A Case Study Examination of Georgia Early College Students' Perceptions

Related to College Readiness

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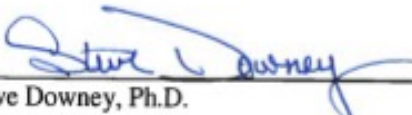
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Angela Chanté Harrell

M.A.T. in Secondary Education, Georgia College and State University, 2010
B.S. in Psychology, Georgia College and State University, 2007

This dissertation, "A case study examination of Georgia Early College students' perceptions related to college readiness" by Angela Chanté Harrell is approved by:

Dissertation Committee Chair

Steve Downey, Ph.D.
Professor of Leadership, Technology & Workforce Development

Dissertation Research Member

Jiyoon Jung, Ph.D.
Assistant Professor of Leadership, Technology &Workforce Development

Committee Member

Brian Gerber, Ph.D.
Faculty Coordinator, STEAM Center for Applied Creativity and Innovation

Associate Provost for Graduate Studies and Research

Becky K. da Cruz

Becky K. da Cruz, Ph. D., J.D.
Professor of Criminal Justice Political Science

Defense Date

10/10/2022

ABSTRACT

This case study examined the student perceptions of their time in one of Georgia's Early College High Schools as related to their confidence in preparation for college. The mixed method design allowed for a look into the experiences of both recent graduates and current students. This Early College High School campus is one of eight in the state of Georgia. This campus targets a diverse population of first-generation college students and enrolls them in a program that is located physically adjacent to the public state university campus. Traditionally, many of the students who are enrolled in this program would not be expected to continue into postsecondary education and the population of the Early College campus is representative of communities that are not well represented in college campus environments. Recent graduates were interviewed using an in-depth approach via Google Meet. For phase two of the study, students who are currently enrolled in the Early College were offered a survey. This survey included items related to student perception, college readiness and additional topics of interest that arose from the phase one interviews. Three key findings resulted from the analysis of this research study. First, students' perception of family engagement was more highly correlated with college readiness confidence than either the perception of academic preparation or social engagement. Second, students who noted a perception of positive academic preparation were also likely to perceive positive social engagement. Finally, while both current students and recent graduates perceived a high degree of self-advocacy within the Early College model, they described less certainty about relying on self-advocacy after their time in the Early College setting.

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DEDICATION

To the generations of my family who came before me and to their tireless work to ensure that I could set goals and accomplish immeasurably more.

And to my children, Luke, Caroline, and Nathaniel, that you will grow in understanding and knowledge and that whatever you do, you will work at it with all of your heart.

CHAPTER 1

Introduction

A quickly growing educational initiative is becoming more mainstream in the United States. This initiative is the Early College High School initiative. In 2002, the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, along with several other organizations, began investing in this plan to improve the path to higher education for underrepresented groups of students (Akinmulero, 2015). Before these efforts were made, and in many cases still today, students who are from low socio-economic, minority backgrounds and students who are first-generation college applicants were less likely to attend college (Conley, 2008; Dennis, Phinney & Chuateco, 2005). For students in these groups who do attend, college is often a difficult and confusing journey.

At the onset of the Early College High School initiative, several guidelines governed the creation of these Early College campuses. For instance, one guideline suggested the campuses be physically located adjacent to or in the middle of college and university campuses (Kaniuka & Vickers, 2010; Leonard, 2013). In addition, the guidelines required that the students who were enrolled in the schools be low-income, first-generation students, and many were from a minority background (Kaniuka & Vickers, 2010; Leonard, 2013). The initiative has sought to address the problem that these groups of students are less likely to apply to or attend a college or university (Howley, Howley, Howley & Duncan, 2013; Kaniuka & Vickers, 2010; Woodcock & Beal, 2013).

So far, the outcomes from these Early College settings are encouraging. In many cases, the students who are enrolled in Early College around the country are performing

at much higher academic levels than previously noted, and college enrollment rates have increased for student groups that are engaged in the Early College High School initiative (Berger et al., 2009; Hoffman, 2015; Ndiaye & Wolfe, 2016; Webb, 2014). While there is still much progress to be made in advancing these underrepresented student groups, trends in current data support the idea that the Early College High School initiative promotes stronger college experiences for these groups. (Berger et al., 2009).

Although much of what has been noted regarding the Early College High Schools has been positive, there are still many aspects of the programs that have gone unexplored (Saenz & Combs, 2015). Much of the exploration has been narrowly focused, and researchers have specifically analyzed the academic benefits and the financial costs of the program (Saenz & Combs, 2015). In contrast, one area that has been overlooked until recently is the student perspective (McDonald & Farrell, 2012; Saenz & Combs, 2015). While there is a growing number of studies that explore the financial, academic, and professional impacts of the Early College High School initiative, vastly fewer studies have sought to understand what the students themselves perceive and how these perceptions have affected their lives (De La Ossa, 2005; McDonald & Farrell, 2012, Woodcock & Beal, 2013).

The perspectives and perceptions of stakeholders in the Early College models, specifically the students, can provide insight into the current statutes of these schools as well as how they are preparing Georgia's students for postsecondary education. Understanding the reasons for this educational model's strengths and shortcomings will supplement the existing data related to Early College High Schools (McDonald & Farrell, 2012; Saenz & Combs, 2015). Knowing *why* students are succeeding in a particular area

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can be as informative as knowing *that* they are succeeding. Knowing a student's

perspective of his or her own success and the meaning behind it goes one step further into

informing the model (De La Ossa, 2005; McDonald & Farrell, 2012).

Another essential area of research related to the Early College model is the

concept of college readiness. Conley (2007) makes the argument that the notion of

college readiness is outdated and inefficiently measured. He also discusses the flaws in

measuring college readiness as simply the outcome of courses on a transcript and a Grade

Point Average (GPA). College readiness involves a more comprehensive picture

including cognitive strategies, content knowledge, academic behaviors, and transition

skills (Conley, 2007, 2015). It is no longer appropriate to assume that a student meeting a

minimum GPA and test score has the skills that are necessary to succeed in

postsecondary education (Conley, 2007, 2008, 2015).

By design, Early College High Schools are structured to address a more

comprehensive approach to college readiness. The success that these Early College High

Schools have in getting underrepresented youth into college has been demonstrated in the

recent college admission data. Hoffman (2015) reports that Early Colleges maintain a

graduation rate of 90 percent, while the traditional model of high school shows a national

graduation rate of only 78 percent. In addition, 71 percent of students who graduate from

an Early College enroll in college the following semester; this is above the national

average of 68 percent (Webb, 2013).

Problem Statement

There is no shortage of data to proclaim the effectiveness of the Early College

High School model, and no shortage of data to suggest that college readiness is a

significant problem in this nation's high schools; however, this study serves to view these data through the eyes of Georgia's Early College students. The approach of this study offers a significant perspective. While we know many facts about the Early College High School initiative and college readiness, this study provides an opportunity for Georgia's Early College High School students to offer their perspective regarding preparedness for college within the Early College High School model.

Student perceptions provide an internal view of the workings of the Early College High School model. Having the individual experiences and perceptions of these students offers the opportunity to flesh out the Early College data that has been collected and studied (McDonald & Farrell, 2012; Saenz & Combs, 2015; Woodcock & Beal, 2013). Much of the existing data implies that the Early College model has enjoyed success and the next logical step is to ask the stakeholders in the center of the model- the students- what seems to drive these positive outcome (De La Ossa, 2005; McDonald & Farrell, 2012; Saenz & Combs, 2015; Woodcock and Beal, 2013).

Before the Early High School Initiative began, college preparatory programs were reserved for students with impressive academic performance and a promising future. By contrast, the students in Early College High Schools represent an unlikely selection for college preparatory work. By examining the aspects of the Early College experience that are most consequential for these students, this study can present a better understanding of how these underrepresented student groups might best be assisted in the pursuit of postsecondary learning.

Purpose and Scope

This study provides insight into potential improvements for the Early College model in Georgia by gaining an understanding of the perceptions that most influence these students. To fulfill this purpose, this study examines the perception of Early College students in relation to their academic preparation, social engagement and family relationship to school and their confidence in their ability to transition to college. Because the Early College High School initiative targets groups of students who typically struggle for success in the college arena, an exploration of these students' experiences and perspectives provides valuable insight.

The scope of this study included the college preparatory achievements of these Early College students, the influence of the program upon the students' experiences, and the students' perception of college readiness in terms of college transition knowledge and skills. This study originally sought to include all high school students enrolled in a specific Early College Academy in Georgia. Due to outside factors related to COVID-19, this study changed to a more limited case study to include the students enrolled in one of Georgia's Early College High Schools.

Conley (2015) presents the most comprehensive definition of college readiness and transition knowledge and skills. Over the past two decades, this research has served to both expand the discussion surrounding college readiness and to refine the list of key principles related to the topic. Conley's Four Keys model for assessing college readiness provides an ample list of research material regarding college readiness. This model organizes factors necessary for success in college and career into four "key" categories:

(a) Key Content Knowledge, (b) Key Cognitive Strategies, (c) Key Learning Skills and Techniques, and (4) Key Transition Knowledge and Skills.

To understand the specific details of the transition to college, the scope for this study was limited to Conley's fourth key: Key Transition Knowledge and Skills (Conley, 2015). Although each of the keys involves meaningful aspects of the college preparation process, existing literature thoroughly covers many of these concepts while neglecting others. In the past, themes such as motivation, high stakes testing, and content knowledge dominated the conversation related to college readiness (Conley, 2015). Previously, research related to college readiness did not take into consideration a student's ability to understand and navigate the college enrollment process (Conley, 2007, 2015).

The details of this fourth Key involve the processes that lead a student through the transition from high school into postsecondary education (Conley, 2015). This study focused on Georgia's Early College students' aspirations for college attendance, proper selection of college, their ability to secure the necessary resources for college entrance, their comprehension of the culture of postsecondary education and these students' ability to advocate for themselves in the process of pursuing college.

Because an individual's transition to college does not occur in a vacuum, there are any number of factors that may relate to the transition to college. There were areas of these students' personal experiences outside of school that fell outside of the scope of this study. This study was limited to the constraints of those aspects of life that are directly affected by a student's participation in an Early College program. For instance, a student's family structure can certainly affect their personal journey to postsecondary learning; however, this study only explored that student's perceptions of the relationship

between family and Early College. Considering a formulation of any discernable argument informing the future of the Early College model in Georgia, this study aimed to include only those factors that fall within the realm of influence for the schools in Georgia's Early College High School model.

Research Questions

This study sought to answer one overarching question: What are the perspectives of Georgia's Early College students as related to college readiness? This question was explored through a subset of questions:

In Georgia,

1. What perceptions do the students have about their Early College experience?

    a. What are the students' perceptions about the academic preparation they receive in the Early College model?

    b. What are the students' perceptions regarding social engagement in the Early College?

    c. How do the students perceive the relationship between their family and their Early College?

2. How confident are students in the Early College regarding their college transition knowledge and skills?

    a. What aspects of an awareness of college culture do the students explore as participants in Georgia's ECHS model?

    b. What aspects of the self-advocacy do the students explore as participants in Georgia's ECHS model?

c. What aspects of college enrollment knowledge for a postsecondary institution do the students explore as participants in Georgia's ECHS model?

3. Is student perception of the Early College experience related to their confidence in college transition knowledge and skills?

The overarching question of the experiences of Georgia's Early College students could be addressed in a variety of ways. These students are in a unique situation and the participation of the students from one of these campuses provided insight into the Early College High School program. The subset of questions under each leading research question helped to organize the details of this research study.

Theoretical Framework

Conley (2015) presented a new model for measuring college readiness. Following nearly two decades of research related to college readiness, Conley's model, the Four Keys model, emphasized four central features that constitute college success: (1) Key Cognitive Strategies, (2) Key Content Knowledge, (3) Key Learning Skills and Techniques, and (4) Key Transition Knowledge and Skills (Conley, 2007, 2015). Conley contended that each of the Four Keys outline areas of college readiness must be considered in assessing student's preparedness for post-secondary education. College readiness was an overarching theme for this study and the research questions concern themes related to the fourth of these keys- transition knowledge and skills. This study aimed to understand college readiness through the perspective of students enrolled in one of Georgia's Early College campuses.

The Four Keys model detailed a comprehensive list of necessary skills and attributes necessary for college success. The first three Keys, as described by Conley

(2007), involve the intelligence needed for learning, the details of academic topics necessary for mastery at the high school level, and a student's ability to constructively self-monitor academic progress. Conley's fourth and final Key, Key Transition Knowledge and Skills, was originally named Contextual Skill and Awareness (Conley, 2007, 2015). In more recent research, the fourth Key has been defined in terms of aspirations for college, successful college selection, understanding of post-secondary norms of college culture and self-advocacy (Conley, 2015). It is this fourth Key that dominated the focus of this research study.

Key Transition Knowledge and Skills, the key that most pertained to this study, can most easily be divided into three central themes: (1) The culture of college and postsecondary environment- a student's comprehension of the environment in a postsecondary setting; these students must successfully interact with peers and instructors from a variety of backgrounds and understand their role as a college student, (2) Self-advocacy- students who intend to succeed in a postsecondary setting need to feel comfortable advocating for themselves in a range of settings and must be willing to take steps to grow as individuals, (3) "College Knowledge" – a student's working knowledge of the expectations in higher education and his or her capacity to select an appropriate postsecondary institution and to navigate admissions and financial aid systems (Conley, 2007, 2008, 2015).

Methods

Research Design

The case study research design for this study uses mixed method data to understand the happening within one of Georgia's Early College High Schools (Creswell

& Plano Clark, 2011). Although a larger, exploratory sequential design was the ideal model, the choice of a case study design still met the desired objectives in the constraints of a global pandemic at the time of the study. The choice of a mixed methods data stems from the fact that much of the current research has relied entirely upon quantitative data (Dennis et al., 2005). This study functioned to build a bridge from the existing quantitative findings related to the Early College literature to additional data, both qualitative and quantitative in nature, as well as to draw connections to the perceptions of these students.

Data Collection Procedures

The data collection procedures for this study occurred in two phases: (1) A qualitative phase involving individual interviews to collect qualitative information from select recent graduates of the Early College High School, and (2) a quantitative phase that utilized a survey to collect information from the Early College students who are enrolled in the same Early College campus.

Research Question 1. The first research question encompasses the students' perspectives of attending a school within the Early College model. Perceptions concerning the student's academic preparation, social engagement and the relationship between the school and family were included in this first research question. This question was initially addressed during the qualitative phase of the study, using individual in-depth interviews.

The interviews were conducted on the Google Meet platform. Google Meet is free for all users, is accessible for both computer and phones users and it can be recorded. Five recent graduates from the selected Early College campus were interviewed using a

semi-structured interview design. These individual interviews lasted between 50 and 115 minutes each. Following each interview, the interviewer reflected upon the interview content and made key notations for each interview immediately following the Google Meet session. Prairie Research Associates (2001) recommends that an interviewer's notations be added within the first two hours for best recollection of the interview.

After the completion of each interview, the transcripts were reviewed for any themes relative to the first research question, student perception of their experiences at their Early College campus. These themes were added to the student survey prior to the beginning of phase two of the study. The student survey provided an opportunity for current students to respond to items related to the first research question as well.

Research Question 2. The second research question addressed the students' confidence in several aspects of college transition knowledge and skills within the context of Georgia's Early Colleges. More specifically, the focus of this question was the students' level of confidence in an awareness of college culture, an ability to self-advocate in an academic setting, and college enrollment knowledge.

The data collection for this question occurred first in the qualitative interview phase of the study. The recent graduates answered questions and shared their experiences related to college transition knowledge and skills. The semi-structured interview design allowed for themes to emerge from the students' stories. In turn, these emergent themes informed the quantitative phase of the study but provided guidance for amendments to the student survey.

The second phase of the study also addressed the topic of confidence in college transition skills and knowledge. Just as with the first research question, survey items were

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included to address specific elements of college transition and any themes related to the topic that emerged from the in-depth interviews with the recent graduates.

Research Question 3. This final research question incorporated both student perception of the Early College model and the features of college transition knowledge and skills. The data collected for this research question assisted in determining if there was any relationship between these students' perceptions and their confidence concerning college transition.

The data that was collected from the survey provided information to explore more about this relationship, and to what extent various aspects were significant. The surveys were structured into two sections, including a brief introductory portion for participants to answer personal and background information and a second section that included Likert-scale items directly related to each of the questions listed in the subset of research questions: participants' perceptions of academic preparation, social engagement, family life related to Early College, an awareness of college culture, self-advocacy, and college enrollment knowledge.

Data Analysis Procedures

Research Question 1. A portion of each of the in-depth interviews focused on the perceptions of students who attend Early Colleges. Because the interview responses were digitally recorded and transcribed, a detailed analysis of these transcripts was able to be completed in great detail. The responses related to this first research question focused on themes related to the students' perceptions of academic experiences, social relationships, and family life in relation to their experiences as Early College students. The interview

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guide provided at least three guiding questions for each of these topics, along with follow-up questions that could be asked depending upon the direction of this discussion.

The analysis of the interview data as related to students' perceptions followed Saldaña's (2015) process of analyzing the transcript for themes that emerged from the students' actual responses. The coding for this data was a multi-cycle process. This method was necessary to best categorize the information that was gathered (Saldaña, 2015). The first cycle of coding used the participants' exact language to develop themes that could be further analyzed. This type of coding, called In Vivo Coding, honors the integrity of the participant's voice and uses the actual verbatim words of the participant (Saldaña, 2015). During this first phase of coding, all the participant content was simply read, noted line-by-line, and then categorized into patterns that are formed by grouping the participants' own words.

During the second phase of coding, the technique of Pattern Coding was utilized to group the codes created during the In Vivo Coding phase into fewer, more categorized groups. For instance, themes of responses in the same category were regrouped so that they created a more inclusive category, or theme. It was during the second and subsequent phases of coding that the codes were better organized to complete a better picture of how each of these stories all fit together into a consistent, larger story (Saldaña, 2015). Pattern Coding is typically an appropriate method of coding for seeking to understand patterns of human interactions and social networks (Saldaña, 2015). Once these groups are recoded, the overall thematic or conceptual patterns that emerge from the interviews' transcripts can influence the instrumentation for the next phase of data collection.

Research Question 2. The portion of the interviews that involved college transition knowledge and skills provided the information that was analyzed to answer the second research question. The interview included questions related to awareness of college culture, self-advocacy, and college enrollment knowledge. Similar to topics covered for the first research question, three guiding questions were provided for each of these topics, followed by optional follow-up questions that were more dependent upon the direction of the discussion. These topics gave the participants the opportunity to elaborate on their own transition out of the Early College model and into college or adult life, which produced patterns and themes to include in the remainder of the study.

The same multi-cycle process was utilized for this portion of the interview content as was for the first research question. Using the participants' exact language in the In-Vivo coding cycle afforded the opportunity to gather the responses that best informed the research. Once themes became apparent in the first phase of coding, the reorganizing of data through the Process Coding technique was used. The more categorized themes that emerged from this specific set of questions helped to refine and contribute to the survey phase of research.

Research Question 3. While the analysis of the first two research questions focused on the elements of the in-depth interview analysis, research question three centered around the survey data and the connections that could be drawn between the various themes that had emerged from the interview phase as well as those data from the survey results. The goal of the analysis for this phase was to discern if there are any significant correlations between the students' perceptions of their Early College

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experience and their level of confidence regarding college transition knowledge and skills.

The analysis for this final research question involved searching to discover if there was a relationship between the students' perceptions of their experiences in the Early College model and their level of confidence related to specific areas of college transition knowledge and skills. This analysis looked for any relationship between and among these topics from the first two research questions and measured how significantly these elements of these concepts were related. Where a relationship was noted, the strength of the relationship and the effect size was measured.

Significance

This study provides insight into the workings of Georgia's Early College schools. While current data indicates that the Early College model is very successful in preparing students for college, this study functioned to supplement those data with information from the students themselves. Current literature promotes themes including college readiness and confidence as prominent in successful education programs. This study provided a look into the Early College model from the perspective of those who are at the center of the model- the students. These students' responses to both the interviews and the survey offered information to stakeholders about the influence that the Early College model has had in the lives and stories of these students. This study also provided a unique opportunity to assess how well the students perceive the program had prepared them for college in some key areas.

Terms and Definitions

The area of research in education that is related to college readiness uses some terminology that is specific to a narrow portion of literature. For the purposes of this study, the terms "postsecondary education" or "college" referred to an educational environment that follows high school. While some areas of research distinguish between a trade school setting, a junior college and a university, this study used the phrase "college" to include all the above. While it was important to glean whether the students who were engaged in the study knew and understood the differences in these educational settings, the terminology for the survey materials, interview questions and all written portion of the study remained consistent in the use of "college" to be easily understood by each of the participants.

Conley (2007) originally coined the phrase "awareness of norms and culture of postsecondary environment" as one of his Key transition pieces of knowledge. Since then, the terminology has evolved through a couple of other variations including "postsecondary awareness" and "postsecondary environment awareness" (Conley, 2008, 2015). In all these adjustments to terminology, these phrases referred to a students' ability to understand the culture and norms that occur in the academic postsecondary environment. For the purposes of this study, the phrase "awareness of college culture" was the terminology used to depict this idea. This was both to express the cumulative meaning of these terms as well as to keep the terminology consistent throughout this study, including with both the survey and interview.

"College Knowledge," a term developed by Conley (2007), referred to all the procedures and routine tasks included in choosing, applying for, and enrolling in a postsecondary school. For students who are from typically underrepresented groups,

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these seemingly basic tasks prove critical for student success. While the list of tasks and procedures can include a large array of items, depending on a student's specific experience, Coney (2007) has compiled a relevant listing of items and given them the broad name "College Knowledge." Because all the items in the list are relative to the enrollment process, this study used the phrase "college enrollment knowledge" to clarify the specific application of the phrase. For purposes in this study, the discussion of a working knowledge of the requirements necessary for postsecondary enrollment was used in place of the specific term "college enrollment knowledge."

CHAPTER II

The foundational elements of this study included the description and evaluation of traditionally underrepresented student groups, the overall progress made in Georgia by the Early College High School initiative, and the transformation of the term college readiness. In addition, it is important to understand the history and contextual details that have led our nation's educational system down the current path. This chapter presents the current literature surrounding the topic of college readiness and first-generation college students and introduces the theoretical framework for this study. The components and variables that are related to these topics are discussed in this chapter and provided through a description of the current and previous changes in education that have led to the Early College movement as a plan for addressing underrepresented student groups in the postsecondary level of academia.

Characteristics of Students Joining ECHS

While an improvement of college degree attainment must improve for all students, there are specific groups of students who have been severely underrepresented in postsecondary education. Students who are from a minority background, are the first-generation college student in their family, or come from a low-income or low socio-economic environment have typically been underrepresented on college campuses (Dennis, Phinney & Chuateco, 2005). Students in these classifications have typically failed to demonstrate the necessary skills for college (Conley, 2007, 2008, 2015). Students who were traditionally underrepresented on college campuses faced more challenges once they began college level work than faced by their more traditional peers (Blackwell & Pinder, 2014; Brady-Amoon & Fuertes, 2011; Conley, 2008; Dennis et al.

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2005; Hoxby & Avery, 2012; Leonard, 2013; Markle, 2015; Pascarella, Wolniak, Pierson & Terenzini, 2003).

Once a student is accepted to a postsecondary institution, many other opportunities for confusion and difficulty arise. In many cases, research has indicated that students who are low-income, first-generation college students or minority students take more time and effort to adjust to a college setting than traditional students (Akinmulero, 2015; Brady-Amoon & Fuertes, 2011; Dennis et al., 2005; Hoxby & Avery, 2012). Reason, Terenzini, and Domingo (2006) discussed the significance of the first year of college for these first-generation college students and for the likelihood of persistence toward a degree. Leonard (2013) explained that students who are from low-income, minority or who are first-generation college students are more likely to require remediation once in college and that this remediation is often just an initial step in dropping out of postsecondary learning.

Current literature related to college readiness validates the theory that the lack of these knowledge and skills has been shown to have negative effects on students who are traditionally underrepresented in the postsecondary environment (Covarrubias, Romero & Trivelli, 2015; Herrmann & Varnum, 2018; Rubin, 2012). Herrmann and Varnum (2018) found that, if first-generation college students can be presumed as similar to those who face bicultural identity integration, then the students who perceive the blending of home and college cultures to be harmonious demonstrate positive outcomes in physical and mental health, academic measures, general well-being, and persistence. When the culture of a students' home is nonequivalent to that of the postsecondary institution of choice, an inequality results, even after controlling for demographic backgrounds,

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enrollment characteristics, and past academic performance (Herrmann & Varnum, 2018; Stephens, Fryberg, Markus, Johnson, & Covarrubias, 2012).

Students who are from a family background that is unfamiliar to the postsecondary environment will have more adjustments to make in the college setting than those students who are from a more traditional college background (Collier & Morgan, 2008; Conley, 2008, 2015). Conley outlined the importance of students' understandings of faculty expectation, communications at the collegiate level and social norms as necessary skills for success in the postsecondary environment (Conley, 2008; Conley, 2015). Collier and Morgan (2007) discussed the similar necessity for new college students to grasp the role of acting the part of college student. Without a clear understanding of the details and procedures that are typically in the college environment, students who are new to the postsecondary demonstrate less ability to thrive in a postsecondary setting (Collier & Morgan, 2007; Conley 2008, 2015).

Once students complete high school and are accepted into a postsecondary environment, the next hurdle is to operate at a level that is acceptable for college learning. Leonard (2013) explained how the lack of college readiness is particularly a problem for traditionally underachieving high school students. Because students enrolled in Early College High Schools are selected from these same traditionally underachieving subgroups of students, college preparedness is a vital topic (Conley, 2008; Leonard, 2013).

These underrepresented groups find many of the aspects of college life new, strange, and difficult to navigate (Brady-Amoon & Fuertes, 2011; Dennis et al., 2005). In addition to academic details, Pascarella et al. (2003) focused non-academic features of

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these students' experiences and discovered differences for the non-traditional students versus traditional ones. Jehangir (2009) outlined the individual experiences of a small sample of non-traditional college students and described their difficulties with adjustment to college life. In many cases, these students spoke of the early days in their college experience as foreign, difficult, and overwhelming (Jehangir, 2009).

As with all students in college, these non-traditional students are also learning to operate on an adult level in many non-academic areas of life, such as finances and healthcare. While this season of life can be surprisingly complicated for any young adult, these underrepresented student groups most often have a more challenging path to follow (Hoxby & Avery, 2013; Perez-Felkner, 2015; Pascarella, Wolniak, Pierson & Terenzini, 2003). Underrepresented groups of students have a disproportionally higher number of health problems than their counterparts, including chronic illnesses like asthma and diabetes (Perez-Felkner, 2015).

Early College High School Initiative

One concerted effort to counteract these problems with getting underrepresented groups into the postsecondary arena is the Early College High School initiative. The Early College High School programs appear promising because Berger et al. (2009) reported that Early College High School students typically perform at a higher level in postsecondary work than students from more traditional high school backgrounds. Kaniuka and Vickers (2010) reported that students consistently described the Early College High School academic setting as excellent and as having a focus on a positive future for students. The ability for these students, who come from typically

underachieving subgroups, to earn college credit before high school graduation has been evident in the Early College High School setting (Saenz & Combs, 2015).

This study came at an opportune time in relation to the literature base for college readiness and Early College and an understanding of the historical contexts that have led to this study is helpful. Not too long ago, the United States of America held a more prestigious place in the world education system. During an earlier era, the United States relished in the idea that we were the smartest and the best. More recently, the United States has fallen in the world's ranking of education (Kelly, 2010). In 2009, the United States ranked 10th in the world among developed countries in the percentage of young adults with college degrees (Kelly, 2010). At that time, President Obama set the goal that America would lead developed countries in college acceptance (Kelly, 2010). Kelly (2010) reports that in 2010, the United States was producing 2.3 million associate and bachelor's degrees annually. To meet the 2020 College Attainment Goal set for Congress, the United States would have had to increase the percent of college degree attainment by 4.2 percent annually over the past decade (Kelly, 2010). More recent analysis of postsecondary education in the United States shows that 44.3% of the population hold a postsecondary degree of some kind and that we are ranked 12th in the developed world for tertiary degrees (OECD, 2017; OECD, 2019).

The Early College High School initiative exists to address each of these specific concerns for underrepresented student groups. As mentioned above, the Early College High School initiative began in 2002. As a recent development in education, the Early College High School initiative emerged to encourage college access and attendance to students traditionally not represented on college campuses (Dennis et al., 2005, Saenz &

Combs, 2015). Saenz and Combs (2015) discussed that the Early College High School initiative is one of the most aggressive attempts to counteract the numbers of underachieving high school students who do not successfully complete college. The Early High School initiative has ushered in many exciting and positive trends in relation to these underrepresented student groups (Howley, Howley, Howley & Duncan, 2013; Kaniuka & Vickers, 2010; Woodcock & Beal, 2013). Many of the students who are enrolled in Early College High Schools are performing better than their peers in traditional high school settings (Howley et al. 2013; Kaniuka & Vickers, 2010; Woodcock & Beal, 2013).

In Georgia, the Georgia Early College Initiative focuses on four goals: (1) To increase college readiness and college success of high school graduates who traditionally underserved in Georgia, (2) To develop and test model programs for young people that get better results, are more coherent and less duplicative, and make possible a shorter time to complete an associate degree where applicable or two years of college, (3) To study the effectiveness of the Early College model for reducing the high school dropout rate and increasing the college admission and college success rate of students, and (4) To replicate throughout Georgia the successes of Early College (University System of Georgia, 2012). The Office of Education Access and Success (OAES) oversee the Early College program in Georgia (University System of Georgia, 2012).

In keeping with the national data, Georgia's Early Colleges have also proven beneficial for student achievement. The first graduating class for the Georgia Early College Initiative enjoyed a 100 percent graduation rate (University System of Georgia, 2012). The class at Carver Early College consisted of 79 students, all of whom were

accepted into at least one college (University System of Georgia, 2012). Currently, Georgia's Early Colleges see a 90 percent high school graduation rate over the traditional state average of 81 percent and a 90 percent post-secondary enrollment rate among Early College graduates (University System of Georgia, 2012).

Conley's Four Keys Model of College Readiness

One underlying theme that drives the Early College High School initiative has been finding strategies to best prepare these underrepresented groups of students for postsecondary learning. The selected framework serving as the basis for the current study is Conley's Four Keys model, an extensive look at what it means to be college and career ready. David Conley, an avid researcher in relation to the topic of college readiness, suggests this model for measuring college readiness (Conley, 2007, 2008, 2015). Conley's (2015) Four Keys model presented specific areas that are necessary for a student's success in postsecondary education. Taking a complete look at all factors that contribute to a student's success at the collegiate level, Conley (2015) advocated for a comprehensive analysis of college readiness. The Four Keys of this model are: (1) Key Cognitive Strategies- the ability to think and make connections between various academic subjects, (2) Key Content Knowledge- the understanding of the main concepts of the central content areas of academia, (3) Key Learning Skills and Techniques- the use of practices and techniques that assist a successful student to manage an academic environment (i.e., time management, metacognition, note taking, etc..), and (4) Key Transition Knowledge and Skills- an aspiration to attend postsecondary school, a cognitive grasp on the process that were required and the capacity to advocate for necessary resources in the context of an academic environment (Conley, 2015).

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Each of these Keys is pertinent to the success of a prospective postsecondary student in a specific and important way. A student who has strengths in academic content but no awareness of the process of transition to the postsecondary world would struggle more than one with strengths in both areas (Conley, 2008, 2015). Likewise, a student who is well informed and aided in the college application process only to arrive in a postsecondary environment with no personal management skills or college ready behaviors may not fare as well. The elements of the Four Keys function together, and a specific student's college readiness can be drastically affected by a weakness in any one area (Conley, 2008, 2015).

College Transition Knowledge and Skills

Traditionally, college readiness has been measured by a rudimentary system based on GPA and titles of courses in a student transcript (Conley, 2007). While this measurement of readiness is not altogether wrong, there are many more indicators of college preparedness that should be considered when determining a student's academic career (Conley, 2007, 2008). The Educational Policy Improvement Center [EPIC] (Conley, 2015) suggested that it is no longer enough to assume that because a student has successfully graduated from an accredited high school that they are prepared for the nuances and challenges of the post-secondary world. Several strategies for discussing readiness have risen in the current research alongside that of Conley's Four Keys, each with its own area of focus (McAlister & Mevs, 2012). Two specific frameworks that are discussed at length later in this chapter, the Holistic Model of Education and Workplace Success Framework and the Hierarchical Education and Workplace Readiness Framework, have both contributed to the discussion about readiness. (Camara et al.,

2015; Mattern et al., 2014; McAlister & Mevs, 2012). Both alternative frameworks begin to investigate readiness from a more general perspective, including how readiness affects a student in traditional and nontraditional ways, both in postsecondary learning and in the workplace (Camara et al., 2015; Mattern et al., 2014; McAlister & Mevs, 2012). The Four Keys model is the most pertinent framework for this study because it goes beyond simple test scores and dives into some non-academic aspects of readiness in addition to high stakes testing and secondary grades while still maintaining a focus on the transition to postsecondary learning (Conley, 2007, 2015).

The Four Keys model has been developed because of several strategic initiatives working in agreement with one another toward a combined goal of improving college readiness for students in the United States (Conley, 2007, 2008; McAlister & Mevs, 2012). After some tenuous years in the political spotlight, the No Child Left Behind Act (No Child Left Behind [NCLB], 2002) was replaced by the Every Student Succeeds Act (Every Student Succeeds Act [ESSA], 2015) in 2015. The ESSA (2015) introduced a new focus beyond simply high school graduation and into postsecondary success. This new political focus on having students prepare for life after high school while still attending K-12 education played exactly into the work being done by David Conley as a part of the EPIC program at the University of Oregon (Conley, 2008, 2015). Founded in 2002 by Conley and his colleagues, EPIC worked to provide strategies and a framework for readiness for all (Conley, 2007, 2008, 2015). Conley's Four Keys model, the forefront initiative of EPIC, provided the cornerstone for the growing dialogue surrounding readiness for students.

Conley (2007, 2008, 2015) suggested that with a more comprehensive look into college readiness and its various dimensions, stakeholders can better prepare students to promote success at the postsecondary level. This theory involves the level of assessments that are used to determine a students' aptitude or readiness for college (Conley, 2015). Conley suggests that if more performance and task-based assessments were used to measure a students' readiness, a clear understanding of that students' strengths heading into postsecondary work could be collected. This theory lined up perfectly with the timing of the ESSA's initiative to create better assessments and the creation of the Partnership for Assessments of Readiness for Collage and Careers [PARCC] and the Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium [S-BAC] (Conley, 2008, 2015; ESSA, 2015; McAlister & Mevs, 2012). The Four Keys model suggested that the existing level of assessments, mostly standardized, multiple choice, did not provide sufficient information to measure students' postsecondary aptitude but that a more holistic assessment program would promote better understanding (Conley, 2008, 2015).

Many researchers who work with the topic of college readiness and assessments agree that empirical evidence is needed to support the interpretations of college readiness measurements (Camara et al., 2015; Fina et al., 2018). Twenty states used assessments that were developed by either PARCC or SBAC during the 2016-2017 school year (Fina et al, 2018). The early findings related to the newer generation of assessments are beginning to be measured and added to information regarding high school assessments and college readiness is becoming available (Fina, Dunbar, & Welch, 2018). Fina et al. (2018) found that a higher average first-year postsecondary GPA could be correlated with a higher number of content benchmarks passed on high school benchmark assessments.

Early outcomes are beginning to show that a more comprehensive assessment program may more accurately characterize readiness for students (Camara et al., 2015; Fina et al., 2018; Mattern et al., 2014).

Conley's Key that is most closely related to this study, the Fourth Key: Transition Knowledge and Skills, focuses on a students' awareness of the culture of college, their ability to advocate for themselves in an academic setting, and their knowledge of the requirements and procedures necessary to enroll in a postsecondary institution (Conley, 2015). Conley (2007, 2008, 2015) discussed the elements of this Fourth Key in detail and argued that these elements are equally essential to postsecondary success as the academic elements that can be measured through assessments. The related theory is that students who lack these transition skills or this knowledge will not thrive in the actual transition from high school to postsecondary education (Conley, 2007, 2008, 2015). This study examines the details of this Fourth Key and the strength of this theory. Figure 1 provides a visual model for the aspects of the Fourth Key.
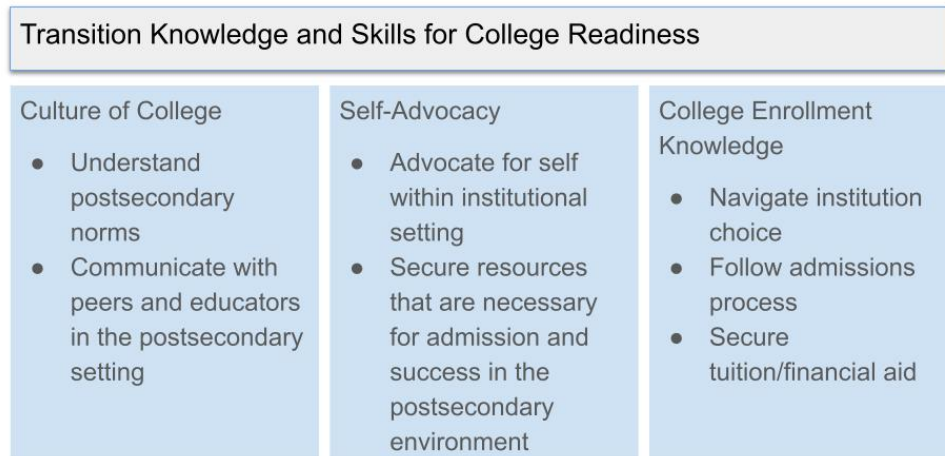
Figure 1. Conceptual Framework.

The key principles of the Four Keys model included prospective postsecondary students' understanding of the culture of college, their ability to advocate for themselves and to contribute to their own personal growth and their ability to seek out and obtain the necessary resources during the transition from high school and college (Conley, 2007, 2008, 2015). These elements of this Key work alongside those of the other Three Keys in Conley's model for measuring college readiness (Conley, 2015).

This Fourth Key and its specific concepts relate directly to the key topics for this study and the research questions addressed in this study. The first research question for this study emphasizes the relationship between Georgia students' perspective of the Early College model, and the second deals with college transition knowledge and skills. These college transition skills discussed in this first area of focus are those listed in the Fourth Key model: awareness of college culture, self-advocacy, and college enrollment knowledge (Conley, 2008, 2015).

Culture of College

Conley (2008, 2015) explained that the culture of college is foreign to a student who is from an underrepresented student group of who is a first-generation college student. Having to acclimate to the environment of a postsecondary institution without a familiar background based in similar contexts can cause some students to feel that they experience a cultural mismatch (Conley, 2008, 2015; Herrmann &Varnum, 2018). This study asked Georgia's students in this Early College High School for their perceived level of confidence related to an understanding of the culture of college. Another way of thinking about this question is to ask if the exposure to the immersive nature of an Early

College environment has influenced these students' awareness of the culture of college and the role of a college student on a college campus.

Ndiaye and Wolfe (2016) cited examples of students gaining the ability to work more successfully in a *college for all* culture where students from underrepresented groups benefited from real-world connections to college life. Carter and Welner (2016) examined the pitfalls that can await a student entering the postsecondary arena without a cultural understanding of that level of academia. The students may be able to effectively apply and enroll into such a program, but their academic success wanes without the necessary understanding of college traditions, proper communication with peers and faculty, and the skills necessary to live as an adult (Carter & Welner, 2016). Pascarella et al. (2003) found the most significant differences between first generation college students and those students who had two parents with bachelor level degree. In these findings, first-generation college students had statistically significant differences in cumulative college hours taken after two-year, college grades and a lower number of Greek or other non-academic affiliation (Pascarella et al., 2003).

Self-Advocacy

A second area of focus for examining the confidence of Early College students as it relates to their college transition knowledge and skills is a look into a student's ability to advocate for themselves within an academic setting as well as secure necessary resources for success in that environment. Conley (2007, 2008, 2015). Conley explained that an integral portion of the Fourth Key is a student's ability to take ownership of their own personal growth and an ability to advocate for themselves. Students who learn to seek out necessary resources and information will adjust better to the postsecondary

environment than those who cannot (Conley, 2008, 2015). This study questioned what evidence exists that these Early College students demonstrate confidence in self-advocacy within the Early College model. Any evidence provided either in the student's survey responses or individual interviews was able to shed light into how the Early College model is related to an easier transition to college for these students.

The literature base also validated the argument that self-advocacy is a key skill for successful college students. Blackwell and Pinder (2014) examined the specific benefits of self-efficacy within an academic setting and determine that school environment can play a role in a student's ability to foster a sense of autonomy and better relate to the culture of the academic process. Self-efficacy is the first step in a student becoming an advocate for themselves (Brady-Amoon & Fuertes, 2011). Conley's (2015) Four Keys model highlights the necessity of self-advocacy for postsecondary student success. Wang and Castaneda (2008) found that first-generation college students experience a higher occurrence of somatic symptoms as a result having less self-efficacy. Students who report lower self-efficacy or who perceive themselves as less capable to achieve will not effectively advocate for themselves (Brady-Amoon & Fuertes, 2011; Wang & Castaneda-Sound, 2008).

Woodcock and Beal (2013) discussed how students who had graduated from Early College High Schools reported a high level of comfort in the coursework at the four-year university level. This level of comfort proves important considering Brady-Amoon and Fuertes (2011) findings that college students who reported a high level of self-efficacy also demonstrated better levels of acclimation to college academics. In addition, Conley (2015) discussed the dimensions and constructs of college readiness,

listing academic preparedness, academic tenacity, and college knowledge as meaningful aspects of readiness. Conley (2008) discussed each of these three dimensions in terms of individual, school setting and system level preparedness.

The importance of self-advocacy within the postsecondary process was also noted by key literature related to college readiness (Conley, 2008, 2015; Hoxby & Avery, 2013; Perez-Felkner, 2015). Conley (2007) explained that college students must be able to communicate with peers and faculty in a manner that is acceptable for the academic culture. Students must be able to communicate effectively with classmates and professors from an array of diverse backgrounds (Conley, 2007). Self-advocacy plays a pivotal role in a student's academic experience. For the purposes of this study, the goal was to ascertain each participant's perspective of advocating for him or herself. The intention was to gauge an overall level of comfort for this group of Early College students. In addition to a basic comfort level, it would also be interesting to learn specific ways that these students have grown in this area within the Early College model.

College Enrollment Knowledge

One final detail of the first research question for this study was a student's ability to recognize which steps are needed to successfully apply and enroll into a postsecondary institution and to act effectively to pursue these steps. This study specifically asked, "What aspects of college enrollment knowledge for a postsecondary institution do the students explore as participants in Georgia's Early College model?" Conley's Fourth Key (2007, 2008, 2015) labeled the various steps in this process as the "college knowledge" needed to navigate all the parts of the process to complete college applications, to secure financial resources and to successfully enroll into a postsecondary program.

The literature regarding college selection, admittance and enrollment provided validation for the notion that a successful student requires a working knowledge of the process for application and enrollment into a postsecondary school. Conley's (2007, 2008, 2015) Four Keys model labels this knowledge *College Knowledge,* the understanding of the process for college admission, testing, college options and choices, financial aid, tuition and costs, curricular prerequisites, and testing standards. Jehangir (2009) promotes the importance of social and academic integration for students who face postsecondary work as first-generation college students. Students who lack the background to prepare them for college admission and attendance require a focused and strategic approach for assisting in the steps for transitioning to college (Jehangir, 2009). Pascarella et al. (2003) found that, without any intervention, first-generation students worked more and studied less, were less likely to register for natural sciences, mathematics or arts and humanities and had lower grades than their counterparts.

Conley coined the phrase "college knowledge" and explained that some of the most formidable obstacles for a potential college student are the admissions requirements, financial aid and applications, tuition costs, testing requirements and other procedural routines that accompany entry to postsecondary life. Ndiaye and Wolfe (2016) explain how the strong social support within an Early College setting helped to prepare underrepresented and first-generation students in choosing, applying for, and attending an appropriate institution. Schools that provide support systems for students in these areas demonstrated a much more successful group of graduates at the college level (Collier & Morgan, 2007; Conley, 2008, 2015; Ndiaye & Wolfe, 2016). Students who were enrolled in a highly supportive high school setting resulted in a more successful pursuit of

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appropriately matched level of colligate work (Perez-Felkner, 2015). The students in Georgia's Early Colleges are first-generation college students, but they have been exposed to a program specifically tasked with better college preparation. This study aimed to explore these students' level of knowledge as related to the various processes required for college selection, application, and acceptance.

Alternative Frameworks

Several factors exist that have influenced this study that are not addressed by the Four Keys framework. Although the Four Keys model does consider many facets of these students' experiences as first-generation college students, there are elements to this specific study that fall outside of the scope of the framework. One principal factor for these students' experiences is the dynamic within their family as related to the Early College experience. This study sought to understand the perception of family connection to the Early College model through in-depth interviews and survey questions. Conley (2007, 2008, 2015) focused on the elements of the experience that is controlled directly by the students themselves. This study focused on the student as an individual as well, but the students' perceptions of family support did enter the study as part of the student's perceptions.

One alternative framework for the discussion surrounding college and career readiness is the Holistic Model of Education and Workplace Success Framework. This Holistic Framework, an abbreviated name for this model, was developed by the professionals at the American College Testing [ACT] as an effort to gather a more encompassing picture of what is necessary for success in both college and career (Camara et al., 2015). The Holistic Framework focuses on four broad areas of college and career

readiness: core academics, critical thinking capabilities, behavioral skills, and education and career navigation skills (Camara et al., 2015). These four areas do not differ in many ways from Conley's Four Key Model, the areas of focus are the same (Camara et al., 2015; Conley, 2015). The Holistic Model differs most specifically from Conley's Model in that it approaches the K- Career experience as a complete continuum and seeks to assess how these four areas impact each stage all the way through a student's career and into career satisfaction (Camara et al., 2015). Conley's Model limits the focus to K-12 instruction and then into the transition into postsecondary learning (Conley, 2008, 2015). Conley's Model presents a better fit as a framework for this current study because of this level of focus on the transition from high school to college.

A second alternative framework is the Hierarchical Education and Workplace Readiness Framework (Mattern et al., 2014). This framework, called Hierarchical Framework from here forward, also provided a more holistic look college and career readiness (Camara et al., 2015; Mattern et al, 2014). Also developed by ACT, inc., the Hierarchical Framework was created in response to the Every Student Succeeds Act to further explore areas of education that contribute to both college and career readiness (Mattern et al., 2014). Similar to both Conley's model and the Holistic Framework, this framework identifies knowledge, skills, and attributes that best contribute to students' success after K-12 learning (Mattern et al., 2014). The central distinguishing factor for the Hierarchical Framework was that it differentiates specific knowledge and skills that benefit either college *or* career (Mattern et al., 2014). While still taking into consideration the entire Kindergarten to career continuum, just as the Holistic Framework, the Hierarchical Framework contained specific indicators for institutional (or college)

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success versus career success (Camara et al., 2015; Mattern et al., 2014). While this framework does address college readiness more specifically than the Holistic Framework, a focus upon transition from high school to college was not as strong as the Four Keys model presented by Conley (Conley, 2015; Mattern et al., 2014).

Student Perceptions of ECHS Experience

Research in the area of college readiness has just begun to incorporate student voice, experience, and perceptions into the exploration of the Early College High School initiative. Saenz and Combs (2015) provided a model for incorporating student perspective into the analysis of the Early College High School initiative. Saenz and Combs (2015) worked closely with 17 Hispanic students in an Early College High School in Texas. Utilizing both focus groups and individual interviews, emergent themes were established for these students in relation to their experiences as Early College High School students (Saenz & Combs, 2015). These themes included: (1) The significance of an Associate degree, (2) The importance of a positive school environment, (3) An establishment of self-awareness and adult skills for success, (4) Positive and negative impact of family members, and (5) A necessity of support from peers and teachers (Saenz & Combs, 2015). These themes all connect to the existing literature related to first-generation college students. McDonald and Farrell (2012) also incorporated student voice into an analysis of Early College High Schools and determined that college readiness emerged as an important theme for these students.

In addition to providing a deeper understanding of these student's perceptions of Early College, their stories also assisted in drawing a connection between the existing literature base topics related to college transition knowledge and skills and the future of

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programs like Georgia's Early College High Schools. This study sought to answer the question, "How confident are students in the Early College with regard to college transition knowledge and skills?" The students' responses in both phases of the study served to answer this question.

Academic Preparation

While it is logical to examine the academic preparation of any academic program, the students' perceptions regarding their academic preparedness may specifically influence their experience as ECHS students. The existing research related to the ECHS model promotes its success as an academic setting (McDonald & Farrell, 2012; Ndiaye & Wolfe, 2016). One related question for the students within the ECHS model involves their *perception* of academic preparation. The benefit of preparing students to perform academically could easily be undercut by their perception of not being well prepared (Jehangir, 2009; Park et al., 2018).

Social Engagement

College transition literature speaks to the importance of the student's capacity to feel a sense of belonging in the postsecondary world (Conley, 2008, 2015; Herrmann & Varnum, 2018; Pascarella et al., 2003). Students who would typically socially identify with groups that are less represented in a postsecondary setting tend to struggle socially once they enter a college setting (Conley, 2008; Pascarella et al., 2003). The students' perceived social engagement could influence other areas of the student experience (Wang & Castaneda-Sound, 2008), or upon their confidence about college readiness (Blackwell & Pinder, 2014; Collier, & Morgan, 2008).

Family Relationship to School

Stephens et al. (2012) discusses how a divide between a students' college experience and their home can be problematic for first-generation students. Markle (2015) discusses how the students' academic journey, and the perceived reactions of that students' family can influence their experience as a college student. While there are several analyses of the impact of family support on the experiences of first-generation college students (Dennis et al., 2005; Pascarella, et al., 2003) and some work has been done to explore the difficulties faced by specific student groups in merging the culture of home and college life (Hermann & Varnum, 2018), little literature exists to explore the perceived relationship between the ECHS students and their families.

This study invested an effort into gleaning these students' perceptions regarding academic preparation, social engagement, and family relationship with the school within the Early College model. This study offered a look into the relationships between aspects of the Four Keys framework with each student's perceptions of their experience of the Early College model. An understanding of these students' perceptions informs the literature moving forward. The actual reality of transitioning to college could be affected for each student to the extent that their own perceptions affect their own reality. In addition to providing a deeper understanding of how students perceive their school experience, student data can be used to examine how their perceived experience is related to their confidence in college transition knowledge and skills.

CHAPTER III

To investigate how student experiences in an Early College High School (ECHS) in Georgia relate to their confidence in college transition knowledge and skills, this study sought to answer the following three research questions: What perceptions do ECHS students in Georgia have about their school experience, as it relates to academic preparation, social engagement, and family life? What confidence do they have about their college transition knowledge and skills, in terms of awareness of college culture, self-advocacy, and college enrollment knowledge? How does their perceived school experience relate to their confidence in college transition knowledge and skills?

This study was originally proposed as an exploratory sequential mixed methods study (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011), targeting all students enrolled in 8 Early College High Schools approved by the state of Georgia as the study population (Cooper, 2013). This would bring the total to approximately 2,487 students (Cooper, 2013). However, the researcher had adjusted the research design as a case study due to the pandemic which limited the researcher's access to various schools. Details on how this impacted the research methods are described in relevant sections.

This chapter provides an overview of the design of this study, who the participants were, what instruments and procedures were used for data collection and analysis, and concerns about validity and reliability of the study.

Research Design

Because of the pandemic and the need to alter the study's original design, as described above, a case study design (Yin, 1994) was used to examine the students' perceptions of the Early College experience and their confidence regarding college

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transition knowledge and skills. According to Yin (1994), case study research allows both quantitative and qualitative investigations to explore a phenomenon that is observed in a particular bounded system—that is, the ECHS. Using this research design, the researcher was able to systematically explore in-depth how one aspect of college readiness (i.e., transition knowledge and skills) might be related to various aspects of students' perception of school experience in a unique setting of Early College, which has not been popularly examined. Diverse student groups within a school setting are purposefully invited to participate in the study to account for potentially different perspectives (Creswell & Plano-Clark, 2011). Furthermore, both qualitative and quantitative methods are sequentially used to validly examine the student perspective within the setting. Details are shared below.

Research Participants

Case Selection

The case in this study is the collective student experience and perceptions in an ECHS institution in rural Georgia. This study originally targeted eight ECHS approved within the state of Georgia in 2013. Due to COVID-19 that limited access to various schools, a modification was made to this study design. Using the case study design, the case was selected based on the researcher's access to the research site (Creswell & Plano-Clark, 2011). Out of the five ECHS institutions in Georgia who had agreed to participate prior to the COVID19 outbreak, only one institution remained in the study as the governing committees of the other sites chose to be removed from consideration, to focus the unprecedented demands and needs of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Student Characteristics at the ECHS

The students enrolled in this Early College campus are first-generation college students, students who may not be served well in a traditional school setting, are traditionally underrepresented on a college campus, are low-income, minority or are struggling learners (University System of Georgia, 2012). The students at this ECHS site include both male and female students, in grades sixth to 12th. As a pre-qualifier for acceptance, students must provide documentation regarding the educational background of their families, their own academic progress, and a teacher recommendation into the program.

Students in Georgia's ECHS institutions work to earn college credits prior to high school graduation in a modified approach that differs from traditional high school approaches, (i.e., dual enrollment program). In a more traditional high school environment, the students who are targeted for Georgia's Early College are traditionally underrepresented in dual enrollment or advanced placement programs and would not be expected to earn college level credits prior to high school graduation.

Some characteristics of this particular Early College campus include the stated target population of students, one that will resemble the diversity of the traditional schools in its community as well as pursue first-generation college students. One goal of the ECHS campus is to provide an educational setting for these learners that will provide them with a strong chance of postsecondary learning while still modeling the demographic surroundings of the local community and schools.

This institution is also located in a rural community setting that is geographically isolated and has a small population size. Not accounting for the difference in the cost of living, the average base salary of a rural teacher ($50,770) is lower than those of urban

($59,390) or suburban ($62,820) school teachers, according to the 2017-18 statistics by National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES). Rural schools are also known to have challenges with hiring and retaining quality teachers and staff (Fred, & Bishen Singh, 2021; Goldhaber et al., 2021) and lower rate of student college enrollment (Byun et al., 2012; Hu, 2003).

Another characteristic that separates this Early College campus from some others in Georgia is its location directly adjacent to a university campus. The facility that houses this program is a stand-alone building on a university campus. While it is typical for an ECHS to have a postsecondary collaborator, having a geographically proximate location to the college campus is not the case for all of Georgia's ECHS institutions. Several other ECHS institutions in Georgia, mostly those campuses in more urban settings, are more easily described as a dual enrollment program within a traditional high school setting (Cooper, 2013).

Phase 1 Interview Participant Recruitment

To better understand students' perceived school experiences at the ECHS as they relate to their academic preparation, social engagement, and family life (RQ1) and their perceived knowledge and skills for college transition in terms of college culture awareness, self-advocacy, and college enrollment knowledge (RQ2), recent graduates of the ECHS were recruited for semi-structured interviews. These Phase 1 participants were recruited based on the criteria that each participant needed to be a recent graduate from an Early College High School as of March 2021, so that the perspective they provided would be most opportune for understanding the transition from high school to college. This included graduates from the class of 2019 and 2020.

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Based on these criteria, 35 graduates from 2019 and 2020 were recruited for the phase 1 data collection via email invitation. The content of the invitation was written by the researcher (Appendix A) and the invitation was sent by a school administrator at the ECHS. The school administrator also promoted the invitation to participate on multiple social media outlets that were followed by the ECHS alumni. Five of them had shared their interest in the study and participated in an interview, which is described later. The researcher had no way of knowing which recent graduates would accept or decline the invitation until they volunteered to participate in the study.

Interview Participant Demographics

The five interview participants in the qualitative phase of the study were all recent graduates of the Early College campus. They were all the first members of their family to attend any form of college. All five of the interview participants were able to earn Dual Enrollment credit as students in the ECHS campus, and three went on to enroll in postsecondary college courses after high school graduation. Table 1 provides a pseudonym and brief description for each interview participant. For the entirety of the results chapter, each quotation shared will be presented here using the participant's pseudonym so that the specific individual's interview content can be easily followed by the reader while still protecting the identity and privacy of the participants. Each participant participated in an in-depth interview lasting between 60 and 90 minutes.

The five participants included two female participants and three males, four African American participants and one Hispanic American participant. Currently, three of the participants report that they are enrolled in college and expect to complete their college bachelor's degree on time. All three of these participants attend a university

within the University System of Georgia. The other two participants report that they will

not graduate with their bachelor's degree within four years of completing high school.

One of these two has chosen to join the military and intends to pursue the remainder of

his college degree through resources provided by the armed forces. The final participant

has joined the work force and stated that she hopes to re-enter the college environment as

soon as possible but that, due to personal financial concerns, this plan may be delayed.

Table 1

Interview Participants' Pseudonyms and Identifying Characteristics

Name	Gender / Ethnicity	Current College Status	Introduction to ECHS	Dual Enrollment Credit
Andrew	Male/African American	Attends a 4-yr University, earning a B.S. in Education, with a minor in Business, small business owner	5th grade teacher recommendation	59
Cameron	Male/African American	Serving in the Navy, not currently enrolled in college courses	All 5th grade students in his school received an application	59
Bella*	Female/Hispanic	Working full time, not currently enrolled in college courses	5th grade teacher recommendation	39
Adrianna*	Female/African American	Attends a 4-yr University	All 5th grade students in her school received an application, 5th grade teacher recommendation	59
Bryson*	Male/African American	Attends a 4-yr University, earning a B.S. in Education	Relative had attended the Early College, 5th grade teacher recommendation	59

Note. * indicates students who have described themselves as a strong student at the beginning of their ECHS experience.

Each of the five participants would originally have attended the traditional middle and high school in their local public-school system but were selected for enrollment in the ECHS at the conclusion of fifth grade. They each began attending the ECHS in sixth grade and continued until their high school graduation. Two of the students graduated from the Early College in 2020 (Adrianna, Bryson) and the other three in 2019. Alongside their high school diploma, each of the participants had earned college credits, ranging from 39 to 59, through a dual enrollment program at the time of their ECHS graduation.

The group of interview participants constitutes a representative sample of the target student body of the Early College High School. The stated mission of the school is to target average students who will be the first in their family to attend college and who show great potential. This group of participants each represents a facet of that description. Three of the five participants described themselves as strong students at the beginning of their time in the Early College, while the other two described having grown into a more accomplished student because of having attended this school (Andrew, Cameron). This group also reflected the ethnic makeup of the overall school population (Cooper, 2013). The five interview participants included four African- American graduates and one Latina graduate. The school has an overall ethnic makeup of 85% African American, 5% White, 5% Latina, and 5% Asian American (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2022).

Phase 2 Survey Participant Recruitment

To examine the relationship between students' perceived ECHS experience and their confidence in college transition knowledge and skills (RQ3), this study targeted the

current students at the Early College as of March 2021. There were 108 students enrolled in the Early College at the time of this study. A packet containing a letter explaining the survey and informed consent forms for parents was sent home with every student. Also contained in the packet was login information to a digital copy of the survey and a unique survey code for each packet along with letters of consent for parents. Once parents had signed the consent forms and returned them to the school, they could digitally access the survey and enter the unique code. The administration of the school verified unique codes with the researcher as the surveys were compiled to assure all consent forms were completed in advance.

Survey Participant Demographics

Of the 108 students, 21 students responded to the survey administered (19.4% response rate). Each of these students entered the Early College model as 6th grade students, so they have attended the school between two and seven years. The respondents span across grade levels and GPAs at the time of survey data collection. Gender and ethnicity information could not be collected per request from the school board. Table 2 shows the survey participant demographics.

The participants for the quantitative survey phase ranged from 8th to 12th grade students. Although the Early College campus includes students from 6th to 12th grades, the participants were limited to 8th to 12th grade by the administration of the school. Of the 21 participants in this phase of the study, three were entering their senior year of high school, six were rising juniors, five were rising sophomores, two were rising freshmen, and 5 are entering 8th grade.

Table 2

Survey Participants

Participant Number	Grade in school (2021-2022)	Year of enrollment into the Early College	Expected High School Graduation	GPA
1	10th	2017	2024	2.1-3.0
2	11th	2016	2023	2.1-3.0
3	8th	2019	2026	3.1-4.0
4	11th	2016	2023	2.1-3.0
5	9th	2018	2025	2.1-3.0
6	8th	2019	2026	3.1-4.0
7	8th	2019	2026	2.1-3.0
8	10th	2017	2024	2.1-3.0
9	11th	2016	2023	2.1-3.0
10	10th	2017	2024	3.1-4.0
11	10th	2016	2024	3.1-4.0
12	11th	2016	2023	2.1-3.0
13	9th	2018	2025	3.1-4.0
14	8th	2019	2026	Below 2.0
15	8th	2019	2026	3.1-4.0
16	12th	2016	2022	3.1-4.0
17	11th	2016	2023	2.1-3.0
18	10th	2017	2024	3.1-4.0
19	11th	2016	2023	2.1-3.0
20	12th	2016	2022	3.1-4.0
21	12th	2016	2022	3.1-4.0

Of the 21 survey participants, 10 reported a GPA between 2.1 and 3.0 and 10 reported a GPA between 3.1- 4.0. Only one student reported a GPA below 2.0. None reported a GPA higher than 4.0 (which would indicate a weighted GPA that has been scaled to accommodate advanced level courses at the high school level—4.0 is typically considered the top of the normally weighted GPA scale). A GPA higher than 4.0 is typical of students who are enrolled in Advanced Placement courses that are equivalent to earning college credit during high school.

Each of these survey participants had met the requirements set forth by the Early

College High School and demonstrated acceptable standardized test scores, attendance,

and behavior records at the conclusion of fifth grade in their public elementary schools.

Each participant was also accepted for enrollment in the Early College High School

based upon recommendations given during their fifth-grade year from their elementary

school teachers, administrators, and community members.

Instruments

Two types of instruments—interview (Phase 1) and survey (Phase 2)—were used

in this study for data collection. Below is a description of the instruments, as well as how

these instruments were developed and revised.

Recent Graduate Interview

The goal of a recent graduate interview was to explore the students' perspectives

on ECHS experience and college transition knowledge and skills. In particular, the ECHS

experience was examined through dimensions of academic preparation, social

engagement, and family and school relationship. Students' perceptions on college

transition knowledge and skills were captured through the three dimensions by Conley

(2015)—namely, college culture awareness, self-advocacy, and college enrollment

knowledge.

To address all six of these dimensions of student perception, an interview protocol

with 22 questions was developed. The 22 questions included in the protocol were used as

initial probes to ensure that each dimension was sufficiently introduced within each

interview, and then further follow up items were added as a guide for further exploration.

As recommended practice for interview procedures (Adams & Cox, 2008), the interview

guide included probes for further guidance as often as was beneficial. For example, as a follow up to the initial question, "Did you feel academically prepared for college level learning?", the interview protocol provided three follow up probes as options for follow up questions: (1) As a follow up to a positive response, the researcher asked, "Have you always felt that you were an academically strong student?"; (2) As a follow up to a negative response, "What were some specific concerns that you had?"; or (3) As a follow up to an unclear response, "What were some specific concerns that you had at the time of your graduation?" The initial draft of the interview protocol was reviewed by two content experts and their feedback was incorporated into the final version of the interview protocol. As a result, a semi-structured interview protocol with 21 questions, each followed by three additional options for probes was developed (Appendix B).

Table 3 outlines the interview items by construct. At the beginning of the interview, participants were asked four questions about themselves and their background. Following this brief introduction of the participant, the interview protocol consisted of three initial interview questions related to each of the six dimensions of student perception of school experience and college readiness. The students' perception of school experience included the dimensions of academic preparation, social engagement, and the family relations with the school within the Early College model. Student perception was key to understanding their experiences within this model. Some of the students' most notable perceptions of college readiness included the dimensions of the understanding of the culture of college, the benefits of having a strong self-advocacy, and college enrollment knowledge.

Table 3

Interview Guide Items Grouped by Construct

Construct addressed	# of interview items	Example of initial interview question	Example of a probe
Introduction of participant	4	"If you had not attended this ECHS, which school would you have attended?"	"What are some things that you can tell me about that school?"
Academic preparation	3	"Do you feel that you were academically prepared for college level learning?"	"Have you always felt that you were an academically strong student?"
Social engagement	3	"Did you feel socially engaged at your school?"	"Were you involved in any groups? Extra-curricular activities? Sports? Clubs? "
Family relationship with school	3	"What aspects of your Early College experience has made a difference for your family, if any?"	"Did this aspect of the experience also make a difference to you individually?"
Culture of college	3	"Have you adjusted well to college/adult life?"	"Are there things that your school could have done differently to have helped?"
Self-Advocacy	3	"Were you able to access needed resources for college enrollment?"	"In which areas did you experience the most difficulty?"
College Enrollment Knowledge	3	"What have been some surprises for you as you have completed your time in high school?"	"Can you give me an example of anything specific that caught you off guard since being a high school senior?"

Current Student Survey

The quantitative portion of the study utilized the student survey of students who are currently enrolled in the ECHS. As initially written, the survey was originally a 25-item inventory that was refined following the analysis of phase one data. The final survey

included 28 survey items, either focused on demographic and background information for the participants, or Likert style items related to the themes from the research questions. Table 4 provides an overview of the survey items by construct. The outline of this survey included an opening section that asked students to answer questions related to their personal background, a second section with survey items related to the students' perspective of the Early College model, and a third related to the participants' confidence regarding college transition knowledge and skills. The formation of this instrument was necessary for this study as the number of existing instruments in the literature of the field that currently exist to ascertain students' perspective of college transition skills within the Early College model are few. While the content of the survey was originally determined by the existing literature in the field, adjustments to the survey were made following the completion of phase one data. This included the addition of three new items that involved prominent themes from the phase one data analysis.

Data Collection Procedures

Phase One: Recent Graduate Interview

The first step of data collection was to gain access to the participants for the interview. Figure 2 displays the process of gaining access to study participants. The individual interviews provided an opportunity to qualitatively explore the perceptions of recent graduates from the ECHS model as they discussed college readiness. The in-depth interviews provided an opportunity for the recent graduates to discuss their own perspectives of college transition knowledge and skills within the Early College model in detail. These conversations provided a solid foundation for phase two of the study to produce a meaningful context for the student survey.

Table 4

Survey items grouped by construct

Construct	Scale	# of items	Example of survey item
Participant information	Categorical	7	"What year did you enroll in this school?"
Academic preparation	5-point Likert	4	"I feel that when I graduate from this school, I will be academically prepared for college."
Social engagement	5-point Likert	4	"I have concerns about my social engagement at school."
Family relationship with school	5-point Likert	3	"I feel that my family approves that I attend this school."
Culture of college	5-point Likert	3	"I am nervous about adjusting well to college life after high school."
Self-Advocacy	5-point Likert	3	"I am confident in my ability to advocate for myself at school."
College enrollment knowledge	5-point Likert	3	"I am nervous about the process of applying to college."

An in-depth interview can operate more like a conversation than a group method of data collection might provide. By allowing the interviews to be one-on-one, the goal was that participants would not feel more pressured to share details that may compare or contrast with their peers. Although planning and implementing in-depth interviews for five different dates and times was more time intensive than other methods, the benefit of providing each participant with a more comprehensive interview certainly outweighed the logistical costs.
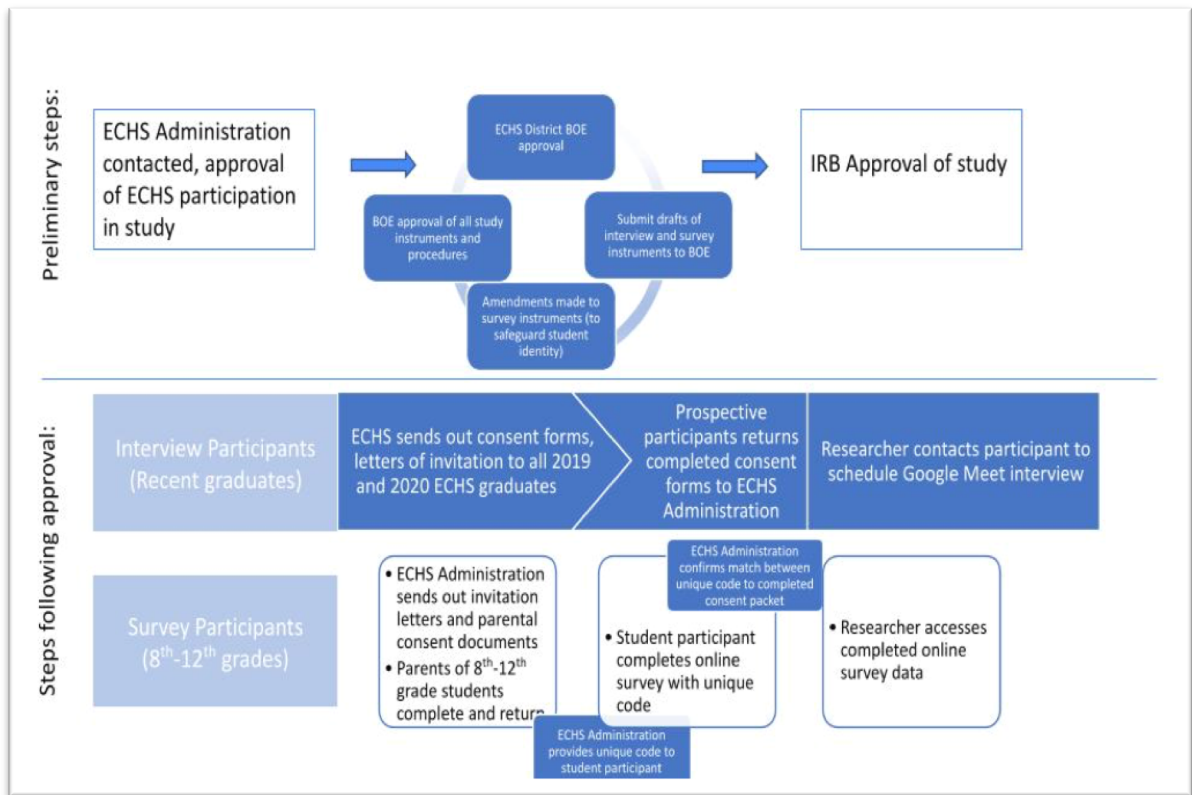
Figure 2. Gaining access to participants

     A preliminary relationship with a member of the administration of the Early College campus made this phase of the study a possibility and aided in the selection of participants who were able to contribute to the interview phase of the study. The administrator who served as a liaison between the students and researcher until after the letter of consent has been signed was a vital piece to the success of this study. Once a participant agreed to an interview, the time and place was scheduled for the interview to occur. The allotted time for the interview was dependent upon the discussion that needed to occur as part of the interview, but the interviewer aimed to keep the interview close to

90 minutes. Each interview was recorded for accuracy purposes with video recording and using interviewer notes. The interviewer used a guide that included a standard list of questions for each interview. The discussions did vary in addition to items included in this guide but, to remain consistent, the list of questions remained a priority during each interview. The interviewer made written notes on her copy of the interview guide. Immediately following the interview, the interviewer returned to the notes made during the real time interview and expanded upon those notes with more detail. This process took place immediately following the interview to preserve the interviewer's memory of both the content and context of the discussion.

Phase Two: Current Student Survey

The survey phase of data collection process began by sending packets to every student enrolled in this Early College campus. These packets were distributed through the students' homeroom, or first period class and it included a letter of intent and a parental consent form. The letter of intent and consent forms were sent home for parent's review and signature. The letter of intent described this study in detail and explained the potential outcomes of having completed a study specifically focused on these stakeholders. Upon the return of the consent forms, the liaison provided each participant with a digital code to use when completing the survey online. After one packet was sent home with each student and the initial date to have the survey passed, a count of the completed surveys was taken, and a second round of packets were sent home. Following this second round of surveys, it was apparent that the participation numbers were still incredibly low. A third set of packets was distributed to any remaining students who had not yet returned their informed consent paperwork. The goal was to include the majority

of the 108 members of the student body, but the final number of survey participants was 21.

The interview data collection process began early in the spring semester of 2021. Informed consent forms and student interviews were set to be completed by the middle of Spring semester, to afford time for the surveys to be conducted before the end of the same semester. Once the data from the interviews was analyzed and refining details were added to the survey, the survey packets were immediately distributed. The packets were given a timeline of two to three weeks for each distribution.

Data Analysis Procedures

The analysis took place in two stages: once for the qualitative data and then next for the quantitative data. Because these data are so closely related, a mixed methods approach guided the implementation and analysis of both the interview and survey portion of the study following the analysis of the interview responses.

Having an initial interview phase to explore recent graduate's perspectives on the Early College experience (RQ1) and what their college transition knowledge and skills looked like (RQ2) allowed the researcher to better design a survey that could examine the relationship between perceived school experience and college transition knowledge and skills at a larger scale (RQ3).

Phase One: Recent Graduate Interview

To understand student perceptions about academic preparation, social engagement, and family relationship in an ECHS, responses to the relative interview questions were initially examined. Table 3 outlines sample interview items by construct. The interview guide in its' entirety is also available (Appendix B). For each interview

participant, these questions were used as a catalyst for a deeper discussion about the recent graduates perceived experiences within the Early College model.

After the initial drafting of the themes from the graduate interviews, the themes were regrouped based on their relevance to each other (Matthes, Davis, & Potter, 2017). and to the *a priori* dimensions of perceived school experience (Bohn et al., 2004): academic preparation, social engagement, family-school relationship.

The perceptions of these students provided a specific type of lens with which to view Georgia's Early College model. The interpretation of the interview data as related to students' perceptions about attending an Early College High School followed Saldaña's (2015) process of analyzing the transcript for themes. A multi-cycle process of coding the data was necessary to better group and categorize and arrange the information that had been gathered (Saldaña, 2015). Figure 3 gives an example of this multi-cycle coding process. For the first cycle of coding in this study, the process of deriving themes from the participants' actual language provided a rich and informative set of codes to organize for further analysis. This type of coding, called In Vivo Coding, is one that is well suited for honoring the participant's voice and offering the actual verbatim words of the participant to enlighten the conversation (Saldaña, 2015). During this first phase of coding, all the participant content was simply read, noted, and categorized into patterns that are formed by grouping the participants' own words, line by line.

During the second phase of coding, the technique of Pattern Coding was utilized to group the codes created during the In Vivo Coding phase into fewer, more organized groups. Once these groups are recoded, the overall thematic or conceptual patterns started to become more obvious and emerge from the interviews' transcripts. It was during the

second and subsequent phases of coding that the themes were better organized to complete a better picture of how these stories all fit together (Saldaña, 2015). Pattern Coding is typically an appropriate method of coding for seeking to understand patterns of human interactions and social networks (Saldaña, 2015).

Once these themes were determined, following the two phases of coding, the researcher collaborated with an expert in the field of mixed methods to further review the list of originally determined emergent themes. This collaborative discussion around the themes assisted in the process of categorizing, subcategorizing, and identifying conceptual similarities and differences. These efforts served to further organize and identify motifs in line with each *a priori* construct.

Once all the interviews were coded and emergent themes were established, the details of these participants' stories could not only be applied to an amendment of the student survey instrument, but also to the larger discussion of student perception of the Early College model. Themes that emerge from the participants' perspectives inform the topics related to student perception and confidence in college transition knowledge and skills. The interpretations of these students' own words considering each of these topics also provided the necessary context for topics being addressed in the student survey.

Phase Two: Current Student Survey

While the analysis of the first two research questions focused on the elements of the in-depth interview analysis, research question three centered around the survey data and the connections that could be drawn between the various themes within the study. The first step for analysis of the survey data was to determine if any data is missing or incomplete. There were not any participants who did not complete the full survey, so all

were able to be included. Also, survey responses that contained extreme outliers or wildly

contradictory responses were removed from the study.

Figure 3, Multi-cycle coding

The goal of the analysis for this phase was to determine the nature of the

responses to each dimension as well as to discern if there are any significant correlations

between the students' perceptions of their Early College experience and their level of

confidence regarding college transition knowledge and skills. Each construct of

perception was analyzed for a relationship with the other dimensions of perception, each

construct of college transition knowledge and skills was analyzed for a relationship with

the other confidence dimensions, and the dimensions of perception were also analyzed to

measure any relationship between the two constructs.

Descriptive Statistic Analysis

For each of constructs of perception and confidence, a mean response value was calculated, along with a standard deviation. In addition, a mean and standard deviation were reported for each individual survey item. This process included all six dimensions included in the first two research questions: academic preparation, social engagement, family relationship with school, culture of college, self-advocacy, and college enrollment knowledge. Each individual survey item's mean was compared to the construct mean. Individual items with a mean outside of one standard deviation of the construct mean were noted. When a specific item did fall outside this parameter, the standard deviation of that item was noted to discern the consistency of that survey item. Table 4 shows the descriptive statistics for the survey items.

Correlation Coefficients

At this level of analysis, the goal would be to determine which correlations, if any, are significant between the students' perceived academic preparation, social engagement and family relationship to school, and the students' confidence in the awareness of college culture, self-advocacy, and the college enrollment knowledge. In addition, survey items were grouped into six constructs.

A Spearman's rho coefficient was calculated to analyze any potential relationships between and among any of the dimensions in the study. The Spearman's rho test statistic was a suitable choice for these sets of data because it is a nonparametric statistical analysis that allows for the measurement of correlations among ranked data, such as Likert scales (Mertler & Vannatta, 2013). In the case that the analysis for these correlations presented statistically significant outcomes, the correlation coefficient (r)

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was calculated for more specific sets of survey items to identify which specific topics of the study are more strongly correlated.

Correlation coefficients that were reported with an alpha level of $p < 0.05$ or $p < 0.01$ were noted. Table 5 reports both Spearman correlation coefficients for each dimension and makes note of significant alpha levels for each item.

Validity and Reliability

Validity

The validity of the instruments was also a concern for this study. To ensure that the instruments were measuring what they claimed, both the guide for the in-depth interviews and the survey were reviewed for face validity. The first step in fighting this threat was the use of pilot tests. For each instrument, a pilot test was performed to eliminate any confusion or confounding variables. Each pilot test consisted of a small group of students who were comparable to those who would be included in the study. Because the survey instrument in this study is new, was created, and refined specifically for use with this research, this review provided insight into how it would be received by students.

In addition to reviewing for face validity, both the interview guide and the survey were reviewed by two Principals in the field of secondary education (Dr. M. Edwards, personal communication, September 9, 2020; Dr. J. Marshall, personal communication, October 22, 2020). These experts reviewed both instruments to confirm content validity.

Reliability

To strengthen the survey's psychometric properties, the wording of the survey items was written in a way that approached the same topics and answers in various ways.

Inconsistencies that may be present in participant responses could more readily be identified because of the positively versus negatively worded survey items. Internal reliability was important to verify so the survey could be trusted. Allowing for repetitive questioning throughout the survey so that the central themes were included in a variety of question styles served to ensure consistency throughout the instrument.

Constraints

The constraint that had to be considered for the in-depth interviews was the changes in availability of the participants due to COVID-19 pandemic. Because each interview was conducted at a distance, over Google Meet, the potential quality of the interview experience was affected. One effort to counterbalance this constraint included an offering of flexible meeting times, to be selected by the participant. The COVID-19 pandemic also served to further discourage participation and availability of access, but the students who were able to complete the survey provided a perspective that has otherwise not been represented in the literature. Before the pandemic, several ECHS campuses had discussed participation in the study, but with the added concerns of COVID-19, many of the schools did not have the ability or permission from local school boards to participate in the study.

Limitations

In an ideal situation, this study would have addressed more representative sample of Georgia's Early College students. This study was limited to a case study of just one Early College campus in a rural location. A broader look into the student perspectives and experiences as Early College students would potentially include students from multiple campuses across various geographic locations. The limitations for this study,

most of which were largely resulting from the Covid19 pandemic, relegated this study to a limited sample of students from only one campus. While a case study analysis of the single campus' students provides a meaningful look into the experiences of students within that particular campus, these findings may or may not be able to be generalized to the experiences of students who attend other campus. In another context, without a pandemic to consider, a broader look into more campuses or a larger number of students might have provided a more extensive look into the student experiences within this model.

CHAPTER IV

This chapter presents the findings for this study. The findings from the interview phase of the study are first presented as they relate to student perception of the Early College experience (RQ1) and student confidence in college transition knowledge and skills (RQ2). Then, statistical analyses results based on the survey data are reported (RQ3). The themes identified from Phase 1 interviews contributed to changes in the student survey administered in Phase 2 of the study. These changes are discussed along with a presentation of the survey results and findings.

Student Perceptions of ECHS Experience (RQ1)

For this first research question, what perception do the students have about their school experience, three dimensions of the student experience were explored: academic preparation, social engagement, and family relationship to school. Each of these dimensions were addressed in the study to determine how they relate to students' ECHS experience. These three dimensions were developed from existing literature in the field to address the various aspects of student experience. Interview questions were originally developed to address all three dimensions (Appendix B). Through iterative analysis, themes that emerged from the five graduate interviews were revised and polished in alignment with the literature addressing one's college transition knowledge and skills. Participant ideas and accompanying quotes are presented below for each of these themes.

Academic Preparation in ECHS

A Unique Experience: Tough but Caring. During the interviews, each participant discussed how they had been immersed in an environment that encouraged a confidence mindset about high academic achievement. Specific teachers were cited by

interview participants as active motivators to achieve high academic goals. Participants

shared examples of teachers, especially in the middle school years, encouraging a

productive struggle as a strategy for facing academic obstacles.

The interview participants described how they are now traveling on a quite

different path because of the ECHS, one that is much more conducive to the academic

rigor needed for college. Adrianna stated that Early College "definitely gave [her] more

of a chance" of attending college. Bella discussed how college preparation could not have

been the same in any other school for her. She states, "it would've been different for me

because I was in ESOL and when transitioning into Early College I felt even more

encouraged… I felt cared for and wanted. Like the administration just wanted you to get

that big step." She goes on to say, "I wouldn't want to go anywhere regular or anything

like that. I think I would've failed." Cameron stated that he "would never have been

afforded this opportunity anywhere else." In general, students perceived that the school

had "definitely prepared" (Adriana) them to be academically successful through

transforming their mindset early in the ECHS.

Andrew also spoke about the prominent level of academic preparation and the

mindset that was developed during his time at the Early College. He stated, "I will say if

[my school] did one thing for us, it was to prepare us and go ahead and give those college

level classes that we would never have been afforded an opportunity to have anywhere

else." Andrew described that the teachers demonstrated their care and expertise through

"tough love" to instill more endurance in students as they learned. He described his

experiences of learning to be more independent academically because "the teachers used

a very tough love type of relationship. There was no handholding… they made sure to equip us to be independent, even when we were in the 10ᵗʰ and 9ᵗʰ grade."

When asked if Andrew agreed with the intense teaching culture at the school, where students are encouraged to seek independence, Andrew said that he did agree because he can see now that it was preparing them for what a college professor would expect and that "In general, it worked. In general, it did work." Andrew spoke of how he learned to push through the early signs of struggle in an assignment and that now he is a better student and adult because of this mindset.

Transformative Early Years at ECHS. Adrianna explained how she realized right away that this school environment was going to require a higher level of academic performance because "not everyone gets accepted at [Early College campus] and some of your friends are not going to get accepted…but I quickly caught on." She went on to explain that she believe that she was "definitely prepared because teachers immediately, all the way through middle and high school, they instilled in us that college is something serious and that we should take it seriously." She describes teachers who "went the extra mile to really prepare us and we did extra assignments so that we had more of a chance to just go more into what college would be like."

Cameron shared that when he started attending the school in 2013, that he was nervous because he did not know how he would academically fit into the program. He stated, "I didn't know that I was going to be taking advanced classes and that I would potentially be doing college classes in the 10ᵗʰ and 11ᵗʰ grade…but I can definitely say that I definitely made a huge progress in learning a lot of classes and everything that they taught me." Cameron described that he attributes all his academic success to his Early

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College campus, saying "Oh yes Ma'am, definitely [my school], um I can't take credit, but I definitely want to give [my school] a shout out because they got me prepared and made me believe that I can do college courses." Cameron was clear in stating that his academic path would have been hugely different without the experience of attending the Early College campus. He elaborated to say that this confidence prepared him for college level classes as well as for his service in the military. He commented that the confidence he gained as a student in the Early College model helped him to "put priorities straight and…prepare for the military."

Bryson had much to add to this discussion of academic preparation in the Early College. He began by describing a similar tough love strategy. He stated that "In 6th and 7th grade, those are the shaping and molding years. I mean, they really put a beating on you…the workload is so much you're doing homework on the weekends and the first day of school." When he was asked if there were aspects of the academic environment in the Early College that specifically contributed to academic college success, Bryson stated that it was " a more holistic approach to your life, not just during these hours you're in the building for school, but when you leave we don't know you and then you come back in the morning and you're back in school mode but more of a whole approach to your life."

Bella stated that it was clear that the academic experience was going to be different from the very beginning of her experience in the Early College. She states, "Yeah, I think it's a pretty big difference. They cared, and it felt like they cared about every single one of us." She added, "the assignments weren't just to fill time. It was more of a big plan, like, they wanted your whole life to kind of make sense and if you had a

homework assignment, it was so that you could learn. Bella went on to describe various ways that teachers "pushed" students to keep going and that she believes that this resulted in graduates of the Early College being "ready to go to college" and "really knowing their full potential."

Study Skills and Targeted Support for College Life. During the interviews, all the recent graduates reported that their school had taught them various skills, such as time management, notetaking skills and a structured learning environment. In addition to these specific strategies, participants also spoke about being instructed to organize personal and social obligations with school responsibilities, scheduling sufficient "study hours" (Adrianna), and balancing resources. Bryson summed it up best when he said, "they taught us what it meant to be in study mode."

Time Management. One specific skill mentioned in each of the interviews was time management. All five participants describe how they were taught to manage their resources and to balance each task with how much time would be needed. Bryson described in detail how students in middle school were taught to budget time for activities of all kinds- not just academic. He described how, during sixth and seventh grade, students were given agendas to use for scheduling each activity. He explains, "we would get graded on how well we organize different assignments." He elaborated to explain, "...okay, I give you the school, but personal life as well. They wanted to see that in there, so if you was going to the movies, they wanted to see what time you going to the movies."

Adrianna also mentioned the same agendas, saying "These agendas that we had, they really helped with time management. I still have my calendar and my agenda. Now I

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use [my school's] way of time management. I really kept that with me." Cameron shares

details about having to set aside time for afternoon activities that were not school related

so that homework could be scheduled in as well. He said that this skill is the one thing

that has helped him most as an adult was "definitely time management. They had us write

our homework in an agenda every day... we wrote everything down." All five interview

participants discussed how these time management techniques are a skill that they have

continued to use into adulthood.

Effective Notetaking: Cornell Notes. In addition to a structured method for

scheduling activities and assignments, several of the interview participants also discussed

behavioral techniques for successful college level academic life. One specific strategy,

named Cornell notes, a strategy for effective notetaking, was mentioned by several of the

interview participants (Paulk & Owens, 2010). Adrianna described the details of this

strategy, saying "they instilled in us to write a summary highlight, do the questions on the

side, and review them every chance we get." Andrew talked about the introduction of

Cornell notes in sixth grade. He explained that students were instructed to use this

strategy throughout all of sixth grade and that they "hated them, but they did help."

A Structure for First-Generation College Students. Others discuss how the

overall focus of the instruction at the school encouraged students to take responsibility

for balancing all areas of their lives. Andrew talked about the pressure of being a first-

generation student who has recently enrolled in the Early College model. He remembered

that "they were understanding the situations that we're dealing with and the kind of

pressure it has as far as being a first-generation student because there's a lot of pressure

not only behind the teachers, but you're trying to balance everything and just making sure

that you make it to that point." Cameron also made a point to discuss how beneficial the structure of the Early College program had been for him. When asked if there were any aspects of the structure of the school that he would change, he replied, "I don't know anything that I would change because I actually loved it, um the whole layout of it, I wouldn't change it." Several interview participants discussed being thankful for the structured approach for students and how this structure has remained evident in their own experiences as they have transitioned to adulthood. Bryson said, "in so many areas, the steps and the tools that [the teachers] gave me, I still utilize them today and even when I'm tutoring, I utilize them, and I give those resources to students to help them now."

Safe Space to Develop Academically. The idea of school as a "safe space" initially emerged from the interview responses for questions related to social engagement; however, this theme was moved to the academic preparation dimension as it concerned students' development of a personal academic identity- in particular, expressing their "voice" (Cameron) and needs related to the overall student experience. Each participant recalled personal examples of times during their enrollment when they were given an opportunity to share their own concerns, contribute toward the community of the student body, or just learn to have a voice among their peers. In each personal story, their responses demonstrated how the Early College provided a safe space for them to develop into successful, independent students.

A New Administration Promoting Openness. Cameron recalled that he felt comfortable during his enrollment in the Early College to openly share his opinions and beliefs in class without fear of judgement. He said, "Yes, um the class discussions, I felt that I was engaged and able to voice my opinion." He continued to explain that coming to

believe that he could communicate his point without fear gave him more confidence in sharing his thoughts more openly. Cameron said, "[My Early College] definitely helped me on that... then I voiced my opinion."

Bryson recalled a similar sentiment to Cameron. He discussed how the school's new administration, which entered during his eighth-grade year, had a priority of including students' voices and made students feel that they could share their opinions openly. Bryson remembered these times as, "Awesome. The top people up there put me up for, you know, to be their voice because we wanted something different. We wanted to build a community that we can also be productive and work." Bryson explained that his perception at the time led him to see that the leadership of the Early College had spent their sixth and seventh grade years focused entirely on academic strengths but lacking in socially engaging activities. He stated, "I guess it was a wake up call for them because of course in Early College you have to keep a certain amount of your students."

Opportunities to Lead and Voice Opinions. Bryson discussed how he came to feel much more socially outgoing at school than he did at home. He explained, "...as far as having friends and associating with my extended family, I came more alive in social settings like school." Bryson also mentioned that his overall social engagement has increased because of having been a student in his Early College. He stated, "[My Early College] has really, you know, I wouldn't be sitting here talking to you. I wouldn't be who I am now. I would not be on this college campus with a full-ride scholarship if it had not been for all the leadership skills I got there." Bryson told of countless interviews and other opportunities that he has taken part in solely because of having been a student in the

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Early College. He was clear that his social development looks quite different today than it would have otherwise.

　　　　　Assignments and Dual Enrollment Placements to Promote Sharing. Bella was reserved in her early years at the school, but she remembers that the school did start to encourage more social engagement and to train students to speak their minds as she became older. She explained that "during senior and junior year, we, after all those years together as a class, we've known each other for so many years." As the class got closer to graduation, Bella explained that more of their assignments and dual enrollment placement resulted in Early College students becoming more comfortable with sharing in academic settings without fear of "awkwardness." She stated, "it was just something that we had to learn to do as individuals to come out of our shell whenever we go to our college classes."

Social Engagement in ECHS

　　　　　Social engagement is a vital part to any educational experience for adolescents. How students perceive their social environment can play a significant role in their overall experience as a student. The interview guide from phase one of this study included three specific questions related to student perception of social engagement within the Early College model: (1) Did you feel socially engaged at your school? (2) Did your social engagement at your school seem to be the same or different from other social settings? and (3) Would you say that attending your school helps students to become more socially engaged or could the school do more to encourage social engagement?

　　　　　During the first phase of the study, interview participants were eager to discuss the social engagement dynamics of their Early College campus. While their responses

were more varied regarding this topic, three themes that were consistent for all participants emerged. These three themes were: a predominant academic focus that allowed for little social engagement, a joint effort among teachers and student leaders to improve social engagement over time, and the notion that the social environment of the Early College was a safe space for all student to have a voice. While each participant's connection to each of these themes is unique, as discussed within these findings, the general ideas behind each theme were consistent across all interview participants.

Academics a Predominant Focus. Throughout the interview phase of the study, the participants described their experiences within the Early College model to be exclusively academic- at least in the beginning. Each of these interview participants had begun their time in the Early College near the beginning of the school's existence and they all described the early season of the school as lacking any emphasis on social engagement. While everyone went on to describe how this changed over time, they all commented on the early days in their tenure as Early College as being "work, work, work" and "all business," as Adrianna describes.

While all interview participants extended this discussion to include many eventual positive outcomes that resulted from this initial academic focus, they also each described an initial environment that allowed little time for social engagement within the school. Bella even reminisced about a song that students were taught during those early middle school years that included the lyrics "be responsible, be prepared" and that the students would "sing it every morning." She had the perception that this responsibility and preparation was the dominant focus of the Early College- even to the detriment of

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other areas, like social engagement. Bryson also elaborated on this idea, saying that, in the beginning, "there was no balance, it was just working, working, work."

Related to this concern, Andrew stated that, at least at first, "extracurriculars were just not possible" and that he "wasn't able to experience" sports and other activities that are accessible to typical middle school students. During these early years, all sports and other extracurricular activities were housed completely outside of the Early College campus. Students were bused back to what would have been their traditional school if they hoped to participate in those groups. Andrew described the difficulties that came from trying to play a sport with this design. He stated, "Okay, so clubs and everything like that were not accessible to us because they're, everything, everything, is on site. If you want to play football, you have to go to [the traditional school site]." Andrew said it was "easy and hard at the same time…because all we had was each other."

Complicated Middle School Years. Bella described her early years in the Early College as "pretty complicated" in terms of social engagement. She explained that the only focus in those first couple of years was strictly academic and "there wasn't a lot of people to socialize with and if we did we'd get in trouble for it. So, it was just pretty academic focused- especially in middle school." She also said that she felt much more socially active outside of school and could talk about anything, but that at school, she felt she "just had to put a mask on and, you know, it wasn't nothing bad, it's just like you have to show respect."

Andrew also spoke about difficulties he had experienced in his early years at the Early College. He explained that, in the beginning, "there was really no time to be anyone else than yourself," and that it "took a little while to adjust to that setting socially."

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Andrew told of a pep rally event during those early years that provided an opportunity for Early College students to visit the traditional school. He remembered that "It wasn't the best time because people thought that we thought we were better than them." He continued, "I don't think the students completely grasped, or even the teachers…they didn't understand why we did the things that we did." His recollection of the pep rally represented how socially challenging the early years were for his class at the Early College. Andrew explained that, as he became older, the Early College setting became a place where he was more comfortable to risk new extracurricular and other social activities. He stated that, eventually, "[my Early College] actually helped my parents to see who I actually was, especially when I got to leading different extracurricular activities, such as choir and FCA."

   Commentary for social engagement themes. While each of the interview participants describe the conclusion of their experience in the Early College model as beneficial for them socially, it is evident that some of these gains were not immediate and, in some situations, the social gains that were seen resulted from an initial difficulty. All the interviewees, at least eventually, came to perceive the Early College as a place where they felt safe and encouraged to speak up, take the lead and to build friendships and community. Because the interview participants described this social engagement as a progressive situation over time, the student survey was amended to include a survey item that stated, "[My Early College] felt comfortable right away." When analyzed alongside other survey items that already addressed social engagement, it could be telling to look for a correlation with this specific survey item.

Improvement Over Time. Each of the interview participants discussed the social engagement at their Early College campus as something that dramatically changed over time. The participants elaborated that this strong academic focus was most prevalent in the 6th grade and "more strict" early in the middle school years, but that making social connections become much easier as they were older. They also all remember that the overwhelming focus on academics provided the student body with an opportunity to work together to petition for more socially engaging and extracurricular activities. They all perceived this joint effort to have been a very meaningful time in their Early College campus because advocating for what they wanted gave them a feeling of coming together for the good of the group.

Each interview participant recalled this improvement in social engagement in his or her own specific way. Cameron recalled that "I kind of took time getting used to my surroundings because when I went down there, I only knew a couple of people" and that at first, he needed to "make sure that my surroundings were okay and that I was more comfortable with saying what I wanted to say." Cameron explained that, over time, "[school] made me feel so much more social and I was like, okay will, I voiced my opinion." By the time Cameron was in ninth grade, the class had worked together to petition for more socialization and the administration started to bring in more extracurricular options for students. By ninth grade, Cameron was "in a club for leadership coaching and we pretty much, well we created a book actually. It was about leadership and teamwork, being able to help others that need help and not leaving them behind."

Andrew recalled that "it took time," but that by "eighth grade, I started to open up" and "building personal relationships." He discussed how not being afforded a convenient path for sports and clubs was "a personal regret because all of my siblings and my parents and whole family have done that all their life, so I wanted to experience that." Andrew went on to discuss how the first couple of years were the hardest, but that some of these initial challenges led to other positive avenues for him. He recalled, "What I did was I took it by myself to create it. I created a choir at [my Early College], so year we had a choir for a year or year and a half." He continued, "I created a couple of organizations at my school. One with over 100 members- over half of the student body." Andrew explained, "the teachers wanted to help in any way, and we made the best of the situation."

Bryson explained that in the early years, the "Administration was still kind of new," but that "by eighth grade it changed because they showed that they wanted to hear our voices." He continues to say that, now, there are "so many programs now." He explained, "I was able to be one of the top people up there that, you know, to be the voice [of the students] and that's awesome, because we wanted something different, you know?" Bryson went on to eventually participate in many clubs, play soccer, serve as FCA President, work on the Student Leadership board, volunteer in the community and in church, along with what he calls "a long list of social engagements."

Adrianna mentioned that she remembers only having time to socialize "at lunch and 20-25 minutes at recess" in the beginning, but that by high school, she could see that "they were making us socially prepared." She elaborated that she eventually served as Secretary in a leadership team for students and work with her peers to "help the

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community through servant leadership." The general description of social engagement at this Early College campus involved an evolving protocol that improved over the seven years that these interview participants attended the school.

Like Family. One final theme that emerged in the interview discussions related to social engagement was that the recent graduates frequently describe the Early College as being like family. In the process of describing the academic practices and structures, the participants readily described how these academic goals were presented by individuals and within a system that resembled "family."

Bryson shared how a particular teacher was very tough and required remarkably high academic expectations. He explained that Math had been an area of academical difficulty for him and his ninth grade Math teacher pushed him to work despite his struggle with the content. He recalled that he had been like a perfectionist and Math was difficult for him because he felt that he could not make mistakes. He said, "I was taking tenth grade Math, because at [my school] you take you know the next level. She was just helping me, and she showed me so many resources and so many ways. I didn't think I could and even now, I love Math. I never thought I would say that, but right now I'm going to school for middle grades Math education." He then immediately stated, "I've learned that it's alright to make mistakes, so I am much better now…not just in school but in your life you make so many mistakes, but you have to learn from them." He recalled, "I would cry because I was like 'I just cannot get it, but I had a teacher...I'll never forget. Oh my God, I love that lady." Bryson described how the academic struggles that he pushed through in this teacher's class prepared him to overcome other struggles in

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his life. He attributes his desire to teach Math to this specific teacher and her ability to reach him on such a personal level.

Andrew also recalled how the teachers and faculty at his Early College worked diligently to help students overcome academic struggles. He recalls, "I was very hard-headed as far as a boy goes, but the people at [my Early College], the teachers and the staff and administration they're very patient. They're very kind to us and understanding. Like a family." Andrew also stated that the educators and administration of the school "took the extra mile" to help all students to prepare academically.

Bella stated that she knew that she and her peers were cared for and that in classes, she and her peers became like a close family. She explained that the teachers worked hard for all students, that "it felt like they cared, that they came for us and cared about every single one of us. You know they will not forget you. Yeah." Bella went on to explain that it was clear that this care that the teachers showed the students was motivated in providing students with the resources to achieve high academic standards. She said it was clear that "if you had an assignment, it was so that you could actually learn the content."

Cameron discussed how elements of the Early College helped to prepare him for the military. When discussing the environment of academic preparation at the Early College, he said, "I mean, I can't take credit, but [my Early College] got me prepared and made me believe that I can do college courses as long as I keep my priorities straight." Cameron attributes his decision to pursue dual enrollment courses in high school and then service in the military to the academic environment at his Early College. He perceived that the faculty and staff helped him believe in himself and this gave him the mental

preparation. He stated, "it helped me, like it mentally prepared me, like I actually think I could do college for another two or three years."

Adrianna discussed how her perception of a family feel helped her most in the early years at the Early College. She recalls starting in the sixth grade and being excited but also nervous about both the academic work and the lack of her friends from her old school. She remembers that "in the sixth and seventh grade, um we had the same teachers up until the eighth grade, and so that was good. The administrators, um the principals, they know everyone's name, so that's good." She spoke of what a contrast that would have been in the traditional school that she would have otherwise attended. She assumed that the traditional school being much larger, "the teachers are not going to know you on a personal level to help you. If you go to another bigger school it's harder, but compared to [my Early College], it's like a family. There is a more intimate relationship and you've known them more than just a little while." Adrianna perceived the academic environment to rely heavily upon this closeness with faculty and administration. She stated that the "close-knit" academic environment made it easier to prepare for college.

To include this theme in the second phase of the study, the survey was amended before being distributed to the current students for phase two of the study. The amended survey included the statement, "This school feels like family to me." Because the perception of such a feeling of family was prominent in the interview discussions, it was essential to change the survey to reflect this theme.

Family Relationship with ECHS

The perceived relationship between school and family is a main topic in first-generation college students research literature. The interview phase of this study sought

to ask participants to reflect upon their families' relationship with their schools during their enrollment in the Early College as well as the relationship that their families now have with the Early College since they have graduated. During the interview phase, two emergent themes took precedence in analysis of the discussions. These themes were: (1) a strong commitment to parent engagement, and (2) the fact that families continue to have a positive response to the Early College experience.

Strong Family and Community Relationship. First, the theme of a strong commitment to parent engagement emerged. Each interview participant recalled a strong relationship between their parents and both teachers and administrators from the Early College. Many participants drew connections between their families and school faculty that extended beyond the school and into the community.

Bryson explained that his mother knew his teachers from church and that even his grandmother had attended school with the founding Principal's Father. He recalled his reaction to enrolling in the Early College and learning how extensive his family connection to the faculty and staff was. He said, "...yeah, I hadn't known that they would get other teachers that I'd go, 'wait a minute, now I see you're good friends with my Mom. I can't have you as my teacher!" Bryson also elaborated that, especially after the seven years of being enrolled in the Early College, many of his teachers came to feel like family to his family. He stated, "...it's just like a big thing of social workers, a big team of people right around you, just supporting you and all those networks- not just in your academics- but in your personal life…you cannot say that you came and did not feel welcomed and not be touched."

Cameron explained that his parents were "mostly close with my principals and teachers." He elaborated to say, "They actually love the program and how it prepared us for college. My family actually loved it." Some of the specific aspects of the Early College that Cameron's family approved of included dual enrollment, uniforms in middle school, and the academic preparation for college.

Adrianna described her family's relationship with her school as "great" and that the principal knew her Mom well. She went on to explain that she is "oldest and of three brothers, two went to [my Early College], and so the principals, they all knew my family… and so my Mom would donate things, and just volunteer and help out." She also explained that, when she was enrolled in Early College, it was a part of her family's daily conversation to discuss things from the school. She stated that, even now that she is a graduate, "we still talk about [my Early College]. I live like five minutes away or so and so we still talk about it often- like 'Oh, how is that principal' or different teachers and things like that."

Andrew commented that the principal was "always calling my parents" to "tell them all that I was doing." He went on to explain that this communication helped his parents to "see who I actually was." He talked about how he and his family still have a relationship with the school now. He said, "we make sure to continue to keep up with them. Even the first graduating class... they still come back and one of them is actually a teacher at [me Early College] now."

Bella was the only participant who stated that she thought her parents could have had a better relationship with the school, mainly because of a language barrier. She explained that "it was a balancing act…I hated it." She described how her family was a

little nervous about the early College at first because it was a pretty new program, and they were "pretty distant" with the language barrier. She was quick to explain that, aside from the language barrier, her family's relationship to the school "would have been closer." She said that her family still talks about the Early College "all the time" about "…how it helped me acknowledge something about college for myself. That if it wasn't for [my Early College], I wouldn't have even stepped it up." Bella explained that she believes her family would have been even more engaged in the school if there had been less of a language barrier. She explained, "if maybe a teacher or staff who spoke Spanish, then they could be the translator some of the time." Bella said that this is the one change that she thinks would have improved her parents' engagement.

Another element to the strong parent engagement that emerged during the interview phase of the study was a consistent recollection of events that brought parents and families onto the campus of the Early College throughout the year. Each participant recalled details about Thanksgiving activities, Black history programs, Christmas programs, festivals, and clubs. Adrianna remembered her Mom volunteering and donation items for school activities. Andrew discussed how his parents would always brag about how many events his school held throughout the year. Bryson reminisced about the "biggest festival ever" that the PTO had put on one year for the Fall Festival. He described how all the parents and teachers worked together to put on an "over the top event in a very hard year."

Continued Relationships. The second emergent theme related to perception of family relationship was that, even following high school graduation and a year of college experience, the participants' families continue to discuss the Early College in a positive

light and to recommend the program to others. All the interview participants were able to share examples of how they and their families have recommended their school to others.

Bella, who had dealt with a language barrier, described a time when she and her parents had recommended the Early College to her fifth-grade cousins, and she had even helped them with the application process. She recalled "I actually brought [applications] to their house and explained them and just tried to explain how my story is and my experience to them." She discussed how, even despite having struggled through a lack of language translation resources, her parents "understood that it was the best opportunity." She stated that her family talks of her time in Early College "all the time…even a year later."

Adrianna described how she "still talks about it" and would recommend the Early College model, and "already has" recommended it more than once. She went on to describe why her family would select to recommend the school. She said, "For my family, I would just say that the closeness granted at [my Early College]. That really helped my family because it's rare to get that out of a school."

Andrew described that his family has kept the relationships with those teachers and administrators and his family found the program "absolutely beneficial." He mentioned that he and his parents discussed school every day when he was a student and that "it still comes up." He recalled, "it was the parent teacher relationship that probably one of the strongest things that keeps [my Early College] going." He remembered a specific event then the PTO worked to create a fall festival for the students, "just as a reward during a hard transition year."

Cameron explained that his family would certainly recommend the Early College experience to others. He stated, "I would definitely say they would recommend a lot of people to go. They just loved the program."

Bryson said that his family not only recommends the Early College, but that he and his family "advocate for the school in the community." He also stated that his decision to become a teacher partially stems from his experience of having such a solid network of support between his family and his teachers. He stated, "I only wish I had more teachers and that's one of the reasons why I want to be a teacher and I think I want to be an advocate for teachers as well." He continues, "…these students need love and to know that you care and [teachers at my Early College], if they don't teach you and your family anything else, they teach you about love and community."

Summary of RQ1 Findings

The results and findings for this first research question all culminate to present a positive picture of Early College students' perceptions of their experiences. Each of the interview participants have stories and details regarding their perceptions of a long-lasting, positive relationship between their families and the Early College. For both the interview and survey phases of the study, participants described perceptions of academic, social and family connections that were consistently positive in nature. In terms of perceptions of academic preparation, this study uncovered a theme of students' having built confidence, sharpening academic skills and habits, an overall improvement over alternative academic environments, and a school that felt like family.

The student perceptions of their social engagements within the Early College model involved a narrative of how social activities had been a potential area for concern

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during the early years of the Early College's existence, but of how the students now perceive this original obstacle to have been improved upon over time, giving the student body a healthy opportunity to come together over the shared goal of improving these elements of the Early College setting. The overall perception was that the current social environment is one that is safe for all participants.

The overall perception of study participants regarding the relationship with the Early College and students' families was that it is a strong, positive relationship. The interview participants described a mutually beneficial relationship between the school and families. These relationships were described as long-lasting and a positive influence on both the students and their families.

Student Confidence in College Transition Knowledge and Skills (RQ2)

This second research question focused on dimensions of college transition knowledge and skills for ECHS students. Based on an existing framework, the sub research questions included: (1) What aspects of college culture awareness did ECHS students explore? (2) What aspects of self-advocacy did ECHS students explore? (3) What aspects of college enrollment knowledge did ECHS students explore? Themes that emerged from the analysis of the graduate interviews are described below using quotations and pseudonyms.

Awareness of College Culture

The discussion about the Early College students' awareness of the culture of college provided insight into which actions taken by the school have resulted in student confidence and what this confidence offers to the students. Students provided specific examples of how faculty, administration and staff provided effective modeling of college

culture. They also discussed a slight apprehension about having to individually replicate

that level of awareness regarding college culture. The leading interview questions that

were related to this research sub-question are (1) Do you feel that you are adjusting well

to college life? (2) What made you the most nervous about college life? and, (3) Do you

feel that the role of being a high school student is different than that of a college student?

ECHS Demonstrated College Expectations and Culture. Early in the interview

phase, interview participants described the ECHS environment as a place where they

could grow in an understanding of the expectations of college culture. Each graduate

remembers being keenly aware of the support system that they had been given for seven

years in the Early College model as they navigated their new roles as college preparatory

students. Early College had provided many effective examples of the expectations for

college life. Interview participants provided examples of ways their high school had

adequately prepared them to understand the culture of college and their role as college

students.

Bryson recalled how his connections with his teachers and peers within the Early

College had given him "all this confirmation" he needed during high school. Even though

he clearly had a respect for what is needed to succeed at the college level, he continually

recalls aspects of his "shelter" during his high school years and spoke of how those years

have prepared him well for this phase of life. He spoke of how the Early College had

assisted him in securing a scholarship and that he credited his school with helping him to

choose the correct college. He is attending the same university where he had completed

his dual enrollment, so he described minimal issues in moving into the full-time

enrollment. He said, "…because I was already here, you know, it was a smooth transition, an awesome transition."

Bella recalled the "handholding, the sheltering" during high school at the Early College. She spoke of how she did not feel that the role of an Early College student and a college student are any different, but that the support system is not the same and the burdens change. She states, "We had everything, we had the books, all the resources were there. Everything was there and now -other than the financial burden of just being from an immigrant family- you feel like socially and academically, you would be ready and could do it right now." She added, "I think I'm confident for the most part."

Cameron recalled all the structure and supports that they had been given as students at the Early College- having an agenda, someone to guide you thought keeping your priorities straight, having a schedule- and contrasts that to his current life of serving in the military. He said, "in high school you were just going to school." He explained that he misses so many of the supports that the Early College had afforded him and commented that the mindset that has prepared him well for service in the military "definitely can be credited to [his Early College]."

Andrew recalled, "[My Early College] was a lot of shelter for us, we were thankfully sheltered from the things of the outside world while we adjusted to this life." He also spoke of how the concern remained for him during this transition to college life. He said, Early College "did everything they were supposed to do" … and that he is able to "learn better" because of how they were taught to "interact with professors." He spoke specifically of one teacher at the Early College who had taught her students to understand their "why" in every situation. He explained that this concept had carried him through his

first year of full-time college enrollment because if "you understand why you're here, why you do this, why you do that, why everything is happening, then even though you weren't altogether ready for it, you did have some things to help you to be leveled." He continued by stating, "there really is nothing more that they could have done. They did their part, which was to equip us for college."

Students Apprehensive of Losing Supports. In response to the question of adjusting well to college life, Bryson immediately replies that he feels "kind of alone and on my own" now that he is in college. He said, "I really stay in my room or go to work. He talked of comparing himself to others who have taken much longer to complete college than planned and he spoke about concerns that that would ever be his story. He shares, "you do hear of a lot of college students sort of being stuck… I'm not doing this for no wait. No, no I'm not doing that. I barely want to do it know." Bryson also spoke of being able to attend college in the same town as his Early College and how it was a comfort to him having his high school just up the road so that he had a familiar place if he had any needs. He contrasted that with college life saying, "you're here by yourself. You know you must mature early but as a whole, many students don't mature. So, you know [my Early College] slid that in on us. This world is not going to play with you. Yeah, it will chew you up and spit you out."

Bella had a somewhat distinct experience and perception of this phase of life because she was not currently enrolled in any college courses at the time of the interview. She explained that, due to some financial and citizenship issues, she had been unable to pursue her undergraduate degree beyond what she had completed during Dual Enrollment. She said, "Right now, I'm working, and I feel like I'm not in a good place in

my life right now because I'm just stuck and not going forward or backward… I'm afraid I might get old and not get what I wanted."

Cameron explained that adult life in the military has had a "lot of differences" including waking up early, paying bills, getting to work on time.

Adrianna recalled her feelings about walking in to a 500-member classroom in college and how she suddenly realized how alone she was. She explained that "it was surprising, like 'Wow, 500 students in one class. That's a lot different from the small 'your teacher knows your name' environment." She stated that overall, she feels prepared for college, but there are still some aspects of adult life that are unknown to her. She said, "I feel confident, but there is still some, you know, nervousness because some things as an adult, you don't learn until you actually experience it."

Andrew seemed most focused on the financial adjustments that college culture had brought him. He detailed how "the state no longer pays for…eating, books, medications, pencils…."

Self-Advocacy

The topic of self-advocacy included students' personal recollection of having to advocate for necessary resources as needed in an academic setting. The interview guide included three leading questions that were related to self-advocacy. These questions included: (1) Were you able to get the resources that you needed to apply and enroll in college? (2) Was there anything specific that your school did to help you to acquire the resources that you needed? (3) Can you think of a time in high school when you had to advocate for yourself? During the interview, the two central themes emerged from the

participants' discussions. These emergent themes were advocacy on behalf of the students, and that students' necessity for opportunities to practice self-advocacy.

Advocacy on Behalf of Students. The predominant response that resulted from this portion of the interviews surrounded the theme that the faculty of the school were quick to advocate for their students. Several participants immediately responded with examples of advocacy on their behalf put into action by the faculty members in the school. Some examples included a description of a weekly check in with the principal that was available to them as students in the Early College, an annual event at the school named "College and Career Week," which included the counselors made "every effort" to provide students with scholarship information, applications, and other resources. The interview participants discussed that it would be difficult to miss what you needed to apply to college because of the very structured plan for college visits, school-imposed application deadlines, and a minimum of ten college application policy. There were many examples of how an individual faculty member had given them assistance in a specific way.

Bella recalled that, despite her trouble with language barrier and immigrant status, she still always had all that she needed in the Early College. She also spoke about knowing that she had been advocated for by a specific counselor. She described that, in the beginning, she had been a very shy and scared student, but that this counselor gave her the space that she needed to process everything as needed. Bella remembered, "I walked into her office, and I just wanted to cry on her shoulder, and she'd just be like 'Um, yeah.' She loved us the way that we loved her, and she'd do anything for us." Bella

went on to explain how she eventually learned to cope and even self-advocate, but at first, she remembered this counselor taking this first step.

Bryson told of how an administrator pulled him aside in 8th grade and had a "heart to heart" with him about getting him what he needed for school. He went on to describe how "very grateful" he was for this faculty member. Bryson also described how an individual faculty member had given him the tools that he needed to motivate himself through academic challenges. He went on to say that students should "stop running…trust the teachers. They have your best interest at heart." When asked if he had experienced a time at the Early College when he was unable to have the resources that he needed. His immediate response was, "No matter what, I can say no to that." He insisted that students would have a challenging time not receiving all the necessary resources because of how often the faculty when out of their way to ensure students were provided for.

Andrew mentioned that "all of the teachers were amazing." He discussed how all that the students needed to plan for and implement the college application process was provided for them. He commented that he had inadvertently missed a scholarship deadline and he felt that it would have been a good opportunity for him. His one suggestion for the Early College was to be certain that all students are aware of all financial aid opportunities.

ECHS Students Require Opportunities to Practice Self-Advocacy. In addition to providing numerous examples of faculty and administration who contributed to an academic setting that encouraged student advocacy, the interview respondents also had

many comments about ways that they had been able to advocate for themselves within the Early College model.

Opportunities During Middle and High School. Each of the interview participants stated that self-advocacy played a vital role in the school environment in their Early College campus. All the participants discussed the idea that students are encouraged to "speak up" for themselves, and that students "shouldn't be afraid to ask for help." All five participants stated that if any student has a need, that they should not hesitate to ask for it. Adrianna stated that students are taught "not to be shy" and that even though many students were scared in their early years of enrollment in the Early College, that students learn "to push for themselves." Bella mentioned that "things were not handed to us- we had to speak up."

Bella, Cameron, and Bryson recalled a time that students worked together during their middle school years to expand the extracurricular activities to include those that were originally provided solely at their traditional middle school campuses. At the time, for Early College students to participate in these activities, they had to ride a bus over to another school facility to be involved. The students all commented on how inconvenient this became and how they began to advocate for more opportunities within their campus. Bella explained, "we all came together and asked for them [extracurricular activities]"and she talked of how fighting for these activities taught her to "push for" herself. Cameron added, "I had to take my extracurricular activities into my own hands." Bryson added that, the students knew that the extracurricular opportunities were not what they had hoped for, but that they decided to "get out there and make a change in their community." Each of these three participants who recalled advocating for this change demonstrated a

personal connection to the programs that were started as a result. These interviewees showed that they believed in their own ability to change something through advocacy and there has been a measured change in the school as a result.

Andrew was the only interview respondent who spoke of a time when he advocated for himself and did not get what he felt was the best return for his efforts. He described seeking scholarships that were available, only to discover that another student had been recommended for a scholarship that he had missed. He explained that this frustrating event was not typical and that the school could "provide more scholarship opportunities."

Opportunities in the Process of College Application, Enrollment and Attendance. Two of the other interview participants, Adrianna, and Andrew, spoke of advocating for college application needs. Adrianna remembered that she had discovered early in the college application process that she needed help filling out the FAFSA application. She said that she knew that she "just needed to ask" and she would get what she needed. Andrew told of his college application process and how he knew he needed to "understand the resources that were available." He described how he pursued the needed information from the counselors and other faculty at the Early College and that "everything was provided." He discussed being able to "level" himself and how he's thankful that his high school "socially equipped" him for college.

Cameron responded that many of the tools given to him during high school had helped him so far in adult life. He also commented that, he's "actually been more social than in high school." He said, "I can definitely say adult life is really making me become more social."

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College Enrollment Knowledge

The topic of college enrollment knowledge was the final topic covered during the interview phase of this study. Three questions in the interview were included to guide participants to discuss details of how elements of college enrollment knowledge were addressed in their Early College High School. The three questions were: (1) What has the path toward college been for you since you graduated from high school?, (2) What were some of the surprises that you have faced as you have started college?, and (3) What are some specific things that your school did to prepare you to apply for college?.

A Mantra to Inspire Confidence: "Exceed Expectations". Each of the interview participants have a unique story of their academic path since high school graduation. All five interview participants had earned college credits through the dual enrollment program prior to high school graduation. All five are the first in their respective families to do so. As these students shared the details of how their Early College High School prepared them to enroll in college, they each mentioned a schoolwide slogan that they had been taught: "Exceed expectations." The participants elaborated about how the faculty and administration in their Early College were consistent to express that this was the goal- to perform at a higher level than what is expected. The participants spoke of how this theme guided all their college enrollment preparations.

Four of the five participants- Adrianna, Andrew, Bryson, and Cameron- had completed enough credits during high school to fulfill their first two years of college. Following graduation from the Early College High School, Adrianna, Andrew, and Bryson enrolled in university courses and are successfully working to complete either

their Junior or Senior year of college. Of these three, all have plans to pursue a graduate degree at some point in the future. All three participants who attend college courses report that they have managed the transition from high school into adult life and college with little trouble.

These three participants who enrolled in college immediately following high school graduation shared some of the most helpful aspects of preparing for college enrollment. Adrianna recalled that "we started college week in ninth grade, so we were all sure by senior year." She described her process of utilizing the counselor's office within the Early College to narrow her list of colleges from ten, down to the five to which she applied, and then finally to the one she selected.

Bryson answered that he has had a smooth transition from high school to college and that there had been "no surprises" during the transition period. He also explained that he appreciates how his Early College experience made the college application and enrollment process feel like "common sense."

Andrew not only completed his first two years of college credit in dual enrollment, but also had, at the time of the interview, successfully transitioned into full-time college enrollment, had added a minor in Business, and had opened his own small business on the side. Andrew explained, "I plan to graduate and continue on to my business, and teaching. Hopefully one day I can be able to give back to the place that gave so much to me." He continued by adding, "Yes, I've very confident. I've had some setbacks, but our assistant principal always taught us one thing. It became the school model. It was, 'exceed expectations. Expectations that you have for yourself, the

expectations that they have for you." Andrew concluded by adding, "I would deem myself to have exceeded, so yeah, I'm confident."

Two of the interview participants did not immediately enroll in college courses-Bella entered the workforce and Cameron joined the armed forces and has plans to complete his college requirements through the military following basic training. The participant who currently works in the workforce reported the most trouble during this transition period. She is currently "trying to figure out the next step" for herself. She stated that her limitations have primarily been a result of the financial strain that she experiences as a child of immigrants. She stated that she wishes to eventually find a way to finance college, and that this financial burden has become her main obstacle. Cameron did not describe difficulty during this transition period, but that he felt very capable of adjusting to the expectations of serving in the military. He commented that, "we just make sure to we know when to do the work, due dates, everything like that, we just handle it the best we knew how in that moment."

Interview Themes' Influence on Phase Two Survey

The findings and results that are related to research questions one and two, both those related to students' perception and students' confidence in college transition knowledge and skills, present a fresh perspective into the student experience within the Early College High School environment in Georgia. The recent graduates who participated in the interview phase informed the study by providing a glimpse into the student experience of the program. and the current students who were participants in the survey phase of this study, provided details about the process of preparing for the transition from high school to college while attending this Early College High School.

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The survey that was used for Phase two of this study was initially developed to include questions that related to each of the six constructs. Once the interviews were completed, and the themes were discovered, some adjustments were made to the survey instrument to further cover specific topics from the Phase One data.

"As Prepared for College as I Would Be in Another School"

This is one survey item that was added because of the data analysis from Phase One of the study. The interview participants often made a point to elaborate about how their perceptions were that the Early College High School path was in stark contrast to any other option that they would have been afforded otherwise. While this survey item addressed the students' perception of strong academic preparation, it also spoke to the theme of "exceed expectations" from the construct of confidence in college enrollment knowledge.

"Feels Like Family"

The feeling of family was a predominant theme throughout the interview portion of this study. The first notable mention of the ECHS environment feeling like a family was the participants' description of faculty and staff who held them to a higher academic standard and still communicated an elevated level of care and "tough love." This concept returned within the constructs of student confidence as well. Interview participants discussed their connection to the ECHS environment, most notable calling the school a "shelter." Discussions about how advocacy was modeled for them first by caring faculty and staff. Each of these components encouraged a specific survey item that would address the "family feel" environment within the school.

"Comfortable Right Away"

This survey item was added to address the theme that interview participants perceived an eventual comfort in terms of social engagement, but not an immediate one. The interview participants spoke of a specific change in their ECHS campus as it related to the availability of social activities. Because they described the installation of new social opportunities as a meaningful part of their social experience, it seemed important to understand how current students would respond to this survey item.

Summary of RQ2 Findings

The findings related to the confidence in college transition knowledge and skills provide insight into the mindset of current students and recent graduates of the Early College program. These students are breaking new ground for themselves and charting a path that is new for those what have come before them in their circles of friends and family. The overarching response from the participants is that they have a much more complete understanding of the requirements to become a successful college student and a higher level of competency because of having attended this Early College.

While each of the students and graduates can provide lists of resources and strategies, along with personal anecdotes of support, training, and encouragement from the faculty of the school, there is a distinct theme of uncertainty moving forward. Each interview participant discussed the various supports and skills that they had been afforded by participating in the Early College, but they also have a healthy dose of trepidation as they move forward without some of those supports.

The reality of the situation appears to be that these students were provided with such meaningful support and programs that there is a sense of fear as they must move ahead independently. These reservations were more notable among the recent graduates

than those students who are still enrolled at the high school level. The recent graduates each describe an awareness that these supports and programs were critical for their individual successes and, now moving forward as adults, they have a clearer appreciation of what those supports had provided them and what they are missing now.

Relationship Between ECHS Experience and Confidence (RQ3)

To understand how student school experience relates to their college transition knowledge and skills, students' perceptions of ECHS experiences and confidence in college transition knowledge and skills were examined through a survey refined based on the findings from RQ1 and RQ2. The correlation between various dimensions of ECHS perceptions and college readiness confidence levels were examined to identify aspects of their experience that contributed to shaping student college readiness.

The final research question took into consideration the overlap of the content of the first two questions. The concepts covered in the first two research questions each stand alone as informative topics for the Early College experience, but an analysis of the ways that these topics could be related also provided valuable information. This third question brings these two concepts together to discern if there is any connection or significant correlation between the perceptions of these students and their confidence regarding college transition knowledge and skills.

The analysis of the data for this third research question in this study included a quantitative look at the survey data. First, preliminary descriptive statistics were run for each single survey item. The student survey included 28 survey items, 21 of which were related to one of the six constructs addressed in research questions one and two. Table 3 displays which survey items refer to each of these six constructs. The 21 survey items

related to each of these six topics each used a five scale Likert scale ranging from "strongly disagree" (SD = 1) to "strongly agree" (SA = 5). The descriptive statistics that were calculated for each survey item included the measures of central tendency, the standard deviation, and the frequency of responses for each answer choice ranging between "strongly disagree" (SD = 1) to "strongly agree" (SA = 5).

Changes Made to the Survey Based on Interview Findings

Two survey items were added to the student survey to address this theme (a better path; support for college enrollment) that emerged from the interview transcripts. These two survey items asked participants to respond to the statements "I would not be on a path to college without having attended this school" and "If I had not attended this school, I would still be as prepared for college as I am now." Both items were added to see how consistent the survey responses would be. Because the interview participants all stated that this Early College path had provided them with an improved academic preparation for college transition, it was a necessary change for the student survey.

Descriptive Analysis Results

Descriptive statistics were calculated at the item level as well as at the construct level (Table 4). The mean and standard deviation was measured for each of the six constructs as well as for each individual survey item. Once the construct mean and standard deviation were determined for each of the constructs, specific survey items were analyzed to determine if they fell outside of one standard deviation outside of the construct mean. Survey items that did fall outside of the construct mean were also noted regarding the standard deviation of the specific item responses to determine consistency for those specific responses.

Several items included in the student survey were demographic in nature and did not lend themselves to a discussion of mean and standard deviation. For instance, students were asked to record their expected graduation year, as well as which year they began attending the Early College campus. On average, the students had attended the school for four years and most of the participants in the study were high school students who intend to graduate on time. The students who have taken the ACT or SAT examination were asked to report their scores, but the number of students who with applicable responses was too few to report. The overall Grade Point Average (GPA) of students participating in this survey was $M = 2.93$, $SD = .58$.

The reliability of the survey to measure each construct was determined by Cronbach's alpha. The overall alpha score for the entire survey demonstrated a high reliability (0.86). The reliability scores listed for each construct were as follows: Perception of academic preparation (0.71); Perception of social engagement (0.60); Perception of family relationship to school (0.75); Culture of college confidence (0.73); Self-Advocacy confidence (0.36); College enrollment knowledge confidence (0.86).

Student Perception

The three subconstructs of student perception included student perception of academic preparation, social engagement, and family relationship with school. According to the survey data, students at the ECHS perceived that they had been well prepared academically at the school ($M = 3.90$, $SD = 1.19$). ECHS students responded very positively regarding their expectation to graduate high school on time, ($M = 4.67$, $SD = 0.66$), and that they will academically be prepared for college at that time ($M = 4.57$, $SD = 0.68$). Students also reported that they did not expect that these academic outcomes

would be replicated in a different academic setting (M = 2.76, SD = 0.94). Only when students responded about their level of concern regarding academic preparation did the responses fall just slightly outside of one standard deviation from this construct mean (M = 2.68, SD =1.39). Overall, student survey participants responded very favorably to their academic preparation within the ECHS model.

The students had somewhat mixed perceptions about the social engagement within the ECHS model (M = 3.80, SD = 1.25). Students responded very favorably to survey items that asked directly about social engagement overall (M = 4.29, SD = 0.85) and whether the ECHS environment "felt like family," (M = 3.95, SD = 1.12). Survey participants responded only slightly less favorably to the survey item, "When I arrived at [my school], I felt comfortable right away" (M = 3.38, SD = 1.36). Students perceived some reason for a level of concern related to social engagement within the school, resulting in a notable, less favorable response (M = 2.43, SD = 1.47). While the overall perception of social engagement within this ECHS model was positive, a slight perception of concern was still present.

The final area of student perception, the relationship between the students' family and the ECHS, was the most positive response of the three categories (M = 4.65, SD = 0.72). Participants were almost unanimous in their response to their perception of whether their families "approve" of their ECHS, (M = 4.86, SD = 0.48). In response to both negatively worded survey items, students responded that they perceive almost no reason for concern regarding either their families' relationship with the ECHS (M = 1.33, SD = 0.66), or about their plans for college (M = 1.57, SD = 0.93) All of the survey items in this category were met with overwhelmingly positive responses, with students

responding significantly against any level of concern regarding the relationship between

their family and school.

Table 5

Survey Items by Topic

Survey Item	Mean	SD
Perception of academic preparation	3.90	1.19
I feel that when I graduate from [my school], I will be academically prepared for college.	4.57	0.68
I expect that I will graduate high school on time.	4.67	0.66
*I have concerns about my academic preparation.	2.68	1.39
*If I had not attended [my school], I would still be as prepared for college as I am now.	2.76	0.94
Perception of social engagement	3.80	1.25
*I have concerns about my social engagement at school.	2.43	1.47
[My school] feels like family to me.	3.95	1.12
When I arrived at [my school], I felt comfortable right away.	3.38	1.36
Perception of family relationship to school	4.65	0.72
I feel that my family approves that I attend [my school].	4.86	0.48
*I have concerns about how my family feels about [my school].	1.33	0.66
*I have concerns about what my family will think of me going to college after high school.	1.57	0.93
Culture of college confidence	3.38	1.43
I am confident that I will adjust well to college life.	4.19	0.81
*I am nervous about adjusting to college life after high school.	3.52	1.36
I would not be on a path to college without having attended [my school].	3.48	1.50
Self-advocacy confidence	3.73	1.27
I am confident in my ability to advocate for myself at school.	4.38	0.74
I am confident in my ability to prepare financially for college.	4.00	0.95
*I am nervous about resources that I will need to attend college.	3.19	1.47
College enrollment confidence	3.56	1.29
I am confident in my ability to select the correct college to attend after high school.	4.14	0.91
I am confident in my ability to apply to college.	3.90	0.94
*I am nervous about the process of applying for college.	3.38	1.43
Overall		

*Reverse coding applied, SD= 1 coded as "5", SA = 5 coded as "1"

Student Confidence

Student confidence as related to college transition knowledge and skills was the second construct for this study. Research question two asked, "How confident are students in the Early College with regard to their college transition knowledge and skills?" The specific constructs of this theme were students' level of confidence related to understanding the culture of college, self-advocacy, and college enrollment knowledge.

Students responded positively about having confidence related to the culture of college (M = 3.38, SD = 1.43). Students reported an expectation to adjust well to the culture of college life (M = 4.19, SD = 0.81). They also reported confidence related to a better preparation for the path to college than found in other academic settings (M = 3.48, SD = 1.50). As may be expected for any high school student, students reported some degree of nervousness about the adjustment to college life after high school (M = 3.52, SD = 1.36). While the students' reported level of confidence related to the culture of college was the lowest of the three subconstructs, the overall response was positive, and the differences were not substantial.

Students responded more positively to survey items related to self-advocacy than either of the other two subconstructs (M = 3.73, SD = 1.27). Students responded most favorably in response to their own ability to advocate for themselves at school, (M = 4.38, SD = 0.74) and they also reported that they feel confident about their ability to secure the necessary resources to make college a financial possibility (M = 4.00, SD = 0.95). Students did report some nervousness about their ability to secure all the resources needed for college and their response to this survey item was a little lower than others related to self- advocacy (M = 3.19, SD = 1.47). While the three subconstructs of student

confidence all reported similar responses, students responded slightly higher to those related to self-advocacy than the other topics.

Students also reported confidence related to the final dimension of student confidence, college enrollment knowledge (M = 3.56, SD = 1.29). Most notably, survey participants responded in strong agreement to the survey item, "I am confident that in my ability to select the correct college to attend after high school," (M = 4.14, SD = 0.91). When faced with the topic of the college application process, students did report some nervousness (M = 3.38, SD = 1.43), they also responded with confidence regarding the overall process of applying to college (M = 3.90, SD = 0.94). Overall, while some students reported evidence of nervousness about the future of college enrollment, the overall reaction was one of confidence.

Table 6

Spearman's rho(ρ) correlation coefficient by topic (N=21)

	Mean	SD	1.	2.	3.	4.	5.	6.
Perception								
1. Academic preparation	3.90	1.19	-					
2. Social engagement	3.80	1.25	.69**	-				
3. Family relationship with school	4.65	0.72	.56*	.34	-			
Confidence								
4. Culture of college	3.38	1.43	.37*	.45**	.47**	-		
5. Self-advocacy	3.73	1.27	.44**	.59	.50**	.58*	-	
6. College enrollment knowledge	3.56	1.29	.50	.59	.43*	.66**	.47**	-

*p < .01, **p < .001

Correlational Analysis Results

Spearman's rank-order correlational analysis for non-parametric data was used to take a deeper look into the relationships between student perception of Early College

experience and the level of confidence in college transition knowledge and skills. Table 6 reports the Spearman's rho coefficients between students' perceptions of academic preparation, social engagement, family relationship with the school and students' level of confidence in understanding the culture of college, self-advocacy, and college enrollment knowledge.

Student Perception about the ECHS Experience.

Overall, the students' responses regarding their perception of the Early College experience were positive in relation to their academic preparation, their social engagement, and their families' relationships with the Early College. The school experience survey data suggest that student perceptions about the school's academic preparation was significantly related to social engagement ($\rho = .69, p < .001$) and family relationship with school ($\rho = .56, p < .01$). This means that students who replied positively about being academically prepared at the school were also likely to report positive social engagement at the school. Furthermore, students who responded to the school's academic preparation were likely to state that their family had a positive relationship with the school.

Lastly, although the relationship between student perceptions about social engagement at school and family relationship with school was positive, it was not statistically significant ($\rho = .34, p = .134$).

Student Confidence in College Transition Knowledge and Skills

Student confidence in college transition knowledge and skills demonstrated how much each student perceived that they are aware of the college culture, able to self-advocate within an academic setting, and know the college enrollment process. The

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student confidence data suggest that their confidence about college culture and self-advocacy ($\rho = .58, p < .01$) and their confidence about self-advocacy and college enrollment knowledge ($\rho = .47, p < .001$), and their confidence about college culture and college enrollment knowledge ($\rho = .66, p < .001$), were all significantly related. This means that students who are confident about knowing college culture are likely to be confident in advocating themselves and college enrollment knowledge. It also means that students who are confident in advocating themselves are likely to be confident about knowing the college enrollment process.

Student Perception and Confidence

According to the correlational analysis, only student perception about family relationship with school was significantly related to all three confidence subconstructs of college transition knowledge and skills. Specifically, the family relationship with school was positively related to college culture awareness ($\rho = .47, p < .001$), self-advocacy ($\rho = .50, p < .001$), and college enrollment knowledge ($\rho = .43, p < .01$). Next, student perception about the school's academic preparation was significantly related to two of the confidence subconstructs, college culture awareness ($\rho = .37, p < .01$) and self-advocacy ($\rho = .44, p < .001$). Lastly, student perception about social engagement at school was significantly related only to college culture awareness ($\rho = .45, p < .001$). The other correlations were positive, ranging from .50 to .59 (Table 4), but they were not statistically significant at $\alpha = 0.01$.

These results suggest that students with a strong family engagement are likely to be confident in all three aspects of college transition knowledge and skills (college culture awareness, self-advocacy, college enrollment knowledge), students with a

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positive perception about the school's academic preparation are likely to be confident about knowing college culture and how to self-advocate, students with a strong social engagement at school are likely to be confident in knowing college culture.

Summary of RQ3 Findings

The findings for RQ3 outline the relationship between the students' perceptions of their ECHS experience with their level of confidence as related to college transition knowledge and skills. There is a good deal of meaningful overlap between the constructs examined in this study. The relationship between and among the dimensions of these constructs illuminates the experiences of these students and provides insight for the future of the Early College model.

The strong connection between academic preparation and social engagement is evident throughout this study. Recent graduates discussed the early years of this Early College model and how they felt devoid of social outlets in the school. Their individual efforts, along with those of an administration that valued the students' input, provided for a more balanced approach. This newer model for the program promoted extracurricular and social activities. The results of this change and the positive student response are evident within the results of this study. Students at this Early College have a strong association between the academic features of the program and those that allow for healthy social engagement.

The findings that address the relationship between dimensions of confidence in college transition knowledge and skills provide an example of support for the existing literature surrounding college transition. The dimensions of an awareness of college culture, self-advocacy, and college enrollment knowledge have been described in the

existing literature base as pivotal to the transition process- specifically for student groups who have traditionally been underrepresented on college campuses. The findings for this study promote the strong relationship between each of these dimensions and contribute a meaningful example of how these dimensions look and feel in the Early College model.

The finding that family relationship to the school was the most significant relationship between the two constructs offers a specific topic of discussion for Early College models moving forward. This perceived connection between the families' positive relationship with the school and the graduates' success with college transition provides a potential strategy for further success with students and families in the future. For this study, students reported a stronger relationship between family and college transition than they did for academic preparation or social engagement. This is a surprising outcome for any high school. The implications of this finding can influence both school programs and systems moving forward, as well as provide an intriguing topic to explore in future research related to college transition.

CHAPTER V

Conclusions and Discussion

This case study provided a look into the perceptions of Georgia's Early College High School students as related to college readiness by examining perceptions of recent graduates and current students at a single Early College High School. This study is unique in the way that it places a primary focus on the perceptions of those stakeholders at the centermost of the Early College High School model- the students. The perceptions of these students, both those who have recently graduated and those who are currently enrolled in the Early College High School setting, were key to this study. The findings and results of this study served to provide a descriptive look into how students perceive their experiences of college readiness within the Early College High School model and which elements of their perceptions are related to their confidence in preparing for the process of the transition from high school to college.

This study provided a look into the perceived experiences of the recent graduates who are beginning to face the challenges of adulthood and postsecondary learning and the current students who are still attending the ECHS campus. As one of very few studies approaching this topic through the words and perceptions of the students themselves, this study provided an examination of the connections between the literature and the real-lived experiences as well as offered a new avenue to explore further connections and relationships in future research.

A brief overview of the existing literature in this area of focus shows that the students have very frequently been overlooked in research and their perceptions regarding school systems and processes or college readiness have been overlooked. There

have been numerous programs and strategies attempted in response to the underrepresentation of student groups among college students. Many times, the research that analyzes such programs neglects to seek the students' perspectives or neglects to entertain a multi-dimensional approach to success. Many college readiness literature focuses entirely on the academic nature of a program, forgetting the other dimensions of the program and of the student.

This study sought to focus on one overarching question: What are the perspectives of Georgia's Early College students as related to college readiness? This question was explored through a subset of questions:

In Georgia,

1. What perceptions do the students have about their Early College experience?

    a. What are the students' perceptions about the academic preparation they receive in the Early College model?

    b. What are the students' perceptions regarding social engagement in the Early College?

    c. How do the students perceive the relationship between their family and their Early College?

2. How confident are students in the Early College regarding their college transition knowledge and skills?

    a. What aspects of an awareness of college culture do the students explore as participants in Georgia's ECHS model?

    b. What aspects of the self-advocacy do the students explore as participants in Georgia's ECHS model?

c. What aspects of college enrollment knowledge for a postsecondary institution do the students explore as participants in Georgia's ECHS model?

3. Is student perception of the Early College experience related to their confidence in college transition knowledge and skills?

To address these same questions and issues that have brought these questions to light, current literature provides outlines of various frameworks for understanding underrepresented student groups, college readiness, and the Early College High School initiative. There is a rich history of literature pertaining to the examination of the underrepresented student groups on college campuses. These students, low socioeconomic, first-generation college students, non-traditional students, and others have been at the forefront of college readiness literature for some time.

Student voice and perspective had not been the central focus of the existing literature and, when the students' voices have been the primary focus, only academic features are prominent within literature. The movement away from a narrow academic focus into a more broad, holistic focus has provided a more faceted analysis of the matter. This study examined students' perspectives about academic preparation, social engagement, and family relationship to the school.

The early years of measuring and examining college readiness focused on high stakes testing outcomes and graduation rates. Conley (2008) presented an alternative, more holistic, approach to measuring and understanding college readiness. He hypothesized that there are multiple factors that play a critical role in a students' ability to transition from a high school setting into a college one. Conley's (2008) work in the

research of college readiness provides a multi-faceted approach to discussing and modifying college preparatory strategies.

Conley's (2008, 2015) complete model provides four key pieces of a successful college readiness model. The one facet of college readiness that was addressed by this study was college transition knowledge and skills. This study examined the dimensions of college transition knowledge and skills in relation to the perceptions of Georgia's Early College High School students. The constructs covered by this study are students' perceptions of academic preparation, social engagement and family relationship to the school, and students' confidence related to their understanding of the culture of college, self-advocacy, and college enrollment knowledge.

The mixed method design of this case study provided for data collection from both in-depth interviews of recent graduates from the Early College, and survey data from the students who are currently enrolled in the program. The first phase of the study included qualitative data collection through in-depth interviews of five graduates of the program. These interviews followed a predetermined set of interview topics and questions, while still providing a space for the participants to share the meaningful aspects of their own experiences and perceptions. The emergent themes found in the analysis of these interviews provided tools with which to sharpen the focus of the student survey.

The second phase of this study included a survey including mostly Likert scale items related to each of the constructs of student perception and college transition confidence. Current students were invited to share their responses regarding academic preparation, social engagement, family relationship to school, culture of college, self-

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advocacy, and college enrollment knowledge. In this phase of data collection, students –

the stakeholders who are at the center of this Early College program- were provided with

a response to each of these dimensions considering their own perceptions.

The key findings of this study provide a look into the world of Georgia's Early

College High School students in a way that had previously been overlooked. These

stakeholders were given an opportunity to comment on their own perceptions and

experiences. Both current students and recent graduates perceived a promising level of

preparation for the academic requirements at the college level and they believe this

program has provided them with a more academically successful path than they would

have otherwise been afforded. Both the recent graduates and current students responded

that the social engagement piece of the school was equally important to the academic

piece. The graduates spoke of the early years as a time when the school could have lost

students' commitment, but instead the renewed focus on both academic and social

activities provided the students with the environment needed to thrive. The current model

of the Early College is a direct result of those decisions from the early years and the

current students perceive social engagement as important as academic preparation. The

overarching response from students and graduates alike was that this school feels like a

family and that is a key feature of student perception. The long-term relationships built

within this program have given these students and graduates the perception of a

permanent support system.

The key findings regarding college transition knowledge and skills focus most

heavily on the self-advocacy dimension. Recent graduates spoke of an unending list of

support provided for them by the Early College faculty, staff and the design and

programs of the school itself. These supports were highlighted by the graduates from the program and reported by current students as well. The important part of this finding is the notion that the graduates described an apprehension as they leave the shelter of the Early College and venture into college and adulthood without the same level of support. The graduate and students demonstrated a slight discrepancy in their level of confidence here and this discrepancy may be evidence for a need of a more gradual release of responsibility for those students who are still enrolled in the program.

The findings that relate to the overlap between student perception and college transition confidence demonstrates a strong relationship between academic preparation and social engagement, a strong relationship between all three dimensions of college confidence, and a stronger relationship between family relationship to the school and college readiness than any other dimension of student perception. These students and graduates have found a prominent level of academic preparation and college confidence in a place where they also see a strong connection to their own families. This finding provides implications for both research and practice moving forward.

Family Relationships are Key in the ECHS

One objective of this study was to ascertain any relationship between dimensions of students perceived experiences within the ECHS and their reported confidence regarding college transition knowledge and skills. In both phases of the study, the students' perception of family relationships within the Early College was presented as a meaningful element of the student experience. Interview participants each recalled the meaningful ways that families had banded together for fall festivals, Black History Month parades, test-prep rallies, and other school-wide activities. They also spoke of how

close-knit the faculty had become with their families during their time in the Early College. Students in this study perceived their families' relationship with their school to be vital to their success as students.

The survey data further supported the notion that family engagement was key for this Early College. The correlations between students' perceptions of family relationship to the school and all three subconstructs of confidence related to college readiness were stronger and more significant than any other area of perceived student experience. Students who responded that they were more confident about the culture of college, self-advocacy, and the ability to enroll in college successfully were most likely to also rate their family's relationship to the school as positive.

Pascarella et al. (2003) found that, although first generation college students may have the academic ability to accomplish the academic goals of a college setting, without having someone at home to have demonstrated a desire or understanding of the social and cultural norms of college, these students tend to falter. Along a similar vein of research, Conley (2015) promoted a contextual understanding of college aspirations and the norms and culture of college to best prepare students for the transition from high school into postsecondary learning. He also encourages a healthy cultural understanding of the culture and norms that will be presented in a college setting (Conley 2015). Conley (2008, 2015) suggests that students have a mentor who can provide context for an understanding of college. Prior research has made a point to encourage giving first generation college students or underrepresented groups of college students contextual knowledge about the expectations, policies, and norms of the roles of college life (Conley 2008; Howley et al., 2013; Pascarella et al., 2003). Other scholars have encouraged the

importance of parental involvement upon overall student academic effort (Zhang, 2018). Zhang (2018) found that maintaining an open and real-time line of communication between students, parents and schools and an intentional inclusion of the parents in a campus involvement plan to be significantly correlated with both students' academic effort and their perceived academic effort.

This study explored the connection between the two constructs of students' perception of school experience and their confidence in college transition knowledge and skills. Students within this ECHS campus noted a stronger connection between one dimension of their school experience, namely a healthy family relationship with the school, and the students' confidence in an awareness of college culture, self-advocacy, and college enrollment knowledge. For this ECHS campus, the students who report the most significant levels of confidence in the areas of transition knowledge and skills are those who report a strong, positive relationship between their family and the ECHS. These findings suggest a strong connection between the relationship that a student's family has with their school and that student's comfort level in preparing for the transition from high school to college.

Other recent literature has also examined the connection between parental involvement and a specific college readiness dimension. Roksa and Kinsley (2018) found that engaging parents in the college search process resulted in more successful college transition planning, and a positive influence on students' well-being in college and on social engagement in college for students considered low-income. In terms of Early College settings, much more can be done to ascertain how student perception of parental involvement relates to student confidence in college transition knowledge and skills.

Social Engagement is Meaningful for ECHS Students

Early in Conley's work, to better encapsulate college readiness, he recommended a move away from the rudimentary methods of determining college readiness (Conley, 2007, 2008). Conley makes it clear that a simple measure of GPA and high stakes testing were not adequate predictors of college aptitude (Conley, 2008; Fina, Dunbar, & Welch, 2018). Specifically, for groups of students who were typically underrepresented on college campuses or first-generation college students, (Pascarella et al., 2003), these measures of predicting academic success were misleading and insufficient (Conley, 2008, 2014; Fina, Dunbar, & Welch, 2018).

Conley's Four Keys Model brought to light new dimensions of college readiness. He recommended that a more comprehensive approach to assessing college readiness be considered (Conley, 2007, 2015). First, he explored a broader look into academics outside of high stakes testing and GPA (Conley, 2007). He also supported the inclusion of more contextual elements such as learning skills, collaboration, and understanding of culture (Conley, 2008).

Much in agreement with Conley's recommendations, the perceptions of students within this ECHS campus align with the idea that a more comprehensive approach to preparation for college readiness would better benefit them. In addition to simply an academically focused environment, a need for social engagement was a notable part of their journey through Early College. For recent graduates of the program, the evolution from a lack of social engagement to an academic setting where student voice and concern for engagement introduced change was one of the more pivotal parts of their story. For these students, the process of having joined together, petitioning administration, and then

watching the administration respond and modify the focus of the school was crucial for them. Jehinger (2009) suggests that many typical obstacles faced first generation college students can be diminished in higher learning environments where multicultural pedagogy and social engagement across cultures exists. This study found a similar outcome for these high school students within this Early College campus. They felt that social opportunities had been lacking and they perceived that the change was a direct result of their efforts.

For current students, the fruits of those efforts were evident in the survey data results. For students currently enrolled in the Early College, the highest correlation of the entire study showed that students who were likely to perceive a strong academic preparation within the school were also likely to perceive a strong level of social engagement. Students who perceived a positive social environment were also likely to feel strongly about their academic achievements. These findings are in line with prior research in the field of college readiness that found college students with strong self-advocacy and social engagement skills tend to perform well academically (Brady-Amoon & Fuertes, 2011).

Teaching Self-Advocacy is Preferred to Simply Advocating

Another stated objective of this study was to ascertain the level of confidence held by the students within this Early College as related to college transition knowledge and skills. Conley (2008) discusses the significance of self-advocacy as a dimension of successful college transition knowledge and skills. Without the ability to secure the correct resources, advocate to individuals in authority or to communicate on one's own

behalf, many students flounder in the college experience (Conley, 2008). Throughout this study, self-advocacy was a focus of the discussion as well.

In prior research, Conley discussed the importance of both self-advocacy and the skills necessary to accomplish academic success (Conley, 2007, 2008). The findings from this Early College campus demonstrates a commitment at the school and faculty level to provide resources and knowledge about skills that will lead to student confidence (i.e., time management, strategic notetaking, etc.), as well as the effort to communicate the importance of self-advocacy. Interview respondents in this study spoke highly of the ECHS program in its' efforts to teach self-advocacy and there were numerous narratives of ways in which faculty or staff had assisted students or even advocated on students' behalf.

One notable pattern from this study was the tendency for recent graduates to describe a strong trust in the ECHS faculty and their desire to assist students and then an immediate turn in focus following these narratives to the idea of "leaving the shelter"- a notion that these recent graduates were not as confident about securing resources or communicating with authority figures outside of the confines of the ECHS environment. These findings demonstrate an opportunity for growth in college transition knowledge and skills as described by Conley (2015). Although these students were very well supported during their time as students within the ECHS campus, there is an opportunity for students to transition to more of the role of the self-advocate while faculty facilitate a smoother release of responsibility to these students.

Pearson and Gallagher (1983) introduced the Gradual Release of Responsibility Instructional Framework as a model for how academic content can be delivered from

instructor to students over time. This framework for a gradual transition of responsibility from teacher to student is one strategy that may relate to the pattern found in the data of this study. Students who were currently enrolled in the Early College responded that they felt capable of advocating for themselves and that the Early College was preparing them to secure the necessary resources for college. In fact, the students who replied that they felt confident about college enrollment procedures were also very likely to respond strongly to self-advocacy. The differences noted from the current student's positive perception of self-advocacy to the recent graduate's fear of "leaving the shelter" could identify a need for a smoother transition. The Gradual Release of Responsibility strategy could be applied in the ECHS setting to encourage a move from strong advocacy that is initiated by faculty to strong *self-advocacy* as a student matures and progresses through the ECHS program.

Implications for Practice

This study provided a meaningful look into the inner workings of this Early College campus. For this specific setting, both family relationship with the school and a balanced approach toward academic preparedness and social engagement were important. Students' confidence as related to self-advocacy also demonstrated notable for those participants who have already graduated from the program. Providing opportunities for growth in these areas may encourage a continued positive student experience and correlate with college related confidence.

A Strong Family Relationship With the School

Family engagement played a critical role in the story of this Early College campus. Recent graduates remember fondly the activities that created bonds among the

student body, faculty and families and are complementary to the relationships that were

formed. For current students, family engagement is presented as most related to college

confidence, above both academic preparation and social engagement. While many

similarly modeled schools may be tempted to focus solely on academics or to pour

resources into extracurricular activities for students and their peers, this study tells a story

of how the involvement of family members in the school experience occurred most where

students were confident and provided for meaningful student experiences.

The family involvement in this particular Early College campus is not merely by

coincidence. The parents of these students have made purposeful and intentional efforts

to involve themselves in the happening of the ECHS campus and the faculty and

administration have welcomed these interactions. Interview participants spoke of the

closeness of the individuals within the community to the members of the faculty and the

families of the students. Recent graduates and current students perceived a unified

collaboration between the school and families which resulted in student confidence.

These participants spoke highly of the community that poured into them as high school

students and they still regard that community as prominent in their future development as

adults.

School leaders, administration, and local district officials have been successful in

creating an academic environment that works cohesively with student families. The

parents and other family members have taken ownership of the social environment in the

school, and they feel comfortable doing so. These efforts were most notable for both

current students and recent graduates who participated in this study. Moving forward, any

investment in this schools' relationship with families would be worthwhile. In other

institutions looking to improve college confidence for students, the findings of this study encourage a healthy relationship between school leadership, students, and the families who are investing in them.

Students Utilized Their Voice to Improve Focus on Social Engagement

In addition to the mere inclusion of social and family programs, this campus also experienced a high level of student buy-in because of their ability to advocate for change and to see the desired outcome. When these students requested that more social engagement be considered and then a notable change was made, they felt ownership in the program. Recent graduates recall that the early days of this Early College focused entirely on academic achievement and that the social aspects of the experience were lacking. They each shared the role that they were able to play in petitioning the administration for more social opportunities and the difference that it made for them as students to have Music Monday, participation in a choir, or opportunities to serve on student leadership organizations.

Students who had attended this program in its infancy had been afforded the opportunity to come together and make a meaningful change in the fabric of their school. In being provided this opportunity, these early students felt as if they had made their mark on the program by encouraging a focus on social opportunities. This perceived change is further validated by the strong connection that today's students show between their academic work and social engagement within the school.

The future of early college design can seek to explore the benefits or challenges related to social engagement as related to various dimensions of college transition knowledge and skills. Several of the recent graduates from this Early College stated that

the capacity to work together to create an environment where a healthy social engagement was fostered gave them the desire to stay and face the challenging academic obstacles they confronted as first-generation college students. The results of these decisions are still evident among students who are currently enrolled in the Early College program and have access to a vibrant social environment.

A Gradual Release of Responsibility for Self-Advocacy

Recent graduates spoke of how well they had been prepared for college and how thankful they were for all the resources that they had been provided within the Early College. They gave specific examples of individuals who had guided them through the college enrollment process, helping them to locate resources or to make decisions about the correct college or major. There was no shortage of examples of individuals and programs that had been successful in providing for students' needs. The notable perception came from students who have already graduated or current students who are anticipating the future. The same graduates who originally spoke about having been supported also described how scary it had been to "leave the shelter" and how the adjustment to adult life had been difficult in that no one was there to guide them as closely as before. They were now relying on many of the highly effective strategies they had learned from the Early College, but only now did they have fewer individuals around them to keep them on track.

One notable explanation for the mingling of high correlations and powerful descriptions of supportive faculty and strategies with a legitimate fear of adulthood responsibilities could stem from an abrupt release of responsibility. These students were provided with the best strategies, the most effective resources, and the most caring

faculty, but then were primarily presented with a formula for who to ask for help rather than a method of finding resources for themselves.

The graduates' stories involved examples of respected individuals advocating on behalf of students and these same students moving forward to question their own abilities when those individuals were not available within their new environments. These students could both clearly describe which tools they should utilize as successful college students and plainly explain their apprehension in relying on themselves to get it all right, yet they lacked the confidence to put these tools to use for the first time. Perhaps placing more of the responsibility solely on the students *before* graduation from the program would provide students with the confidence to self-advocate as adults while they are still safe within the shelter. A strategic plan for transitioning these students from a strong dependence on the caring adults within that building to a more internal dependence on self would prove to be a worthy goal for students within this campus.

Implications for Research

This study provided a rare look into the student experience of one of Georgia's ECHS campuses. This ECHS campus is located in rural Georgia. Further research opportunities may examine other Early College campuses in Georgia to understand if these trends hold true in other settings. The details of this campus' history may or may not be reflected in other settings. It would also be telling to examine the perspectives of other stakeholders within the Early College to provide more context for these students' stories.

Another suggestion would be to dive deeper into this specific ECHS campus to ascertain how the perceptions of faculty, parents, and other stakeholders could be

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compared or contrasted with the students. The perceived academic preparedness, social engagement and family relationships from other perspectives would provide a more detailed look at which factors are vital for the success of this program.

Summary

The stories of students in Early College campuses are unique and informative. These students have much to add to the discourse of overcoming the typical underrepresentation of some student groups in the postsecondary world. In many cases, these students are forging a new path, for the first time in their family history. These individuals' stories, experiences and perceptions provide valuable insight into the knowledge base surrounding college readiness.

While the Early College High School initiative provides a path for introducing the realities and requirements of college life to students who may otherwise miss the opportunity, the model of ECHS is not one that is seen in very many parts of Georgia. The ECHS at the center of this study exists in a location much like dozens of others in Georgia where similar groups of students only have a traditional high school experience with typical dual enrollment options. In many cases, students who would go on to become first-generation college students do not have the option to experience ECHS campus. For many Georgia students, traditional transition to college is still the only option. The students in this study are representative of many, many students in Georgia who are just like them.

It is probable that the roadblocks to opening more ECHS campuses in Georgia are numerous or even impossible to overcome. Perhaps there are other details presented by this study that could also benefit traditional high school settings as well. The findings of

this study encourage the examination of any school's relationship with the families of students, the balance between academic preparation and social engagement, and the process by which all students are provided the skills to advocate for themselves. Regardless of the design of an educational environment of leadership method, any high school will face decisions related to these three areas.

The underrepresentation of specific student groups on college campuses is a multi-faceted problem and the Early College High School initiative is only one effort that has approached the problem head on. Because of the success of the ECHS movement, there is undoubtedly much that can still be learned and modeled after this type of program. A more in-depth look into the perceived experiences of students in programs like this, and others, will contribute to a greater understanding of the students themselves. These students are paving the way for future generations, and we have an opportunity to find which pieces of their academic preparation, social engagement, and their school's relationship with family, resulted in more confidence in college transition knowledge and skills.

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Appendix A

Appendix A

Invitation Letter to Potential Participants

March 11, 2021

Dear Recent Early College Graduate,

I am a student at [Early College name] and I am conducting a study to explore the stories and perceptions of Georgia's Early College students as they prepare for college. Many studies have been conducted to demonstrate the benefits of the Early College model, but far fewer have been designed to understand the students' perspective of the experience. This study will provide an opportunity for Early College students to offer their perceptions about the Early College model.

I am interested to learn about students' perceptions related to academic preparation, social activities and the engagement with students' families within the Early College model as they prepare for the transition to college. I have prepared a study that will begin with a short interview of recent graduates. Each interview will be conducted virtually and will last between 60 and 90 minutes. This interview will be related to the graduates' level of confidence regarding the culture of college, self-advocacy and college enrollment knowledge along with the academic, social and family elements as a result of graduating from an Early College.

I want to stress that your participation in this study is voluntary and every effort will be made to protect your identity and to keep your personal information confidential will be taken.

I have enclosed a consent form for your review. Please read the form and feel free to contact me with any questions about the study. If you choose to participate, please sign and date the consent form and return it to me in the enclosed self-addressed envelope. I look forward to your participation and your participation will be greatly appreciated.

Sincerely,

Chante Harrell
Valdosta State University

Appendix B

Appendix B

Interview Protocol

Introduction to Participant
1. What is your name?
2. Which Early College did you attend?
3. If had not attended this Early College, which school would you most likely have attended?
- What are some things that you can tell me about that school?
  - If description is given, record as much detail as possible
  - If "I don't know"- ask specific details:
    1. Did you know any of the teachers there?
    2. Did any of your friends attend that school?
  o When did you start attending this school?

Academic Preparation

1. Do you feel academically prepared for college level learning?
- "Yes" – Have you always felt like you were a strong student academically?
- "No" – What are some specific concerns that you have?
- "I don't know"- How would you describe your grades overall?
2. Which aspects of your academic preparation, if any, do you attribute to your Early College?
- If description is given, record as much detail as possible.
- "I don't know"- ask
  1. Which classes were easiest for you at your Early College?
  2. Can you give examples, if any exist, of how has this school helped you to learn what you need?
3. Are there things that your Early College did to prepare students for college level academic classes? If so, what are they?
- "Yes, they are…" - ask
  1. Do you think these efforts are successful? What would make them more successful?
  2. What would you change about your school's efforts to prepare students?
- "No" –
  1. What is something that the school could do to help with this?
- "I don't know"
  1. What would you change about your school's efforts to prepare students?

Social Engagement

1. Did you feel socially engaged at your Early College?
- "Yes" – ask:
  1. Can you give me some examples? Extra-curricular activities? Sports? Clubs? Friends?
- "No"- ask:
  1. Were you involved in any groups? Extra-curricular activities? Sports? Clubs? Friends?
- "I don't know"- ask:
  1. Were you involved in any groups? Extra-curricular activities? Sports? Clubs? Friends?
     a.Why or why not?

2. Did your social engagement at your school seem to be the same or different from other social settings?
- "Yes"- ask:
  1. Was it the same right away or did that take some time?
- "No"- ask:
  1. What are the main differences?
- "I don't know" – ask:
  1. Did you have a strong social group *outside* of school?
  2. Did you have a strong social group *inside* school?

3. Would you say that attending your Early College helped students to become more socially engaged or could the school do more to encourage social engagement?
- "More engaged"- ask:
  1. Do you have personal examples of this?
- "School could do more"- ask:
  1. What is the first thing you would do to make social engagement better at school if it were up to you?
- "I don't know"- ask:
  1. What is the first thing you would do to make social engagement better at school if it were up to you?

Family relationship with school

1. How would you describe your family's relationship with your Early College?
- Describes a positive relationship- ask:
  1. What about your school made this good relationship possible?
- Describes a negative relationship- ask:
  1. What was the first thing that made this relationship a negative one?
- "I don't know"- ask

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1. Would your family recommend your school to another family who had the choice to attend or not?

2. Did you or your family ever discuss your Early College?
- "Yes"- ask:
    1. How often?
    2. What do you usually talk about?
- "No" – ask:
    1. Why not?
    2. Are there certain topics that you specifically avoid?
- "I don't know"- ask:
    1. When was the last time anyone at your house talked about school?

3. What are some aspects of your Early College that has made a difference for your family, if any?
- Offers an example- ask
    1. Did that also make a difference for you?
- Does not offer example- ask:
    1. Are there aspects that have been negative for you or your family?
    2. Did that make a difference for you?
- "I don't know"- ask:
    1. Are there aspects that have been negative for you or your family?
    2. Did that make a difference for you?

Culture of College

1. Have you adjusted well to college life?
- "Yes"- ask:
    1. Do you think that your school has helped in this process? If so, how?
- "No" – ask:
    1. What are your main concerns?
    2. Are there things that your school could have done to help more in this area?
- "I don't know"- ask:
    1. Are there things that you would look forward to about college?
    2. Are there things that you are nervous about in college?

2. Do you think that there are differences in the role of a high school student versus the role a college student?

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- "Yes"- ask:
    1. What are the main differences.
- "No"- ask:
    1. Which parts are the most similar?
- "I don't know"- ask:
    1. Did anything change for you as student when you became a high school student, or did you feel that it was the same as middle school?
    2. Do you think that would be the same at the college level?

3.What makes you the most nervous about college life (or adult life after high school if college is not the plan)?
- If description is given, record as many details as possible
- "I don't know"- ask:
    1. Do you feel confident academically?
    2. Do you feel confident socially?

Self- Advocacy

1.Have you been able to get all of the resources you will need to enroll in college (i.e. financial aid, applications, standardized tests, meeting deadlines, etc..)?
- "Yes"- ask:
    1. What has been the most helpful in this process?
    2. Has there been anything at your school that has been especially helpful in this process?
- "No"- ask:
    1. What areas do you expect to have the most difficulty?
    2. Is there anything that your school could do to help in this area?
- "I don't know"- ask:
    1. Would you say that your school is helpful in this area or that it could be more helpful?

2.What were some examples in your time at your Early College when you had to advocate for yourself to get something that you've needed?
- If description is given, record as many details as possible
- "I don't know"- ask:
    1. What is an example of a time when you were unable to get something that you needed?

3.What advice would you give a new student just entering your Early College about getting the resources they need to succeed?
- If description is given, record as much detail as possible.
- "I don't know"- ask:

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1. Are there any people or things about your school that were especially helpful to you in the beginning?

College Enrollment Knowledge

1.Tell me about your plans for after high school.
- Anything college related- ask:
    1. Do you know which colleges you are interested in attending?
        1. "Yes"- How did you choose?
        2. "No"- What details matter to you when choosing a college? (i.e. college size, degrees offered, Greek life etc..)
    2. Have you applied to any colleges?
        1. "Yes"- How many? Which ones?
        2. "No"- Do you have a plan for when you will apply?
- Any plan that does NOT involve college- ask:
    1. Tell me about how you came to make this choice.
- " I don't know"
    1. When do you expect to have a plan for after high school?

2.Where do you stand in the college application process (or career equivalent)?
- Just planning, no action yet- ask:
    1. Are you confident that when you're ready, that you'll be successful in applying and eventually enrolling?
    2. Who or what will be your biggest help in this process?
- Some actions have been taken- ask:
    1. What are some aspects of this process that you have handled well?
    2. What are some aspects of this process that you wish you had handled better?
    3. Who or what has been the biggest help in this process?
- "I don't know"- ask:
    1. What would be your next step in this process?

3.What have been some surprises for you as you completed your time in high school and start preparing for what's next?
- If description is given, record as much detail as possible.
- "I don't know"- ask:
    1. Can you give an example of anything that has caught you off guard about being a senior?

Appendix C

Appendix C

IRB approval form

Institutional Review Board (IRB)
for the Protection of Human Research Participants

EXPEDITED PROTOCOL APPROVAL

Protocol Number: IRB-04132-2021　　　**Responsible Researcher:** Angela Chanté Harrell

　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　Supervising Faculty: Dr. Steven Downey

Project Title: *An exploratory sequential examination of Georgia Early College Students' perceptions related to college readiness.*

Level of Risk:　　☒ Minimal　　☐ More than Minimal

Type of Review:　☒ Expedited　　☐ Convened (Full Board)

Approval Category(ies):　6/7

Approval Date:　　03.08.2021

Expiration Date:　03.08.2024

Consent Requirements:

☐ Adult Participants – Written informed consent with documentation (signature)
☐ Adult Participants – Written informed consent with waiver of documentation (signature)
☒ Adult Participants – Verbal informed consent (Research Statement)
☐ Adult Participants – Waiver of informed consent
☒ Minor Participants – Written parent/guardian permission with documentation (signature)
☐ Minor Participants – Written parent/guardian permission with waiver of documentation (signature)
☐ Minor Participants – Verbal parent/guardian permission
☐ Minor Participants – Waiver of parent/guardian permission
☐ Minor Participants – Written assent with documentation (signature)
☒ Minor Participants – Written assent with waiver of documentation (signature)
☐ Minor Participants – Verbal assent
☐ Minor Participants – Waiver of assent
☐ Waiver of some elements of consent/permission/assent

Approval: This research protocol is **approved.** Your approved consent form(s), with IRB approval stamp are attached. If you prefer the original stamped consent, please email tmwright@valdosta.edu and the form will be sent via inter-office mail, or you may come by the OSPRA office to obtain the original. Please see page 2 for additional important information for researchers.

Elizabeth Ann Olphie　　　　03.08.2021　　　*Thank you for submitting an IRB application.*

Elizabeth Ann Olphie, IRB Administrator　　　　Date　　　*Please direct questions to irb@valdosta.edu or 229-253-2947.*

Form Revised: 06.02.16

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