurance she needed. Monica recalled her mom saying, “You (Monica) can’t let this setback totally derail you. You still have a future ahead of you. You can’t let this put you off track.”

### **Aspirations**

Monica acknowledges that she is fortunate to have family that has poured into her the belief that she can add “value to the world.” That mindset was cemented in her ECHS experience. The rigorous projects and collaborative effort of her classmates helped Monica make sense of passions. Monica explained the ECHS experience:

Kind of reinforced my desire to continue to aspire for greater things for myself and for my family. And just, to just help other people. Early college is where I kind of discovered my passion for just wanting to be able to help people in whatever capacity, I can.

In addition, the ECHS course work reinforced Monica's confidence that she was capable of doing things that other students her age could not do. Although Monica longed for a stereotypical high school experience, her ECHS made sure she knew that her experience would not be like what she saw on TV, movies, or typical experiences of traditional high school peers. "They were very good at basically letting us know that we weren't normal and that that was okay, it was okay to be different, it was okay to think about things from a different perspective than you normally would." That shared mindset further reinforced Monica's confidence in her abilities. Monica felt that her ECHS was like a simulation that was designed to help her discover her passions. She may not have agreed with all the methods they used to foster her aspirations; however, she thinks that her experience reflects how the world around us and how people engage in pursuing their aspirations.

### **Definition of College Readiness**

Monica described defining college readiness as an abstract task. She does not believe college readiness is something you can measure using an aptitude test like the SAT or ACT. Monica believes that an individual aptitude to adapt to different circumstance or different people is a key attribute of college readiness. "(In college) you're just going to be in a lot of circumstances where you're not familiar and either you can adjust, or you could fight, flight, or freeze." Monica does not believe you are ready for college unless you have an emotional intelligence that allows you to adjust and succeed in various setting.

## **Beth's Narrative**

Beth lived in the same house in the suburbs of Dallas/Fort Worth until she left for her 4-year college. Beth first heard of the ECHS opportunity when she was in elementary school. When it comes to education, Beth seeks out school experiences that provide her rigor and challenges her academically. Her pursuit of a more rigorous academic experiences is one of the reasons she wanted to attend an ECHS rather than a traditional high school. She believed attending an ECHS was going to prepare her for college. Beth, a White female, graduated from her ECHS in May 2018 with both her high school diploma and associate degree. Beth was valedictorian of her graduating class and is proud of achieving her esteemed title.

### **School Structure and Culture**

To be considered for the ECHS, students had to complete and participate in an application process. Interested students would fill out an application and submit their transcripts, STAAR scores, and middle school grades. Students were asked to write a one-page essay and participate in a face-to-face interview.

Beth describes the school as small with a focus solely on academics. The size of Beth's class was less than 100 students compared to her traditional high school of 500 plus students. Beth felt the size of her ECHS was one of the greatest assets but was also a hindrance. Beth explained:

I was so comfortable with, you know, my class. At a 4-year college unless you're at a really, really tiny school, which is unlikely, there's just so many more people and you just are not going to be that close with your classmates, like I was in my early college high school.

The small class size allowed Beth to get to know her classmates well and created a sense of unity around the ECHS experience. Beth expressed that she has not been able to connect to her peers at college like she did at her ECHS.

Beth shared that her ECHS, unlike the traditional high school, had no extracurricular activities or electives such as cooking classes, choir, drama, and sports. Her ECHS tried to add clubs, but they never really took hold. Beth felt that her ECHS's intense focus on academics left little time for extracurricular activities. The absence of extracurricular activities and electives did not necessarily affect Beth's experience, she recognized that it did have an impact on some of her classmates.

The first 2 years of her ECHS experience was on the campus of a traditional high school. During her freshman year she was able to take one college class and sophomore year she was able to enroll into two college classes. During the first 2 years she remembers having a full high school schedule and the college professors coming to the high school to teach the college courses. During her junior and senior year, she was bussed to the college and was at the college for the entire school day. Although she attended classes fulltime on the college campus, her schedule had open slots and free time that allowed Beth the autonomy to use that time as she deemed fit.

The experience of being on the college campus during her junior and senior year provided her a freedom that her peers at traditional high school were not able to experience. Unlike traditional high school where they have campus monitors and staff who hunt you down, Beth described, being on the college campus, gave her the freedom to skip class or leave campus without any fear of consequences other than not doing well in the class.

Having this type of freedom, she explained, requires that you make sure you go to class and learn to manage your own schedule. For Beth, being on the college campus provided her the opportunity to experience the same freedoms as other college students. Beth was able to walk to classes in different building and utilize the college resources. Beth described her last 2 years at her ECHS as “definitely more of a college feel.” Given this opportunity of attending classes on the college campus and learning how to handle that type of independence was instrumental in supporting her college readiness.

Beth remembers her ninth and 10th grade year being significantly harder than some of her college classes. She felt the high school teachers were making things harder so college would not seem so difficult. Taking classes at the community college provided Beth the opportunity to be surrounded by people who had not been in school for several years. She also observed that the academic level of the students at the community college was not equal to her and her classmates at the ECHS. She felt the academic level of the college was set for people who had not done school for a while and believed the coursework at her community college was easy compared to what she experienced in the ninth and 10th grades.

Being able to attend classes on the college campus exposed Beth to a diverse group of people within her community. Beth was able to interact with people from different walks of life that she would not have encountered at a traditional high school. Beth recalled meeting people who were exchange students, who had full time jobs, and middle-aged students going back to school. This opportunity allowed Beth to see people from all walks of life pursuing an education.

It was assumed that every student at her ECHS would attend a 4-year college after they graduated. Beth believes that this common assumption influenced her peers to

consistently ask each other about what schools they were going to apply to and inquire about each other's dream. Beth shared that knowing you were going through the same experience with your peers who had similar goals created an environment of support amongst her peers. The size of the school and the environment pushed Beth toward her goals as she listened and learned about the things her classmates were aspiring to do.

Beth's ECHS gave each student a planner and expected the students to use them. The planner was used to help student organize and keep track of what was due or needed to be done. The emphasis of using a planner helped establish this as a habit that Beth continues to use to this day.

Her ECHS emphasized collaboration through its many group projects. These projects provided Beth and her classmates additional opportunities to build relationship with their peers. In addition to team projects, Beth's ECHS focused on student presentations throughout the course work.

(Presentations) really prepared us for working in groups and for communicating to audiences in public speaking. . . . That really helps when we have to do presentations in college, and then also just knowing how to speak with authority and how to speak to our professors.

The majority of the presentations were developed in small groups with her peers which provided her several opportunities to work collaboratively with her classmates. In these groups, Monica and her classmates developed a plan, set expectations, established benchmarks, and divided the workload. The skills learned during these group projects and presentation are skills Beth continues to use.



## **Peers**

Beth described a competitive culture between her and some of her classmates. Unlike a traditional high school, her ECHS provided access and flexibility to take an additional seven college courses. This access to college course work at her ECHS paved the way for Beth to be valedictorian.

I wouldn't have worked as hard if I didn't have two people that I was constantly competing with. There was friendly competition. We were all good friends . . . but if I didn't have them fighting me for (being valedictorian), it would not have been as much of an accomplishment.

Beth continues to stay in contact with her ECHS classmates. She is part of a group chat where classmates check in on each other and support each other. In addition, her ECHS classmates use social media to asked questions about college courses, network, and share summer internship opportunities.

## **Faculty**

Beth's ECHS had a couple of teachers that she described as "fantastic people." It was these teachers that provided her with help and advice as she progressed through her ECHS. As 11th and 12th graders, Beth and her classmates would visit the teachers they had in ninth and 10th grade to get help on college course work or just to hang out and talk. The administrators at her ECHS connected Beth and her classmates to help when needed. The small tight-knit community provided Beth and her classmates a supportive educational environment.

## **Event**

Senior year Beth's ECHS had a course that was dedicated to the college application process. The course focused on making sure students were meeting the college application deadline. Assignment in the course were to actually apply to college and making sure you had everything you needed for the applications.

We've been kind of being prepped on the college admissions process like freshman year when we had a method of academic and personal success class, which we also look at college admissions then. We've been kind of given information on the process for all 4 years of high school.

Beth shared that by the time they actually started applying she felt she had been fully prepared for the application process. Beth had ECHS classmates that did not want to go to a 4-year college. Their goal was to attend the trade school or join the military. Regardless of their future plans, these students had to participate in all the class assignment and activities as if they were pursuing acceptance into a 4-year college.

Guest speakers came to her ECHS to share about their careers and their journey to college. Her ECHS created opportunities for Beth and her classmates to interact with people from various colleges and business. Through these opportunities, Beth was able seek out career and college advice and network with others within the community.

## **Family**

There was an active Parent Teacher Association (PTA) at Beth's ECHS, that would meet and provide parents volunteer opportunities. "They did emphasize that it was our responsibility to get our work done and that they weren't going to, you know, get our parents to push us to do it because we should be doing it ourselves."

## **Transition to a 4-Year College**

Beth described a myth that some of her classmates bought into before they left their ECHS. Some of her ECHS classmates became complacent and assumed that they would be fine transitioning to a 4-year university since they had already been taking college course work since they were freshmen. Some of her ECHS classmates assumed that they could do the bare minimum at the university level and get still get an A in their college courses. This myth was based in reality, however, Beth knew several ECHS classmates who had a difficult transition to their 4-year college. She thought that her ECHS peers got too comfortable with the college classes at her ECHS being too easy.

When Beth arrived at her 4-year college, she realized how prepared she was. She noticed that she had a different level of confidence than students who attend a traditional high school. She felt that she was able to deal with situation better than some of her college peers who did not have an ECHS background.

## **Definition of College Readiness**

Beth thinks that college readiness is defined by a student's preparedness to handle the college workload independently. For Beth, the use of passing rates on test standardized tests like the SAT or ACT are not really the point of college readiness. Beth shared other attributes that supports college readiness. For Beth, organization and keeping track of assignments, knowing when they are due, and making sure you turn them in on time are important. Additionally, it is necessary to have a strong work ethic with the ability to steer away from distractions that make you lose sight of your goals or what you are working toward. Lastly, with all the freedoms that come alongside the college experience, time management is

essential. For Beth, without the ability to manage your time you are not going to do well in a college.

### **Melissa's Narrative**

Melissa, a Hispanic female, describes herself as an outspoken person. She graduated from her ECHS May 2016 with her high school diploma and associate degree. Melissa's ECHS focused on academics and did not have any extracurricular sports or elective courses. As a mother, college student, and full-time employee, Melissa plans to complete both her BS and MS in Psychology in the fall of 2020. Melissa would have graduated earlier but had to slow down when she started her family.

### **School Structure and Culture**

Melissa's ECHS is a stand-alone high school located on the campus of the partnering community college. Students who attend her ECHS must apply to be admitted. She began the application process in January of her eighth-grade year. The application process took 6 months before she knew she was accepted into the school. To start the application process, she had to prove she lived in the district and submit three short essays. In May she was invited to participate in a series of face-to-face interviews with faculty. In June she was notified that she had been accepted to the program. When Melissa began, she had a class of 150 students. By the time she graduated her class had dwindled to 100 students.

Melissa's ECHS divided students into cohorts each year. The same group of students would be in the same classes for the year. She attributes being closer to her friends as a result of the cohort model and size of her class. With only 100 students, Melissa shared that she did not really have a choice but to be friends with her classmates. There was no student drama or discipline at her ECHS. "We didn't like a whole lot of drama . . . when it comes to like, discipline, they (ECHS staff) didn't have it, there was a no questions asked. You cannot get

in trouble.” There was a common understanding that you just do not get in trouble and that everyone was there to learn, get a degree, and go to college.

During ninth grade, Melissa took her first college class—health. The class was taught by a college professor on the college campus. Melissa would have to walk to the college campus with her classmates and return to the high school after class. As Melissa reflected on this class she remembered not having to pay for the textbook and being really young, 14 years old, when she took that inaugural class. At Melissa’s ECHS the majority of high school classes are taken during ninth and 10th grades and the majority of college classes are taken during 11th and 12th grades.

Melissa remembers her 11th grade year being one of the most difficult years. It was during that year that she felt pushed into college. During her ninth and 10th grade years they would have one or two classes a semester, but her 11th grade year she had four college classes. That was, “One of the toughest years for us because it (classes) went from just straight high school to, like, all of a sudden, we were in college classes.” Not only was Monica taking more college courses but the complexity of the content in courses like British Literature and American Literature required that she study more. By her senior year, the majority of her coursework was on the college campus.

Melissa’s ECHS had a college prep class that students took each year. She began to learn about the college admission process during the ninth grade. Melissa remembered there being a lot of information shared that first year and at 14 years old, Melissa did not really know what she wanted to do in life. In that course, students wrote college essays, participated in interviews, built resumes “anything that we could possibly encounter when we apply to

colleges or when we did admission processes.” During her junior year, her college prep class helped her apply for scholarships and her senior year they helped her apply to colleges.

## **Peers**

During Melissa’s senior year she was part of study groups where students would help each other understand the material and catch each other up if they missed something. Melissa recognized the contributions of her peers to her success and continued the practice of study groups when she went to university.

When I got to university, I had a lot of the same people in my psychology classes because it was a small campus. It was basically the same people just moving from class to class and I was able to like, “Hey, I’m going to start a study group.” It was a lot easier than me being on my own and just figuring it out on my own.

Melissa’s experience at her ECHS increased her awareness of how peer groups can support her college success. “Don’t be afraid to ask your peers as much as you ask your professor.”

Melissa noticed a difference in her skill sets compared to her peers who came from the traditional high school setting, “It was a lot different.” Melissa described her peers not knowing what an advisor was or how to get textbooks. One “big thing” that separated her from her peers was her ability to write essays. Melissa was exposed to MLA and APA style as early as ninth grade. She recalled her ECHS really emphasized that they would be writing in college. For Melissa, the

little things that you really don’t think about like formatting an essay is like a really big thing . . . I was actually helping some of my friends in university . . . “I can’t believe you’ve never seen this before,” like, you know, I was doing this in ninth grade.

Melissa shared that she desires to complete task on her own without asking for help. She feels seeking help can sometimes create more confusion than assistance. When she needs help, she reaches out to her academic advisor or tutors. Melissa shared that her ECHS encouraged her to self-advocate. “I definitely think that it (the ECHS experience) helped build our interpersonal skills and helped teach us how to advocate for ourselves.” Additionally, Melissa learned from others the things she needed to be successful and was aware of what she needed to do. “It’s knowing when you need help and like knowing when you have to fight for things on your own. Not really depending so much on other people or depending on other people when you absolutely need to.” For Melissa, her ECHS experience supported the development of her self-awareness and gave her confidence to seek assistance when needed.

### **Faculty**

The faculty and staff at Melissa’s ECHS worked to connect with their students. The high school teachers would share their personal cell phone numbers so students could call them if needed. Her ECHS made efforts to encourage graduates to come back, check in, and seek assistance if needed. Having that personal connection and relationship with her ECHS has supported her continued success.

The support provided to students at her ECHS was well planned. Melissa attributed those plans to the effort of a liaison. The liaison was in constant communication with the college campus and worked to make sure everything went smoothly between the high school and the college. If an issue arose between her ECHS and college, the liaison and the ECHS staff would figure it out for Melissa and her classmates.

The professors at the community college treated Melissa and her ECHS classmates like the rest of the college students. The ECHS students did not receive any “special treatment” because of their high school status. Melissa shared that the college professors “treated us like the rest of them (community college students).” The professors would make themselves available if she needed help, just like any other college student. If she needed to meet with her professor, she would schedule her appointments via email during their designated office hours.

### **Transition to a 4-Year College**

Melissa felt her ECHS had supported her throughout the college application process. However, when Melissa arrived at her 4-year college, she realized her 4-year college did not have a clear plan for students with her accomplishments.

They (advisors) didn’t have a clear-cut path for us. They didn’t really know what to do with us. There weren’t very many of us (ECHS graduates). There was probably like three or four in my entire freshman class in university. We were trying to just shuffle through and hopefully somebody knew what to do with us because we had all these credits, right, we have the 60 credits and I don’t think that that’s necessarily a barrier that the high school put for us but it, it definitely became an issue like later on and they tried their best, obviously, but it was something that we had to deal with. Entering her 4-year college with 60 credits created a challenge for Melissa because the 4-year institution was not prepared to support ECHS students. Melissa and her classmates, with associated degrees, finished their 4-year degrees in less than 4 years.

If you go into a science, which a lot of my classmates did because we have a liberal arts degree you have to take more classes. So, they finished in 3 years instead of 2



(years). If they (ECHS classmates) went for a regular arts degree they would finish in 2 or 2½ years.

Melissa's ECHS had a prescribed set of classes that students took to fulfill their liberal arts associate degree. Melissa knew that she would be pursuing a Bachelor of Science when she attended her 4-year college and wished that she could have taken different courses. For example, she was required to take Biology for non-majors, but ended up having to retake a similar course Biology for majors when she went to her 4-year college. For Melissa taking this particular course felt like a waste of time.

I could have been doing other classes that you know actually did help me get onto the path that I wanted to, of course, not everybody knows that, too. I understand why they, just kind of, put us on all the same path, it's easier that way. I don't fault them for that.

The prescribed set of classes did not allow Melissa to take courses at her ECHS that would have counted toward her 4-year degree.

The supportive environment that Melissa experienced at her ECHS made her transition to her 4-year school a challenge. Melissa described her transition as "hard" and further explained:

It was (hard) because we had so much help, we had an advisor who picked our classes for us. We had free textbooks; everything was kind of done for us. . . . Then you go into university where you don't really have all that help. It's just you by yourself. . . you need to advocate for yourself. Even though they tried really hard to teach that (self-advocacy). That's a really hard thing to teach is to advocate for yourself. It was still a transition. And I know that a lot of my classmates, we all have the same issues

of just like we were basically, I don't want to say *coddled*, were like put in a *bubble* in high school. And then when we got released it was like a really big shock to us. I know a lot of people kind of were like, whoa, what's happening, you know.

## **Event**

Two weeks after completing the eighth grade the ECHS brought new students to a 2-week course where “they basically taught us the TSIA test.” At the beginning of the 2 weeks all students took the TSIA to see if they could pass it. Melissa explained that the purpose of the 2 weeks was to get student to pass the placement test to see “if we were at college level” so we could get into the community college. During those 2 weeks Melissa would rotate through different classroom where the teacher “taught the test.” “Basically, they just taught us and tried to fast forward through all the test questions and tried to get us as prepared as possible. At the end of the 2 weeks, we took the test.” Students who didn't pass the test were given other opportunities to test during the school year.

Each year Melissa's ECHS celebrated Alumni Week. During this week, former students come to the campus to share their stories of success with current students. Alumni provide students with advice about college and about being successful. As an alum, Melissa has participated in Alumni Week as a guest speaker. Melissa was able to share things that she was currently learning at college that she thought would be beneficial to them.

Melissa's ECHS focused on helping student with communication. During Melissa's freshman or sophomore year, Melissa and her classmates had to write a speech that they said in front of their peers—115 students. They focused on speeches every year “to help us overcome the fear of public speaking.”

Melissa wished her ECHS provided more opportunities for life skills throughout her ECHS experience. She did acknowledge that laundry is probably something not be taught in school, but it was something all college students should know how to do. During last 2 week of Melissa senior year, her ECHS provided opportunities for students to change a tire and sew on a button. She wished they would have spent time learning to do taxes.

### **Self-Concept**

Melissa feels her ECHS experience prepared her for college. Despite everything, she learned at her ECHS that “life happens.” Melissa would have graduated in 2 years, but unexpectantly became a mom. Melissa speaking of her ECHS classmates explained:

A lot of us, and a lot of my peers have moved on to graduate courses, and I will in the fall. I still feel like that the school (ECHS) prepared me to continue my education and . . . not stop just because life happens or just because it’s hard. A big part of that program was like if it was easy, anybody would do it . . . I did feel ready to keep going. I also felt a little bit burnt out, because you know we’ve been in college, since we were 15 years old.

During Melissa’s senior year she only had one high school course, the college prep class. She felt by this time she was mostly a college kid. The professors or other students on campus could not tell the difference between the college student and seniors at her ECHS. “We were able to blend in more and we felt more accepted by the college kids . . . So nobody really knew.” Melissa was able to make friends on the college campus and a had a greater sense of being a part of the college campus.”

## Skills

If students were struggling in a class, the liaison and teachers at her ECHS would set up tutoring for the students. The teachers and liaison regularly asked students what they needed help with. Reflecting on her experience Melissa shared that this may have hindered her ECHS classmates' ability to speak for themselves. Now in college "we're like, 'Oh shoot, I have to think about what I need help with, how do I get that kind of help on my own.'" Melissa felt her classmates lacked an awareness of their need for help and lacked skills to seek out help when needed. Coming from an ECHS environment where teachers are constantly asking if you need support to a 4-year college environment where the student needs to take the initiative to seek out support was a substantial shift. Advocating for herself was a skill set Melissa felt she had acquired but noticed that for some of her college classmates this was a "big problem for them." She attributes the lack of self-advocacy as a reason many of her classmates were dropping out of college.

Melissa wished that her ECHS had spent more time on time management techniques. Time management was a particular area Melissa struggled with early on. It was a big transition for Melissa going from the eighth grade to taking college classes.

It was a very big transition and like I definitely think that we could have benefited from more time management skills . . . and help with anxiety and all that stuff that comes along with being a college student.

Melissa recalled one teacher trying to help with time management, but what she remembers is her teachers saying things like "you got this, get this done, this is your deadline." Melissa wished that they would have shared more strategies on how to use your time wisely.

Melissa shared that her ECHS tried to share some different study tactics and styles, but “it was more like, you have to study, figure it out.” She had wished that her ECHS had been more explicit with examples of how to study and ways to be more successful. “When I got to university, I did find a professor who showed us different study tactics. I wish that would have happened in high school, that would have been very helpful.” Melissa thought it sounded “weird and crazy” that she did not really know how to study when she went to college. Based on her experience she believes that study skills are something that “you learn over time,” and that study methods are unique to the individual student.

Melissa’s quest to acquire study strategies came from her own personal research and trial and error. She shared her journey of discovery using flashcards, reading text from beginning to end, taking notes in class, writing things on a white board, and color coding. For Melissa some of these strategies worked and some of them wasted her time. Although it eventually worked for her, Melissa does not feel learning study strategies on your own to be the best method.

I think that would have been beneficial for us to know, like, ‘look, these are some of the ways to study successfully,’ like ‘choose the one that helps you,’ instead of me having to try every single one of them and eventually finding one that suited me.

### **Definition of College Readiness**

For Melissa, a key attribute of college readiness is an individual ability to self-advocate. Having the ability to ask for help in academics and in life is an important skill Melissa thinks all college students need. At a university, “you often are seen as like a number. Being seen and being heard by your professors, by your department is very

important.” For Melissa the ability to communicate and self-advocate was an important part of her success in college.

Melissa defines college readiness as a mixture of knowing your support system, knowing where to get help for the things you need, knowing how to gain access to your professors and superiors, knowing when to solicit help. Melissa explains:

I think that, that’s a really big part of college readiness is asking for help when you need it. And a lot of people, you know, don’t know that. Or they don’t like to ask for help, but that was a big part of my success in college.

### **Reggie’s Narrative**

Reggie, an African American male, graduated from his ECHS in May 2019 with both his high school diploma and associate degree. He currently attends a public 4-year college in central Texas and studies political science. Reggie plans to graduate with his bachelor’s degree, then pursue and obtain a law degree, and eventually become a judge or the president of the United States. While attending his ECHS Reggie was Historian of the National Honors Society, a participant in the model UN, and president of his senior class.

Reggie applied to several colleges and wanted to attend The University of Texas at Austin. Unfortunately, he received a conditional offer from The University of Texas at Austin that guaranteed his acceptance to most majors, if he successfully completed the Coordinated Admission Program (CAP). Participating in that program would have required Reggie to take some of the classes he had already completed while at his ECHS. Instead, he decided to attend a school that was affordable, closer to home, and would provide a comparable education. By staying in his local area, Reggie was also able to keep his job, start university, and continue to make progress towards his goals.

Reggie wants to make the world a better place. He wants those around him to be happy and does all he can to improve the things around him. Reggie's motivation is grounded in his belief that he can improve the lives of others around him. In college, Reggie has continued to take on leadership roles as a member of the President's Leadership Cohort. As part of the cohort, Reggie works alongside his 4-year college peers to collectively use their leadership skills to positively impact the college community.

### **Campus Structure and Culture**

Reggie's ECHS was a stand-alone high school right next to the community college campus, allowing students to walk from the high school to attend their community college courses. According to Reggie, the rigorous program created a high achieving atmosphere within his school. In fact, Reggie joked about how many times the principal used the word rigorous—35 times in her orientation speech.

During Reggie's freshman and sophomore years, his ECHS focused on helping students manage both high school and college classes. They emphasized the need for students to work on their time management skills and to earn high grades. The focus of his ECHS was academics. There were clubs at his ECHS but there was not really time for extracurricular activities. The transition from middle school to the ECHS was frustrating for Reggie. He described coming from a middle school that was easy and where he was able to complete a week's worth of work in a day. At his ECHS he had a week's worth of work every day. He quickly realized he needed to improve his time management.

Unlike a typical college registration experience, Reggie and his peers were told what courses to take by the ECHS staff. Course selection was predetermined by the ECHS staff, yet students did receive guidance on how to register for classes, how to access their college

accounts, and how to look up their degree plans to make sure they were choosing the correct courses. His ECHS scheduled “homeroom” time each day, giving students a specific time to study and complete work. Reggie felt this designated time was really helpful for him when he had to study for a test. The study skills and habits he practiced and absorbed at his ECHS helped prepare him for success in college.

Reggie felt his ECHS prepared him for success in college. His ECHS had an Advancement Via Individual Determination program and as part of the program, teachers and former students would share their college experiences. “We would constantly, from my point of view, get alumni to come in and share their experiences.” In addition to guest speakers, the AVID program taught Cornell notes, a common note taking strategy that Reggie continues to use.

From freshman year to senior year Reggie and his classmates were provided instruction on how to address professors in person and in emails. They would provide examples of how to send an email if you had an issue in the class. The need to communicate with professors in person and via email was something his ECHS instilled in the students.

Since Reggie’s freshman year, his ECHS frequently talked about the college admission process to the point that Reggie felt that it was a bit “boring.” Reggie remembers the staff constantly using the phrase, “You’re going to have to get ready for real college.” By the time Reggie was a senior he had already heard about the college admission process, but it was that year that he felt “they finally explained it.” It was during his senior year that he actually put into practice all the skills he had learned over the years to apply for financial aid, scholarships, and admission to college.



## **Peers**

Reggie expressed how proud he was of his ECHS classmates and describes them as “brilliant people.” Although they have moved to different cities and states, he continues to keep in weekly contact with them via Facebook messenger. Prior to Facebook messenger, they would find themselves calling each other to check in. During their weekly talks, they would share their experiences to make sure everyone was ok.

We basically just talk to each other and say, “Hey . . . Do you need help? How are your classes? . . . Hey, give me an idea, like I needed help with a sentence.” They would shoot out their answers kind of like . . .good advice.

Reggie maintains ties with his ECHS community and continues to access his ECHS peers for support while he attends his 4-year college. Reggie shared a recent example of his ECHS classmate asking for assistance with passive voice on a writing assignment. His ECHS classmate sent him a draft, Reggie read through the work, and provided his edits. Reggie’s peer group at his ECHS would discuss their interactions with professors at the community college. They were able to share how the professors graded, the type of tests they gave, and how well they worked with students. “We have sort of, like a guide, you know. You know what you’re expecting to do. You know what you’re getting into.” Reggie’s peers provided a supportive community that gave him information about college courses and professors that helped him navigate the course work requirements. Additionally, his peers reminded him about assignments and tasks that he needed to complete, which further supported his success.

## **Faculty**

Reggie had meaningful relationships with all faculty members at his ECHS, but one in particular had a profound impact on him. His freshman English 1 teacher, Mrs. Jackson,

assigned Reggie a one-page essay. Reggie did not put much effort into the assignment and turned in a paragraph. Reggie's teacher responded, "This isn't what I expected from you. I expect a lot more." Reggie grappled with making sense of Mrs. Jackson's response. Why would she say something like this when she was a stranger to Reggie? As Reggie reflected on the experience, he remembered being annoyed that Mrs. Jackson would make such a remark not knowing his writing skills or academic capacity. Yet, from the first day of class, Mrs. Jackson constantly encouraged Reggie's writing. Reggie remembered that his other teachers would also say things to him like, "Hey, I know you can do more. This is good but I know you can do more. I know you can be more."

Reggie's teachers made a point to let him know that they believed the work he turned in was not his best and was in need of revision. The interactions Reggie had discussing his inadequate work with his teachers guided Reggie to reread, review, adjust, fine tune, and refine his work to meet his teachers' high expectations.

After his initial interaction with Mrs. Jackson, Reggie recalls that she really listened to him when he shared his dreams and aspirations about wanting to be a lawyer and President of the United States. In addition, Mrs. Jackson took an active role in helping him apply to a summer law program at Georgetown University. She helped Reggie write his essay and did most of the groundwork researching the details. Reggie recalled, with a continued sense of bewilderment, the efforts of Mrs. Jackson walking him through the process of applying for the summer program and even committing to helping find a way to pay for the cost, if Reggie was accepted. Ultimately, Reggie was not able to attend the summer program, but the efforts of his teacher left a lasting impression on him.

She was like, “Here, I want this for you”. . . knowing that someone else believes in you, it really kind of pushes you . . . I was like, “That is so nice, you barely know me. The fact that you care enough about me and what I believe in or what I want to achieve meant the world.”

The teachers at Reggie’s ECHS provided tutoring for students and would stay after school as late as 7:00 PM. When students had problems with their college courses, the high school teachers would sit down with the students and provide additional instruction. Reggie’s Pre-Calculus professor had a thick accent, which made it difficult for Reggie to understand. Reggie recalls struggling in the math class but was able to find help from one of his former high school math teachers. His high school math teacher went out of his way to reteach and provide tutoring for Reggie. Reggie can remember spending countless hours with his high school math teacher re-learning Pre-Calculus and talking about life.

When applying to college, the ECHS encouraged all seniors to apply anywhere and everywhere. When it came time to find a 4-year college, Reggie recalled, “our advisor made sure that we knew about any opportunities for scholarship or programs.” Reggie described his ECHS as being “persistent and adamant” about making sure Reggie and his classmates had the information needed. Reggie felt their system of getting information out to students was strong. He described being bombarded with information through emails, classroom visits, announcements and multiple staff members communicating the available opportunities.

Reggie described the college application process as a challenge for both students and the ECHS staff. Students felt stress and anxiety around meeting deadlines for FAFSA (free application for federal student aid), scholarships, and college applications. He described

teachers and counselors being overwhelmed trying to meet the demands of a college-focused student body. Students flooding staff with request for letters of recommendations and support to finalize their college essays and resumes. The counselors hectically tried to keep up with student requests for letters of recommendations, transcripts, FAFSA support, college essay support, and college application process. Reggie recalled an interaction he had with his high school college advisor:

She was super busy. I never seen a woman so busy in my life . . . I wanted her help . . . I was like does this sound right, is this what you are looking for. Because she was so busy. She really couldn't sit down and say Hey, do this, this is what they are looking for, she was kind of like. This sounds nice, this sounds great, I'll look it over. She looked over it real quick and was like awe yeah this sound great and hands it back to me. I really, on that note, I kind of wanted her to like seriously to critique it and say hey this isn't good. This isn't what they want to see, you need to have this.

While the counselor's intentions were positive and supportive, her cursory response to his letter did not meet Reggie's expectations for support. Reggie saw this as a challenge for a small school so focused on college acceptance. Their school did not have the capacity to provide all the support necessary for the number of students that were applying for college and scholarships. It was just too much for two people to handle. At times Reggie felt counselors skimmed or cut corners just to keep up with student demand.

During Reggie's first semester at his 4-year college he felt "lonely" and "bored." Reggie had too much free time and found himself sitting around doing nothing. So, Reggie reached out to Mrs. Jackson to share how he was feeling.

She (Mrs. Jackson) was just encouraging. She gave me this long essay (text), make sure you don't stay complacent. Always look for opportunities. This might be where you are at now, but it's not going to be where you are at tomorrow.

The text from Mrs. Jackson was influential in encouraging Reggie to become more active at his 4-year college. Reggie began to participate in extracurricular activities and started to volunteer with organizations at his 4-year college.

### **Events**

In August of Reggie's junior year his ECHS took students to Austin to talk with political leaders about stronger gun reform laws. His ECHS teamed up with another small school to form a coalition. The two schools worked together to share their ideas with the attorney general regarding the need for stronger gun regulation. Reggie noticed a distinct difference in how students from each school prepared for the event. He described the partnering school as having a canned speech that was used over and over. Although emotional and well written, Reggie felt their speech failed to incorporate multiple perspectives. Reggie shared that his ECHS supported him in developing his ideas and allowed him to analyze things from various perspectives. "I wasn't just being told what to say, not to think, but how to think and how to express those ideas in a sincere and articulate way." Reggie was thankful that his ECHS empowered him to develop his own point of view and that he was able to share it with others in a meaningful way.

During his senior year, Reggie found himself watching several videos on YouTube about police brutality and unjust practices in the prison system. Reggie used every opportunity in his assignment at his ECHS to expose the deficits in the legal system.

I'm like, I need to learn this, I need to know this. When I'm in the position, I need to be able to fix things . . . At the end of the day if I become the judge or I become the president. . . . if I'm too ignorant of the issues, then how effective am I going to be? So that really pushes me.

Reggie's quest for learning has been inspired by his goals of one day being in an occupation where he can enact change.

### **Family**

Reggie made a point to keep his family life and academics separate. He did not involve his parents unless he felt it was necessary. If ECHS students were having difficulties, however, the ECHS staff and teachers would call parents or schedule meetings. During those meetings, the goal was to get the students what they needed so they could succeed.

At a young age Reggie's family showed him the world is not perfect, and that he had a responsibility to make it better. He shared an exchange he had with his mother when he was younger:

Mom: Don't be in this world and make it worst.

Reggie: I'm like, 'that's true.'

Mom: There is already terrible people out there. Be a good guy.

Reggie: Alright, Mom, I will.

### **Transition to a 4-Year College**

When Reggie transitioned to his 4-year college, he did not have the same support system with peers like he did at his ECHS. He described the feeling as if there was no one there to help him, guide him, or share in his experiences. Getting information about his college courses and professors was something he depended on at his ECHS, but at his 4-year

institution, “I had no idea. I don’t know anyone here. I didn’t know if I had a professor. I was just like, ‘oh, do you know this professor’ and people would be like, ‘no, I’ve never had him.’” The loss of connection with his peer group and the loss of knowledge about the courses and professors impacted his transition to his 4-year college. Reggie expressed loss at not being able to access information about his new professors, and this further disconnected him from the college and increased his sense of isolation.

Before college, Reggie never had an issue making new friends, but when he began his 4-year college he was “surprised” at how challenging it was. Most of Reggie’s classes were online and he was taking them with “adults” and not freshmen or students he met at orientation. He found it difficult to communicate with classmates his age.

They were all taking classes together. They know each other, forming bonds, just like you do in regular school. But I wasn’t there for those times. I probably get to see them like once every like 2 weeks. I was missing out on a lot of things. It was kind of hard. I’m not going to lie. I had to go to many events just to meet like 20 people. Reggie had entered college as junior and took upper level course work that directly related to his major while his age level peers were freshmen completing parts of the core curriculum. He feels entering his 4-year college as a junior hindered his ability to have a normal college experience.

(Attending an ECHS) sort of robs you of that college experience. Instead of hanging out with a bunch of new people, making new friends, forming new study groups, you’re kind of left by yourself in your own course work. You have to mature a little faster cause you are going to hang out with 23-year-olds and 24-year-olds. That have

kind of been around the college block. They're not trying to hang out with you. They are trying to get their stuff done.

Reggie did not know people in the classes he was taking. Connecting with people who have the same ambitions and goals was difficult and made him feel like he was alone in his classes.

In spite of difficulties, determination and persistence were two attributes Reggie felt his ECHS had instilled in him. Reggie used those attributes to build new relationships with his 4-year college peers. "I was like, 'Okay. Go to every event. Wave when going to classes, try to be friendly and as loving as possible.' I made friends; it wasn't that hard."

When Reggie saw his older college classmates struggling, it was difficult for him to provide them academic advice. He perceived that his older college classmates looked down on him because of his age.

I'm just a student who is going to college, whether I'm a senior or not. This is still technically my first year. Although that, I'm speaking that I know . . . I don't truly know. That's what it looks like to them.

It was hard for him to share strategies and skills he had learned at his ECHS. Reggie described the atmosphere being different at his 4-year college compared to his ECHS. The study habits of his college classmates did not match up to his ECHS experience. "It's kind of a different mindset, here everyone is super relaxed, super chilled. They are taking C's and D's like nothing. I'm like that's crazy. I get a 99 and I'm crying."

To maintain his educational trajectory, Reggie made a concerted effort to surround himself with individuals that would help him maintain an environment where people were excelling. "I just tried to get in the mindset of a scholar instead of trying to . . . just relax and



enjoy the college experience.” It was difficult at first, but Reggie connected with people who had similar ambitions and goals. He surrounded himself with student ambassadors, student mentors, and other student leaders. Reggie believed that he performs better than other students at his 4-year college. He shared having stronger study habits, study skills, time management, self-discipline, and a strong sense of self-confidence. “Even my worst day will be better than what most people can do.” He felt that his ECHS experience put him at a different level of college readiness than other college students.

When Reggie started his 4-year college, he made a point to seek out a professor to be a mentor. He felt that having a mentor would elevate his critical thinking abilities. He has a genuine desire to develop relationships with his professors and wants to know who they know. Reggie believes that his ability to communicate, share ideas, and debate with his professors are central to sharpening his mind, and these are all skills he learned at his ECHS.

### **College Readiness**

Reggie was confident about his readiness for college. He had a formula based in time management skills that he developed while at his ECHS that he continues to use.

For example, if I have a 10-page essay, I’ll be like, ‘that is like 2 days of work and 1 day to write it down and the other day to review.’ If I really want to get an A. Three days of work, 1 day to write it, other day to review, and the other day to improve.

Reggie is aware of his abilities and the time it will take to complete an assignment.

### **Definition of College Readiness**

Reggie believed that college is not for everyone and that some people have too much going on in their lives to be focused on college. Reggie believed that an individual’s intelligence, which he calls raw talent, is not what you need to be successful in college.

Rather, “You got to work hard, like I said, you got to be able to put in the effort to improve.” Initially, Reggie defined college readiness as an individual’s ability to overcome any challenge. As he pondered further, he redefined college readiness as an individual’s self-awareness of the need to improve. Reggie attempted to define college readiness using these terms: Motivation, dedication, independent, and interacting with others. Reggie’s definition of college readiness evolved as he shared his perspective of his definition of college readiness.

Reggie first described college readiness as a student’s ability to look for things that are going to help them improve and the ability to find the programs your college is offering and take advantage of them. Students who do not take advantage of these supports and opportunities are not college ready, according to Reggie. An individual is college ready if they have the ability to work hard, discover what they want to do, and can be independent. Reggie grinned as he shared, “Your mom is not going to be at college to help you and your friends can’t help you because they are not the ones taking the test or submitting the homework.” Reggie proceeded to share other definitions of college readiness: knowing the impact of your decisions on your future; the ability to interact with others and get out there and experience life; you have got to improve, and you have got to know what to improve; and knowing you’re not perfect, knowing your weaknesses and knowing your strengths makes a huge difference in your ability to be college ready. Then Reggie added, “College readiness to me is completing yourself.”

Reggie loved his ECHS experience even though he also felt his ECHS experience robbed him of traditional high school and college experiences that he did not anticipate missing out on. “The ECHS program, no matter what it took from me or no matter what I

think it took. It gave so much more.” Instead of framing this as a loss, Reggie considered it a sacrifice necessary to achieve his goals.

### **Christine’s Narrative**

Christine, a Hispanic female, graduated from her ECHS in May 2019 with both her high school diploma and associate degree. Christine is the second youngest of five siblings, and two of her older sisters are currently in college. Growing up, she felt that she was always lagging behind her other siblings. While Christine aspired to attend college as well, she did not know how her family was going to be able to support her. She was concerned that she would miss out on the opportunity to attend college. “Out of nowhere,” Christine and her family and friends learned about the new ECHS opportunity in her district when she was in the eighth grade. The thought of earning a high school diploma and associate degree was appealing to Christine, particularly because of financial concerns. Christine was a member of the first graduating class of her ECHS.

Christine described herself as a “selfish kid” when she first started her ECHS. Her experience at her ECHS was transformational to the point where Christine now describes herself as an individual who is always trying to do things for others. Christine described herself as a goal-orientated individual who focuses on preparing for the future. Christine was involved in several aspects of the college community but emphasized that she was focused on long term goals, “rather than living in the moment.” She strove to get everything she can out of college so that she will one day be able to support her family with whatever they need.

Christine is grateful for the opportunity she had to be a part of the ECHS experience, and she was proud to earn her associate degree at such a young age. As a current university student, she is also thankful that she is able to focus on courses related to her major and her

degree. This has allowed Christine to feel that she has “begun a new chapter in her journey in life.” Christine is dedicated to her studies and to her family.

Learning came easy for Christine in middle and elementary school. Growing up she did not need to study to be successful in school. However, when she entered the ECHS program, she realized she could not continue to advance at a high level on her own terms. Christine had to put in the effort to keep up with her course work.

I had to study a lot harder, I had to put in more time, I had to, because I’m a very visual learner and a hands-on person, so I would have to find different ways that help me learn or study the material. In biology I learned, pretty late in the semester, to start drawing things . . . the different terms, what the different parts of the cell, what organs look like, what different types of organisms look like, and how to identify the different parts of them. That part really helped me.

Christine’s ECHS provided her opportunities to develop and practice study skills, strategies, and habits that supported her academic aspirations.

### **School Structure and Climate**

Christine’s ECHS was located on the campus of a traditional high school. The ECHS operated independently from the traditional high school and followed the community college guidelines. Although on the same campus, the ECHS was housed in a different building, separating the ECHS students from the rest of the student body. Christine describes feeling like she was in a “little bubble” rotating between four classrooms in the designated ECHS space.

Christine’s ECHS provided everything the students needed such as textbooks, school supplies, and transportation to the community college. If a student failed a class at the

college, students were supposed to pay for it, but her ECHS did not make them pay. Christine never failed a college class but knew of classmates who did. Christine recalled her ECHS making a concerted effort to make sure all the classes they needed to complete their associate degree were offered.

Most students at Christine’s ECHS did not have an opportunity to be involved with the traditional high school activities or events. When students would attend college classes, the students who did not pass the TSIA stayed behind at the high school and participated in a remedial TSIA preparation course. TSIA is designed to evaluate if a student is prepared for reading, writing, and mathematics at the collegiate level (College for All Texans, 2020). The TSIA is required for all students entering college in Texas.

The students who did not pass the TSIA had additional opportunity to participate in traditional high school events and activities because they remained on the high school campus while the other ECHS students were bussed to the college. The teachers who helped students who had not passed the TSIA were not a part of the ECHS program but were part of the traditional high school. Christine felt that the teachers who helped these students “crippled” them rather than preparing them for the TSI.

Christine’s observation of the TSIA requirement left her feeling that her ECHS was not intended for everybody, just like she felt college was not meant for everyone.

I feel like there were a lot of kids in our program that felt like they weren’t smart enough or something was wrong with them because they weren’t TSIA ready. . . .

There was so much pressure to basically be college ready. But because they didn’t meet those expectations . . . they were not treated the same way as TSIA students were.

Christine had a friend who was not enjoying her ECHS experience because she had not passed the TSIA . In contrast, Christine had passed the TSIA . “I was loving it (ECHS). I was enjoying it, while they were kind of losing themselves.” Christine shared a genuine concern for her classmates that did not pass the TSIA test at her ECHS. Christine had the impression that there was a difference in how school personnel treated students who passed the TSIA and students who did not pass the TSIA.

Christine knew where she wanted to go to college early on. Deciding on a 4-year college was not a difficult decision for her like it was for some of her ECHS classmates. ECHS students who were not sure about what college they wanted to attend would be directed to the career center located within the traditional high school. Students who needed help completing the FAFSA or ApplyTexas (Texas’ universal college application used by public and private college) were directed to the career center at the traditional high school.

During Christine’s junior and senior year, her ECHS bussed her to the community college to attend her classes. Going to the college campus made Christine feel as if she was planted into the college environment. She was able to experience and feel what it was really like to be on a college campus. She no longer had adults to monitor her every move or making sure she was attending her classes. Students could leave campus or skip class, but for Christine the feeling of being an adult helped her make the decision to take advantage of the opportunity she was given. “We were just part of the campus. We weren’t treated as kids. We were treated like actual adults there.” Students at Christine’s ECHS could join clubs and organizations on the college campus and had access to the recreation center.

## **Faculty**

Christine felt that the professors on the college campus treated the ECHS students like any other college student. The professors provided assistance and encouraged the ECHS students to reach out to them if needed. Christine felt that she, along with her classmates, had the ability to do things on their own terms while on the college campus. At the same time, she felt supported by her college professors who provided guidance along the way.

The teachers at Christine's ECHS came from different backgrounds and were certified by the community college to teach at the college level. Christine shared that the chancellor (principal), at her high school, made a point to hire professors and "not just regular" high school teachers. Each year as the ECHS added a grade level, they would also add an additional staff member. Christine noticed a change in the staff and culture as she progressed through the program. When she first began her ECHS, Christine felt that the teachers were really there for them.

The first 2 years they (teachers) tried to make everything like college as possible, but the district, but the school was telling them to adjust because we were kids or whatever. I'm grateful that they did things on their terms.

The teachers made a point to create a college-like environment and treated her like a college student. However, over time and as new teachers were added to the team, Christine got the impression that teachers were not preparing her younger classmates at the same level of intensity.

Christine and her friends developed a relationship with their chancellor, Mrs. Cook. Christine describes Mrs. Cook as a good communicator who always willing shared with Christine and her friends' different things they could do in life. Mrs. Cook helped Christine

develop her skills and abilities to acknowledge diverse perspective in various situations. As Christine's former guidance counselor, Mrs. Cook provided support to Christine throughout her time at the ECHS. Christine felt Mrs. Cook helped her navigate important personal and academic decisions. "She helped me with my mental health. She was just really supportive of me and helped me go through everything." Christine felt that Mrs. Cook believed in her more than she believed in herself. Mrs. Cook pushed Christine to do her best during her ECHS and continues to push her now. Christine attributes much of her success to Mrs. Cook and feels that if it was not for her, that she probably would not be where she is today.

Through the 4 years, Christine had a diverse set of professors that provided points of views from various walks of life. Her government and psychology college professors were of minority descent and had cultural backgrounds different than Christine. Their backgrounds enabled Christine to engage in the course material and class work. Their collective influence encouraged Christine to reflect and think about who she wanted to become.

The communication she had while at the ECHS with her chancellor and professor gave Christine a "step up" from others in her peer group. Christine believes that being able to communicate and interact with professors is important. She observed her peers struggling in this area and noticed the effect it had on their success. Christine's ability to communicate and interact with others has opened unique opportunity at her 4-year college. While talking with her college advisor, Christine shared her need for a work study opportunity to cover expenses. As a result of that exchange Christine was able to obtain a job in the graduate research office. Christine explained, "Yes, it was simple, but I was able to verbalize what was going on in my life, and he was able to get me a position." This opportunity is something



Christine feels is “pretty cool” for someone her age, all because she had learned to effectively communicate with others during her ECHS experience.

### **Family**

Knowing how hard her parents work feeds Christine’s aspiration to excel in college. Christine desires a “better life” than the hard work her parents had endured. She also believes that one day she will be taking care of her parents and wants to be prepared. Christine lives in the campus dorms and commutes home each weekend to visit with her family.

### **Events**

Because the college semester ended before the high school semester, Christine remembered having seminars that focused on things like communication skills or guest speakers discussing careers on these “free” days.

Teachers would . . . teach us like different ways of like how to write your email, how to really phrase things whenever it comes to my questions. Just really getting us more comfortable with communicating with our professors is what they did, or like preparedness more for the real life.

Christine sees herself as her own obstacle when it comes to college success. She felt prepared for college because of her experience being on a college campus her junior and senior year. Christine noticed a difference between herself and others who did not attend an ECHS when it comes to communicating with professors. She heard her classmates being critical of the professors and criticizing them without reaching out to the professor regarding their concerns. Christine’s experience at the ECHS provided her opportunities to interact with professors in a professional manner unlike her college classmates. It was during her

junior and senior year at the ECHS that she interacted with her college professor regularly. She felt like an adult and was treated like an adult.

### **Individual College Readiness**

Christine saw herself as college ready. She has passed her TSI, successfully passed her college classes, and earned an associate degree. Although Christine earned her associate degree, she felt like she needed to pause a bit. By attending her ECHS, she came to realization that not only did she not have the high school experience like everybody else, neither is she able to have a traditional 4-year college experience. She was in college classes with students 2-3 years older than her and had few classes with others her age. This created obstacles for her to interact with other first year college students which limits her social interaction with others her age. The accelerated ECHS program left Christine feeling like she lost track of life's experiences. She missed the experiences of a traditional high school and "not really having the whole 4-year experience at college."

### **Definition of College Readiness**

Christine shared several different variations of a college readiness definition and explained why she believes it is difficult to develop a specific definition. "Because everybody comes from different backgrounds. It's different for everybody." She believes a student can get a 4.0 without really pushing themselves to improve and thinks college readiness should be "recommendation based." Christine described college readiness being a moment in time where an individual is focused and in tune to the career they want and how they want to be successful. Christine added college readiness also requires involvement, commitment, and making connections. From Christine's perspective, anyone could get a 4.0

grade point average, but if individuals lack connections with people and fail to immerse themselves in the community, you cannot really view them as committed to college.

### **Eddie's Narrative**

Eddie, a Hispanic male, graduated from his ECHS in May 2018 with both his high school diploma and associate degree. Eddie pushed himself to succeed at his ECHS, describing himself as more mature than others his age. He was an A/B honor roll student throughout high school, and he also received awards for attendance and was recognized at the college level twice for his high GPA. Eddie attributed his ECHS experience as a key to his growth as an individual and his ability to improve his social interaction, academics, and involvement in the school community.

### **School Structure and Climate**

Eddie's ECHS was located on a college campus and was focused on providing pathways in Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM). Once students began his ECHS they were required to select a major in one of the STEM fields. All students who attend Eddie's ECHS had to apply while they were still in middle school. During the summer, after their eighth grade, all students went through an interview process with staff from the ECHS. Eddie remembered participating in a couple of interviews and filling out required paperwork. After completing the application and interview phase, he had to wait a long time before he was notified that he had been accepted into the program.

Eddie considered himself an introverted person when he first began his ECHS. As an ECHS student, Eddie was able to take classes with other college students. By his senior year, he began to hang out with the college students and started making more friends. As an ECHS student, Eddie had full access to the weight room, gym, and common areas on campus. It was during his visits to the gym that he was able to build relationships with individuals from

diverse backgrounds. He credits his ECHS for providing him the opportunity to interact with a diverse group of individuals.

I never even would have seen and been able to meet people from different backgrounds. This person from this place, this person has done this, it's really awesome just being able to see like all the different ethnicities and backgrounds.

Through the college recreational facilities, Eddie was able to interact and build relationships with others outside his ECHS.

Eddie described his course work at his ECHS as rigorous, specifically on the college side. One of the most rigorous courses taken by Eddie was his college U.S. History course. He described the course as one of the most stressful courses he had ever taken. The course contained lecture, exams, and papers. The professor was strict, and she would mark off for the slightest deviation of what was requested in the assignment. Eddie and his classmates were all having trouble, and more than half the students dropped the course.

It definitely pushed me. It definitely pushed my limits . . . When she saw how many people dropped the class and she saw the grades . . . she said, "I'm only doing this because this is what college is supposed to be."

Eddie was determined not to fail this course. He would record the lectures, listen to the recording, and study until two or three in the morning. Eddie stated, "I wasn't going to fail a history class."

The stress of the course was so much for Eddie, that even his parents asked what was going on. Eddie shared with them about struggles he was having in his U.S. History course. Eddie knew they could not do much, but he did heed their advice to "suck it up" and do what

is asked of you. Knowing that his classmates were also struggling Eddie felt like he was on his own to figure it out.

I just felt like . . . by myself I could figure everything out. . . . That (my) family didn't necessarily know what to tell me. Because they weren't taking the course with me. They were not in school with me. My friends were struggling so it was kind of like me against the class. Me against this history professor.

The college provided assistance to help Eddie progress through the STEM program. Eddie's ECHS provided tutoring, but Eddie took advantage of late-night workshops and internships related to his major that the community college offered. As an ECHS student, Eddie was able to obtain an internship on campus where he was able to complete tasks related to his future career.

When they offered me an internship it was . . . little IT stuff, fixing routers, check up on switches, making sure this works and that works, cleaning up storage rooms. Just pretty basic stuff for an intern making sure computers are running smoothly.

Eddie used this experience, along with attending workshops and other services, to further prepare him for college.

I took the time to use the internship to better prepare for my computer science world. It even looks good on my resume to be fairly honest. Because that helped me prepare for jobs in the future at a young age.

Eddie went on to share that he would frequent the building that housed the equipment and professors for his STEM major. Eddie would go to offices and ask questions about things he wanted to understand and note how certain programs worked. When it came to the college resources, Eddie felt that they played a key role in his academics in high school.

Eddie also used this dedication and perseverance to figure out how to approach his coursework best. If taking notes was not working, he would change it up and try something else.

Every class is different; every class is not going to be the same. You have to figure out, you have to know the system of the class. You have to see how to read the syllabus. Figure out what the professor expects and just be transparent with the class. Know the system of how they want it to work and just adapt to it.

## **Faculty**

Eddie attributed his college readiness to two professors who recognized his potential. Eddie's Algebra I teacher left a lasting impression on him. In the ninth grade, Eddie's struggles with math left him "laughing in class, giggling, and not paying attention." But because of support from his teacher, Eddie's class behaviors began to change.

I started paying more attention, I started attending tutoring, he stayed longer after class at the end of the day to help me out with homework, my assignments, just tutoring . . . to figure out what I needed to do to pass these classes. . . . He saw my potential, that I was smart enough to put effort into actually doing the work to actually pay attention. At some point, I would be helping out my classmates.

Eddie maintained interaction with his Algebra I teacher all through ECHS. "If it wasn't for his help, I probably wouldn't have succeeded in his classes overall (and) really in my core curriculum classes." Eddie's Algebra I teacher noticed his potential, pointed out his potential, and supported his success in the ECHS program.

Eddie's history teacher was also influential in his success. Eddie and a classmate were invited by the principal to participate in the interview process for prospective new teachers.

During the interviews they would observe and later provide feedback to the principal on prospective candidates. One of the teachers hired became his history teacher the following year.

He was really laid back with everybody. . . . I would go to tutoring with him and stay after school, and we would crack jokes and we would hang out a little later than usual. He helped me with the application through colleges, what they wanted and what they were looking for. When I graduated, he told me that he really enjoyed getting to know me that he saw the growth in my potential to pay attention in class, to do the homework. . . . I still go by the high school just to check up on him. Just to say hi, drop in, and say hello.

These conversation and interaction with teachers helped Eddie figure out what he wanted to do. The tutoring and focus on the “nitty gritty” of academics provided by the professors were instrumental in Eddie’s success at the ECHS. His ECHS teachers encouraged Eddie to go for his goals and dreams that he had begun to develop for himself.

### **Peers**

Eddie shared that he made a lot of friends at the high school and at the college while attending his ECHS. Eddie’s high school friends were his support system for pushing him in his high school classes. Eddie and his friends would text each other and meet for lunch to figure out assignments, clarify their understanding of class material, and remind each other of deadlines. “My high school friends definitely helped me with classes that I was having trouble with and I would help them out, they would help me out.”

Eddie collaborated with his friends to help him meet the demands of the rigorous course work. He stayed on campus more to participate in groups to figure out what he needed to do to pass the classes he was taking.

The friends he made at the college were the ones that made him feel like he was ready for college. They were able to help Eddie see that college was more than just classes and homework. “They help me see that college is another steppingstone in your life to network and socialize and just have fun while you are in college to get your BA or AA.” For Eddie, having the two peer groups provided a balance between the dynamics he was experiencing while attending the ECHS. Eddie appreciated the friends he had at his ECHS and he continued to keep in contact with a few of them but was not inspired by them to pursue his academic or career desires.

Eddie felt many of the peers at his ECHS had better communication skills than he did. Talking with his peers, he would pick up tips and tricks and the different words they used that he did not know or never used before. “I knew I should combine learning and comprehension communication skills to be able to talk to people that have better communication and better vocabulary. I think those were the kind of things that really helped me along the way.” The interactions Eddie had at his ECHS prepared him to have conversations with his college classmates. Eddie shared that he knows the words that are being used amongst his peers and that he understands what is being said and is able to make sense of it.

## **Family**

When Eddie first started his ECHS, he was skeptical of what the program was going to offer. While in middle school he considered the ECHS because it would give him an



opportunity for a head start and not waste his time repeating courses. When he started his ECHS, however, he changed his mind. He did not want to make friends and convinced himself that the ECHS was not going to get him anywhere. He was failing his classes and intended to get out of the program. Before that could happen, ECHS staff began interacting with his family by providing Eddie and his family feedback about his progress. Eddie recalls his teacher sharing, “You’re a good kid. Do what you need to do. Start reaching out. This is a really good program for you. Just don’t mess it up . . . keep pushing yourself.” Eddie’s mother started to get more involved in school. She started to come to meet the teacher events and the parent-teacher organization meetings. Eddie attributed his mother and teachers pushing him to where he wanted to be. Two months into his ninth-grade year Eddie’s mom intervened and talked with him.

I got a talking from my mother, telling me you’re not going to get out of this program. You need to do what you need to do. We had this whole debate, this whole conversation about the future, and how it is going to look for me when I get out of high school and when I go to college.

The opportunity for Eddie to receive his high school diploma and associate degree was something that his mother and father desired. After thoughtful consideration and reflecting on what his mother said Eddie made a decision to get his “stuff” together. Eddie started to make new friends, began getting involved on campus, doing everything he could to get his grades back on track.

Eddie did not want to go out of state for college and applied to several schools in Texas. Eddie was accepted at the private university he desired to attend, but after applying for financial aid and scholarships the cost was a still a factor.

(Tuition) was pretty hefty since it was a private institution. My mother talked with me about how she would need to get two other jobs to make money. I didn't like hearing that because I didn't want her to have to go through so much trouble to get me to college . . . I was 18, I was thinking about doing it myself. I needed to pick up the ball on my end.

Eddie applied to another college, the one he attends now, and was able to visit, learn about their program, and get pricing for tuition. "It was very cheap for my family where they didn't have to go out of their way to do more jobs. And we could save money for just about the same program." Eddie was closer to home and the cost was three times less than the private college. Eddie came to the conclusion that graduating from college was more important than the college you attend.

Eddie believed that his family holds him accountable to the goals he has set for himself. He described them as constantly pushing him to do more, to improve, and to do what it takes to get closer to graduation. He worked toward his goal not only for himself, but in honor of his grandmother who cherished his accomplishment of getting accepted to college. Eddie holds the input he receives from his family "dear to his heart" and believes that without them he would not have pushed himself to be where he is today.

## **Skills**

Eddie shared a recent accomplishment in his fundamental programming class. As part of the project he had to work with a group of classmates to write a complex script from scratch. The challenge for his group was dealing with the strict timeline given by his professor to complete the project along with the research required to understand the coding needed for the task. Eddie shared that his group had no idea what they were doing when they

first started, but as they progressed through the weeks, they had accomplished a great deal of work together. Eddie shared,

I think that was one of my biggest accomplishments, because it really got me in like, in depth to my major and my classes and what to expect in the workforce. It is possible to work with someone or a group of people on a project. That actually opened up my perspective on that. . . . I felt really good afterwards.

When asked how his ECHS prepared him for this accomplishment Eddie stated: “a little bit, but not too much.” Eddie’s ECHS did not have any major group project. There were minor group projects for high school classes, but there was little focus on working with people. For this particular project working with other helped him with the comprehension of the computer language he was using. Eddie wished that his ECHS would have placed some emphasis on teamwork. “I think if I was able to get a hold of that group team working atmosphere, I think it would have helped a lot more. Instead of picking it up while at a 4-year university.”

Eddie shared that college required the ability to multitask and the ability to use strategies to prioritize tasks. Eddie learned to prioritize what needed to be done now and what can be done later.

If there are things that need to be done in a week or 2 weeks from now. I would start to pick at those as well. I’m doing multiple things at once but I’m also taking care of everything in a timely manner.

Eddie shared that time management is a skill he continues to develop. He began using strategies at his ECHS but continues to pick up new strategies and regularly uses a planner to support his time management.

## **Transition to a 4-Year College**

When it came to select a college, Eddie narrowed his choice down to two public and one private university. To help him with the selection process, he began asking others if they knew anyone that went to the colleges he was interested in. He would ask random people if they knew anyone that had visited the campus or went to the campus. Eddie sought out individuals who were attending the three colleges of his choice, and their feedback helped him weigh his options and make a decision. Eddie also asked his counselor and principal what they thought of his choices and which one they thought would be “best” for him.

Due to cost, Eddie eliminated the private school despite it having the best program for his major. He knew if he selected the private school his mother would get a second job to support him, but that was not an acceptable option for Eddie. He eliminated a second school because the school was several hours away from home. He was concerned about the expenses of traveling back and forth from home to visit family. The school he selected was closer to home and was the least expense option.

The transition to the 4-year college was not scary for Eddie. He felt he had a good background about what college was. He had already experienced the college atmosphere when he attended the ECHS. Eddie explained,

You know, I was already involved in the college . . . I felt like I was ready back then and currently now. I feel as I completely mastered that. I feel completely ready for the workforce. I feel ready where I am now, where as before, I’ve grown. I think my own college readiness has definitely developed over time and has definitely taken off since I first started (4-year college).

Eddie's involvement during his ECHS years supported his ability to transition smoothly to his 4-year college. Unlike other students transitioning to college, Eddie knew what to expect because of his ECHS experience.

Eddie's transition was different than his peer group transferring from traditional high school. The students Eddie interacted with were 2-3 years older than he was. He was also taking courses that were specific to his degree.

I knew what classes to take, what major to follow up with . . . the major itself is leading me to more and more classes that I will eventually need in the workforce. The transition from high school to college was fairly easy cause I already knew what to expect.

Eddie also began college with a plan of what he was going to do. Eddie knew the academic path that would help him get to the career field he wants to work in.

For Eddie, the ECHS experience provided him an environment to grow up and mature, to get out of his shell and become a different person. Eddie described his transformation from being a person who did not make friends to a person who is active on campus and socially engaged at his 4-year college. Eddie viewed these friendships as supports for college and beyond.

When you are trying to succeed in college, you can pass up good opportunities for your career too. You run into people that can help you with your college experience and your career goals. Overall, just (the) more friends (you) have, the greater social support you would typically have.

Eddie is confident in his ability to interact with others. He felt he had great relationship with his peers, advisors, and other people he meets. It was during his ECHS

school where he came out of his “comfort shell” and had the confidence to talk to random people and share in a conversation. Without this opportunity, Eddie “would have been more secluded” when he arrived at college.

### **Event**

Eddie shared his experience about a career fair that was offered by the partnering college. During the career fair, Eddie was able to walk around and talk with individuals from various companies. The career fair provided him the opportunity to ask questions about the different positions available within the companies and organizations represented. The experience helped Eddie understand the various roles within a company and the different scholarship programs they offered if Eddie wanted to pursue working for one of the companies.

Being able to talk with people. “Hey, what programs have you done through your major?” Actually, talking with them. They’ve done an internship out of town or in town. They’ve done programs for nursing. programs for their major . . . for a week out of town, maybe a weekend thing. I never really got into programs and stuff but being able to ask other what they’ve done. I was able to see how much people have made a difference in themselves. I think that’s what kind of opened my eyes, saying, “Oh, well, if these people are doing all these things, if these people are taking these classes for themselves, why shouldn’t I do it?”

Eddie did not participate in any formal career program, but the career fair expanded his understanding of what others were able to do for themselves as well as what he could do for himself to prepare for the workforce.

## **Definition of College Readiness**

Eddie believed he was ready for college while attending his ECHS. He felt that his college readiness developed over time and had exponentially grown since he started in his 4-year college. Eddie defined college readiness “as being able to look in the mirror and tell yourself . . . you are ready. You got to where you needed to be. You are ready. You can do this.” He also shared that college readiness was also defined by the things you have been able to do. For Eddie, college readiness was determined by the combination of individual accomplishments and self-confidence. “Telling myself don’t give up and reminding myself of these people that I surround myself with people who keep pushing.”

## **Cross Case Study Analysis**

The purpose of this research was to explore the gap between college eligibility and college readiness from the perspectives of recent ECHS graduates to provide insight and understanding of how ECHS and institutes of higher learning support or fail to support student success. Yosso’s (2005) Community Cultural Wealth outlines a framework of six types of interdependent and overlapping forms of capital that build on one another as part of the Community Cultural Wealth. The six forms of cultural capital are aspirational, navigational, social, linguistic, familial, and resistant capital.

I used the Community Cultural Wealth framework to investigate the impact of the ECHS experience on a student’s readiness for college and to identify, analyze, and challenge the distorted perceptions of college readiness from the perspective of ECHS graduates. In this cross-case analysis, I used data collected from six ECHS graduates from central and northern Texas. I used my findings across all six case narratives to answer my research questions. I identified several themes that had impacted the participants preparation for college and their

self-perception of college readiness. I was also able to further conceptualize a definition of college readiness from the perspective of an ECHS graduate.

### **Aspirational Capital**

I found the ECHS experience supported the aspirations of all six graduates in various ways. By design the ECHS provided each participant access to college courses that allowed them to fulfill their aspirations of earning their high diploma and associate degree simultaneously. The ability to attend classes on the college campus supported their aspirations of being a college student. They were given the independence and freedom to be a college student, to access college resources, participate in clubs and organizations, and use the college facilities like every other college student. Their success in their college courses further supported their aspirations and supported their confidence that they were ready for a 4-year college.

Five of the six ECHS had a yearly class, at the high school, that focused on college readiness. A common element of this class was its focus on the college selection and application process. Graduates shared that this class helped them write college essays, prepared them for interviews, building resumes, searching and applying for scholarships, and supported filling out college application. In addition, some graduates shared that this class also provided them with support registering for college classes, understanding degree plans, time management skills, communication skills, note taking skills, organization skills, and study skills.

Five of the ECHSs provided opportunities for students to interact with former students, college recruiters, and career professionals through various activities and programs on campus. When Eddie visited a career fair at his ECHS it expanded his understanding of



the different jobs within the technology field and how he could prepare for them. Reggie's trip to Austin talking with public officials about gun supported his hope of becoming a lawyer. At Monica's 2-week orientation, a student, who also played softball, shared how she organized herself to be successful. Hearing a student Monica's own age was helpful and gave her the confidence that she too, could be successful at her ECHS. During Alumni Week, a former student at Melissa's ECHS provided students advice about college and tips for being successful. Melissa has now become a speaker during Alumni Week and is eager to share what she has learned with others. Programs and activities such as these nurtured the growth of the graduates' aspirations.

The rigorous course work at the ECHSs supported the aspirations of a few graduates. Access to the dual credit courses supported Beth's mission and drive to become valedictorian of her graduating class. Christine saw the ECHS course work as an opportunity to save money for her family by completing 2 years of college while in high school. Eddie's struggle in his U.S. History course helped him get a glimpse of how difficult college could be. Eddie was determined not to fail the course and adopted new methods of studying and taking notes.

For Melissa, it was not that her aspiration was hindered, but the constant drive to complete college courses since the age of 14 made her feel "burnt out." Likewise, Christine shared that she desired to hit pause on further schooling before she continued. The push to complete college course work and obtain a degree so quickly has left her feeling like she is losing track of where she is going. Monica, now 21 years old, has been engaged in college course work since the age of 14. She expressed her excitement in exploring other interests outside of school that she had neglected to be successful in her studies.

All six graduates shared stories of faculty members who inspired them to pursue their dreams. Monica was able to connect with the shared stories of her ECHS teachers. Monica's teachers provided her guidance, encouragement, and believed that she would be successful at her ECHS and beyond. Christine established a close relationship with her chancellor who was willing to listen to her, provided her advice, mentored her, guided her through difficult decisions, and believed in her ability to be successful. Eddie had two teachers who not only noticed his potential but made an effort to point out his potential. These two teachers help Eddie work through what he wanted to do for a career. Beth found members of her faculty to be a strong support system that she was able to share ideas with. Melissa's faculty provided their cell phone numbers and made an effort to connect with students to support their success. Melissa also connected with one of her teachers who had a small business and sought her advice and mentorship as she started her own small business. The impact faculty had on Reggie began when he turned in his first English assignment. Reggie's English teacher expected more and wanted more for him. So much so that Reggie's English teacher researched and laid the ground work for Reggie to apply for a summer legal camp at Georgetown University. The impact, knowing that someone believed in him and cared enough about him to challenge him and seek out opportunities, pushed Reggie to pursue his goals.

The shared experiences at the ECHS fostered a community of peer support. A focused environment that rallied around college readiness with the goal to complete the associate degree and high school diploma simultaneously. Reggie described there being an atmosphere of success among his peers. Beth described an environment where everyone was expected to

go to college which set the stage for her peers to constantly talk about what colleges they wanted to attend and what degree they planned on pursuing.

### **Linguistic Capital**

In my findings, graduates shared how the ECHS impacted their linguistic capital. For several graduates the college prep class provided students guidance on how to communicate effectively with their college professors. Each of the graduates was encouraged to communicate with their professors and was provided assistance with crafting emails to their professors. Monica, Beth, and Reggie all shared pedagogical practices used by their professors that helped support the growth of their communication skills. All three of them were required throughout their ECHS to work in groups with their peers and present their work in front of their peers through speeches and group presentations.

The academic-focused environment exposed Eddie to words and phrases that he had not heard or learned before coming to the ECHS. Eddie's exposure to this new vocabulary supported his comprehension and communication skills with his peers and professors. Eddie's ability to interact with his college peers, regularly talk with his college professors, and participate in interviewing perspective ECHS teachers supported the growth of his communication skills. Three of the six participants were bilingual Spanish speakers. Melissa shared that her ECHS provided opportunities for Spanish speakers to take a more advanced Spanish course to meet their specific needs. Melissa's ECHS had a strong focus on essay writing. As early as the ninth grade, she was using both MLA and APA writing styles when she turned in her assignments. Reggie's trip to Austin revealed his growth as a communicator. Compared to other students present at the event, Reggie's ECHS had

provided an environment where he was able to develop ideas, express those ideas, and articulate his ideas in an authentic manner.

### **Familial Capital**

Monica, Reggie, Christine, and Eddie all shared stories of how their families played a role in their success at their ECHS. Monica's family is the foundation of her academic support and continue to support through her studies in graduate school. It was her family that forced her to take advantage of the ECHS experience and reminded her to overcome challenges and not allow setbacks to derail your dreams.

Reggie preferred that his school life and family life remained separate. His family did not interact much with his ECHS. His family had encouraged Reggie to be a good kid and work to make the world a better place. Reggie has adopted that philosophy as he pursues his dreams of law school and one day being President of the United States.

Christine has two older sisters who are attending college. She is aware of the potential cost college would have on her family. Through observation of her sisters, she is aware of the commitment needed be successful in collegiate studies. Her desire to create a better life for her family without being a burden is one of the reasons she chose to attend her ECHS.

When Eddie first started his ECHS he was failing several of his courses and was not connecting with his peers. Eddie had made the decision to fail out of the program. Eddie's ECHS teachers reached out to his family. Teachers at his school shared with his family the potential they saw in Eddie, his need to connect with classmates, and the importance of being a part of the school community. His mom was invited to participate in activities at the school and the parent-teacher organization. When Eddie began selecting a college his mom was quick to offer getting a second job to support Eddie.

Findings did not reveal a common strategy to leverage family support through the ECHS experience. The graduates provided insight on how their families supported them. Eddie was the only graduate who shared a story of his ECHS reaching out to his family. My discussion with the graduates did not reveal any points of leverage used by the ECHS to support parents' participation in the program other than parent conferences and parent-teacher organizations.

### **Social Capital**

In my analysis, the ECHS experience supported the development of social capital for all six participants in many different ways. The small class sizes at the ECHS forced students to get to know one another. Four of the six graduated attended an ECHS that provided several opportunities for them to work collaboratively with their peers, thus creating additional opportunities for them to develop relationships. Being accepted into the ECHS with a few students magnified the shared experience and created a unique bond amongst the students.

I found the focus on academics cultivated social capital by creating the unique atmosphere at each ECHS that influenced the interaction between the graduates and their peers. Monica described the atmosphere at her ECHS as competitive. The competitive environment pushed Monica to maintain her class ranking, which in turn did the same for some of her classmates. With Beth and her peers, the expectation that everyone was going to college created an environment where the topic of college selection, college application process, degree aspirations, college visits, and acceptance were routine topics of discussion. At Melissa's ECHS, an environment free of drama and discipline allowed student to stay focused on their pursuit to obtain an associate degree and high school diploma.

Analysis revealed attending classes on the college campus reinforced the growth of social capital amongst many of the graduates. Having access to the college campus allowed graduates to utilize college resources, facilities, and the ability to participate in clubs and organizations. Attending a stand-alone ECHS had a significant impact on Eddie's social capital. Eddie described himself as an introvert when he first began his ECHS. Having the ability to use the weight room regularly allowed Eddie to meet other college students from various diverse backgrounds. Eddie had direct access to his professors where he was able to develop relationships with his professors. Out of those relationships, Eddie was able to obtain an internship at the community college while he was an ECHS student. Attending classes with other college student also allowed him to build relationships with others outside his ECHS. Eddie used his social capital to gather information and opinions, and network with others about the colleges he was thinking about attending.

Graduates acknowledged the support they received from the social interaction they had with their peers. All graduates shared how they worked with their peers to navigate their ECHS experience. Several graduates found support participating in study groups where they worked with their peers to meet the demands of the rigorous curriculum. Christine, Beth, and Eddie revealed social interaction with peers helped them navigate not only aspects of school, but of life. Reggie used his peer social networks at his ECHS to seek out information about the professors and the courses. Reggie learned to seek information about how the professors graded, the type of exams they gave, and how willing they were to work with students. Reggie used this information to make decisions about how to go about completing courses successfully or which professors to take courses from.

Relationships developed between the graduates and ECHS staff supported the growth of social capital for all participants. Graduates reported being able to relate and connect with professors on both an academic and social level. All graduates shared how professors made themselves accessible through scheduled office hours, scheduled appointments, some provided their cell phone numbers, and other were open to drop-in appointments. The social interaction with the ECHS provides graduates the opportunity to share their ideas, seek mentorship, work through college and career choices, seek guidance, and participate in “adult conversations.”

In my analysis, I found graduates encountered social obstacles unique to the ECHS experience worth noting. The decision to attend an ECHS was also a decision to not follow the traditional patterns of the school system. In doing so the graduates no longer followed their classmates from school to school but made the distinct decision to do something different than the majority of their peers. For Monica, deciding to attend her ECHS meant she would be leaving peers she had attended school with since kindergarten.

The school within a school model also created an additional social challenge for Monica. As an ECHS student she was required to wear a patch on her clothing, a scarlet letter so to speak, letting everyone at her high school and college know that she was an ECHS student. The ECHS label left Monica feeling that her friends perceived her a part of an elitist group or would create situations where she felt singled out.

In my study, I found social implication for students who are not able to meet the standards of the ECHS. Student who are unable to pass the TSIA are placed in remedial classes and were not allowed to fully participate in the ECHS, thus isolating them from some of the ECHS experiences. Christine described her peers losing themselves because they were

in essence removed from part of the ECHS for not meeting the TSIA standard. Additionally, not every student who attends an ECHS wants to go to college. Four of the graduates shared that they had friends who struggled at the ECHS who desired to enter the workforce, attend a trade school, or join the military after graduation from their ECHS. The social support they received from faculty and staff was perceived as not as supportive as it was for students aspiring to go to college.

The accelerated curriculum at the ECHS created social challenges for graduates when they transitioned to their 4-year school. Since graduates completed their associate degree while in high school, all six graduates began their experience at a college classified, at a minimum, as juniors. Graduates were able to participate in freshmen orientation activities, but the relationships built were difficult to maintain because they did not share common classes nor a similar workload. The graduates were already taking upper level courses related directly to their major. The graduates took classes with students 2-3 years older than them. As a result, the graduates were disconnected from members in the peer groups and expressed missing out on other social activities they feel they would have participated in if they had not attended their ECHS or been so advanced in their studies.

### **Navigational Capital**

The ECHS experience supported the development of navigational capital for all six graduates. The small school design with the mission to provide college access to high school students fostered an environment that focused on navigating college. In order to attend their ECHSs, all six graduates participated in an application process. Similar to the college application process, graduates were required to fill out a formal application, submit essays, participate in an interview, and wait for an acceptance letter from their ECHS. Four of the six



graduates shared the intentional efforts of their ECHS to support their navigational capital during a 2-week orientation camp that took place the summer before they began their ECHS. During those 2 weeks graduates prepared for and took the TSI. Guest speakers, including current ECHS students, shared with the graduates time management skills, the importance of using a planner, the rigor of the course work at the ECHS, and tips for success.

In my analysis, the ability to attend classes on a college campus had a substantial impact on their navigational capital. Being on the college campus required students take courses in various building throughout campus. Being on the college campus provided graduates a strong sense of independence. More than one graduate shared the freedom they had to miss class or leave campus without consequence, unlike they would have at a traditional high school. That awareness compelled them to act responsibility and manage their time appropriately. Having classes on the college campus provided graduates the opportunity to use the college resources, college facilities, and participate in clubs and activities being held on campus. The college campus experience allowed graduates the opportunity to navigate social interaction outside their peer group as well as instructional resources. Christine was able to participate in clubs and organizations on her college campus which supported her navigational capital with peers. Eddie's navigational capital was impacted the development of friendships he made in class and at the gym. Additionally, Eddie was able to attend career fairs, talk with his professors, and obtain an IT internship while still an ECHS student. Monica's interactions on the college campus enabled her to obtain a job as a tutor while she was attending her ECHS.

The college prep class was a foundational course supporting the navigational capital of all six graduates. All graduates described the college prep class as an annual class that

focused on the college application process. During that class, graduates researched colleges, learned about the college admission process, practiced writing college essays, supported completing Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA), scholarship research, and assistance with the college application process. The college prep course also provided tips for time management, organization, study habits, study skills, and study time.

All six ECHSs provided workshop or lessons in college prep that equipped student with skills to navigate interactions with their professors or others in authority. Graduates were encouraged to reach out to professor for assistance during office hours. Some of the ECHSs provided model emails to professors and encouraged students to write in a professional manner with proper grammar. All graduates shared that they were encouraged to talk to professors and communicate with them regularly.

Findings indicate the rigor of the curriculum and pedagogy of the instructors further supported the navigational capital of students. All graduates shared stories of an ECHS class that challenged them academically and prepared them for future course work. Four of the six graduates shared the impact of pedagogical practices on their navigational capital. The group work during ECHS provided opportunities to experience navigating relationship through the completion of an assignment. The public speaking requirements at several of the ECHSs equipped students with the skills to confidently navigate communicating in front of a variety of audiences.

The activities graduates participated in had an impact on the growth of their navigational capital. Attending a career fair exposed Monica to the various jobs available after school. For Eddie, the career fair helped him understand the different IT jobs and the specific degree he would need for a certain job. Reggie's Austin trip enabled him to see

firsthand how to navigate talking to public officials about legislative initiatives and how to voice his ideas for change.

I note two navigational obstacles worth mentioning that had an impact on one or more graduates. Four of the six graduates shared the turnover of their counselor during the 4 years at their ECHS. Monica perceived that all her counselors cared about were metrics and making sure students got into college. As a successful ECHS student, Monica also desired additional assistance from her counselor to learn about graduate school, something she felt she sought at her ECHS. Reggie recalled his counselors being over worked and stressed. When applying for college he attempted to seek assistance and feedback about his college essays but felt that his counselors were too busy to help. Reggie commended his counselor's dedication in making sure he knew about every scholarship opportunity and internship. Eddie does not place blame on his counselor for not getting into the school of his choice, but he wonders if the outcome would have been different if he would have gotten the support reviewing and receiving feedback about his college essay like he had wished for, but was unable to get.

Beth expressed concern about the academic rigor of her college classes. She felt that college courses at her community college were not rigorous enough and as a result some of her classmates did not do well when they attended their 4-year colleges. She was under the impression that students at her ECHS were under a false impression of success and when they arrived at their 4-year schools, they did not know how to put forth the effort to be successful.

## **Resistance Capital**

My research revealed limited evidence of support for the development of resistance capital among the ECHS graduates. The struggles of inequity in the college preparation process did not surface in the data. Several of the ECHSs invited guest speakers, current students, and former ECHS students to share tips for academic success, yet only Monica shared a story of a guest speaker talking about social justice. Reggie and Melissa demonstrated their ECHSs may have provided an opportunity for them to leverage their education to support their community. Melissa began to leverage her support for her community by returning to her ECHS campus, after an invitation from a former teacher, to annually participate in Alumni Week. The trip to Austin provided Reggie an opportunity to experience one method of engaging in his community to bring about reform and change.

## **Definition of College Readiness**

In my study graduates shared diverse perspectives of their definition of college readiness. All graduates began with an initial response but would expand by adding additional defining elements to support their college readiness definition. College readiness for ECHS graduates did not focus on standardized test scores such as the SAT, ACT, or TSI. None of the six graduates referenced standardized testing as a defining element of college readiness. Monica did not believe you could measure college readiness with a standardized tests, and Beth felt standardized testing missed the point of what college readiness really is.

My analysis of the graduates' definitions of college readiness revealed ECHS graduates' definitions of college readiness encompassed more than a set of standardized tests. Several of the ECHS graduates described the importance of knowing how to leverage social and navigational capital. Monica defined college readiness as a student's ability to adapt to

different circumstances and people in unfamiliar settings, while having the social intelligence to adjust and succeed. Reggie, Eddie, and Melissa referenced the importance of knowing where to get help and the ability to find that help among peers, professors, and intuitional resources. Melissa's college readiness is a combination of having the ability to identify your support systems and connecting with both peers and professors to gain access to navigate college successfully. Christine believed there were different definitions of college readiness depending on one's background. A student's ability to immerse themselves into the college community was how Christine defined college readiness. She also defined college readiness as a moment in time when a student is in tune and focused on the skills one needs to be successful in the career you choose to pursue.

Evidence in my study suggested graduates believe there are several critical skills and attributes that support a student's college readiness. I have broken down the attributes of college readiness shared by the graduates during the study into two categories. The first category, attitudes, I define attitudes as behaviors and actions that students demonstrate to be successful in pursuit of their goals. Words used to describe attitudes are perseverance, commitment, dedication, hard-working, self-discipline, and emotional intelligence. The second category, skills, I define skills as a student's ability to execute an action that will help them thrive in any setting. Words used to describe skills are organization, time management, ability multi-tasking, prioritize, notes, communication, adapting to new things, self-discipline, and study skills. Only Beth referred to skills in her definition of college readiness. Beth defines college readiness as a "combination of organization skills and time management skills." Beth believes that students will not be successful without these two skills.

## Emergent Themes

As part of my cross-case analysis, I identified two emerging themes that relate to my research questions and provide insight on how ECHS experience impacts a student's college readiness. The two cross-case themes are a) self-capital and b) isolation and marginalization.

### Emergent Theme 1: Self-Capital

In my research, I found a prominent theme of self-capital. As graduates shared their ECHS experience, they revealed elements of internal growth that supported their continued success. Self-capital is the growth of skills, abilities, knowledge, and understanding of one's self that is acquired and passed on within a community. The development of self-capital is influenced by internal and external elements. Self-capital includes elements of Chickering's (1969) Establishing Identity such as self-concept, self-acceptance, and self-esteem.

Furthermore, self-capital, aligns with non-cognitive college readiness factors, self-regulation and self-control (Dweck et al., 2014). Examples of self-capital found during the study include:

- *Self-Confidence*—the ability to meet new people, navigate new social setting, ability to be successful in college
- *Self-Advocacy*—advocate for yourself, development of voice, seek assistance, ask questions, developing a plan
- *Self-Awareness*—awareness of strengths and weaknesses, knowing when help is needed, and an awareness of being a part of a diverse community
- *Self-Efficacy*—belief and awareness of having the ability to be successful in rigorous coursework
- *Self-Discipline*—time management, balanced school, life, and work, study habits

I define self-capital as an individual's awareness of and confidence in their skills and abilities to advocate and discipline themselves for success in any given task.

For all six graduates, the opportunity to attend classes on a college campus supported the development of their self-confidence. The opportunity ECHS students had to navigate college, participate in the college classroom, and be a part of the college environment gave graduates a sense of what college was like. The rigorous course work experienced by the graduates increased their self-efficacy and self-confidence as they successfully completed college course work while in high school.

The growth of self-confidence is evident in the graduates' experiences transferring to their 4-year colleges. For many of the ECHS graduates the transition was smooth. They expressed not feeling worried or scared, as some of their non-ECHS peers did, because they had already experienced the college environment. One graduate referred to the transition as being the natural progression to the next step in achieving their goal.

The development of self-awareness was another area impacted by the ECHS experience. Being able to take college courses, participate in student organizations, and utilize college facilities increased the graduates' awareness of the diverse college community beyond their ECHS. Graduates were able to interact with individuals from diverse backgrounds, who were much older, who had not been in school for several years, and had life experiences outside of the ECHS community. Through these opportunities graduates gained an awareness of skills necessary to navigate various social relationships. Access to college resources and faculty increased graduates' awareness of skills needed to navigate and develop social relationships with faculty and peers. Graduates had the ability to compare

their academic skills to other college students. This provided opportunities to further develop an awareness of their individual strengths and weakness.

An awareness of her strengths and weaknesses prompted Melissa to develop the confidence and skills to advocate for herself. Melissa's awareness of her need for assistance compelled her to reach out to her peers and professors for support. Melissa created and led study groups to proactively create support systems amongst her peers. The opportunities and expectations for her to interact with professors while in ECHS helped support her abilities to develop her voice and gave her opportunities to advocate for herself.

My findings revealed the diverse set of experiences provided by his ECHS had a positive impact on Reggie's self-capital. The opportunity to engage in a community driven by success heightened his awareness of how such a community supported his own success, so much so that Reggie continues to put himself around people that help create a similar supportive community. Reggie, a self-advocate, continues to seek out mentors and pursue relationships with individuals who desire a community that compels him and others to excellence.

The rigorous ECHS curriculum required Reggie to develop organization and time management skills, that required him to be more self-disciplined. Reggie developed skills to gauge how much time it would take to complete his assignments. These skills supported the discipline he needed to schedule when he was going to complete his assignment and when he had time to participate in other activities. The ability to miss out on social events and activities in order to complete his schoolwork is rooted in the skills he acquired during ECHS.



During his time at his ECHS, Reggie gained a deeper understanding of how individual decisions impact his life. The realization that each decision impacted his life supported his belief that he needed to take advantage of every opportunity to improve. Knowing you can improve, knowing what you can do to improve, and knowing where to get support were all part of Reggie's ECHS experiences. Reggie defined college readiness as "completing yourself," a tribute to the impact of his ECHS experience.

### **Emergent Theme 2: Isolation and Marginalization**

In my cross-case analysis, I found all six graduates experienced some form of isolation or marginalization as a result of their ECHS experiences. By design, ECHS students are separated from the traditional high school programs through the creation of a small school within a school or a stand-alone school on a college campus. Selecting to attend an ECHS, graduates made a choice to separate themselves from the traditional educational path taken by their peers.

The school within a school design created uncomfortable situations for Monica with her peers. The school requirement for her to wear an ECHS patch made Monica feel that other perceived her as part of an elite group. The interaction with her childhood peers was affected because she no longer shared a common educational experience. The academic demands of her ECHS affected her ability to connect with her softball team and created opportunities for her teammates to ridicule her dedication to her studies.

At Christine's ECHS, students who did not pass the TSIA were placed in remedial classes on the traditional high school campus. She described the students being taught by teachers from the traditional high school that did not really support their growth. She felt her peers lost themselves in the process, because they could no longer fully participate in the

ECHS and were required to remain on the traditional campus as she attended her college classes.

Attending college at such a young age created situation unique to ECHS students at their 4-year college. All graduates entered their 4-year college with an associate degree which catapulted their class standing to junior or senior. Although they were able to participate in freshman orientation at their perspective college, relationships and connections with others their age were difficult to maintain. As others their age began to complete basic core courses, ECHS graduates were completing courses directly related to their degree. The advanced academic status separated them from their peers who had also just graduated from high school without an associate degree.

Taking upper level course work at the junior and senior level at such a young age created challenges for some graduates. Instead of taking classes with others their age, they took classes with students 2-4 years older. Reggie particularly had a difficult time relating to his older classmates. While others his age were hanging out, forming study groups, and experiencing college, Reggie felt his older classmates had already experienced the college life and did not really want to hang out with him. Reggie got the sense that they looked down on him because of his age. Eddie did have the same struggles adapting to his older classmates, but his age prevented him from being able to take advantage of an internship offered to his older classmates. Eddie had the same qualifications, but due to his age he was not considered a viable candidate.

Transitioning from the ECHS environment to their 4-year colleges created some isolating situations for the graduates. Leaving the close-knit community of the ECHS to the larger 4-year college was a difficult adjustment for several graduates. The absence of a

supportive community of peers and ECHS faculty left many of them feeling isolated from others and completely on their own. Beth, Reggie, Melissa, and Monica all expressed a struggle developing relationships at their 4-year college. Taking upper level courses with older student exasperated the feeling of isolations from their peers.

When graduates made the decision to participate, they were aware that the ECHS would impact their high school experience. They agreed to participate in an academically focused program void of many of the traditional high school experiences, such as sports, electives, and extracurricular activities. Even though graduates made the choice to attend an ECHS, all graduates expressed a sense of loss not being able to participate in traditional high school experiences. Yet for many of them the ability to obtain their associate degree while in high school was worth the sacrifice.

My study results revealed ECHS graduates did not share an equal understanding of how the ECHS would impact their college experience. The ability to connect with first-year college students, of similar age, was a struggle that graduates had not anticipated. The demands of the upper level course work required a different level of effort and further limited their ability to interact with others their age. Being advanced in the course work required participants to select a major when they started their 4-year college. One participant contributed the rapid academic making her feel as if she was losing track of where she was going despite being well advanced in completing her 4-year degree. The ECHS focus on degree completion continued to influence participants into their 4-year college. Many expressed a commitment to completing their degree at the expense of participating in other activities at their 4-year college. The decision to attend an ECHS denied participants the ability to experience a traditional high school and college experience.

## CHAPTER FIVE: DISCUSSION, IMPLICATIONS, AND CONCLUSIONS

### Discussion of Results

This research study was an exploration of the gap between college eligibility and college readiness, from the perspectives of recent ECHS graduates. Using a cross analysis of my findings, I derived the following answers to my research questions.

#### Research Question 1

What are students' self-perceptions of their own college readiness?

My study revealed all six participants had a strong self-perception of their college readiness. Interestingly, how participants affirmed their self-perceptions of college readiness had no consistent pattern. Participants expressed their self-perception of their college readiness in one or more of the following ways:

- The ability to take a class on the college campus shifted mindsets from preparing for college to being in college. Taking classes with older college students affirmed their college readiness as they compared their academic success and skills to their college-aged peers.
- The confidence and skills to manage time, organize tasks, and completing and ensuring work is turned in on time. Having the capacity to successfully handle the course work along with enjoying the freedom that comes along with college life. The ability to adapt to various situations, sustain a balanced social life, and maintain academics standard while successfully pursuing future ambitions.
- Compared to their non-ECHS peers, the transition to a 4-year school was smooth. In addition, their academic skills, time management skills, and organizational skills compared to their non-ECHS peers reassured their college readiness. Their

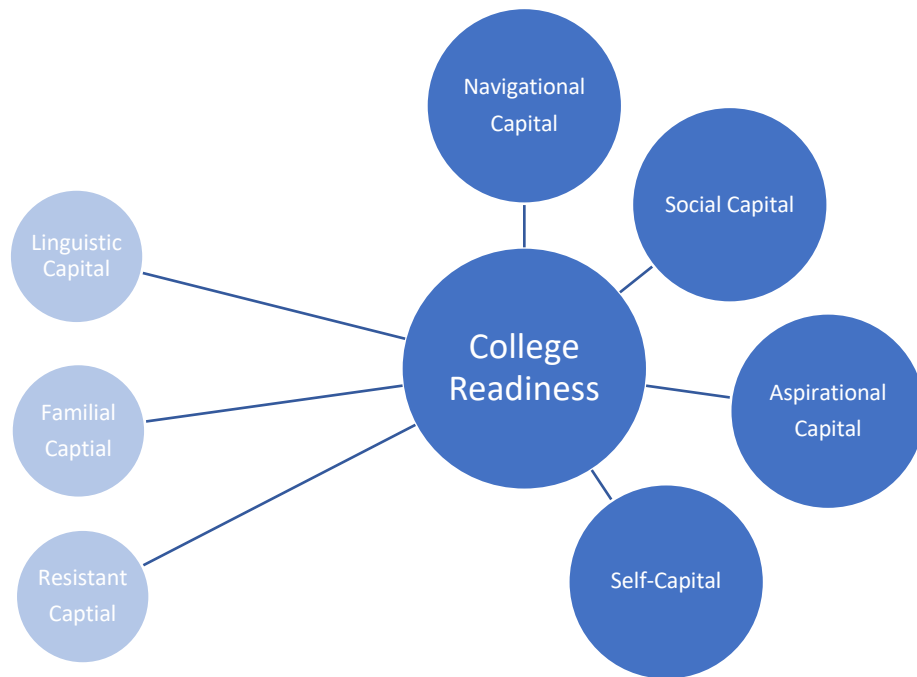
ability to navigate the college environment, register for classes, and awareness of college resources further affirmed their readiness for college.

- Having an awareness of being out of your comfort zone, a willingness to trying new things, and socializing with others outside their known social group demonstrated being prepared to be a part of the college community. When they became more proactive, they were able to develop new relationships and hang out with new friends.
- Having the mindset that you are commitment to work hard, take college seriously, and intentionally connect your learning to future career ambitions.
- Developing an awareness that others take the college experience for granted and you have opportunity to take advantage of attending college.

Participants' did not define their self-perception of college readiness by their score on a standardized placement test. Nor did the participants define their college readiness based on the current definition that emphasizes no need for remediation or developmental coursework (ACT, 2019a, 2019b; Camara & Quenemoen, 2012; Clark, 2015; Conley, 2007; Texas Education Code, 2013a, 2017). Participants found their self-perception of college readiness within the interactions in their community. The impact of the ECHS experience on navigational capital, social capital, aspirational capital, and self-capital also impacted student's self-perception of college readiness (see Figure 5). Self-capital was added to Yosso's (2005) model to capture the impact of participants' self-awareness of their talents, strengths, weaknesses, experiences, and aspirations that contributed to a strong self-perception of their college readiness.

**Figure 5**

*Self-Perceptions of College Readiness*



**Research Question 2**

How do students who participated in an early college high school define college readiness?

A notable finding in my research was the absence of standardized test scores as a defining indicator for college readiness. In my study, participants shared diverse perspectives of their definition of college readiness:

- Having the skills and knowledge to leverage, navigate, and adapt in various social settings.
- Self-awareness of your need for assistance and the skills and knowledge to access support systems among your peers, professors, and institutional resources.
- Connecting to the college community socially and academically.

- When a student is in tune and focused on acquiring skills, they need to be successful in their career choice.
- Maintaining an attitude and actions of perseverance, commitment, dedication, hard-work, self-discipline, and self-motivation.
- Ability to effectively use the following skills: Time management, organization, self-discipline, note taking, prioritizing, and communication.

Participants' definition of college readiness echoed their perception of their own self-perception of college readiness. I think Christine said it best when she said college readiness is "different for everybody." Christine and responses from other participants highlight the complexity of defining college readiness and the importance of developing students beyond a set of standardized scores. In addition, their responses support Castro's (2013) argument for the need to of re-norming a broader assumptions of college readiness. A college readiness definition that considers the larger racial and socioeconomic contexts that are both race conscious and equity minded. Utilizing the perspectives of six ECHS graduates, I offer an expanded version of college readiness for consideration:

College readiness is the ability a student has to independently and successfully handle the college workload. The skills to manage time, steer away from distractions, and maintain the course towards the goal they have set. The self-awareness of their strengths and weaknesses and the ability to self-advocate when assistance is needed or desired. The knowledge of their support systems and the emotional intelligence to overcome challenges in a healthy way. The capacity to build on their past experiences and the awareness of knowing the impact of their decisions on their future.

### **Research Question 3**

How did early college high school experiences impact, promote, or hinder student preparation for college?

As a result of my study, I assert the ECHS experience had a positive impact on these participants' college readiness. In my analysis, the impact among participants' social and navigational capital proved positive. Aspirational and linguistic capital were less pronounced among participants but still reflected a positive contribution to their college readiness. The study revealed little to no data on the ECHS experience's impact on familial and resistance capital.

The ECHS experience had a positive impact on participants' social capital. The small size of the school created a tight-knit community that fostered the development of genuine relationships amongst peers, professors, and staff while supporting the development of their interpersonal competence (Chickering, 1969). The mission and vision of the ECHS influenced the social interactions amongst participants' peers that all were expected to go to college. The rigorous coursework compelled students to develop social support systems, like study groups, to help them keep track of important due dates and provide peer-to-peer assistance as they navigated the difficult curriculum.

Having access to attend classes on the college campus created opportunities for social interactions with individuals outside their ECHS community. Access to the college enabled participants to expand their social networks by allowing interaction with other college students, professors, and college staff. In addition, being on the college campus presented participants' further opportunities for social interactions by providing access to participate in clubs, organizations, and the ability to use college resource centers and facilities. These



experiences and interactions provided opportunities for participants to increase interpersonal and social skills that improved their likelihood of success in college (Conley, 2007). The positive impact on participants navigational capital was evident throughout my findings. From the onset, the ECHS introduced the importance of navigating the application process when all participants had to apply to attend. Developing the skills and abilities to complete the college application process was a central theme to the ECHS experience. Each of the ECHSs provided participants supports including, not limited to, researching degree plans, researching colleges, filling out college applications, providing scholarship information, resume building, essay writing, and FAFSA assistance. This course addressed Conley's (2008) notion that mastery of information, formal and informal, about college and the application process enhanced students' success in college. The development of these skills was embedded in a course dedicated to college readiness. During the annual course, participants developed skills in time management, organization, study habits, and study skills. Taking classes on the college campus gave participants the chance to develop skills navigating the college environment. Participants learned to navigate the college campus to find their classes, attend campus events, and utilize various college resource centers. Many participants acquired the skills necessary to navigate online platforms to select their courses, register for classes, monitor their degree plans, and engage in various learning platforms. The college campus experience also provided opportunities for participants to navigate various social situations with their peers, professors, and older college classmates. Engaging with older students during their college classes and participating in clubs and organizations provided participants the ability to develop skills to successfully navigate interactions with others outside the ECHS community. Participants were taught the importance of

communicating with professors in person and via email and taking advantage of professors' office hours. The ECHS experience created a supportive environment amongst their peers. Participants described working with their peers on class assignments or in study groups to meet the demands of the rigorous curriculum. Participants reached out to peers to find out information about classes and professors on the college campus. They would use that information to help make informed decision in the courses selection process and obtain prior knowledge of grading standards, course workload, and course expectation for various professors.

The design of the ECHS supported the development of aspirational capital among participants. The ECHS provided immediate access to college course work, which provided participants a tangible pathway to fulfill their aspirations of simultaneously earning their high school diploma and associate degree. The academic-focused environment fostered an atmosphere of success amongst ECHS participants. A shared community expectation that everyone was going to college set the tone for participants' peers to constantly talk about what colleges they wanted to attend and what degree they planned on pursuing. Obtaining an associate degree, at no cost, created hope that the 4-year degree would be less of a financial burden on their families. Attending classes on the college campus supported and fulfilled their aspirations of being a college student. Success in the college courses further grew participants' aspirations and supported their self-confidence to apply and attend a 4-year college. Their aspirations to be treated like an adult was supported by the independence and freedom allotted to them to access college resources, participate in college clubs and organizations, and use the college facilities like a college student.

Opportunities to interact with former students, college recruiters, and career professional through various programs and activities at their ECHS further nurtured the growth of the participants' aspirations. During these programs and activities, participants were able to connect with alumni and current students and meet business and community members. Such interactions increased participants' self-confidence about the skills needed to succeed in college and careers and afforded them the opportunity to visualize themselves being successful in roles they may have not considered.

The professors and faculty at the ECHS were instrumental in developing aspirational capital. These quality relationships influenced their academic success (Engels et al., 2016; Roorda et al., 2011). They provided guidance, encouragement, advice, and mentorship along with inspiring participants to pursue their dreams. They were willing to listen and provide guidance to participants as they worked through making difficult decisions which further supported the development of their aspirations. Having a belief and expectation that participants would be successful and making a concerted effort to point out participants' potential was a common thread of aspirational support. The knowledge of knowing that someone believed in them and cared for them beyond the ECHS experience further inspired participants' hopes and dreams of college and career success.

My study revealed the ECHS experience has the potential to negatively impact aspirational capital. The toll of beginning college at the age of 14 led to participants' feeling burnt out or like they needed to take a break from continuing their education. The accelerated academic program required students to make decisions much sooner than their peers, leaving some participants feeling like they were losing track of where they were going. Additionally, in pursuit of academic success, participants abandoned opportunities to participate in

extracurricular activities that may have further developed their aspirations in non-academic areas.

My findings revealed minimal impact on participants' linguistic capital. A focus on effective communication with professors in college-prep classes and seminars encouraged, supported, and provided guidance for the participants' linguistic capital. For some participants, the ECHS provided an environment where they were able to develop ideas, express those ideas, and articulate ideas in an authentic manner. There was evidence of pedagogical practices at some of the ECHSs that supported the development of communication skills in small groups and large group settings.

Families were instrumental in encouraging and mandating that participants apply to the ECHS. Families continue to be a significant source of support for participants as they pursue their academic and career goals. Participants shared the sacrifices their families were willing to make to support their academic ambitions and their consistent support to persist in completing their academic goals. Other than a parent-teacher conference, my finding revealed no common strategy to leverage, grow, or acknowledge familial capital.

Findings indicated limited efforts to support the development of resistance capital among the participants. The ECHSs invited guest speakers, current students, and former ECHS students to share tips for academic success, yet only one participant discussed a speaker making a connection to social justice. There were two isolated events where the data revealed development of resistance capital. One participant took a trip to Austin to speak to elected officials about gun control policies, leveraging his understanding of the process to effect change in his community. Another participant was invited back to her ECHS to

participate in Alumni Week. Topics of inequity, social justice, or racial justice did not surface in the data.

ECHS experience was instrumental in the development of participants' self-capital. Their experiences of successfully completing rigorous course work in a supportive community increased their self-efficacy and self-confidence. Additionally, the rigorous ECHS curriculum required participants to develop organization and time management skills that required a significant level of self-discipline. Early on in the ECHS experience, students learned the self-discipline required to miss out on social events and activities in order to complete their course work. The opportunity to take classes on the college campus developed a self-awareness in participants as they interacted with individuals from diverse backgrounds with life experiences outside of the ECHS community. These interactions further developed their self-efficacy and self-confidence as they successfully completed course work among the diverse college community.

The ECHS experiences promoted an academic self-awareness that compelled participants to self-advocate and reach out to their peers, professors, and college resource centers for support. The opportunities at the ECHS to engage in a community driven by success heightened participants' self-awareness of the importance of a supportive community. The ECHS experience further developed an awareness of their individual strengths and weaknesses. Furthermore, the experience supported the development and awareness of skills needed to navigate and develop social relationships with faculty and peers, so much so that participants learned to self-advocate by creating supportive communities, study groups, mentorships, and establishing relationships that supported their aspirations. Table 3 is a summary of the cross-analysis.

**Table 3***Summary of ECHS Impact on College Readiness*

Capital	Relationships		ECHS Design	Events	Pedagogy	College Prep Class
	Peer	Faculty				
Aspirational	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑
Navigational	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑
Linguistic		↔		↑	↔	↑
Social	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑
Familial						
Resistance		↔		↔		
Self	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑

*Note.* The up arrow (↑) indicates perceptions of ECHS was positive. The horizontal arrow (↔) specifies a neutral perception of impact. The shaded cells signify the absence of data and/or lack of impact on participants' college readiness.

**Limitations**

As the primary instrument to collect and analyze data, the potential of unanticipated biases was plausible. The first limitation was researcher bias. As an educator for 24 years, I bring a set of skills and experiences that influences my perspective on all participants in the study. For the past 4 years, I served as an assistant principal at an ECHS. Throughout my career, I have had the opportunity to work in schools in various diverse communities, both ethnically and socioeconomically. From these perspectives I have developed my own opinions regarding the ECHS experience and have a set of assumptions of how the ECHS impacts students.

A second limitation was the method of selecting participants for the study. Two non-profit organizations that work closely with former ECHS students denied my request to interview their members, citing conflict of interest. Three public institutions responded to open-records requests. The data received from each institution contained directory information for the entire student body. Parameters were used to filter the directory information to isolate individual who may have attended an ECHS. Filtering the data may have eliminated potential participants from the study. An email containing the details of the research project was sent to all student who met the established parameters. A call for participants, with details of the research project, was sent out via social media. Participants in the study had to respond to a social media post or email to be considered for the study.

A third limitation was the reliance on participant self-reporting. I relied on participants to remember their perceptions of events and experiences that occurred 1 to 4 years prior to the interviews. Participants' perceptions may be over exaggerated or provide a false narrative of the actual experiences. Given the nature of the study, I was not able to cross-check or verify the statements provided by the participants.

A fourth limitation was the disruption of the collection of participants' artifacts due to the COVID-19 pandemic. I was unable to fully deploy requests for reflective artifacts nor did I follow up with participants to obtain artifacts as planned. This disruption limits data triangulation and member checking.

A fifth limitation was the nature and design of this study, the findings are not generalizable to all ECHSs. However, I do believe my findings are applicable to the ECHS context and can benefit other ECHSs in Texas and across the United States.

## **Implications and Recommendations for Practice**

### **Resistance Capital**

The absence of data to support the development of resistance capital in participants suggests opportunities for growth and improvement in the ECHS initiatives in Texas. The ECHS focus on providing traditionally marginalized and disenfranchised students access to college is a critical initial step. The lack of support for resistance capital is concerning, given that the ECHS's primary focus is to support those who have traditionally been marginalized. ECHSs have the potential to be more than a scholarship or access point to college but to become an agent of change in preparing students to enter society with knowledge and skills to solve challenging problems that impact society, particularly in marginalized communities.

I recommend that the college and career readiness initiative in Texas consider adopting culturally relevant activities that would develop students' resistance capital. Museus's (2014) culturally engaging campus environments model is worthy of exploration for the ECHS setting and can be used as a guide to support such an initiative. The culturally engaging campus environments model encourages institutions to a) provide opportunities for meaningful cross-cultural engagements, b) provide cultural community service activities/encounters, and c) provide opportunities for students to cultivate their knowledge of their community and culture (Museus, 2014). I believe a focus in these areas would have an immediate impact on the development of resistance capital amongst ECHS students. Museus's model can provide educational leaders and legislators with guidance on key indicators that would further support the development of resistant capital among ECHS student across the state of Texas.



## **Familial Capital**

The absence of data supporting the development of familial capital revealed the need for ECHSs to reconsider institutional structures and practices concerning family outreach. I question the current methods used to access the knowledge and assets of families of ECHS students. In addition, I wonder what institutional structures or practices perpetuate the absence of familial capital or the perception that parents do not value or support education (Yosso, 2005). ECHSs must learn to meet the families where they are, their environment, which includes their homes. They must learn to reconceptualize family support to be inclusive of the multiple interpersonal relationships that students depend upon for support. (Knight et al., 2004). They should invite family members to share their high school, college, and career experiences. Furthermore, they should create opportunities to hear and embrace the voices of families as they share their aspirations for their children, fellow students, and community members. Being purposeful in connecting parents and students' aspirations, ECHSs can improve the design of programs supporting student success, transitions, and academic planning. By building relationships with families, I believe the ECHS can create a common narrative of success and empowerment for all students as they pursue academic success for themselves and their families.

## **Integrated Instructional Experiences**

Reggie's trip to Austin had a profound impact on the development of several key areas of cultural wealth. During that instructional experience, Reggie was able to work with students from another school, interact with public officials, research an issue affecting his community, navigate the political process, and utilize his voice to initiate change. I attribute Reggie's growth to his ECHS intentionality of connecting his learning to current issues

affecting his community. Providing opportunities for students to engage in integrated instructional experiences aligns with the culturally engaging campus environments model presented earlier. Adapting integrated instructional experiences by creating space within the curriculum, providing students with the tools, and connecting students to the community has the potential to enhance the development of resistance capital and other capital among ECHS students. Integrated curricula increase learning outcomes, student motivation, student ownership, improves teamwork and improves connecting the subject matter real world situations (Drake & Reid, 2020; Zhbanova et al., 2010).

### **Personal Impact**

Findings from my study had a profound impact on my professional efforts. As an assistant principal at an ECHS for the past 4 years, finding from this study motivated an immediate response. In reflection of my findings, I realized that educators rely too heavily on traditional methods of connecting with families. In addition, the COVID-19 pandemic has further heightened my awareness of systematic methods used to communicate with families that are no longer worthy of continuing.

The following are tangible ways I have begun to broaden my work as an ECHS administrator to impact the development of familial capital and resistance capital amongst my students. First was a shift in mindset that families need to attend our events or come to our campus to a mindset of meeting families where they are at. I now schedule time during and outside the workday to regularly visit families in their homes and neighborhoods. This has allowed me to connect to families in a completely different way and has led to students and families strengthening their connection to the school community. Secondly, I purposefully triangulate aspirational capital between the student, school, and family. I am

making an intentional effort to bring to the surface the common goal of success and dispute any assumptions or obstacles that may hinder progress achieving that shared goal.

Additionally, I have substantially increased the time I invest in equipping the ECHS families with tools and skills they need to navigate the student information systems for both college and high school. During this process the student, family, and I collectively develop actions steps in line with our shared aspirations of success, while connecting them to resources to support their success. As an administrator, I have begun to schedule home visits with other members of my team and have begun working with my team to develop measurable goals to improve the development of familial capital on our campus. Furthermore, I have initiated discussions among our leadership team to revisit our current efforts developing a culture of social and racial justice. I anticipate these discussions creating intentional opportunities for our students to develop their voice, broaden their community awareness, and allow space for students to engage in civil discourse around issues that impact their communities.

### **Implication for Additional Research**

The current study provided insight into the perceptions of college readiness from perspectives of ECHS graduates who are currently attending a 4-year college. Specific to this study, further research may consider the perception of college readiness of ECHS graduates who did not attend or no longer attend a 4-year college. Findings of this study would provide additional perspectives of the ECHS experience and definition of college readiness.

Moreover, a study that focuses on students who left during the ECHS program would provide insight to the overall ECHS experience. This line of inquiry, focused on retention, would help school leaders understand why students left the ECHS and returned to the traditional high school. It would also provide an awareness of aspects of the ECHS experiences that led them to leave. The evidence collected from such a study could inform policies and incentives

aimed at improving student retention in ECHSs. Furthermore, a longitudinal study that explores the long-term impact of the ECHS would provide further understanding of the ECHS experience and its impact. Finding from the study would reveal the impact on degree attainment, employability, career advancement, and community involvement 10 to 20 years from now. I believe that as educational leaders, legislator, and the business community continue to develop strategies to improve the K-16 pipeline that information collected from a longitudinal study would be of interest as they consider the long-term impact of their policies. Lastly, a study to investigate the development of self-capital among ECHS students would advance one's understanding of internal growth and identity development among students of color in an ECHS setting. I believe the data obtained from the study could provide educational leaders a healthier understanding of student development in the ECHS context.

### **Conclusions**

This qualitative multi-case study examined the ECHS experience and its impact on college readiness. Utilizing Yosso's (2005) Community Cultural Wealth framework as a lens, I examined the experience of six ECHS graduates, their self-perception of their own college readiness, and their definition of college readiness. In this study, I suggested the addition of a seventh capital, self-capital, to Yosso's framework. This study revealed elements of internal growth during the participants ECHS experiences that supported the development of self-discipline, self-awareness, self-advocacy, and self-efficacy. Based on my data, self-capital was a key element of participants' college readiness and was not reflected in Yosso's model. Self-capital is an individual's awareness of and confidence in their skills and abilities to advocate and discipline themselves for success in any given task. Similarly, to other capitals in Yosso's framework, self-capital builds on and supports the

development of other part of Community Cultural Wealth. By extending Yosso's model we weave in Chickening's developmental theory and Conley's check list of college readiness skills and begin to embrace a large construct of Community Cultural Wealth that builds on the wealth of students rather than fix their perceived deficits.

Findings from the study revealed the ECHS experience had a positive impact on the development of navigational capital, social capital, aspirational capital, linguistic capital, and self-capital. The results of the study indicated there is room for improvement for ECHSs to develop strategies and systems to increase the support and development of both resistance capital and familial capital among their students. A focus on developing students' resistance capital has the potential to equip and empower students to become change agents when they apply their knowledge and skills to impact their own communities. An emphasis on familial capital would support a common narrative of success and empowerment for its students. The study exposed the complexity of defining college readiness and the importance of developing students beyond a set of standardized scores.

If the ultimate goal is degree attainment, then the definition should embrace much more than being successful in a college class or meeting a set score on a standardized test. Academic performance may qualify a student for college, but it does not necessarily prepare them to finish college. As Texas continues adding ECHSs to support students who have been historically marginalized, I am hopeful that the findings in this study will encourage legislators and school leaders to reconsider the influences of college readiness and its definition. This study provides a new perspective to consider ways to systematically influence the educational pipeline and takes into account the cultural assets of minority

students. Findings from this study reveal new areas of research and can be used to teach and develop leaders as they seek social and racial justice.

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## APPENDICES

## **Appendix A: Interview Protocol (Phase 1)**

1. Tell me a little bit about you and your journey to college.
  - a. How did you end up at this school?
2. Tell me a little about your experiences at ECHS?
3. How did the school (teacher/staff) support your college readiness?
4. How did your institute of higher education support your college readiness?
5. How did your friends support your college readiness?
6. What are some of the obstacles that got in the way of your college readiness?
  - a. How did you overcome these obstacles?
  - b. What supports did the school provide you to overcome these obstacles?
  - c. How did they help you through these obstacles?
7. What strategies have you used to help support your own college readiness?
8. Take a look at this picture: What does it represent to you? What else comes to mind when you see this picture.
9. What are some of the things that get in the way of you being successful in college?
  - a. How do you overcome these obstacles?
  - b. Who else helps you overcome these obstacles?
  - c. What do you wish the ECHS would have done to support you to overcome this obstacle?
10. What tips could you give a friend who is having a hard time focusing in class?
11. Is there anything else you would like to share with me?

## Appendix B: Reflective Journal Prompts (Phase 2)

- Briefly describe a change in yourself that had a major impact on how you lived your life. What was the “old” way of thinking or being, vs. the “new” way? What did you move from and what did you move to? How did you know that a significant change had occurred?
- What were the important things (or persons) that help the process? What did that person do? What was the experience that catalyzed the shift? Were there any feelings that helped or accompanied the process?
- Briefly describe a change in yourself that had a major impact on how you perceived yourself as ready for college. What was the “old” way of thinking or being, vs. the “new” way? What did you move from and what did you move to? How did you know that a significant change had occurred?
- Complete the following sentences:
  - This week I questioned my readiness for college life when .....
  - This week I knew I was ready for the challenges for college life when .....
- Take/choose a picture of an object (person, place, or thing) that best describes your college readiness or your journey to college readiness. Provide a brief reflection of why you chose that image.

### **Appendix C: Interview Protocol (Phase 3)**

1. How has your semester been going?
2. Describe an event or accomplishment that you are proud of?
  - a. What role, if any, did your experience at an ECHS contribute to your accomplishment.
3. How would you describe your interaction with other?
  - a. Faculty
  - b. Peers
  - c. Support Staff
  - d. What role, if any did your experience at an ECHS contribute or not contribute to your accomplishments.
4. What type of opportunities were you provided at your ECHS that prepared you to participation in a diverse community?
5. Describe how your ECHS supported and developed your language and communication skills.
6. What opportunities did your ECHS provide you to connect with individuals who were and are instrumental in your previous educational success.
7. Describe your experience learning about the admission and selection process for college. What kind of supports did you find helpful, not helpful, or a barrier to your success?
8. Where do you draw your support to develop and maintain your own aspirations?
  - a. What role did your early ECHS experience play with the development of your aspirations?
9. How do you define college readiness?
10. What do you think of your own college readiness?

## VITA

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## ABSTRACT

### GRADUATE PERSPECTIVES OF COLLEGE READINESS: THE IMPACT OF THE EARLY COLLEGE HIGH SCHOOL

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Early college high schools (ECHS) were designed specifically to disrupt the inequities that are present in high schools by focusing on serving students underrepresented in higher education. ECHS students can earn 60 hours of college credit setting them on a fast track to college and degree completion. Utilizing Yosso's (2005) Community Cultural Wealth as a lens, this qualitative multi-case study examined the experience of six ECHS graduates, their self-perceptions of their own college readiness, and their definitions of college readiness. Findings from the study revealed the ECHS experience had a positive impact on participant college readiness, but also revealed the lack of support and development of resistance capital and familial capital. The study suggests an expansion of Yosso's Community Cultural Wealth to include self-capital to capture elements of internal growth during the ECHS experience. Findings from the study

provide new perspectives of college readiness and recommendations for future research that are both race conscious and equity minded.