Readiness Programs in Title 1 High Schools: School Counselors' Perceptions of Preparedness and Access

A Dissertation submitted
to the Graduate School
Valdosta State University

in partial fulfillment of requirements
for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION

in Public Administration

in the Department of Political Science
of the College of Humanities and Social Sciences

October 2024

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ABSTRACT

College and career readiness programs are critical for vulnerable student populations, including low-income, economically disadvantaged students, and students of color, because these students have been historically and consistently identified as not college and career ready. Many factors contribute to the culmination of readiness that goes beyond academic skill and ability. Underserved student populations face increased barriers to readiness that influence their engagement with college and career programs, and their overall degree of preparedness for postsecondary transition. This qualitative study captured the perspective of five counselors in Duval County Public Title 1 high schools to understand the level of access students have to college and career readiness programs, student holistic preparedness, and the barriers students face in postsecondary transition. This study adds to the literature by offering a viewpoint of day-to-day realities from educators tasked with preparing students for college and careers. The findings from this study resulted in seven themes: (a) students have more access to college and career counseling than programs; (b) fewer students are prepared for college; more are prepared for a career; (c) academic rigor, cognitive, and non-cognitive ability impact overall preparedness; (d) barriers to college enrollment play a leading role in students' perception of preparedness; (e) parent engagement and involvement are pivotal in postsecondary transition planning; (f) district awareness of program outcomes and resource needs is a necessity, and (g) college and career readiness programs ought to start earlier. This study has significant implications for public school districts, including school administrators; higher education partners; parents; and city and community stakeholders.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

Advancement Via Individual Determination (AVID)

American College Testing (ACT)

Career and Technical Education (CTE)

Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL)

College and Career Readiness (CCR)

Common Core State Standards (CCSS)

Duval County Public Schools (DCPS)

Educational Talent Search (ETS)

Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA)

Federal Work-Study (FWS)

Gaining Early Awareness and Readiness for Undergraduate Programs (GEAR UP)

Grade Point Average (GPA)

Institutional Review Board (IRB)

National Association of Colleges and Employers (NACE)

Social and Emotional Learning (SEL)

Transitional Intervention (TI)

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I started this dissertation at a time when life was uncertain, and I was not sure that I had the mental fortitude to continue. For that, I am forever grateful to God for his gentleness, mercy, and grace.

Many people spoke life into me long before my mind could conceive of pursuing a doctoral degree. Those, now near and far, have contributed to this journey in a way I don't believe my words could ever truly describe, but for the purpose of this acknowledgment, I will do my best.

To my parents, James and Mavis Bush, you are everything. Thank you for allowing me to pursue higher education as an undergraduate student without worry. Your mental, emotional, and financial support allowed me to truly fall in love with learning. Knowing that two people in this world always have your back without question propelled me to try things that were scary and challenging. For you both, I am forever grateful. To my grandma, my "girlfriend" Shirley Ann Williams, thank you for loving me, seeing me as me, praying for me, and speaking life into me. You always encouraged me even when I failed, and you would not allow me to quit. I can only hope I am making you proud. May you rest in eternal peace. A special thank you to Auntie Von — I did it! Thank you for checking on me, praying for me, and encouraging me. You are the epitome of a woman, a human, and I am grateful to have you in my life. I would also like to thank my siblings, nieces, nephews, aunts, uncles, and cousins for your prayers, questions, cheers, and unwavering support. Your love warms me and has carried me through. To my previous supervisor at the University of Central Florida, Dr. Karemah Manselle, thank you for encouraging me to pursue a doctorate degree. Your frequent nudges sparked a light. Thank you for always pushing me to be better and supporting my academic and professional growth.

To my dissertation committee, Dr. Odessa Downing, Dr. Hanae Kanno, and Dr. Elizabeth Johnson, thank you for your patience, time, encouragement, and guidance. I recognize that this has been a long journey, and I am grateful for the ways that you supported my mental health breaks while encouraging me to the end. You invested in me, and I am grateful for each of you.

Thank you to the five participants who gave their time to participate in this study. It was a joy to speak with each of you and hear your insights and experiences and the work you are doing with your students. I was happy to hear about the ways in which you are supporting students in Duval County Public Schools. Thank you for all that you do.

Finally, thank you to my best friend of 24 years. We have been through so much together, and we still love and support each other to the end. Thank you for the many nights of listening to me talk through this dissertation. As an educator yourself, your insight provoked thought and helped me stay the course. You've always encouraged me and supported me through my life's decisions, even the ones that were a bit out there. I am grateful for our friendship.

DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to the 2025 graduating class of Duval County Public Schools, including my nieces, Jaycie and Amari. I pray you know that the sky is the limit and that you can be and do absolutely anything you set your mind to.

Chapter I

INTRODUCTION

College and career readiness (CCR) is associated with developing skill sets that prepare students for postsecondary transition. College readiness and career readiness are not the same, but both work to provide a holistic set of skills that impact cognitive and non-cognitive student development (Holles, 2016). College readiness is defined as "the skills, knowledge, and dispositions that students need to succeed in postsecondary education, including academic knowledge, critical thinking skills, social and emotional learning skills, perseverance behaviors, and community involvement" (Mokher & Jacobson, 2021, p. 451). However, career readiness is described as the "readiness of an individual to engage in the career decision-making process and make a mature career decision" (Chen et al., 2022, p.3).

There is a critical need for college and career readiness programming for underserved and vulnerable student populations because these students have been historically and consistently identified as not college ready (Castro, 2020). Underserved students include Black and Brown students, students who are first-generation college students, and those who are low-income or economically disadvantaged (Bhat & Stevens, 2021). In 2018, the American College Testing (ACT) Service published a report that detailed college readiness benchmarks, noting that students who are low-income, first-generation college students, and students of color consistently struggle to meet achievement levels and readiness benchmarks (Castro,

2020; Tsai et al., 2022). Castro (2020) describes college and career readiness as complex, identifying student motivation and individual responsibility as key factors in student readiness outcomes. Holles (2016) discusses a similar perspective, emphasizing student experiences and the impact the experiences can have on a sense of readiness.

Several scholars theorize that a student's perception of preparedness and motivation to participate in postsecondary transition planning is influenced by CCR counseling, programs, and services offered in their schools (e.g., Castro, 2020; Lindstrom et al., 2022). Particularly, access to qualified staffing that is responsive to underserved student needs is critical (Fletcher, 2023; Lindstrom et al., 2022). In the K-12 educational landscape, Hackmann et al. (2018) contend that there is a sustained drive to better student preparedness for postsecondary transition, evidenced by several federal and state initiatives created to lessen equity gaps for postsecondary enrollment and fund programming that prepares students for the workforce (Grimard & Maddaus, 2004; Hackmann et al., 2018; Lapan et al., 2017). Per Xu et al. (2023), college and career readiness for all students became a federal "education policy priority" (p. 218) for the Department of Education in early 2010. Since that time, several federal and state education initiatives have been created to prioritize the development of students' academic, cognitive, and non-cognitive abilities to increase the likelihood of postsecondary education obtainment and workforce readiness (Tsai et al., 2022).

Background

College and career readiness programs date back to the early 1960s. Attention was placed on these programs with the goal of bridging equity gaps for students

interested in pursuing postsecondary enrollment while offering career-related skill building and training (Grimard & Maddaus, 2004). The Johnson Administration originated an example of such programming through the Higher Education Act of 1965 (Grimard & Maddaus, 2004). To promote postsecondary enrollment, the Johnson Administration signed the Higher Education Act of 1965 as part of the War on Poverty. This Act established programming and federal funding to support low-income families in completing postsecondary degrees (Grimard & Maddaus, 2004; Higher Education Act, 1965).

In recent years, beginning in 2003, the Obama and Bush presidential administrations focused on high school students' college and career readiness efforts, believing that the resources provided for students at this formative age directly affect future well-being (Lapan et al., 2017). Core components of CCR can be seen in the No Child Left Behind Act (2002), the Race to the Top Initiative (2009, as cited in Lapan et al., 2017) and the 2014 Reach Higher Initiative (as cited in Lapan et al., 2017). Despite federal initiatives and national efforts, college and career readiness for underserved students remains a concern. Research also notes that students generally are not attending college at consistent rates, with students discussing their perceived lack of preparation for the postsecondary world (Castro, 2020). Cox (2016) acknowledges this disparity in college attendance rates, specifically for vulnerable student populations, through his study of college choices and barriers for low-income students, noting that although over 75% of students aspire to earn a college degree, the percentage of attendance and completion is much lower (Cox, 2016).

Duval County College and Career Readiness Programs

Duval County Public School (DCPS) district is in Jacksonville, Florida, and is one of the state's seven major metropolitan school districts. The district has a mission to provide educational excellence with an emphasis on student achievement with a "whole child" educational philosophy (Duval County Public Schools, n.d.-a). Slade and Griffith (2013) describe this philosophy as being attentive to the "social, emotional, mental, physical as well as cognitive development of students" (p. 21). With a holistic approach to education and student care, DCPS's vision is to ensure every student is inspired and prepared for success in college or a career, as well as life in general. To facilitate this, the organization works to provide educational excellence in every school and classroom for every student every day (Duval County Public Schools, n.d.-a).

College and career readiness efforts in DCPS are driven by the premise of every student succeeding (Duval County Public Schools, n.d.-b). Highlighted in their strategic plan, "Achieve '26," the district has a goal of improving soft skills for graduates' postsecondary readiness "by increasing the percentage of students earning soft skills credentials from the baseline in August 2023 to August 2026" (Duval County Public Schools, n.d.-b). In 2017, the district received a 7-year 12 million dollar grant to administer Gaining Early Awareness and Readiness for Undergraduate Programs (GEAR UP) in its schools (Duval County Public Schools, n.d.-d). The GEAR UP grant serves several purposes, with a primary mission of "increasing students' aspirations toward high school and beyond and to create experiences that give students access to traditional/nontraditional postsecondary options" (Duval County Public Schools, n.d.-d). Presently, the GEAR UP grant serves seven of the 16 Title 1 schools in Duval County.

The schools are Englewood, First Coast, Jean Ribault, Riverside, Terry Parker, and Westside High School.

At the district level, in addition to GEAR UP and other programs like Educational Talent Search (ETS), a federal TRIO program, and Advancement Via Individual Determination (AVID), students are prepared for college and careers through counseling, and through electronic resources such as guides, webinars, and online education technology (Duval County Public Schools, n.d.-e; Florida State College at Jacksonville, n.d.). CareerShip, Big Future, and MyFuture.com, with career readiness platforms such as Duval Ready, are education technology platforms that prepare students for postsecondary transition (Duval County Public Schools, n.d.-c.). Each platform offers students information on college planning, paying for college, exploring careers, financial literacy, and money management.

Problem Statement

By legislative action, underserved schools designated as Title 1 are expected to receive funding for readiness programs (Robinson, 2018). A subset of Title 1, Part A funding is set aside for CCR programming "to increase students' access to early college, high school dual enrollment opportunities, or career counseling to identify students' interests and skills" (Florida Department of Education, 2020). However, students who attend systematically under-resourced schools and are in vulnerable populations, including low-income, first-generation, and students of color, remain at a greater disadvantage compared to their peers, with regard to college and career readiness (Cook et al., 2021). Students from cultural minority populations have not experienced equity in efforts from secondary school administrations, which has resulted in unrecognized

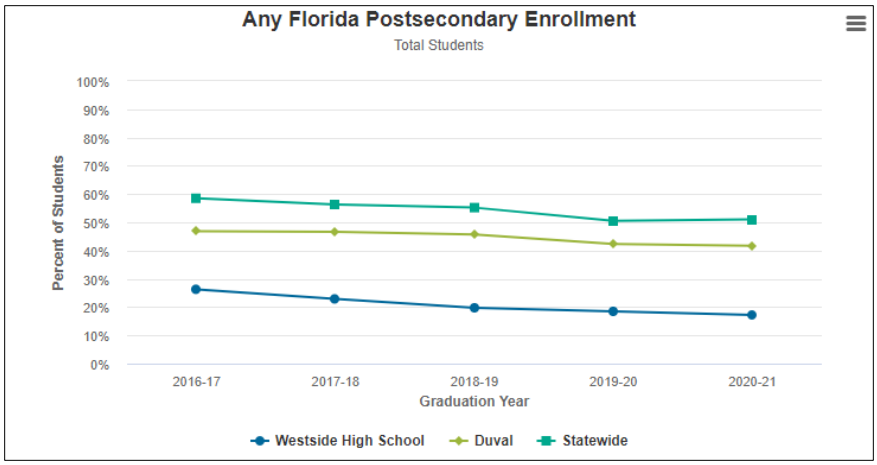
academic and non-academic strength and ability (Lindstrom et al., 2022; Robinson, 2018). In a review of elementary and secondary education legislation, including the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (2002) and the Every Student Succeeds Act (2015), Robinson (2018) examines equity in secondary education, highlighting the disparities in access for economically disadvantaged students in areas of resources, funding, rigorous coursework, and qualified staffing.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this qualitative study was to investigate college and career readiness programs in DCPS Title 1 high schools that primarily serve low-income and students of color to understand (a) the equity and accessibility of college and career readiness programs for academic and non-academic skill development, (b) holistic student preparedness and (c) and barriers to being college and career ready. Xu et al. (2023) suggest that approximately 60% of students are not adequately prepared for college. Similarly, Mardis (2019) estimates that over 70% of high school graduates enroll in college, yet only 50% earn a degree. However, Hackmann et al. (2018) recognize that preparing students for postsecondary transition and college and career readiness can be complex and overwhelming for secondary school instructors and administrators. The scholars go on to emphasize that student readiness requires a culture change at the secondary school level, one that encompasses new leadership and transforms curriculum and learning experiences (Hackmann et al., 2018). However, in secondary education, effort is placed into building academic skills to align with the assessment of student and school performance, which often leaves limited space for cultivating non-academic skill sets (Lerman, 2013). This is especially the case for specific student groups such as first-

generation and low-income; research suggests that these students generally receive insufficient guidance from their high schools for college preparation (Tsai et al., 2022).

In most Title 1 high schools in Duval County, postsecondary enrollment rates trend below the average for the entire Duval County School District. In the 2020-2021 school year, on average, 41% of Duval County Public School graduates immediately attended a Florida postsecondary institution. The 11 Title 1 high schools in 2020-2021 trended well below this average, with some schools reporting as low as 15% of the graduating class having attended a Florida postsecondary institution. As reflected in Figure 1, in a graduating class with 336 students, such as at Westside High School, over 280 of its students have no immediate postsecondary enrollment. In Title 1 high schools in Duval County where postsecondary enrollment rates trended above district averages, there remained a significant number of students with no postsecondary school enrollment. For example, 48.6% of Sandalwood High School's 2021 graduating class had immediate enrollment at a Florida public post-secondary institution, viewable in Appendix A. Of the 665 graduates, this results in over 340 students from the Sandalwood High School graduating class of 2021 not attending a Florida postsecondary institution.



Note. Postsecondary enrollment data for Westside High School were compiled by the Florida Department of Education (n.d.-g).

Figure 1. *Westside High School —Florida Postsecondary Enrollment*

Although it can be assumed that some of these students attended postsecondary institutions outside of the state of Florida or enlisted in the military, research shows increased barriers to successful postsecondary transition and decision-making for students in economically disadvantaged schools and communities (Castro, 2020; Cox, 2016; Kim, Bowman et al., 2021).

Significance of the Study

In the education sphere, there is a consensus that students should be armed with the knowledge and skills to succeed post-high school whether they elect to attend college or enter the workforce (Hackmann et al., 2018). Holistic readiness for college and career is essential because many career fields are beginning to require some postsecondary education and training, and industry leaders have called for high school and college graduates with workforce-ready skills (Bettencourt et al., 2022; Mardis, 2019). It then becomes imperative for students to see a tangible connection between academic knowledge, real-world problems, and workforce demands to understand how an inclusive

approach to preparedness is beneficial (Fletcher & Dumford, 2021; Lerman, 2013). In the city of Jacksonville, according to the most recent census, 30% of the population 25 years of age and older have a bachelor's degree or higher. This trend is below that of neighboring major cities with a similar population (U.S. Census Bureau, n.d.-a; U.S. Census Bureau, n.d.-b). In a study of the relationship between educational attainment and economic growth in metropolitan cities, Gottlieb and Fogarty (2003) found positive correlations between citizens' educational attainment and employment, as well as between citizens' educational attainment and per capita income growth.

To this end, Malin et al. (2017) charge K-12 schools with the responsibility to adopt a holistic approach to preparedness that recognizes choices and encapsulates academic knowledge and employability. Per Malin et al. (2017):

> Secondary education, it follows, should prepare students to transition successfully to college and the workforce. The U.S. labor market demands more highly educated and trained workers, and the nation's economy increasingly relies on the quality and versatility of its human capital to maintain its international strength. (p. 811)

The investigation summarized here had the goal of contributing to the discussion of college and career readiness counseling and programs in DCPS. The present study aimed to offer an on-the-ground perspective of student preparedness and barriers that negatively impact postsecondary transition, which can be beneficial for school and district leaders for the purposes of program evaluation, counseling practices, and district mandates. Castro (2020) argues that in intervention programming, when policies and programs fail, the individual students and their lack

of motivation and preparedness are blamed for the failure, as intervention programs are designed using individualistic models. Policy administrators and educational leaders often have limited awareness of any other outside factors and influences that could further explain program failure (Castro, 2020). The present study is significant because it offers a viewpoint to educational leaders beyond student motivation in preparedness. It captures a perspective of program offerings, structures, and resource needs from counselors that can provide a transparent viewpoint on program objectives versus outcomes. Per Lindstrom et al. (2022), an in-depth understanding of the counselor's perspective allows researchers and administrators to "gain critical knowledge to improve current systems and approaches" (p. 224).

Further, this study is useful for higher education administrators and practitioners. Xu et al. (2023) advocate for a unified strategy between secondary and postsecondary education institutions that supports high school students in college enrollment and reduces college remedial rates. This study gives context to administrators regarding barriers that can impede college enrollment and matriculation, allowing college and university administrators to create initiatives to proactively address these barriers through intervention (Xu et al., 2023).

Research Questions

College and career readiness is a complex composition of skill sets that reveals a student's ability to succeed in postsecondary education or the workforce with the ability to make mature career decisions (Chen et al., 2022; Holles, 2016). More than focusing on academic achievement, college and career readiness programs cultivate students' social and emotional well-being that supports critical thinking, problem-solving, and

communication skills. Aligned with four theories, college readiness theory, social cognitive theory, social and emotional learning framework, and choice theory, the conceptual model that grounded this study incorporates college and career program requirements that support students' academic ability, cognitive and contextual skills, self-perception, mental and emotional well-being, and choice.

Guided by the conceptual framework, this study examined college and career readiness efforts in Duval County Title 1 schools, to understand (a) the accessibility of college and career readiness programs for academic and non-academic skill development, (b) holistic student preparedness, and (c) barriers to being college and career ready. To investigate these purposes, the study was guided by the following research questions:

RQ 1: How do counselors perceive the equity and accessibility of college and career readiness programs available within the Duval County School District?

RQ 2: How do counselors perceive student preparedness for college? How do counselors perceive student preparedness for a career?

RQ 3: What additional support is needed, if any, for students in the Duval County School District to address barriers to being college and career ready?

Approach to Research

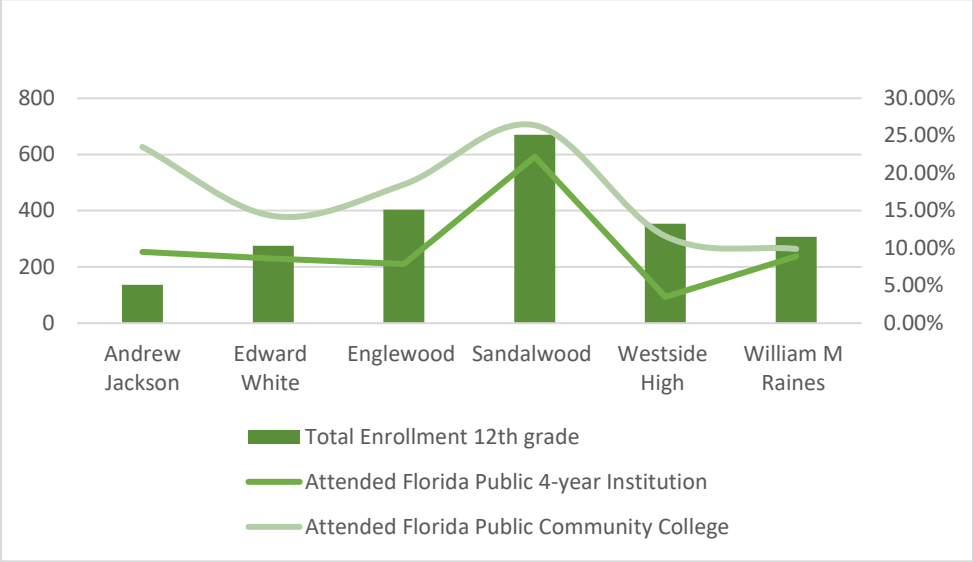
This study utilized a qualitative exploratory approach with a case study research strategy to investigate college and career readiness programs in the Duval County School District. Case studies can assume several forms and are a strategy for research that explores programs, activities, and processes of individuals in great depth (Creswell, 2014; Priya, 2021). Makri and Neely (2021) discuss case study research as a connectivity measure and a form of research that investigates a program from a perspective of what

and why (Makri & Neely, 2021). To identify participants and collect data in case study research, sampling is the recommended method of participant selection, as interviewing or engaging with everyone within a population is unlikely (Priya, 2021). Sampling is choosing a population subset to further study (Creswell, 2014).

The goal sample size for this study was six counselors; however, five participated who were representative of five of the 11 Title 1 schools in the 2020-2021 school year. Counselors were chosen as the study participants as counselors are primarily charged with preparing students for college and careers. The counselors participated in two semi-structured interviews. In this study, the semi-structured interview was the chosen data collection method as it offered variability and the space to ask closed-ended and open-ended questions with probing questions such as how and why (Newcomer et al., 2015). The 2020-2021 school year was selected for this study as it was at the time of the study's inception the most recent year with a complete compilation of data, including high school graduation rates, and information on immediate enrollment into either a Florida State University System school or the Florida College System. Importantly, Florida does not currently receive out of state postsecondary enrollment data from the National Student Clearinghouse, so out of state information is not included when determining graduates' postsecondary education status and therefore also not used in reporting related to individual high schools.

The counselors identified to participate in this study each represented a Title 1 high school in the district. The schools were Andrew Jackson, Edward White, Englewood, Sandalwood, Westside High, and William M. Raines. Each school was selected based on two factors: the percentage of economically disadvantaged students and

the percentage of students who immediately attended an institution in the Florida State University System or the Florida College System. Of the six schools, the percentage of economically disadvantaged students ranged from 38% to 76%. The proportion of the student population that was economically disadvantaged at each school was 55% at Andrew Jackson, 60% at Edward White, 53% at Englewood, 38% at Sandalwood, 63% at Westside High, and 76% at William M. Raines. Across the six schools, graduates with immediate Florida postsecondary enrollment averaged 27%, as reflected in Figure 2. The average includes graduating classes with student numbers greater than 600 and less than 200.



Note. The figure represents a compilation of data provided by the Florida Department to show enrollment totals and postsecondary education attendance of 12th grade students (Florida Department of Education, 2021).

Figure 2. *2020-2021 Graduates with Immediate Florida Public Postsecondary Enrollment*

Notably, the school with the highest percentage of economically disadvantaged students also had the lowest percentage of students in the senior class who immediately attended a school in the Florida State University System or the Florida College System

(Florida Department of Education, 2021). This is not an assumption of causation but an observation through the analysis of the data. In the years preceding the 2020-2021 academic year, similar trends existed in Title1 high schools in DCPS in students immediately attending a Florida public postsecondary institution, either a community college or university, as reflected in Appendix A. Secondary school counselors are charged with preparing students for postsecondary transition (Castro, 2020); therefore, this study assembled counselors' perceptions, focusing on program offerings, students' preparedness, and barriers to college and career readiness.

Definitions of Terms

Advancement Via Individual Determination: A college readiness system designed to prepare students for four-year college eligibility and completion (Duval County Public Schools, n.d-e).

Career Readiness: Preparedness for postsecondary transition planning and the ability to engage in career and employment decision-making processes (Chen et al., 2022; Lindstrom et al., 2022).

College Readiness: The motivation and academic knowledge, skill, and ability to enroll and persist in a postsecondary institution (Conley, 2008).

Counselor: Noninstructional K-12 administrators responsible for college and career readiness counseling and programs for high school students. These agents of change are charged with student development, including fostering future interest and positively impacting students' non-cognitive skill development (Pérusse et al., 2017).

Duval Ready: A specialized curriculum designed to prepare students for work by building their skill sets in teamwork, problem-solving, communication, and professionalism (Duval County Public Schools, n.d.-c).

Educational Talent Search: A federal TRIO program offering academic and mentoring services to help students through high school and prepare them for college.

Equity: The opportunity for underrepresented, low-income, and first-generation students to have experienced teachers and academic resources that promote college enrollment and career readiness (Cook et al., 2021).

First Generation: A descriptor for an undergraduate student whose parents have not earned a bachelor's degree and are the first in their family to complete college; these students may experience systemic barriers and lack home support while pursuing postsecondary enrollment (Bhat & Stevens, 2021).

Florida College System: A compilation of 28 public community and state colleges (Florida Department of Education, n.d.-i)

Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA): A federal aid application students and parents complete to determine a student's aid eligibility for the purposes of attending a postsecondary institution (Federal Student Aid, n.d.).

Gaining Early Awareness and Readiness for Undergraduate Programs (GEAR UP): A federal academic initiative that promotes academic success, high school completion, and college and career readiness (Duval County Public Schools, n.d.-d).

Helicopter Parent: A style of parenting branded as controlling, illustrated by overprotective behavior resulting in less autonomy in child decision-making (Vigdal & Brønnick, 2022).

Higher Education Act of 1965: Educational legislature enacted to provide programming and federal funding to support individuals in low-income families in completing postsecondary degrees (Grimard & Maddaus, 2004).

Intervention: A program or service designed using individualistic models to improve upon a skill or solve a social problem (Castro, 2020).

Johnson Administration: Lyndon B. Johnson's presidential administration which enacted the Higher Education Act of 1965 (Grimard & Maddaus, 2004).

Low-Income: A descriptor for a student at or below the poverty level and classified as economically disadvantaged (Bhat & Stevens, 2021).

Non-Traditional Path: The steps taken by a student who does not immediately enroll in a postsecondary institution but instead enters the workforce and later attends college (Lindstrom et al., 2022).

Program Access: The availability and equal opportunity for all students to obtain college and career readiness skills through programs and training (Cook et al., 2021).

State University System of Florida: A collection of 12 state public universities that serve more than 430,000 students annually (Schwarting, 2024).

Title 1 School: A federal designation for schools with at least 40% of students who are low-income or economically disadvantaged (National Center for Education Statistics, n.d.).

Vulnerable Student Populations: Students who experience low economic resources, and/or are students of color; these students experience barriers at a greater rate than their peers (Kim, Bowman et al., 2021).

War on Poverty: Legislation enacted by the Johnson Administration to contend with national poverty rates to improve the conditions of low-income communities (Grimard & Maddaus, 2004).

Whole Child: An educational philosophy described as being attentive to the "social, emotional, mental, physical as well as cognitive development of students" (Slade & Griffith, 2013, p. 21).

Chapter II

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Chapter 1 introduced the concept of college and career readiness, briefly discussing its complexity and relationship with student preparedness for postsecondary transition. The chapter provided a background of college and career initiatives, focusing on programming for underrepresented and underserved students. Further, Chapter 1 established the purpose and significance of this exploratory case study and its benefits to education administrators and practitioners.

Chapter 2 explores the literature and provides an overview of scholarly research in college and career readiness. The chapter independently discusses college and career readiness as two separate experiences. It addresses barriers students face in pursuit of this attainment while discussing the known benefits of college and career readiness programs. Next, Chapter 2 discusses the high school counselor and their impact on student's post-high school success. In this section, I introduce counselors as agents of change, notating specific behaviors that influence student outcomes. The chapter concludes with a conceptual framework that grounds the research, the interview questions, and the concept of holistic readiness.

College Readiness

Secondary education systems are charged with providing tools and resources to increase the likelihood of students being admitted to and enrolling in postsecondary institutions. An environment that supports college-going behavior consists of

"organizational practices where curriculum, high standards, school personnel, values, expectations, beliefs, and institutional resources are aligned to support the college aspirations of a student" (Murillo et al., 2017, p. 239). Being college-ready can be determined by examining a student's placement test scores, grade point average (GPA), class ranking, and overall academic performance (Conley, 2008). Similar factors are also used to determine if a student is not college ready. When identifying students apt to attend college immediately after high school, these students are usually categorized solely by above-average test scores and GPA (Conley, 2008).

However, through his college readiness theory, David Conley (2008) suggests that non-academic factors must also be considered to determine readiness. He suggests four facets (see Figure 3) that together construct the concept of college preparedness, which include cognitive strategies, such as problem solving and communication, and contextual awareness, such as personal aspirations and the ability to navigate cultural norms.

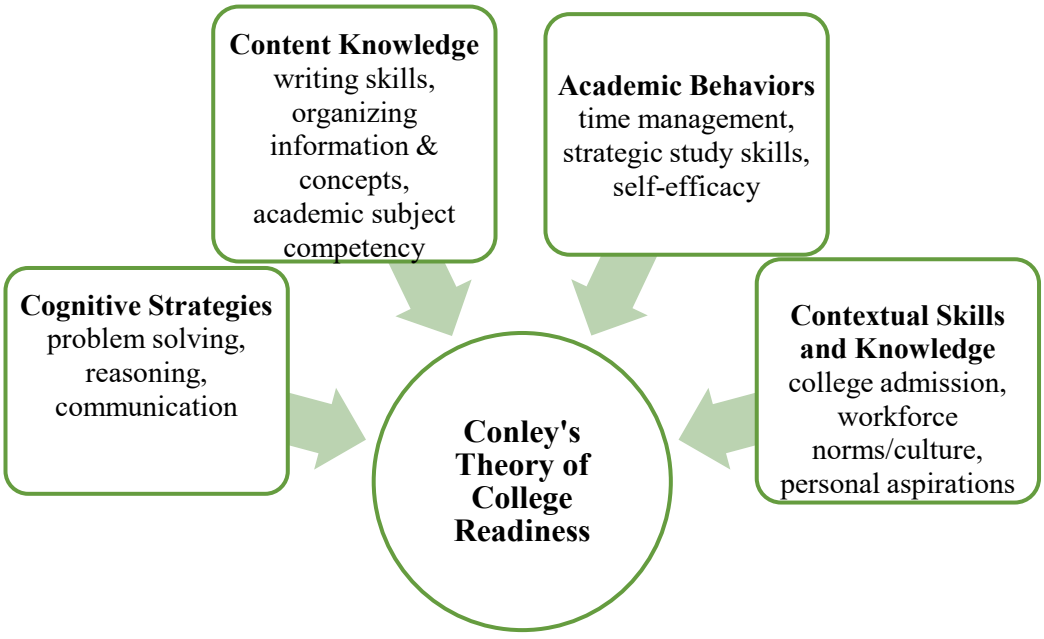


Figure 3. *Conley's (2008) Theory of College Readiness*

Holles's (2016) research validates Conley's theory of college readiness by recognizing a disconnect between high school teachers' and college professors' perceptions of student preparedness for postsecondary success. The divide in perspective is validated by reports generated from the ACT that show that over 80% of high school teachers believe their students are prepared for college, while less than 30% of college professors agree (Holles, 2016). Scholars suggest that college readiness is more than academic achievement and outstanding test scores. Instead, it is a culmination of soft skills that dictates a student's ability to be resilient, navigate, and persist through the college environment (Conley, 2008; Malin et al., 2017; Murillo et al., 2017).

To support the postsecondary education goals of students, Murillo et al. (2017) suggest that schools need "(1) leadership committed to advancing a positive college climate, (2) a consistent message among school personnel about college, (3) all counselors as college counselors, and (4) partnership between counselors, teachers, and parents in the college-preparation process" (p. 239). The success of a student's postsecondary transition is often contingent upon high school structures and organizational norms that are inclusive of specialized programs to support the college climate (Lee et al., 2017).

Because skill sets beyond academic abilities and fortitude are also important aspects of college readiness, preparedness programs have infused initiatives into college readiness programs to facilitate success beyond the classroom (Conley, 2008). These programs consider academic, cultural, and socioeconomic factors that could impede a student's ability to attend a college or university. Due to knowledge of factors such as poverty, homelessness, intellectual delay and disability, and family strain, college

readiness programs are designed to contend with these factors by offering specialized programming to identify and overcome these barriers (Lindstrom et al., 2022; Malin et al., 2017). In addition, because college readiness programs are primarily administered to high school students, these programs can often identify areas of educational weakness for students that can impede upon high school completion, to provide enhanced instruction for academic growth during the secondary school years (Xu et al., 2023).

Barriers to Postsecondary Enrollment

Barriers to postsecondary enrollment are of a large variety and include academic, geographic, and socioeconomic challenges (Grimard & Maddaus, 2004; Kim, Bowman et al., 2021; Mokher & Jacobson, 2021; Rivera et al., 2019). Specific barriers involve a lack of parental involvement, low familial financial support, students' perception of preparedness, insufficient academic preparation, and inequity in access to resources (Bettencourt et al., 2022). Compared to their peers, underrepresented student populations experience these obstructions at higher rates (Kim, Bowman et al., 2021). Therefore, interventions are critical to increase vulnerable students' college- and career-related knowledge and college-going behaviors (Bhat & Stevens, 2021; Kim, Bowman et al., 2021).

Academic Preparation

Mokher and Jacobson (2021) discuss a disconnect between secondary and postsecondary education in areas of curriculum, assessment, and the impact they have on students' postsecondary transition. The discussion points to how the high school curriculum does not adequately prepare students for college enrollment, leaving students underprepared and uninformed (Mokher & Jacobson, 2021). The study conducted by

Yavuz et al. (2019) supports this, noting that "almost 50% of high school graduates are not adequately prepared by their high schools to meet the rigor of college coursework" (p. 449). However, colleges and universities rely on academic preparation in high schools that yields measurable outcomes like GPA and standardized test scores because these are traditionally noted to be a strong indicator of college readiness and a college admission requirement (Kim, Bowman et al., 2021).

For vulnerable student populations there is a difference in academic preparation compared to their peers. Castro (2020) affirms this through research and fieldwork in Illinois Public Schools but further questions why. Specifically, why are race, class, and other socioeconomic factors correlated with metrics that gauge college readiness, and why are students from low-income neighborhoods who are Black or Brown mainly reported as not college-ready (Castro, 2020)?

Several scholars also acknowledge that underrepresented students, including those in low-income communities face greater challenges to postsecondary degree enrollment and attainment (Castro, 2020; Cox, 2016; Kim, Bowman et al., 2021). Research has consistently shown achievement gaps between low-income students and middle and high-income students (Kim, Bowman et al., 2021). In fact, Kim, Bowman et al. (2021) suggest that the variation between these specific student populations' math and reading scores has increased over time, and the lack of academic preparation explains lower college attendance and completion rates. When there is limited academic preparedness in vulnerable student populations such as first-generation students, motivation and other aspects of academic resilience predict academic success (Tsai et al., 2022).

Self-Efficacy

A student's belief in oneself is a significant factor in readiness. Bandura calls this internal belief self-efficacy, the level of confidence in oneself toward mastering a specific skill (as cited in Parikh et al., 2020). In alignment with Bandura's social cognitive theory, it is understood that self-efficacy drives behaviors. In conceptualizing this part of social cognitive theory, Bandura (2006) writes, "Efficacy beliefs are the foundation of human agency. Unless people believe they can produce desired results and forestall detrimental ones by their actions, they have little incentive to persevere in the face of difficulties" (p. 170). Conley's college readiness theory speaks to holistic readiness and recognizes that students must have personal aspirations and believe in their abilities (Conley, 2008). Engagement in college and career readiness programs depends on a student's belief that they can achieve whatever they set out to obtain. Following Bandura's theory, Parikh et al. (2020) note that unsuccessful experiences in an activity can limit an individual's participation, motivation, and commitment to the pursuit. Therefore, Lindstrom et al. (2022) suggest that for underserved student populations, these students should receive additional support when they are disengaged and have "limited aspirations for the future" (p. 232).

Parent Involvement

Although a lack of academic preparedness is one of the most obvious barriers to college enrollment, non-academic barriers such as familial responsibility, low parental involvement, and low parent education are equally significant. Pérusse et al. (2017) discuss parents' role in how students perceive college and career readiness, noting parents' substantial influence on each. In their research, Tsai et al. (2022) examined first-

generation students' motivations for postsecondary enrollment. They found a strong correlation between parents' education attainment, their beliefs about postsecondary education, and students' attitudes toward it. When the parent does not have a college degree, the expectation for the student to obtain a degree themselves is less likely (Tsai et al., 2022).

Tsai et al. (2022) argue that students of parents who did not attend college are deficit in "cultural capital" (p. 413), "defined as the value students gain from their parents that supports and assists them as they navigate the college experience and seek a higher social status and greater social mobility" (p. 413). Parental involvement, along with socioeconomic status, is also correlated with student postsecondary persistence (Kim, Bowman et al., 2021). Kim, Hoskins et al. (2021) discuss a lack of awareness about college-related information, such as pricing and financial aid, as factors contributing to persistent gaps between groups in college pursuit.

Further, in consideration of underserved students, Lindstrom et al. (2022) discuss the likeliness of instability in the home environment, writing that "living in poverty or unpredictable family situations impact[s] the ability for underserved youth to learn or benefit from college readiness programs" (p. 230). Research suggests that these students may not have access to mentors and role models in the home who are invested in and provide support toward their postsecondary ambitions (Lindstrom et al., 2022; Tsai et al., 2022). Therefore, per the educators in the study of readiness in underserved youth conducted by Lindstrom et al. (2022), due to their home life, these students are not encouraged to engage in college and career programs.

Familial Responsibility

Supporting family, whether financially through assuming the obligation of household costs or caring for relatives, underserved students often experience a heightened degree of responsibility (Perez-Felkner, 2015). In a study to assess the value of education amongst African American male students in a rural community, Tyler et al. (2021) reported responsibility as a theme identified in these students' perception of a postsecondary degree, as they notably mentioned of their sense of responsibility for being a provider. The researchers concluded that for these students, responsibility was a burden and a motivator (Tyler et al., 2021). Comparatively, Cedeño et al. (2021) discuss intergenerational poverty, i.e., the cycle of scarcity, and its relationship to youth assuming familial responsibilities. Cedeño et al. (2021) further acknowledge that youth in impoverishment cycles experience the burden of familial financial strain, specifically stating, "Scarce financial resources can create and sustain detrimental behaviors and outcomes in children, adolescents, and their families, for instance, by means of transmission of economic-related stress from parent to children" (p. 199).

Financial Strain

A common barrier consistently identified in research on underserved students is the lack of financial resources or familial financial strain (Bettencourt et al., 2022; Ober et al., 2020). Ober et al. (2020) discuss financial barriers to college that can persist despite scholarships or other aid options. In a study to understand the factors that contribute to summer melt and the challenges students face before attending their first semester of college, findings "suggest that students spend a considerable amount of time contemplating financial issues over the summer leading up to the first semester" (Ober et

al., 2020, p. 127). Similarly, Bettencourt et al. (2022) noted that although many low-income students aspire to attend college, going is often impractical due to financial constraints and viewed as unaffordable. The feasibility of immediate college enrollment is then forfeited for entrance into the workforce due to the perceived notion of increased financial stability (Bettencourt et al., 2022).

Homelessness

Navigating postsecondary transition while experiencing housing insecurity has compounding implications for students (Havlik et al., 2018; Popp et al., 2018). Havlik et al. (2018) contend that homeless students "who may want to go to college face (a) a lack of information tailored to their needs; (b) challenges completing the FAFSA forms; (c) limited funding for application fees, tuition, and housing deposits, and; (d) college support staff who lack knowledge of homelessness" (p. 7). Although homeless students receive support throughout secondary education via the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act (2000), a law that mandates K-12 public schools ensure unhoused students' success through support resources, the challenges students face while homeless often persist during the college years (Popp et al., 2018). According to Havlik et al. (2018), food instability, compromised physical and mental health, and access to healthcare can be common oppositions students face while being enrolled in and transitioning beyond secondary education. To support homeless students toward college enrollment Popp et al. (2018) recommend an alliance between secondary schools, community-based programs, and local colleges to create a myriad of support structures that provide a seamless experience in college enrollment and matriculation.

Surrounding Community

Grimard and Maddaus (2004) discuss geographic barriers to postsecondary success, suggesting that students who live in rural communities are at a greater disadvantage than those in metropolitan geographic regions and may attend college at a lower rate. A similar statement can be made regarding students who live in underserved communities, as research acknowledges that students from low-income backgrounds and families persist toward postsecondary education at a lower rate than students from higher income backgrounds (Parikh et al., 2020). This is largely due to disparities in access to resources designed to bridge achievement gaps, specifically among African American and Latino students (Cook et al., 2021).

Cook et al. (2021) additionally highlight that "in terms of equity and access, some African American, Latino, and biracial students attend schools where they are likely to have inexperienced teachers and limited academic resources" (p. 1639). Bhat and Stevens (2021) discuss students' perception of an under-resourced environment, emphasizing that student motivation and perception of their environment are factors in students' post-high school plans, namely college. Students in under-resourced communities may have difficulty seeing future possibilities beyond their present conditions and surroundings (Bhat & Stevens, 2021).

Student Perception of College Value

Research shows that students with college degrees outearn those with less education (Fraysier & Reschly, 2022; Palmer, 2023). However, recent reports suggest that students see less value in traditional two-year and four-year post-secondary programs (Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, 2024). Instead, students are looking at the value of

education and opting for more immediate, cost-effective alternatives. In a 2023 survey administered by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation to assess student perceptions of American higher education, findings indicated that 65% of respondents believed a certification or proof of job skills was sufficient to receive a good job (Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, 2024). Similarly, in a study to understand career and technical high school students' perception of a college degree, Bettencourt et al. (2022) found that students largely viewed a college degree as more of a long-term goal. They saw it as a qualification that they would need someday, but immediately opted, post high school, to utilize vocational certifications and training to enter the workforce. It has been found consistently in research that low financial feasibility, debt, lack of awareness of financial resources, and anticipated poor return on investment result in many students' perception of college being that it is unaffordable and for some unattainable (Bettencourt et al., 2022; Ober et al., 2022).

Global Pandemic

In 2020, the world experienced a life-disrupting phenomenon, the COVID-19 global pandemic (Sirrine et al., 2023; Velez, 2023). The infectious outbreak caused families to suffer loss, including losing loved ones, unemployment, financial instability, and challenges in connectedness to familial support systems (Sirrine et al., 2023). For prospective and current college students navigating the postsecondary space, the disturbance was similar, including disruption to academic instruction, co-curricular student engagement, non-cognitive skill development, and well-being (Velez, 2023). Students who may have most benefitted from face-to-face class delivery were now transitioned to online course delivery (Sirrine et al., 2023). In secondary education, the

pandemic and change in instruction modality adversely impacted student achievement and academic outcomes; however, the true extent of the decline remains unknown (Fisher et al., 2022). In a study on COVID-19 and learning decline in middle and high school students, Fisher et al. (2022) reported that in the 2020-2021 academic year, 34% of district administrators saw an increase in poor student grades, "with greater increases in districts serving mostly Black and Hispanic students or districts with historically lower academic achievement levels" (p. 1028).

The interruption in access and resource availability also manifested in the college admissions process. Although colleges and universities could pivot and adjust their admissions criteria, many students could not satisfy traditional college entrance requirements such as standardized testing (Cai, 2020). According to Cai (2020), there were pre-pandemic discussions in higher education about slowly eliminating standardized assessments as an admissions criterion; however, the pandemic hurried the timeline. To accommodate students, postsecondary institutions started to remove standardized testing requirements, yet there remained discussion of the need to have standardized information about applicants to render an equitable admissions decision (Cai, 2020). A standardized testing task force at the University of California (UC) found that standardized tests allowed for a more diverse cohort of admitted students (as cited in Cai, 2000). Specifically, "the task force found that approximately 25% of low-income, first-generation, and underrepresented minority students earned their guaranteed admission into UC because of test scores" (Cai, 2020, p. 35).

The COVID-19 pandemic brought about several aspects of hesitation for students' families for students entering college, including a compromised sense of belonging and

emotional well-being that traditional in-person co-curricular support would have provided (Fisher et al., 2022). Research has indicated that students who were in virtual courses only were less likely to feel connected to school (Fisher et al., 2022; Sirrine et al., 2023; Velez, 2023). However, this was not standard for all students, as factors such as family support and socioeconomic status influenced how students experienced COVID-19-related stressors (Su et al., 2023).

Career Readiness

Career readiness programs offer specialized benefits to students that can be facilitated as a single focus or in conjunction with college readiness programs. According to Chen et al. (2022), career readiness prepares and engages students in decision-making so that they are equipped to make informed career decisions. Similarly, in a study to assess college and career readiness among underserved youth, Lindstrom et al. (2022) defined readiness as "specific career knowledge and skills to develop concrete postschool plans" (p. 221). The National Association of College and Employers (NACE), in its assessment of college students' career readiness, uses eight non-academic competencies for valuation, including "critical thinking/problem-solving, oral/written communication, teamwork/collaboration, digital technology, leadership, professional/work ethic, career management, and global/intercultural fluency" (as cited in Akos et al., 2021, p. 80).

Career readiness helps students set career goals, plan career paths, improve professional skills and knowledge, and follow selected paths (Chen et al., 2022). Career readiness programs often include an introduction to financial literacy, resume writing, interviewing skills, effective communication strategies, and life skills that support

decision-making. Chen et al. (2022) highlight career maturity and the ability of students to make informed decisions about their future careers. Through their research, Chen et al. (2022) found that high school students face challenges with career-related decisions for three reasons. These reasons are "(a) lack of readiness, which exists before the career decision-making process begins; (b) lack of information; and (c) inconsistent information during the decision-making process" (Chen et al., 2022, p. 3). Conley (2015) points out students' frequent lack of career preparedness and its correlation to the quality of high school counseling. To circumvent poor quality career counseling in high schools, Bhat and Stevens (2021) recommend comprehensive career readiness interventions that are intertwined in school curriculums.

The awareness and significance of career preparedness for secondary students have been long-standing. Wei et al. (2016) reported that in 2010, researchers Deil-Amen and Deluca (as cited in Wei et al., 2016) approximated that over 40% of graduates with a high school diploma had not been adequately prepared for college or the workforce. More specifically, underserved youth or youth in under-resourced school systems are at an even greater disadvantage. Lindstrom et al. (2022) suggest that within these school systems:

> Without appropriate instruction and career planning that builds upon individual, family, and community strengths, underserved students may experience a gap between career aspirations and attainment. Due to systemic barriers, these youth are also at risk of having limited vision for the future and may need to expand or transform their sense of possible post-school opportunities or future selves. (p. 223)

Career Technical Education

Preparing students for careers and the workforce often requires specialized training that focuses on developing communication, time management, and problem-solving skills. In some high schools, this training can be found in career academies or in career and technical education (CTE), a specialized instructional space with career-focused courses to give students practice in real-world applications of academic training. The concept of career academies has grown since its inception in 1969, with more than one million high school students enrolled as of 2009 (Hackmann et al., 2018). In a study by Fletcher and Dumford (2021), students in career academies showed high levels of creativity and problem-solving. Per Fletcher and Dumford (2021), "students' heightened perceptions of their abilities to develop creative ideas and solutions are likely due to the problem-and project-based nature of the curricula in the career academy" (p. 40).

Under certain conditions, workforce training and CTE can strengthen student learning and yield long-term occupational success (Hackmann et al., 2018). Vocational education provided in consideration of industry needs supports relevant work-based learning. Five industry sectors, supported by the National Academy Foundation, have been identified as focal subjects for career academies, including engineering, finance, information technology, hospitality, and health sciences (as cited in Murillo et al., 2017). Mardis (2019) places high value on CTE, believing it will drive economic development with a specialized ability to prepare students for the information technology (IT) sector.

Benefits of CCR Programming

Akos et al. (2021) indicate that students most often obtain the vocational and professional skills needed to be successful in the workforce through postsecondary

education. Tsai et al. (2022) echo this assertion by correlating lifetime earnings and success in the workforce with college graduation. In most cases, institutions design strategies to promote career development through formal career centers or Federal Work-Study (FWS) programs. Both offer career-related benefits to students, such as internships, resume building, student employment, and networking. In fact, in the study of Akos et al. (2021) to assess the impact of FWS on college students' career readiness, it was reported that over 75% of students receiving FWS showed growth in NACE's career readiness competencies (Akos et al., 2021). Similarly, college and career readiness programs can have the same impact at the secondary level. Lindstrom et al. (2022) suggest that a student who engages in college and career readiness training becomes a student who can excel in college courses or a career readiness program without remedial exercises.

Combined programming inclusive of college and career readiness components has been debated in the academic community. Malin et al. (2017) advocate that students should not have to choose between the two. The infusion of college and career components in postsecondary transition programming has been embraced by policy makers because of the belief that students should graduate high school prepared for both college and career (Malin et al., 2017). Conley (2008) echoes the perspective, acknowledging that CCR holistically offers a foundational skill set, as the competencies for career and college success overlap, both requiring elements such as work ethic and motivation (Conley, 2008; Malin et al., 2017).

Researchers advocate for developing and building non-cognitive skills, such as communication, interpersonal skills, and collaboration, in college and career readiness programs, as they are necessary for postsecondary success (Radcliffe & Bos, 2013).

Yavuz et al. (2019) suggest that, for urban students, a village model for readiness builds cultural capital in students. The partnership between parents, counselors, and teachers can add to a student's aspirations, providing a community of support for students and a sense of shared norms and beliefs that promote a successful postsecondary transition (Yavuz et al., 2019).

College and Career Readiness Federal and State Initiatives

A repeated theme in the literature is the call for enhanced efforts toward college and career readiness for students. Government and non-profit organizations have amplified their contribution to student readiness by putting federal dollars into programs like Upward Bound, GEAR UP, and Talent Search (Royster et al., 2015). Several of these programs have an added layer of targeting underrepresented, including low-income, students, often making low family income a qualifying factor for program participation. Initiatives to lessen equity gaps and support students in postsecondary enrollment are seen in several of these federal and state readiness initiatives. Per Xu et al. (2023), in four years, from 2013 to 2017, more states adopted mandated statewide CCR initiatives. These programs aim to align secondary education curricula with postsecondary academic success standards (Mokher & Jacobson, 2021; Mokher & Leeds, 2019; Xu et al., 2023). The reform initiatives that leverage secondary school learning to facilitate postsecondary success are due widely to the idea that student preparation is a shared responsibility (Xu et al., 2023).

Mokher and Leeds (2019) discuss the 2008-2009 Florida College and Career Readiness Initiative, which focused on academic reform to ensure that students could succeed in college-level English and math courses. Similarly, Xu et al. (2023) discuss

Transitional Intervention (TI), a state readiness program implemented in Kentucky after continual high rates of student cohorts who required remedial college courses. The TI initiative required secondary and postsecondary schools to work together to "develop a unified strategy to reduce college remediation rates by at least 50% by 2014 and increase the college completion rate of students enrolled in one or more remedial classes by 3% annually from 2009 to 2014" (Xu et al., 2023, p. 219).

A proposed solution to lessen the gap between secondary graduation requirements and the academic skills needed for college enrollment and persistence was the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) implemented across most states. Presently used in 42 states, CCSS has been included in federal legislation, including the Carl D. Perkins Vocational and Technical Education Act of 2006 and the Every Student Succeeds Act of 2015. The language in the legislation shares a clear expectation that secondary schools adequately prepare students for college and careers (Hackmann et al., 2018). Stone-Johnson (2015) discusses the Race to the Top federal initiative, which is targeted to improve teaching and learning to yield better student outcomes.

Local CCR Initiatives

College and career interventions are important at every level of K -12 education, but the high school years are considered the most critical (Bhat & Stevens, 2021). Duval County Public Schools offer, through community partnerships, several college and career intervention programs. In secondary schools planning for students' post-high school years, career readiness and interventions should be interwoven into the school curriculum (Bhat & Stevens, 2021). To prepare students for careers, DCPS created Duval Ready, a strategic initiative based on employer feedback in the Jacksonville community (Pierce,

2022). Duval Ready is a specialized curriculum designed to prepare students for work by building their skill sets in teamwork, problem-solving, communication, and professionalism (Duval County Public Schools, n.d.-c; Pierce, 2022). The program begins in the eighth grade with discussion of career exploration, but the full curriculum is conducted in grades 9-12. Throughout grades 9-12, students use the online self-paced module "Florida Ready to Work" (Duval County Public Schools, n.d.-c) curriculum for soft skill development, culminating with a Ready to Work diploma designation.

Gaining Early Awareness and Readiness for Undergraduate Programs

To develop its students for college or careers, the Duval County School District facilitates the GEAR UP Project Belief program. This federal grant initiative supports academic success, high school completion, and college and career readiness (Duval County Public Schools, n.d.-d). To accomplish GEAR UP program objectives, the district partners with community organizations, including Communities in Schools, Florida State College at Jacksonville, I'm a Star, and the University of North Florida, to engage students in mentorship, summer programming, including interactive activities, and services that aid the whole child with emotional, social, and behavioral support (Duval County Public Schools, n.d.-d). The GEAR UP program is conducted in seven high schools within the district, six of which are classified as Title 1. Of the six schools, two are included in this study. Those schools are Westside High and William M. Raines. GEAR UP is facilitated by program specialists in partnership with high school counselors, who are charged with challenging students to a rigorous curriculum, advising students of accelerated learning opportunities, and offering holistic support for the whole child (Duval County Public Schools, n.d.-d).

Advancement Via Individual Determination

Advancement Via Individual Determination, AVID, is a college readiness system designed to prepare students for four-year college enrollment and completion (Duval County Public Schools, n.d.-e). In DCPS, AVID is offered in five high schools, two of which are included in this study. Those schools are Edward White and Sandalwood High. Students participating in this program must take an AVID elective course, which has a curriculum constructed to advance students' writing, collaboration, reading, organization, and inquiry skills. Per the district's website, students who participate in the program for at least three years are generally accepted into colleges and universities (Duval County Public Schools, n.d.-e).

Educational Talent Search

The mission of Educational Talent Search (ETS) is to help students every step of the way (Florida State College at Jacksonville, n.d.). To accomplish this, this federal TRIO program offers academic support and mentorship to guide students through high school toward college enrollment. The program is offered in seven Duval County high schools, two of which are in this study, including Andrew Jackson, and William M. Raines High School. The program offers specialized topics by grade level. For 11th and 12th graders, ETS programming offers college application workshops, college visits, financial aid workshops, SAT prep, and mentoring (Florida State College at Jacksonville, n.d.).

The Counselor-Student Relationship

The success of college and career readiness programs, as assessed by student postsecondary achievement, are highly correlated with the quality of the relationship

between students and adult educators. Lindstrom et al. (2022) found that one of the most important aspects of college and career readiness for a student is a nurturing and supportive relationship with an adult who can serve as a mentor and coach in the postsecondary transition. Pérusse et al. (2017) describe counselors as agents of change that are "positioned to identify the needs of students, focus on their future goals and aspirations, and educational preparation required to fulfill those dreams" (p. 1224).

Although Pérusse et al. (2017) note that parents are often the first influence on students' college and career experiences, students can also benefit from school counselor initiatives that create systematic interventions for career counseling and exploration, college preparation, and non-cognitive skill development. Per Lapan et al. (2017) an effective high school counselor who forms a personal relationship with their students while facilitating CCR interventions can have a lasting impression on student behavior. Specifically, the school counselor-student relationship can result in students' heightened awareness and informed decision making, such as related to immediate postsecondary enrollment, an investment in funding their education with scholarships, an awareness of the academic reputation and rigor of colleges and universities, and how a college education can better prepare them for the workforce (Lapan et al., 2017).

To streamline the approach to counseling students on college and career readiness, the College Board Office for School Counselor Advocacy (2010) identified eight components of CCR counseling to build equity in process and results. They include the following:

1. College Aspirations: Build a college-going culture based on early college awareness by nurturing in students the confidence to aspire to college and the resilience to overcome challenges along the way. Provide adequate support, build social capital, and convey the conviction that all students can succeed.
2. Academic Planning for College and Career Readiness: Advance students' planning, preparation, participation, and performance in a rigorous academic program that connects to their college and career aspirations and goals.
3. Enrichment and Extracurricular Engagement: Ensure equitable exposure to a wide range of extracurricular and enrichment opportunities that build leadership, nurture talents and interests, and increase engagement with school.
4. College and Career Exploration and Selection Processes: Provide early and ongoing exposure to experiences and information necessary to make informed decisions when selecting a college or career that connects to academic preparation and future aspirations.
5. College and Career Assessments: Promote preparation, participation, and performance in college and career assessments by all students.
6. College Affordability Planning: Provide students and families with comprehensive information about college costs, options for paying for college, and the financial aid and scholarship processes and eligibility requirements so they can plan for and afford a college education.

7. College and Career Admission Processes: Ensure that students and families have an early and ongoing understanding of the college and career application and admission processes so they can find the postsecondary options that are the best fit with their aspirations and interests.
8. Transition from High School Graduate to College Enrollment: Connect students to school and community resources to help the students overcome barriers and ensure the successful transition from high school to college (College Board Office for School Counselor Advocacy, 2010, p.3).

Counselors as Agents of Change

School counselors are believed to have a far greater responsibility than teachers in a student's readiness as they influence more than academic behavior (Stone-Johnson, 2015). Several scholars correlate students' postsecondary success and their college and career program participation with the quality of the student-counselor relationship (e.g., Lindstrom et al., 2022; Pérusse et al., 2017). Pérusse et al. (2017) label counselors as change agents and advocates, leaders in student development who are responsible for helping students navigate their future aspirations.

Counselors are charged with student development, in areas such as goal setting, transition plans, and self-understanding (Stone-Johnson, 2015). Royster et al. (2015) discuss the effects on student learning when counselors and teachers do not believe that college is for, or attainable by, everyone. When counselors have this belief, Royster et al. (2015) emphasize that it can manifest in counseling behaviors limiting a student's access to resources and negatively influencing the rigor of students' academic schedules. Non-academic skills such as time management and goals articulation are not standard

traditional academic curricula. Thus, the counselor's role in mentoring, skill set training, and college and workforce readiness program facilitation becomes imperative for the student.

Representation in Counseling

The counselor's role as an adult responsible for coaching students in postsecondary transition is emphasized to a greater degree with underserved student populations (Lindstrom et al., 2022; Pérusse et al., 2017; Stone-Johnson, 2015). Research suggests that Black and Brown students in underserved communities often lack access to qualified school staff that are responsive to their needs (Fletcher, 2023; Lindstrom et al., 2022). Fletcher (2023) emphasized the importance of cultural responsiveness as a tool in supporting Black students. In their research on Black male success in the secondary school system, Fletcher (2023) emphasized representation, specifically writing, "Black-educator-Black student relationships are quite positive in that these teachers exhibit interpersonal care that promotes the well-being, achievement, and long-term postsecondary success of Black students" (Fletcher, 2023, p. 271).

Cultural representation in teachers and other school staff is viewed as a positive predictor of student outcomes (Ford, 2022). In discussing minority administrators and representation, Ford (2022) broached the phrase "representative bureaucracy": the idea that a population of people is best served by an overseer that shares their values (Selden, 1997). In relation to K-12 education, Ford (2022) states that "in the context of urban education, racial alignment between students and teachers is demonstrated to have a positive impact on student outcomes under specific circumstances" (p. 691). The results of the work of Ford (2022) and Fletcher (2023) suggest that working with school

counselors who share their worldview and minority background could contribute to students' college and career readiness. Metrics associated with student success outcomes show growth when students are in culturally responsive environments and engage with adults who share similarities in race, ethnicity, and values (Fletcher, 2023; Ford, 2022).

Counselors' Perceptions of CCR Program Effectiveness

High school counselors' perceptions of college and career program effectiveness are critical to evaluating counseling policies and practices that seek to optimize student readiness (Lindstrom et al., 2022). Although critical, research that documents day-to-day realities from the perspective of the high counselor is limited (Lindstrom et al., 2022; Parikh et al., 2020). However, Lindstrom et al. (2022) recognize that an in-depth understanding of the counselor's perspective allows researchers and administrators to "gain critical knowledge to improve current systems and approaches" (p. 224). In a study aimed at garnering counselors' perspective on CCR program effectiveness, studying Indiana schools, Harvey et al. (2019) reported that counselors felt the pull to operate in multi-role functions for a program's success. For example, counselors needed to serve as mentors, advocates, and collaborators, roles that were at times in conflict with their daily duties. To summarize the study's survey results, counselors reported that two things must be understood about CCR, which are "(a) college and career ready are not the same and (b) approaches and pathways to achieve CCR take on unique direction, supports, and purposes based on student interest, preferences, and needs" (Harvey et al., 2019, p. 276).

Flexibility in readiness is a recurring theme in counselor perceptions (Harvey et al., 2019; Lindstrom et al., 2022; Parikh et al., 2020). Many counselors understand the complexities of postsecondary transition and recognize that it is not a "one-size-fits-all"

situation. Instead, counselors reinforce that students have options beyond immediate college enrollment, such as trade schools or other occupational training programs (Lindstrom et al., 2022). However, Parikh et al. (2020) found in a survey of professional school counselors that 34% of respondents believed they were not adequately trained to have an in-depth discussion with students about career transitions.

Another theme that emerged from Parikh et al.'s (2020) study was the high workload of counselors amid competing demands. Sixty-seven percent of survey respondents reported having time constraints delivering CCR programs and other mentorship and counseling services (Parikh et al., 2020). Parikh et al. (2020) summarized Monteiro-Leitner et al.'s (2006) study, reporting that "45% of their sample of school counselors indicated experiencing insufficient administrative support, which is an essential consideration for the profession" (Monteiro-Leitner et al., 2006, as cited in Parikh et al., 2020, p. 189). Similarly, Parikh et al.'s (2020) findings showed that 54% of counselor respondents reported a lack of time as a barrier to college and career program effectiveness, while Novakovic et al. (2021) indicated that time, in addition to high student-to-counselor ratios, are a hindrance to CCR program effectiveness. Generally, per Parikh et al. (2020), counselors reported that college and career programming is effective in helping students plan for postsecondary transition. However, Parikh et al.'s (2020) and Novakovic et al.'s (2021) studies also revealed a need for consistent CCR program evaluation to adjust to and address evolving student needs.

Doctoral Research on College and Career Readiness

The study of college and career readiness remains a focus in student transition planning research. Evidenced by recent doctoral dissertations, there is a consistent focus

on academic preparation and holistic student preparedness in CCR programs, including student non-academic skill building, such as decision-making skills, self-efficacy, and career readiness practices (Morse, 2020). Academic preparation, as part of college and career readiness, includes preparing students for the academic rigor of college so that they can persist and graduate (Walton, 2021). Examining his research findings in a study of CCR in Chicago Public Schools, Walton (2021) argued that there were inconsistent efforts toward college and career preparation at the school and district levels. Specifically, Walton (2021) found that many students met the academic standards to graduate high school but were not adequately prepared for college and career success. He proposed a collaborative and transparent relationship between secondary and postsecondary institutions that would yield a better understanding of college and career readiness standards.

In addition to the fostering of academic fortitude, non-academic skill building persists as a recommendation in CCR programs. Like Morse (2020), Babb (2023) recommended that educators leverage non-academic programs to increase exploratory learning and expand students' awareness of career options. Student feedback supports the critical nature of non-cognitive and non-academic skills in building a support structure that promotes successful postsecondary transition (Babb, 2023). Corley (2018) surveyed students in a rural high school and found that there were many non-cognitive skills that students indicated were crucial for postsecondary enrollment and navigating life's disturbances. In the study, students described confidence and self-efficacy, strong support from educators, competent leadership, and parent involvement as essential factors to postsecondary transition (Corley, 2018).

Support structures, notably the counselor-student relationships, also remain at the forefront of student preparedness for college and career (Babb, 2022; Gilfillan, 2019). Gilfillan's (2019) findings in a study of counselor influence on first-generation students from the student's perspective reaffirm previous research (e.g., Lapan et al., 2017; Royster, 2015) asserting that the counselor-student relationship can dictate students' post high school plans. Students are influenced by the CCR practices of their counselor, which can dictate how students engage in programming and make college and career decisions (Gilfillan, 2019). In a study of college and career readiness amongst elementary students in Title 1 schools, Babb (2022) confirmed the significance of students' social and emotional awareness in developing relationships with educators who nurture students' future interests.

Theories

Conceptual Framework

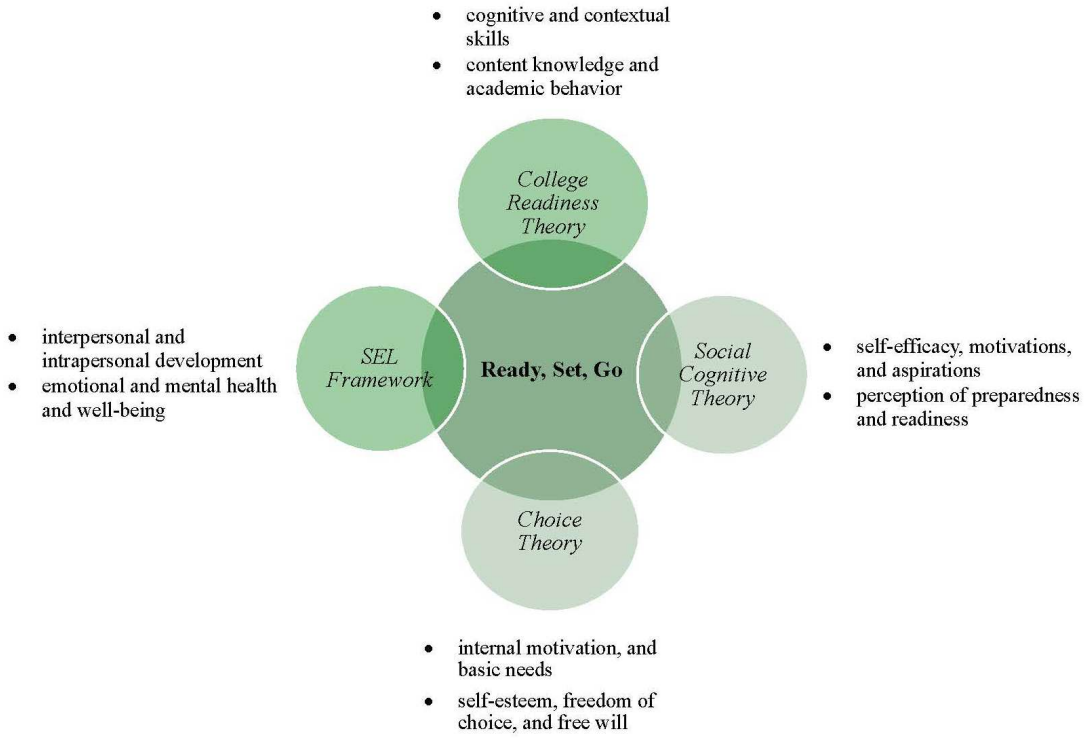
A conceptual framework is a model of interconnected concepts that provides an inclusive understanding of a subject (Jabareen, 2009). Often found in qualitative research, conceptual frameworks take on an "interpretative approach to social reality" (Jabareen, 2009, p. 51), grouping concepts into themes that explain a singular phenomenon, such as college and career readiness.

Readiness for college and career is complex (Holles, 2016). Educators, scholars, and administrators recognize that being college and career ready is more than academic achievement and includes cognitive and social abilities that support students' critical thinking, communication, problem-solving skills, social and emotional wellness, and mental fortitude. Because of the need for holistic skill sets, education administrators and policymakers have started to "embrace a combined CCR definition,

noting students should not be required to choose between college or career but rather should graduate high school having satisfied both expectations" (Malin et al., 2017, p. 812). An inclusive approach to college readiness also includes workforce training and interpersonal development.

Self-efficacy, as well as students' specific beliefs regarding college and career, are factors in students' perception of transition success. Studies have shown that a student's perception of readiness includes both cognitive and non-cognitive factors (McDonald & Farrell, 2012). Readiness relates to the culmination of skills and abilities that lead to effective time management, critical thinking, problem solving, and the ability to engage in rigorous coursework (McDonald & Farrell, 2012; Martinez et al., 2020).

The combination of academic and non-academic skills can have a lasting impact on student success (Martinez et al., 2020). With an inclusive approach to readiness, students are armed with the skills needed to be prepared for college and career immediately following secondary education, regardless of their selection. To that end, this conceptual framework, which I have called "Ready, Set, Go," illustrated in Figure 4, encapsulates program requirements that support students' academic ability, cognitive and contextual skills, self-perception and social awareness, mental and emotional well-being, and choice.



Note. Information in this original figure is based on Bandura (2006), Conley (2008), Dymnicki et al. (2013) and Glasser (1999).

Figure 4. *Conceptual Framework: Ready, Set, Go*

College Readiness Theory

Conley's (2008) theory of college readiness suggests that students also need cognitive and contextual skills and awareness to supplement academic achievements. Conley (2008) describes contextual skills as:

> the knowledge of the norms of the academic culture and how one interacts with professors, administrators and others in the environment, the ability to be comfortable around people from different backgrounds and cultures, the ability to take advantage of academic and personal support resources available on most campuses, and the ability to demonstrate leadership skills in a variety of settings. (p. 26)

The absence of these skills could cause students to not persist academically at the college level (Conley, 2008). Conley's theory of college readiness works in conjunction with his viewpoint on the integration of CCR, highlighting four broad dimensions of combined readiness to include cognitive strategies, content knowledge, academic behaviors, and transition knowledge and skills (Malin et al., 2017).

Social Cognitive Theory

Bandura's social cognitive theory introduces the concept of self-efficacy, depicting it as the belief in one's ability to master a specific skill (Bandura, 2006). As self-efficacy is an indicator of human behavior, the theory of self-efficacy suggests that individuals respond in accordance with their beliefs about what they can and cannot do (DiBenedetto & Myers, 2016). Therefore, a student's perception of their degree of readiness can dictate how they engage with career or college readiness resources. DiBenedetto and Myers's (2016) research supports the college readiness and social cognitive theories by noting that many factors contribute to student success, including "motivation, interest, aspirations, socio-economic status, support systems, and developmental processes" (DiBenedetto & Myers, 2016, p. 29).

Social and Emotional Learning Framework (SEL)

Non-cognitive skills that promote interpersonal and intrapersonal capability are needed for academic postsecondary success and optimal performance in the workforce. The framework for systematic social and emotional learning (SEL) developed by the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL), a non-profit organization, "involves the processes through which students and adults acquire and effectively apply the knowledge, attitudes, and skills necessary to understand and manage

emotions, set and achieve positive goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain positive relationships, and make responsible decisions" (Dymnicki et al., 2013, p. 2). Specifically, the SEL framework includes core competencies that suggest contributions to social and emotional well-being, including self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making. Dymnicki et al. (2013) suggest that these competencies are skill sets, such as the ability to engage ethically in conflict resolution, form healthy relationships, and be cautious in decision-making, all of which support emotional wellness.

Choice Theory

The right to choose is the premise of choice theory. William Glasser, a psychologist, theorized that humans have choice and free will regardless of external factors and influences (Gabriel & Matthews, 2011; Glasser, 1999). In his theory, Glasser suggests that human behavior is driven by internal motivation and the satisfaction of five basic needs: survival, love and belonging, power, freedom, and fun. Related to choice theory, Maslow's hierarchy of needs (as cited in Noltemeyer et al., 2021) plays a role in internal motivation, behavior, and decision making. Specifically, Noltemeyer et al. (2021) asserts that in relation to Maslow's theory "children's ability to be motivated by growth needs such as academic achievement must be built on the satisfaction of deficiency needs such as physiological needs, safety needs, love/belonging needs" (p. 24).

Gabriel and Matthews (2011) discuss choice theory concerning education, emphasizing the inability of administrators to control student behavior because students choose their response to their environment and feelings (Gabriel & Matthews, 2011).

Fereidouni et al.'s (2019) study of happiness among university students found a direct correlation between choice and self-esteem. The research suggests that the freedom to choose undergirds self-esteem, and student success depends on students' ability to freely engage in cognitive independence and decision-making (Fereidouni et al., 2019).

Chapter Summary

Chapter 2 defined college and career readiness and acknowledged the complexities of each. The research suggests that students from underserved student populations, including low-income, first-generation, or Black and Brown students, are not as prepared for college and careers as their peers. A review of the academic literature identifies underserved student populations as having less access to programs and resources to adequately prepare them for postsecondary transition. The high school counselor is identified as being primarily responsible for facilitating holistic preparedness.

The student-counselor relationship is a focus within Chapter 2 because students' receptiveness toward CCR programs and school counseling is directly connected to the student's relationship with the counselor. The chapter further discussed holistic readiness and the benefits of college and career preparedness programming. Defining readiness from a holistic perspective led to the construction of the conceptual framework and proposed theories that encapsulate the development of cognitive and non-cognitive skills to support the whole child.

Chapter III

METHODOLOGY

Chapter 2 discussed college and career readiness and provided in-depth context for each phenomenon. It also provided an overview of the academic literature that reports on the benefits of college and career programming, barriers students face in postsecondary transition planning, and the impact and influence of the high school counselor on student postsecondary success. Chapter 2 concluded with a conceptual framework that focuses on skills and abilities for holistic student success in the postsecondary transition.

Chapter 3 describes the approach to the current research and provides a rationale for an exploratory research design. The chapter offers an overview of participant demographics and recruitment, including selection procedures and data collection using semi-structured interviews. Further, the chapter discusses data analysis, confidentiality, and institutional reviews. Chapter 3 concludes with information about delimitations, limitations, and the researcher's positionality.

Introduction

Students in underserved communities have unequal access to resources that promote college and career success (Castro, 2020; Cox, 2016). Similarly, students in vulnerable populations experience heightened obstacles in postsecondary transition compared to their peers of greater economic means (Kim, Bowman et al., 2021). To lessen equity gaps in terms of preparedness, research recommends a change to the culture

in secondary education, to infuse college and career planning into the curriculum, and advocates for enhanced counseling practices Lindstrom et al., 2022; Mokher & Jacobson, 2021; Xu et al., 2023). Therefore, this study explored college and career readiness programs in Duval County's Title I high schools to understand the access and accessibility of CCR programs and practices, barriers impacting students' postsecondary transition, and the perception of holistic student preparedness. Through an exploratory case study methodology, the study investigated the district's programming and interventions, exploring any individualized programming at the school level. Interventions within the context of this study included specialized practices and programs designed to better individuals or organizations (Boruch et al., 2016).

To understand the interventions offered at the district level and within each high school, this study captured the perspective of five high school counselors to investigate perceived program impact on student preparedness using student data from the 2020-2021 school year. The 2020-2021 school year was selected for this study as at the time the study began it was the most recent year with immediate postsecondary enrollment into the Florida state university system or Florida college system. In K-12 education, counselors are charged with preparing students for postsecondary transition; therefore, this study assembled the perceptions of high school counselors with a focus on CCR program offerings, access, impact on students' preparedness, and barriers to student postsecondary transition success (Castro, 2020).

Jacksonville, Florida

Duval County Public Schools district is in Jacksonville, Florida, in Duval County. Jacksonville, Florida, is one of the state's seven major metropolitan counties, accounting

for 4.6% of Florida's population. As of the most recent 2022 census, Jacksonville has a population of 971,319, which grew 2.3% from the previous year (U.S. Census Bureau, n.d.-c). Demographically, 54.5% of Jacksonville's population identify as White, and 30.7% identify as Black or African American, representing the two dominant racial origins in the region (U.S. Census Bureau, n.d.-c). The remainder of the population identifies as Latino (10.9%) or identifies as two or more races (6.6%). Further, the most recent census shows that nearly 15% of the population is deemed as experiencing poverty. The median household income in Jacksonville in 2022 was of $58,263 per year (U.S. Census Bureau, n.d.-c). The 2022 census data also reflect that Jacksonville, Florida, does not have a large population of adults with postsecondary education, as only 30% of the population aged 25 years and older have a bachelor's degree or higher level of education. The researcher chose to investigate the educational system within the city of Jacksonville because (a) according to the 2022 census, the number of adults with a postsecondary degree trends below other major Florida cities such as Orlando and Miami, and (b) from 2016-2021, the number of students who immediately attended a Florida university or college system trended below state averages (Florida Department of Education, n.d.-c; U.S. Census Bureau, n.d.-a; U.S. Census Bureau, n.d.-b).

Duval County Public School District

DCPS is the 20th-largest district in the nation and currently serves over 129,000 students (Duval County Public Schools, n.d.-a). This study focused on demographics in the 2020-2021 school year; that year, DCPS served over 126,000 students (Florida Department of Education, n.d.-c). The district has a mission to provide education excellence with an emphasis on student achievement and a whole child educational

philosophy. Specifically, the district's vision is to ensure every student is inspired and prepared for success in college or a career and in life in general. This study examined DCPS's commitment to college and career readiness, narrowing the focus to Title 1 high schools. In the 2020-2021 school year, 11 schools in DCPS were identified as Title 1 (Florida Department of Education, n.d.-a). The schools were Andrew Jackson, Baldwin Middle High, Darnell Cookman, Edward White, Englewood, First Coast, Jean Ribault, Sandalwood, Terry Parker, Westside High, and William M. Raines. These schools are located in different regions of the city of Jacksonville, with some in areas that are considered underserved; however, the DCPS has implemented a policy known as school choice that allows parents to enroll their students in schools outside of their immediate geographic area or attendance zone (Duval County Public Schools, n.d.-g).

Title 1 high schools are identified by the percentage of students from economically disadvantaged backgrounds or low-income families. Part A of the Every Child Succeeds Act (2015) gives financial assistance to local secondary education institutions for specialized services and programming. In guidance provided by the Department of Education, Title 1 schools are provided specialized funding:

> Schools enrolling at least 40 percent of students from low-income families are eligible to use Title 1 funds for schoolwide programs designed to upgrade the entire school's education program to improve achievement for all students, particularly the lowest-achieving students. (National Center for Education Statistics, n.d., para. 1)

According to the Florida High School Feedback Report for 2020-2021 (Florida Department of Education, 2021), five of the 11 Title 1 high schools in Duval County

consisted of at least 60% economically disadvantaged students. These schools also share a commonality of a predominately African American population, with a high percentage of 93% at William M. Raines and Jean Ribault High School. Several other Title 1 high schools also have a high percentage of African American students, with Andrew Jackson at 82% and Edward White at 66%. However, the overall district instruction and administrative population shows racial variances that differ from those of its students.

In the 2020-2021 school year, with a total of 126,815 students in DCPS, 42.6% of the student population identified as African American, 32.2% identified as White, and 14.8% identified as Hispanic or Latinx. The remaining student populations consisted of Asian, Native American, and Native Hawaiian ethnicities. In contrast, of the 7,162 instructional staff members in the 2020-2021 school year, 60% identified as White, and 28% identified as African American. Regarding leadership, the district had similar variances in the race/ethnicity demographic variable, with 50% of its administration identifying as White and 39% as African American. However, in stark contrast, counselor demographic information in the most recent 2023-2024 school year indicates 44% of counselors in DCPS as African American, 43% as White, 10% as Hispanic or Latinx, and 2% as Asian (Florida Department of Education, n.d.-j). Unlike in the case of instructional and administrative staff, African American counselors are more common than counselors from other specific racial/ethnic groups. Racial demographics are a salient factor in college and career readiness, as economic and ethnic status can contribute to the success of CCR programs, and representation is a noted influence on student receptiveness to postsecondary counseling (Fletcher, 2023; Ford, 2022; Lapan et al., 2017).

Methodological Approach

This study utilized a qualitative exploratory approach to research with a case study research strategy. Qualitative research aims to describe the experiences of individuals (Makri & Neely, 2021), and the case study is a commonly used strategy in qualitative research (Priya, 2021). Creswell (2014) defines case studies as "a qualitative design in which the researcher explores in depth a program, event, activity, process, or one or more individuals" (p. 241). Case studies can take several forms, one being exploratory (Makri & Neely, 2021; Priya, 2021). Exploratory research explores social events, phenomena, and connections from a what and why perspective (Makri & Neely, 2021).

After preparing the research questions, the researcher identified a sample for this study. Sampling is recommended in case study research as one is unlikely to survey or interview an entire population in a set (Priya, 2021). The remaining sections of Chapter 3 outline what Priya (2021) refers to as case study protocol, four distinct steps that structure and give reliability to case study research beginning with an objective of the study. The following are elements of case study protocol:

> (a) an overview of the entire study, including its objectives, (b) a detailed description of field procedures, including the techniques of data collection to be employed and how one plans to move ahead and operate in the field, (c) clearly and sharply developed questions whose answers the researcher seeks to obtain and which should inform the methods of data collection, and (d) a well-formulated guideline for the analysis of the data and the reporting of the case findings. (Priya, 2021, p. 101)

Research Questions

This study was grounded by the conceptual framework that incorporates college and career program elements that support students' academic abilities, cognitive and contextual skills, self-perception and social awareness, mental and emotional well-being, and choice evidenced by four theories: the college readiness theory, social cognitive theory, social and emotional learning framework, and choice theory. Conley's (2008) theory of readiness promotes college enrollment while proposing a set of cognitive abilities that translate to career readiness, suggesting the need for holistic programming. Specifically, Conley (2008) suggests four facets that construct the concept of college preparedness, which range from cognitive strategies, such as problem solving and communication, to contextual awareness, such as personal aspirations and the ability to navigate cultural norms (Conley, 2008). These facets extend to readiness for postsecondary transition, as Lindstrom et al. (2022) acknowledge readiness as the skills to make successful postsecondary plans.

Social cognitive theory and the social and emotional learning framework consider self-efficacy, as well as the interpersonal and emotional skill sets that high school graduates need for holistic readiness whether they immediately attend a postsecondary institution or enter the workforce. The actuality is that students choose their postsecondary plans, and freedom of choice is correlated with their self-esteem (Fereidouni et al., 2019). Social cognitive theory and the social and emotional learning framework include key components that can work together to help students navigate barriers to postsecondary transition regardless of their choice. The research questions align with the conceptual framework by (a) examining CCR programs for student

academic and non-academic skill development, (b) surveying student holistic preparedness, and (c) addressing barriers to postsecondary transition.

The study's research questions are:

RQ 1: How do counselors perceive the equity and accessibility of college and career readiness programs available within the Duval County School District?

RQ 2: How do counselors perceive student preparedness for college? How do counselors perceive student preparedness for a career?

RQ 3: What additional support is needed, if any, for students in the Duval County School District to address barriers to being college and career ready?

Identifying the Participants

The participants in this study were identified using purposeful sampling. Purposeful sampling was the strategy of choice because it is used to select individuals who are highly informed and experienced in a subject area (Lindstrom et al., 2022). In this study, the high school counselor was considered to be the individual with the most knowledge and experience related to the topic. College and career readiness programs are facilitated by counselors within the high school, making their relationship with students often highly relevant to student college and career-related behaviors. (Lapan et al. 2017; Lindstrom et al., 2022). Specifically, per Lindstrom et al. (2022), in many college and career readiness programs, emphasis is placed on the counselor-student relationship. Lapan et al. (2017) discuss the counselor-student personal relationship and the impact it can have on students' likelihood of going to college, while Royster et al. (2015) discuss the impact of the counselor's belief on students' college preparedness and how it can impact the student's college-going behavior.

The counselors selected to participate, to each represent one of the six initially selected high schools, were chosen by analyzing DCPS's High School Feedback Report (Florida Department of Education, 2021), which provided data on high school graduation rates and the percentage of graduates who attended a Florida State University System school or Florida College System institution in the Fall semester immediately following the student's high school graduation. The postsecondary education criterion is limited to Florida public institutions as they are the sole source of postsecondary enrollment data collected by the Florida Department of Education (Florida Department of Education, 2021). The percentage of graduates who attended a Florida State University System school ranged from 3.5% to 41%; for Florida College System schools, the range was 9.9% to 43.2% (Florida Department of Education, 2021). The statistics are significant because it means that at the lowest post-high school enrollment levels, 3.5% of graduating seniors attended a Florida State University System school, and 9.9% attended a Florida College System institution. The researcher also considered that each selected school's economically disadvantaged student population ranged from 38% to 76%. Considering the barriers to postsecondary enrollment, it can be inferred that most of the remaining students did not immediately attend an out-of-state postsecondary institution (Mokher & Jacobson, 2021).

Participant Selection

Initially, six counselors from six of the 11 Title 1 Schools in Duval County were identified to participate in the study. Newcomer et al. (2015) suggest that when conducting semi-structured interviews, it is important to get the perspectives of more than just a few people, so the study ultimately investigated over 45% of the Title 1 schools in

the 2020-2021 school year, resulting in five counselors. Each school was selected based on two factors: the percentage of economically disadvantaged students and the percentage of students who immediately attended a Florida State University System school or a Florida College System school. More specifically, this study investigated schools with a high percentage of economically disadvantaged students and a low percentage of immediate postsecondary enrollment, as well as one school with a relatively higher percentage of immediate postsecondary enrollment and a relatively lower percentage of economically disadvantaged students. Information about each school initially selected is reported in Table 1.

Table 1. *2020-2021 Duval County Title 1 School Demographics*

	Total Enrollment	Total Enrollment 12th grade	% of Econ. Disadvantage	Attended Florida State University System	Attended Florida College System
Andrew Jackson	927	136	55%	9.50%	23.50%
Edward White	1473	275	60%	8.60%	14.30%
Englewood	1843	404	53%	7.90%	18.50%
Sandalwood	2706	670	38%	22.20%	26.40%
Westside High	1580	354	63%	3.50%	11.60%
William M. Raines	1424	307	76%	8.90%	9.90%

Note. Data were obtained from Florida Department of Education (2021) and Florida Department of Education (n.d.-b; n.d.-d; n.d.-e; n.d.-f; n.d.-g; n.d.-h).

Once the schools were identified, the researcher used the Duval County District staff directory to determine the counselors for each school. The directory provided email

addresses, which was this study's primary communication form. Each participant needed to be:

- over the age of 18,
- a Duval County employee,
- working in a Title 1 high school, and
- a counselor in the 2020-2021 academic year.

The researcher anticipated that each study participant actively engaged in postsecondary transition planning for current high school juniors and seniors. This means the counselor would be able to offer a robust perspective on the accessibility of their high school's college and career programs, the degree of student preparedness for each, and the barriers students face in postsecondary transition. Table 2 reflects examples of potential school counselor duties and participant descriptors.

Table 2. *Professional Descriptors of Five Participants*

Descriptor 1	Counselors with at least three years of experience counseling students so that they are well versed in district and state policy, including best practices for helping students navigate postsecondary transition
Descriptor 2	Counselors who coordinate college and career programs for students in grades 11^{th} and 12^{th}, at a minimum
Descriptor 3	Counselors who provide counseling, mentorship, and postsecondary transition planning appointments with students in grade 12
Descriptor 4	Counselors who address barriers students face in college and career transition by offering tools and resources to mitigate challenges related to academic preparation, self-efficacy, and financial strain
Descriptor 5	Counselors who consistently engage in professional development opportunities to maintain awareness of change in the postsecondary education landscape, including standardized testing metrics and college admissions requirements
Descriptor 6	Counselors who engage parents as partners in student's postsecondary transition planning

Note. Descriptions of school counselors' duties and descriptors were constructed using the researcher's personal knowledge base.

Selection Procedures

After Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval was received, with chair and committee consent, the researcher sent a letter of introduction, viewable in Appendix C, with an overview of the study to a school counselor at each site, beginning in alphabetical order. The letter of introduction is significant as it provides an overview of the study and details the importance of the participant's contribution (Newcomer et al., 2015). Within the letter of introduction, the researcher explained the purpose of the study and expressly detailed informed consent. Per the IRB study approval, signed consent was not required, so the researcher requested an initial response of consent in the email reply, followed by a verbal response prior to beginning the initial interview. There are multiple counselors for each selected school; however, the study protocol called for one participant per school site. The researcher contacted the counselors sequentially at each high school to allow for invitation decline. Each counselor, per site, was given 5 to 7 business days to respond to the researcher's request before the researcher proceeded to the next counselor. The email communication, per counselor, included an initial email and one to two follow-up emails. The follow-up email communications to a select counselor were to re-request individual participation while other follow-up communications were to schedule participant interviews. The researcher sent 29 emails in total. Five counselors, resulting in one counselor from five of the six schools, responded to the invitation and met the criteria to participate. One counselor, representing the sixth school, declined the invitation.

Setting

The site for the semi-structured interview was Microsoft Teams, a communications platform that allows for video and audio calls. Each interview was

recorded for audio transcribing. Participants were asked in advance to disable their video in the Teams call. Video capabilities were confirmed to be disabled before the recording began.

Data Collection

The primary source of data collection was semi-structured interviews. The study called for two semi-structured interviews per participant because college and career readiness is a complex phenomenon (Holles, 2016). College and career readiness, although often conjoined, are standalone topics with diverse meanings, skill sets, and output. In qualitative research, multiple interviews, known as serial interviewing, are used when a topic has complexity, layers, and several dimensions (Read, 2018). Serial interviews are also used to test the validity of the information received and allow for cross-referencing and cross-checking participant responses (Read, 2018). Familiarity, trust, and forged relationships are all potential benefits of serial interviewing, yielding an opportunity for support of the literature on college and career readiness, including previous interview responses (Read, 2018).

Before each interview, the counselors were contacted to schedule an appointment. Newcomer et al. (2015) recommend arranging appointments before the interviewer arrives on site. Confidentiality and informed consent were initially discussed in the invitation email. Newcomer et al. (2015) support confidential interviews as they will likely yield unreserved responses.

At the beginning of each interview, confidentiality and informed consent were discussed once more to facilitate the respondent feeling comfortable speaking honestly.

Specifically, the researcher read aloud the consent statement to confirm the participant's understanding and willingness to take part in the interview before the interview began.

Semi-Structured Interviews

In exploratory research, "semi-structured interviews are used to discover what is happening and seek new insights, observations, and documents from field sites" (Makri & Neely, 2021, p. 4). Semi-structured interviews encompass closed-ended and open-ended questions with probing questions such as how and why (Newcomer et al., 2015). Most significantly, semi-structured interviews were chosen as a primary source of data collection in this study as they can allow for unfiltered independent responses. Per Newcomer et al. (2015), the semi-structured interview is best used when the goal is to capture candid responses uninfluenced by group thought. Viewable in Appendix D, the structure of the interview questions was designed to allow for free expression and individual perspective. The primary aim of the interview was to explore CCR program accessibility, barriers to postsecondary transition, and student preparedness.

The interview questions for this study were guided by the conceptual framework and research questions, as illustrated in Figure 5.

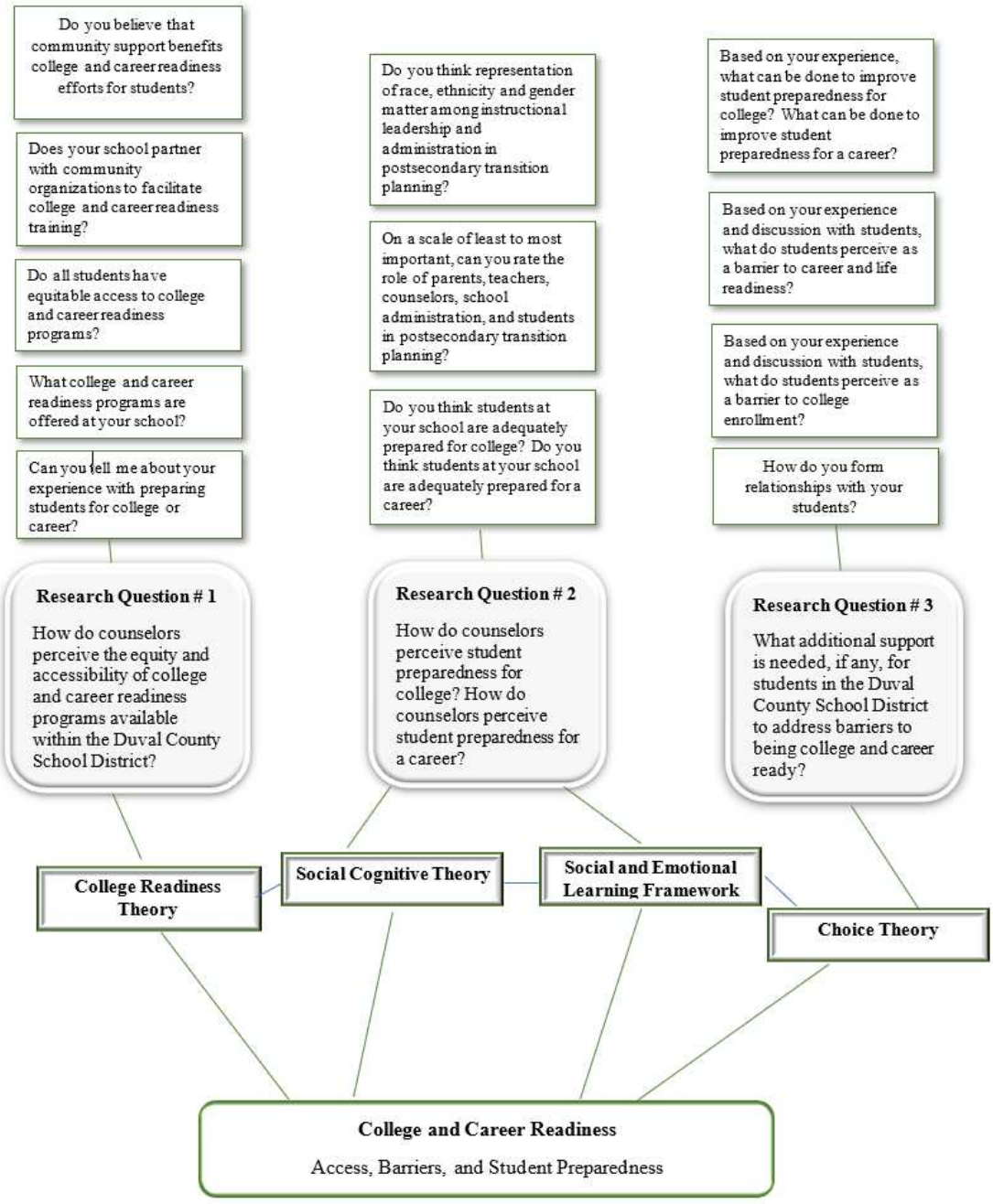


Figure 5. *Integrated Model: Theories, Research, and Interview Questions*

Storing Data

Participant interviews were recorded via Microsoft Teams. At the conclusion of each interview, the recording was imported into Otter.ai, a meeting notes and

transcription service, to transcribe the data. Otter.ai requires a username and password to ensure the safety and security of the imported information. All transcriptions were backed up on my personal device, which is password-protected, and stored in a password-protected folder. Once the interviews were transcribed, per the IRB guidelines, the recordings were deleted from all devices. The interview transcripts will remain stored on a password-protected device for a maximum of three years, after which the transcripts will be permanently destroyed.

Data Analysis

In exploratory qualitative research, data is analyzed thematically (Makri & Neely, 2021). Regarding qualitative research, Newcomer et al. (2015) note that analysis necessitates sorting data into codes, categories, and themes. Analyzing data requires a sequential approach, first reviewing and coding the interview transcripts (Newcomer et al., 2015; Priya, 2021). As mentioned above, Otter.ai was used to transcribe the interviews. The researcher used open coding for this study to break down the data and generate themes. In open coding, "the researcher needs to sift through the informant's responses and organize similar words and phrases and concept indicators in broad initial thematic domains" (Williams & Moser, 2019, p.48). As such, audio transcripts were examined and coded for categories and themes after each interview.

To code the data, the researcher first thoroughly read each interview transcript. William and Moser (2019) recommend that in open coding, researchers should "read and re-read interview transcriptions for thematic connectivity leading to thematic patterns" (p. 48). The researcher then used an inductive approach to data analysis, allowing themes to be generated from participant responses instead of pre-defined categories (Naeem et al.,

2023; Thomas, 2006). In qualitative research, identifying themes and patterns within data is called thematic analysis. In thematic analysis, theme development involves conceptualizing codes in a way to construct deeper and patterned meanings (Naeem et al., 2023). Naeem et al. (2023) goes on to assert that:

> in the process of developing themes, a researcher engages in a deeper level of interpretation; they move beyond the more concrete categories derived from the initial coding process to uncover abstract patterns, trends, or relationships that shed light on the research question." (p.11)

The researcher used thematic analysis to find connections within the data to compose a narrative. The themes created were guided by the research questions and the purpose of the study. The resulting themes were grouped to align with a particular research question and purposefully phrased to provide a direct response to one of the three questions.

Institutional Review Process

This study required Institutional Review Board approval before data were collected. The researcher obtained approval for the study from the Duval County Public School District and Valdosta State University as seen in Appendix B.

Confidentiality and Anonymity

In qualitative research, confidential interviews are likely to yield unreserved responses (Newcomer et al., 2015). To allow for free expression, each participant was informed prior to any data collection that their responses would remain confidential. Before beginning each interview, the researcher ensured that each participant was informed of their rights as a research participant and that each expressly provided

consent. Kelley et al. (2003) contend that the most important ethical issues in qualitative research are confidentiality and informed consent.

As the researcher, I adhered to Kelley et al.'s (2003) thought that "the respondent's right to confidentiality should always be respected" (p. 266). As such, participants were reminded pre- and post-interview of confidentiality and the anonymity that would be maintained in final reporting, including not linking participant responses to their name or school. Instead, participants were given pseudonyms to maintain their anonymity.

Pseudonyms

To maintain anonymity, pseudonyms were assigned to the participants in this study. The pseudonyms were derived from African American women who impacted the city of Jacksonville through their work in civil rights activism, community and business development, and education. The women are Janet Johnson, Sallye B. Mathis, Katie McCray, Mary Singleton, and Eartha White.

Janet Johnson was an educator who served as a faculty member at Jacksonville University beginning in 1971. While at the university, she also served as the Director of the Upward Bound program. Because of her work in education, after her retirement in 1999, Janet received the Jacksonville Humanitarian Award in 2001 (Strickland, 2012).

Sallye B. Mathis was a member of the Jacksonville City Council and one of the first African American women to be elected to the Council. She also served as an educator for 20 years, teaching students in secondary school. She dedicated her time to community service and development and was active in numerous causes, such as voting

rights, equal job opportunities, city government formation, and education (McEachin, 2013).

Katie McCray was an African American business owner noted for establishing one of the earliest hotels for American Americans in the Jacksonville community, in 1909. She is recognized in Jacksonville as a business and industry leader who worked to help transform many areas, including LaVilla's central business district (Davis & Burkei, 2018).

Mary Singleton was also a member of the Jacksonville City Council, one of the first African American women to be elected. She was an educator who taught junior and senior high school in the school district for several years. Mary was an educator and activist who focused her political career on issues concerning women's rights, public transportation, and resource development for low-income individuals (McEachin, 2013).

Eartha White was a humanitarian known for providing food and assistance through the Clara White Mission. She established the Jacksonville community's first retirement home for African American seniors and the first playground for African American children. Eartha was a community and business leader who, through her real estate investments and property acquisitions, provided space for African Americans to be cared for, live, work, and play (McEachin, 2013).

Bias

Florczak (2021) describes bias as "leaning unfairly toward a position that is not based on truth but rather on a personal viewpoint" (p. 20) and echoes Simundic's explanation of bias which states that it is "any trend or deviation from the truth in data collection, data analysis, interpretation and publication which can cause false

conclusions" (Simundic, 2013, p. 12). During the semi-structured interview, the researcher was careful about not integrating their personal experience with Title 1 high schools into the conversation. Instead, the researcher allowed participants to freely express their viewpoint and limited probing questions to queries linked to participant responses.

Member Checks

Motulsky (2021) describes member checks as a powerful tool to verify the interpretation of participant responses. The scholar discusses two common approaches to member checks: (a) the presentation of a transcript to the participant to view, edit, and correct and (b) providing participants with a prelude of themes and findings and asking for their response in a written or verbal format such as a follow-up interview (Motulsky, 2021). Carlson (2010) contends that member checking can be done throughout the research process by regularly providing "participants with [the researcher's] interpretations of the narratives for the purpose of verifying plausibility and asking: 'Am I on the right track? Did I understand this in the same way you meant'?" (p. 1105). Therefore, in this study, the researcher verified participant responses from the initial interview at the beginning of the follow-up interview and provided information about preliminary themes. The researcher summarized participant responses throughout the interviews and at the end of the follow-up interviews to allow for respondent feedback to confirm that the counselor's responses were interpreted as intended.

Delimitations of the Study

This study captured the perspective of five counselors representing five of the district's 11 Title 1 high schools. Although teachers and high school administrators are

partners in college and career transition planning, this study captured the perspectives and experiences of high school counselors. Therefore, research participants were delimited to high school counselors who served in a Title 1 high school in the 2020-2021 school year and participated in college and career transition planning. At the time of data collection, the participants in this study were currently serving as school counselors in a Title 1 high school.

Limitations

The study is limited to the perspective of African American female counselors. Five African American women agreed to participate in the study. As of the most recent 2023-2024 school year, according to the Florida Department of Education, 42% of the 198 counselors in Duval County Public Schools are African American women, and account for the majority of the population (Florida Department of Education, n.d.-j). Although this study is limited to the perspective of individuals who identified as female African Americans, research suggests that representation is a noted influence on student receptiveness to postsecondary counseling, and the schools in this study have an African American student population of 70%-90% (Fletcher, 2023; Ford, 2022; Lapan et al., 2017). Therefore, it is reasonable to presume that these African American counselors would have a robust perspective of student holistic preparedness and barriers students face in postsecondary transition.

Positionality

As the researcher and product of the DCPS system, I have similar experiences to students who attend Title I schools. A graduate of William M. Raines High School, I was a student who had very little awareness of self and could not confidently answer the

question, “What do you want to be when you grow up”? Like most children who hear and see professions on television, I would immediately answer this question with “Lawyer.” I was unaware of what it entailed, nor had I encountered many lawyers who could offer a first-hand account. The opportunity to explore this career or careers in general was limited in my high school 20 years ago. Resources and offers for career exploration and engagement were absent. Because of this, I and my classmates were largely uninformed of the value of college and unable to truly understand its benefits.

Looking back, I would describe myself as a high school scholar. I graduated seventh in my class, participated in dual enrollment, was a recipient of the Florida Bright Futures Scholarship, and was accepted into the University of Central Florida at the beginning of my senior year. However, I started college with minimal cognitive and non-cognitive skills, such as effective study habits and learning strategies, time management, interpersonal ability, and grit. Although I ultimately excelled in the postsecondary space, I now can envision how high school could have better prepared me for college, career, and life experiences. Most impactfully, I think about my high school classmates who were not scholars and did not excel in the academic space or attend college. I know firsthand because I have maintained those friendships into adulthood, and according to them, life was harder. My classmates and I were not exposed to many options, and our cognitive and non-cognitive skills were not developed as they should have been.

Professionally, I have worked in higher education for over 15 years as an advocate, providing resources to students like me. While in the higher education administrative space, I have been afforded the opportunity to teach the course SLS 1501 Strategies for Success in a Florida university. I taught two different sections for this

course — one in the summer semester and one in a fall semester. The first section of the course I taught was for students who participated in a summer program called Access. These students were conditionally admitted to the university, and their full acceptance was contingent upon successfully completing their summer courses. The second section was in a fall term with students who had no conditions for admittance into the university. The purpose of the course was to acclimate students to the university and the academic space, nurture their cognitive and non-cognitive skill sets, and promote collaboration and peer engagement.

A common theme that students in both sections shared was an absence of understanding as to why they were there — by there, I mean college. In an open discussion, I recall one student expressing that he had not declared a major because he did not want to be there. His parents made him attend college, but he knew he was not ready. The student was adamant that he would fail. Through further discussion with the student, he expressed that he felt that high school did not prepare him for the postsecondary journey. He described himself as a "typical smart student," and I distinctly remember him saying, "That is about it." I remember encouraging the student to explore careers to understand how college could be of value to him. I also encouraged him to explore options if he decided college was not yet for him.

Over the years, I have encountered many students in similar circumstances. In all instances, I could only think how these students could have been better prepared before entering the postsecondary space. I have also wondered if these students were presented with opportunities to develop life skills as well as information on options beyond immediate college enrollment, like cognitive and non-cognitive skill development, so that

they could reason for themselves and make logical decisions for their age and levels of maturity.

As such, this research is driven by my passion for seeing students have the necessary tools, skill sets, and resources to be successful regardless of their choice to immediately pursue college or career.

Chapter Summary

This chapter explained the study's methodology. It presented the exploratory research design, data collection procedures, and study instrument. The chapter also provided the study's research questions and illustrated their relationship to the conceptual framework and interview questions. Chapter 3 concluded with the strategy for data analysis and discussed the study's limitations and delimitations.

Chapter IV

FINDINGS

Chapter 3 presented the approach to research and the rationale for an exploratory research design. The chapter provided information on data collection procedures, the collection instrument used for the study, and an overview of the study's participants. Finally, Chapter 3 discussed the researcher's position and the data analysis method. Chapter 4 presents the findings of the study represented in seven themes, which are: (a) students have more access to college and career counseling than programs; (b) fewer students are prepared for college; more are prepared for a career; (c) academic rigor, cognitive, and non-cognitive ability impact overall preparedness; (d) barriers to college enrollment play a leading role in students' perception of preparedness; (e) parent engagement and involvement are critical in postsecondary transition planning; (f) district awareness of program outcomes and resource needs is a necessity; and (g) some college and career readiness programs ought to start earlier. The themes were derived from the analysis of participant interviews using an inductive approach that allowed the researcher to create categories that resulted in response commonalities and patterns.

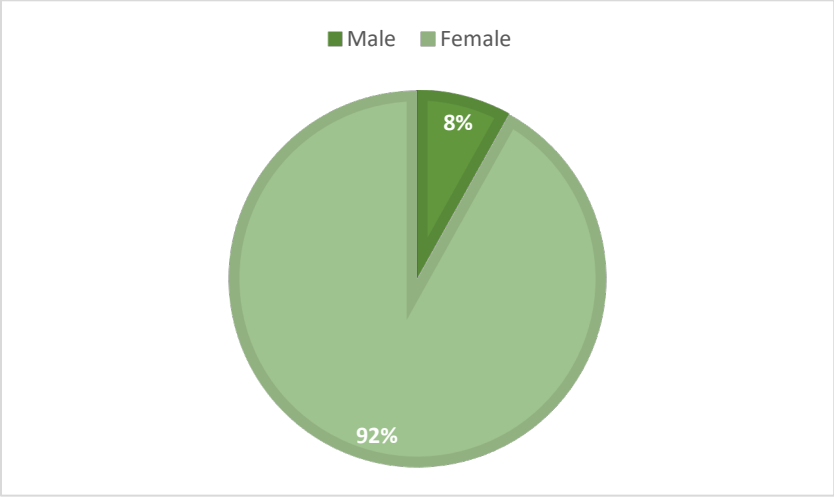
Participants

Five high school counselors participated in this study, which had an initial goal sample size of six counselors. Once the researcher concluded the initial and follow-up semi-structured interviews with the five participants, an attempt was made to recruit a sixth participant. The researcher sent an introductory email to one new counselor and a

follow-up email to two counselors who had received previous communication. The outreach did not result in an additional sixth participant.

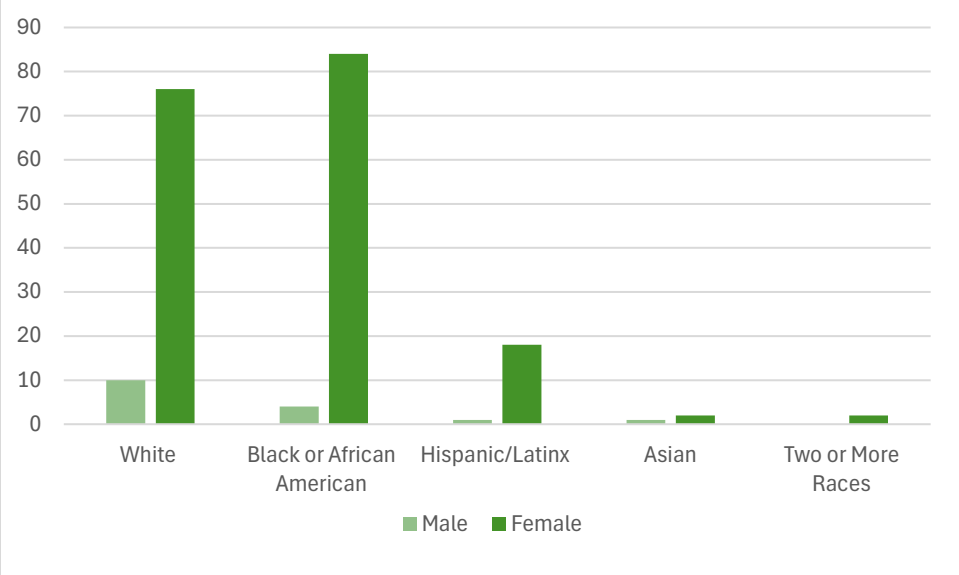
The represented high schools in this study were Andrew Jackson, Edward White, Sandalwood, Westside High, and William M. Raines. Each participant was over the age of 18 and a counselor in the 2020-2021 school year. Although the interviews were conducted in 2024, the 2020-2021 school year was selected for this study as it was, at the study's inception, the most recent year with high school graduation and postsecondary data for a Florida public institution. The participants' years of experience ranged from 5 to 20 years, with an average of 11 years, as reflected in Table 3. All participants were female and identified as African American.

According to the Florida Department of Education (n.d.-j) of the 198 counselors in DCPS in the 2023-2024 school year, African American females are the majority group. Of the 198 counselors in DCPS, 92% are female, and 8% are male, as reflected in Figure 6 (Florida Department of Education, n.d.-j).



Note. Data were obtained from the Florida Department of Education (n.d.-j).
Figure 6. *2023-2024 DCPS School Counselors by Gender*

Further, African Americans are currently the majority group in race/ethnicity of counselors, accounting for 44%, as reflected in Figure 7. White counselors are 43% of the population, Hispanic/Latinx 10%, Asian 2% and Other 1% (Florida Department of Education, n.d.-j). More specifically, for the five schools represented in this study, 61% of the counselors in the schools are female and African American. The variances are similar to student race/ethnicity demographics in the district, as African American students are the majority group and account for 40% of the population.



Note. Data were obtained from the Florida Department of Education (n.d.-j).

Figure 7. *2023-2024 DCPS School Counselors by Race/Ethnicity*

To maintain anonymity, each participant was assigned a pseudonym. Each pseudonym was derived from a historical figure who impacted the city of Jacksonville. These African American women made significant contributions to business and community development, civil rights activism, and education. The pseudonyms are Janet Johnson, Sallye B. Mathis, Katie McCray, Mary Singleton, and Eartha White.

Janet Johnson was an educator and humanitarian who served in Jacksonville, Florida's higher education sector, for nearly 30 years (Strickland, 2012). Sallye B. Mathis was also an educator and a devoted activist for many causes, such as voting rights, equal job opportunities, and city government formation (McEachin, 2013). Katie McCray was known for and recognized as a distinguished entrepreneur who worked to advance her surrounding community (Davis & Burkei, 2018). Similarly, Mary Singleton was an advocate for resource development in low-income communities while serving as an educator teaching junior and senior high students (McEachin, 2013). Finally, Eartha White was a humanitarian who established the first retirement home for African American seniors and provided food and other assistance to the community (McEachin, 2013).

Table 3. *Participant Years of Experience*

	Pseudonym	Years of Experience
Participant 1	Janet	18+ years
Participant 2	Sallye	15 years
Participant 3	Katie	5 years
Participant 4	Mary	10 years
Participant 5	Eartha	7 years

Duval County Public Schools College and Career Readiness Programs

Five participants were included in this study, representing five Title 1 High Schools in the DCPS district. In DCPS, federal, or state college and career readiness programs are not offered in every Title 1 high school. Instead, CCR counseling is more

widely available than programs. Of the five schools, two participate in ETS, two in AVID, and two in the GEAR UP program. One school participates in both the GEAR UP and ETS programs.

The GEAR UP program is cohort-based, and students must enter the program in the seventh grade. The students are supported throughout their secondary career to assist with high school completion as well as college and career readiness. Similarly, AVID is offered in select schools and prepares students for college and careers. These students must take an AVID elective course each year, a course designed to improve their writing, collaboration, reading, organization, and inquiry skills. Lastly, ETS, a federal TRIO program, offers academic support and mentorship to guide students through high school toward college enrollment.

Key Findings by Research Questions

This case study explored college and career readiness programs in select Duval County's Title 1 high schools to understand program equity and accessibility, holistic student preparedness, and barriers that impact students' postsecondary transition. To gain perspectives related to each study objective, this study targeted high school counselors, professionals that are tasked with facilitating college and career-ready interventions. The study was guided by three research questions, which, through participant responses, resulted in seven significant themes to answer and provide context for the set of questions. Specifically, the themes were created using an inductive approach to data analysis to find patterns and generalizations in participant responses and were guided by the conceptual framework. Table 4 provides a summary of key findings for each research question based on participant responses.

Table 4. *Key Findings by Research Question*

RQ 1:	How do counselors perceive the equity and accessibility of college and career readiness programs available within the Duval County School District?
	Theme 1: Students have more access to college and career counseling than programs. • College and career programs in practice focus on 11th and 12th grade students. • College and career programs are voluntary and geared toward students who are apt to attend college. • Schools rely on federal and state programs to offer college and career training. • College and career counseling is more common than formalized programs.
RQ 2:	How do counselors perceive student preparedness for college? How do counselors perceive student preparedness for a career?
	Theme 2: Fewer students are prepared for college; more are prepared for a career. • High-performing students are more prepared for college. • A high percentage of students is already working. Theme 3: Academic rigor, cognitive, and non-cognitive ability impact overall preparedness • High school academic curricula could be more rigorous to prepare students for college courses. • Students could benefit from programming to build critical thinking, logic, and reasoning skills. • Students could benefit from services to improve non-cognitive skill development. Theme 4: Barriers to college enrollment play a leading role in students' perception of readiness. • Students express a lack of financial resources as a barrier to college enrollment. • Students experience a lack of familial support in postsecondary transition planning. • Students express a lack of self-efficacy related to college academic success.
RQ 3:	What additional support is needed, if any, for students in the Duval County School District to address barriers to being college and career ready?
	Theme 5: Parent engagement and involvement is critical in postsecondary transition planning. • Parents were identified as most responsible for students' postsecondary transition planning. • Parental involvement or lack thereof influences students' thoughts toward college or career.

	Theme 6: District awareness of program outcomes and resource needs is a necessity. • Schools need more counselors to serve the entire student body adequately. • There is a disconnect between school and district regarding program mandates versus program outcomes. Theme 7: Some college and career readiness programs ought to start earlier. • Students need life skill development as early as ninth grade. • Students can benefit from hands-on experiences.

Theme One: Students Have More Access to College and Career Counseling Than Programs

Four of the five counselors in this study believed that college and career readiness programs are primarily available to their students. However, one counselor, Sallye, felt that CCR programs were not equally accessible to the students in her school because of program qualifiers. This is mainly because some federal programs operate in cohorts. For example, the GEAR UP federal program is administered through the schools but in cohorts where most students begin working with the program in the seventh grade. For some schools, CCR federal programs are minimal, so if students do not participate in a federal program, they do not receive the same degree of college and career support as their peers. However, Janet believed that the counselor's approach to readiness can atone for this, stating:

> So, we do not necessarily have a program within the school per se; we more or less have a mindset. You know that when we are working with kids, the end goal is to have them do something, go to college, do something.

Federal programs are a large part of CCR preparedness, yet not all students participate. Considering this, four counselors felt that students still had access to resources. Specifically, Janet stated, "If they want access, they can have access," which

means that students were still able to receive information about college and careers regardless of their participation in a program generally, because district policies account for some college and career interventions for 12th grade students. For example, per Janet, counselors are required to directly facilitate or arrange for speakers to administer federal financial aid informational sessions. She also discussed district policy changes that require all students to take two or more language courses, which qualifies them for college admissions. In addition, per policies, the counselors are tasked with conducting senior checks. The counselors described this as a mandate designed to make sure students are on track to graduate high school but also as an opportunity for them to discuss their postsecondary plans.

All of the counselors discussed their approach to college and career readiness and the services offered to students in their schools to either complement federal programs or atone for their absence. Three counselors discussed a more proactive approach to fostering readiness and engagement with students, while the other two shared a more passive method. As an example of a more proactive approach, Eartha discussed initiatives that meet students where they are, such as holding space in a lunchroom or having specific themed events where students are supported in completing college and scholarship applications. Mary indicated that students and families are introduced to CCR programs at student open houses and orientation and given the opportunity to join. She also discussed the CCR program strategy at her school, stating that "From August to December the counseling team, we, work with seniors on postsecondary readiness. We are helping them with completing the FAFSA, completing college applications, and applying for scholarships."

Katie starts the postsecondary transition conversation with her students by implementing a personality assessment. She describes this readiness strategy as helping students discover themselves, including their interests and what they are good at. She felt that the test was an introduction to a career readiness course that is taught at her school. Katie indicated that she does this because if a student is not attending a magnet or career academy school, then they do not have as comprehensive career preparation.

The counselors described their approach to college and career preparedness by student classification. For example, three types of students emerged in the discussion, correlated with degree of engagement. Students were described as either being sure about college, slightly unsure but interested, or not at all interested. The students who were described coming into high school as being sure about college were the students who benefitted most from CCR programs. They were portrayed as students who engaged the most. Mary felt that, although there is access to CCR counseling, a large percentage of the students in her school are not at all interested, so it impacts CCR programming holistically. Katie agreed, so she offers her students incentives to engage in programs. Janet takes the approach of not pushing college on her students. Instead, she said that she "encourages students in whatever interest they express, whether it is cosmetology or plumbing." All of the counselors discussed career fairs and their goals of hosting at least one per year. Mary and Eartha mainly host senior students at their career fairs and occasionally invite high school juniors.

All of the counselors in this study acknowledged that in practice, despite GEAR UP and AVID, CCR programming and counseling is mainly targeted toward junior and senior students. Janet discussed that she would often "pull high achieving junior and

senior students in when colleges or universities come to visit." Comparably, Mary and Katie only invite junior and senior students to their career fairs. All of the counselors are aware that CCR resources should be provided earlier to students, but all discussed time constraints as a limitation, so their efforts are focused on junior and senior students.

The counselors in this study mostly believed that students have access to programs or resources, but three of the counselors acknowledged that counseling practices and student-counselor relationships play a role in student receptiveness and the degree to which students engage with programs and resources on the high school campus. Janet talked about her experiences with counselors "just checking a box" and not telling the students about all options available to them. She referenced an example of a colleague's interaction with a student who was facing homelessness while navigating the college application process. She felt that the student was dismissed or passed along instead of the student being advised of the additional resources that could be available to them because of their circumstance. Janet believed that when counselors "only do what it required" and do not go above and beyond for their students, the student is negatively affected.

Theme Two: Fewer Students are Prepared for College; More are Prepared for a Career

Four out of five counselors vehemently stated that the majority of their students are not prepared for college. Mary felt that only about 20-25% of her school's student body are prepared for college, which are the students who are enrolled in academically rigorous courses. She further felt that 40% could be prepared if they listened to the person supporting them and utilized resources. However, the other 35-40% are not at all prepared. Comparably, Sallye explained that:

> As a whole, like, you will have the few that are, that are prepared, but as a whole, I do not think they are prepared. Socially, and emotionally, I think we have to do a lot of pushing and handholding, and they are not as self-motivated, or intrinsically motivated, as they should be, especially if you are talking about going to a postsecondary institution. Academically, I do not know that the rigor is there for them to compete on the college level.

All of the counselors believed that their students are more prepared for a career. Two of the five counselors felt that their students had more motivation to apply for jobs than to apply for and enroll in college. Janet expressed that it is because they are already working and supporting families, either because they are teen parents with their own familial responsibilities, or they are helping to subsidize their family's household expenses. Mary echoed Janet, stating that approximately 35% of her student body is already working. Mary believed that her students lack the academic rigor and critical thinking skills for successful postsecondary enrollment. However, she also stated that some students feel like they have to work immediately after high school instead of college because they need money. Mary felt that her students are more committed to a job and to making money than thinking about other options for their future.

Janet and Mary felt that there is a lack of commitment to pursuing postsecondary education options. For example, Mary stated "students will start in the program in ninth grade but by 12th grade year there are less. We can start with 100 students in TRIO in ninth grade and by 12th grade there are 20 because students are less committed."

Katie felt that the majority of students in her school are not going to college, so they often forgo college preparedness programs. Katie stated that "most of the students

want to start working. Right now, I would say the majority of students within our school are not going to college, they want to go directly into the workforce, they want to start working." Because Katie recognizes this, she works with community organizations and the City of Jacksonville, which has a program that supports students during a potential gap year between high school and college enrollment, and also with companies such as FedEx, UPS, and Amazon to support her students who express interest in going directly into the workforce. Unlike the other four counselors, Katie's experience has been with many students immediately entering the workforce and then deciding to enroll in college one to several years later. In fact, when I asked Katie if her students were prepared for a career, she stated the following:

> I think they are. Moreover, I say that because many of them are already working. So, they understand punctuality; they understand what their bosses are asking of them. Moreover, many of them are in those programs or they are in the elective course, so they are doing mock interviews, they have to turn in cover letters, so they are being aware of what is needed, the skills they need for the career path they are interested in.

Three of the five counselors have career academies at their schools, so students can obtain industry certifications and credentials to enter the workforce. However, the counselors do not attribute the students being more ready for a career to the career academies. Janet felt that students are consumed by earning and attributed it to social media and "the illusion that students their age are living a luxe lifestyle."

Theme Three: Academic Rigor, Cognitive, and Non-Cognitive Ability Impact Overall Preparedness

All the counselors said that only a small percentage of their students was ready for college. Ready was defined as having the academic preparation, critical thinking, emotional intelligence, and social skills to excel in the postsecondary space. Eartha said two-thirds of her graduating class are "possibly" prepared for the academic rigor of college; others are not. Mary indicated that 20-25% of the students at her school are prepared for college, academically and socially, because they are the students who are in more rigorous courses. Both Mary and Eartha described the "ready" students as top scholars, students who are in AP courses or dual-enrolled in college courses. They indicated that these students were also involved in extracurricular activities, so they displayed a degree of social skills that could benefit them in a college environment. However, Katie disagreed. Although the top students at her school were academically prepared, she did not believe that they had sufficient cognitive and non-cognitive skills, stating, "I feel like the students will struggle with critical thinking."

The counselors collectively had strong feelings about the academic readiness of their students for college level work. Sallye stated, "academically, I do not know that the rigor is there for them to compete on the college level." Janet referenced her students' assessment scores, indicating that several of their students struggled with reading. She gave an example of a graduating senior who reads on a fifth-grade level but has been passed along and not evaluated properly. Mary had similar concerns, mentioning that her students struggled with writing. Often, her students would not apply for scholarships because they needed to write an essay and avoided doing so. Katie suggested that the

curriculum could be more rigorous to better prepare students for college but also questioned if student challenges in academic readiness was actually a curriculum issue. Perhaps it could be the way that information is presented to students, and teaching should be evaluated. Mary had similar thoughts and suggested that students are not given assignments that induce critical thinking.

Janet gave a potential reason for students' academic deficiency, noting that the most recent group, the 2024 graduating class, started high school in the COVID era. Janet explained that these students are academically years behind because they were limited to online instruction for many months, and for some, “they do not learn best that way.” Janet described her students’ needs, academically, socially, and emotionally, as complex. “There are five kids in the classroom, but there are really 50 kids in the room.” All of the counselors said that holistic student readiness is absent. Mary felt that although only about 5% of their students have critical thinking and “life skills,” counselors are not and should not be tasked with teaching these skills.

Theme Four: Barriers to College Enrollment Play a Leading Role in Students' Perception of Preparedness

The counselors in this study all have direct experience helping students navigate barriers that impact students completing high school, enrolling in college, or generally having a postsecondary transition plan. Whether the barriers relate to financial, academic preparedness, familial responsibility, or parental involvement challenges, the counselors discussed how these barriers place students at a disadvantage and discourage them from engaging in college and career readiness programs. The most common barrier that emerged from the interviews was financial difficulty. Each counselor cited finances as a

leading cause of students not attending college. For example, Janet realized that several students work and support their families, and those life factors prevent them from being able to focus on their academics solely. Similarly, Katie stated that "we do have students who pay real bills, they pay rent, and for those students it is kind of hard for them to work full time and come to school."

When asked what students perceive as a barrier, Eartha said, "Finances, whether their parents are well off, or their parents may struggle financially, that is the biggest hurdle." Comparably, Mary stated that about 75% of their student body discuss finances as a barrier to attending college. Specifically, Mary said:

> Duval has school choice. So, a lot of our students are probably not even from the surrounding area, they could be from anywhere in the city. So that 75% figure is not just because of the surrounding area, it is just what students and families are experiencing.

In relation to finances, two counselors spoke about students having concerns about basic needs related to attending college, such as transportation, food, clothes, and dorm supplies. Eartha cited several examples of discussions she has had with students to help alleviate their concerns regarding basic needs. Eartha found that students were not aware of how to access resources to assist themselves, so they would retreat and not engage in the CCR process or attempt college enrollment. However, Mary reported that students now have more resources than ever before, so they should be advocates for themselves. Nevertheless, according to Mary, students do not use the resources. Mary reported that about 70% of students in their school do not use access to resources to their

benefit. When asked what students perceive as a barrier to attending college, Eartha responded:

> Honestly, just knowing what to expect, knowing how to apply, knowing if they can leave the state of Florida or even if they can leave the city of Jacksonville. Just having the necessary resources is what really is the biggest thing, not just financially, but just resources in general. Like will I have transportation? Will I have clothes? Will I have dorm supplies? Things that they will need to survive while they are in college. I think that is their biggest concern.

Another barrier discussed by the study participants was students' limiting beliefs about their future. Every counselor discussed students' lack of self-motivation and esteem when it came to planning for their future. Often, in counseling sessions, students would express perceptions of failure and fear as it related to attending college. Katie cited several examples of her students' limiting beliefs and explained that she uses students' discussion of such beliefs as an opportunity to challenge their assumptions. Eartha's students also express self-doubt but she is not surprised by it and expects a degree of uncertainty for individuals their age. Specifically, Eartha said:

> Students constantly express self-doubt but I believe it to be the norm because they are teenagers. And I do feel social media plays a big impact on their confidence, because they're looking at things and goals that are kind of not unattainable, but just not realistic in the sense of how the real-world works.

A third barrier experienced by the students and counselors was a lack of parental support. Sallye found that many of her students experience difficulty in their home life. For some of the students, a high school diploma is not a priority in the home amongst

parents. Although the counselors wanted more parental involvement, several counselors understood why parents were not as engaged. Mary gave cause, acknowledging that parents lack understanding of postsecondary options. Mary stated, "And that is the barrier too for many of our parents. They have never been to college, so they do not know the process or what to do."

A fourth barrier that was briefly mentioned was some counselors' approach to advising students. Janet cited several examples of a lax style of counseling students. Per district policies, counselors are required to conduct senior checks to make sure that students are on track to graduate high school. During the senior check, counselors are expected to converse with students about their current circumstances and postsecondary plan; however, Janet felt that, at times, counselors do not provide students with all of the resources that could be available to them. She discussed this to be a barrier because, as she stated, "students do not know unless we tell them."

Theme Five: Parent Engagement and Involvement are Critical in Postsecondary Transition Planning

Four out of the five counselors ranked parents as most responsible for students' postsecondary transition, compared to teachers, counselors, school administrators, and the student themselves. Eartha said, "I believe parents to be the foundational place for our students." Katie felt that parents are most critical to a student's education because "they form the foundation for their child, and if we do not have that, if students do not have that, then it makes our jobs a little bit more difficult." All of the counselors recognized parental support, or lack thereof, to be critical to how the student perceives readiness and engages in decision-making about their future.

Several of the counselors discussed how parental support is severely lacking in their schools and the degree to which students are affected by it. Janet referenced several examples of parents' influence on a student's education. In one example Janet described a counseling session where the parent decided that at GED was sufficient for her child because the parent had one. The student was behind in their courses and not on track to graduate high school or attend college, and Janet was attempting to work with the student to create a plan. As another example, Janet worked with a student who was academically college ready with higher test scores than his peers but instead, because of parental nudging, chose to work a blue-collar job with his parent versus attending college. In situations like these, all of the counselors recognized how parents' influence supersedes the work of the counselor.

The lack of parental involvement was described by all the counselors as a pain point. Katie indicated that one of her biggest challenges in counseling students is the inability to reach and communicate with their parents. In advising sessions to review a student's academic standing and graduation requirements, and to discuss postsecondary plans, Katie often likes to include parents, but they are rarely available or interested, per Katie. Katie described parent participation in her school as very low. Similarly, Sallye rated parent participation as low to nonexistent. The degree of parent participation at Sallye's school is so low that she rated parents as least responsible for students' postsecondary transition plans. When asked if her rating was the result of her experience, she agreed and acknowledged that it should not be so, but it is.

According to Eartha, one influential type of parent is the "helicopter parent." This type of parent makes choices for the student and does not allow the student to have

autonomy in their postsecondary transition planning. Eartha insinuated that this can adversely affect students, preventing them from being able to critically think and engage in decision-making.

The counselors recognize that for some students, parent involvement cannot improve, whether because the parent is incarcerated, the student is homeless, or the parent does not have a high school diploma or college degree, so they place little value on an education. To improve this dynamic at her school, Katie expressed interest in engaging with a community organization that will come into the school to talk about the parent-student relationship and the importance of parent involvement. Janet said that she would often invest in students personally to help them navigate their barriers, when parental support is lacking. Katie, Janet, and Eartha each discussed the way they form relationships with their students and how identifying with students helps in relationship building, especially when parental support is absent. Students are then more receptive to the guidance that counselor is giving because they connect through similar experiences.

Theme Six: District Awareness of Program Outcomes and Resource Needs is a Necessity

All five of the counselors discussed the need for additional staffing support. Eartha indicated that, on her campus, the counselors have 40% more students per counselor than what national models recommend. Every counselor in the study expressed the desire to engage more with their students but felt limited because of administrative processes that lead to time constraints. Mary described it as having to do more with less, which means more responsibilities with less staff. Janet felt that district offices were overstaffed in comparison to the schools. Per Eartha, “when schools are understaffed, it

lessens the effectiveness of really helping students and making sure we are monitoring them because we are stretched thin."

In addition to discussing staffing shortages, four of the five counselors felt that the district office is disconnected from the day-to-day realities of what occurs in the schools. Mary felt that sometimes public schools are used as "lab rats," and programs are tried with these students that would not be tried in private schools. Three out of the five counselors rated their own responsibility for postsecondary transition planning after that of school administration. Katie provided cause stating, that "for a lot of programming and initiatives, it requires administration's buy-in and district approval. Because of ethics and policies, there are certain programs that cannot be implemented without administrative approval."

The counselors in this study all felt that programs should be implemented with student needs in mind. Often, programs are implemented at the district level with a "one-size-fits-all" approach. Several of the counselors felt that this approach to program creation and implementation does not consider the complexities and variances of student needs, specifically that of students in Title 1 schools. Instead, Katie thought a task force, including a representative from each school, would be beneficial in speaking on behalf of students and staff to ensure that individual needs are heard. This would also then allow for evaluation to determine if programs are meeting their desired outcomes and objectives.

Human and capital resources were a third area of need addressed by Katie, Janet, and Eartha. Specifically, building needs and the upkeep of high school campuses were addressed. Janet felt that her campus does not receive the same resources from the district

in comparison to schools that are close in proximity. As an example, Janet mentioned the lack of monetary resources for student programs such as college tours. To support the school when there is limited funding for programming, expanded community involvement was raised as a remedy. A mentorship program supported by high school alumni was proposed to help students in cases where parental engagement and familial support are lacking. Specifically, Janet said, "I feel sometimes we need more volunteers to come in and maybe like mentor kids, or help in the hallways or you know, just talk to that kid, that extra person that's just there." Similarly, Katie advocated for community partnerships that could educate parents so that they understand the importance of their presence.

Theme Seven: Some College and Career Readiness Programs Ought to Start Earlier

The counselors in this study agreed that college and career readiness programs should start earlier. Specifically, Eartha says, "CCR programs should start from the ground up, and students should receive more than just informational sessions but hands-on experiences in different career fields of interest before the senior year." College and career guidance and counseling practices, excluding federal programs, are aimed at junior and senior students. Absent programs such as GEAR UP and AVID, students in lower grades do not receive the same degree of college and career resources. Several counselors provided an explanation, such as time constraints and monetary resources, but acknowledged that ninth and 10th grade students could equally benefit from CCR program services.

The goal of secondary education is high school completion. A concentrated effort is placed toward ensuring that junior and senior students are taking the necessary

coursework to complete high school and qualify for college admission. Because of this focus and district policies that guide activities around junior and senior students, ninth and 10th students are not as privy to postsecondary transition discussions. For example, Eartha says “I start college and career counseling in the junior year, so the ninth and 10th graders, I will say sometimes fall through the cracks because I really focus on making sure that our school has the highest graduation rate.”

Student support structures toward college and career readiness that start in earlier grades can benefit students’ cognitive and non-cognitive skills and support life skill development. All the counselors felt that some of their students did not have adequate decision-making and life skills to contribute toward their postsecondary plans. Although Sallye was not confident that her students would participate unless mandated, every other counselor felt that early CCR interventions could benefit students. Engaging with students early and often was believed to be a path to assist more students in being ready for college and careers.

Saturation

The study's initial planned sample size was six counselors representative of six Title 1 high schools in Duval County. However, five counselors participated in the study. Although a sixth participant was not obtained, the researcher determined that the study reached data and thematic saturation. Data saturation is met when “new data repeat what was expressed in previous data” (Sebele-Mpofu, 2020, p. 6), and thematic saturation occurs when new themes do not emerge from further data. Similarly, Tight (2023) asserts that saturation happens when an additional dataset does not result in new concepts or findings. The counselors in this study all expressed generally similar experiences with

students, programming, student preparedness, understaffing, and administrative barriers. As female counselors account for 92% of the counselor population, with African American women being the majority, the researcher concluded, guided by Urquhart's (2012) interpretation of saturation, that it was met, and a sixth participant was likely to result in “mounting instances of the same code but no new ones” (Urquhart, 2012, p.194).

Chapter Summary

This chapter presented the findings from the semi-structured interviews, offering narratives from each participant. The chapter began with an explanation of participant pseudonyms coupled with the years of experience for each study participant. Seven themes emerged from the analysis of interviews and corresponded to the three research questions. The themes are (1) students have more access to college and career counseling than programs; (2) fewer students are prepared for college; more are prepared for a career; (3) academic rigor, cognitive, and non-cognitive ability impact overall preparedness; (4) barriers to college enrollment play a leading role in students’ perception of preparedness; (5) parent engagement and involvement are critical in postsecondary transition planning; (6): district awareness of program outcomes and resource needs is a necessity; and (7) some college and career readiness programs ought to start earlier. The seven themes address program equity and access, student preparedness, and resource needs.

Chapter V

DISCUSSION

Seven themes emerged from this study to summarize the perspectives of Title 1 high school counselors in Duval County Public Schools on college and career program access, student preparedness for college and career, and barriers to postsecondary transition. The study's findings articulate CCR counseling practices while highlighting program inequities, describing student preparedness, and specifying support structures to mitigate barriers:

- Students have more access to college and career counseling than programs.
- Fewer students are prepared for college; more are prepared for a career.
- Academic rigor, cognitive, and non-cognitive ability impact overall preparedness.
- Barriers to college enrollment play a leading role in students' perception of preparedness.
- Parent engagement and involvement are critical in postsecondary transition planning.
- District awareness of program outcomes and resource needs is a necessity.
- Some college and career readiness programs ought to start earlier.

Students who attend systematically under-resourced schools and are in vulnerable populations, including low-income, first-generation, and students of color, are at a greater disadvantage than their peers for college and career readiness (Cook et al., 2021). The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore college and career readiness programs in

DCPS's Title 1 high schools to understand (a) the equity and accessibility of college and career readiness programs for academic and non-academic skill development, (b) holistic student preparedness, and (c) and barriers to being college and career ready. This study builds on existing research and captures the day-to-day realities of student preparedness from the perspective of the education staff most responsible, the high school counselor. Therefore, the findings of this study are significant because, per Lindstrom et al. (2022), an in-depth understanding of the counselor's perspective allows researchers and administrators to "gain critical knowledge to improve current systems and approaches" (p. 224).

The high school counselors who participated in this study are the individuals in the secondary education system who bear the most responsibility for student postsecondary readiness. Secondary to a parent or guardian, research contends that the counselor is the primary person to prepare students for postsecondary transition (Perez-Felkner, 2015). According to Stone-Johnson (2015), counselors are charged with student development, including goal setting, transition plans, and self-understanding. School counselor behavior is regulated through state mandates, district policies, and national boards that are designed to propose counseling best practices.

The key findings in this exploratory case study are consistent with research that discusses financial impediments, parental involvement, and academic ability as barriers to postsecondary enrollment (Bettencourt et al., 2022; Ober et al., 2020; Tsai et al., 2022; Yavuz et al., 2019). Although complex and often interchangeable, college and career readiness are a cohesive set of skills that students need to navigate life post-high school. As consistently presented in research, students in underserved populations, such as low-

income communities and first-generation college students are not often adequately prepared for college or careers, compared to their peers (e.g., G. Johnson, 2017). This can be most prevalent in Title 1 high schools where 50-75% of the student population is deemed economically disadvantaged. However, the counselors in this study offered a counter-narrative to career readiness as students were believed to be more ready for careers than college.

The findings also reveal a correlation between the school's fiscal and human resources and barriers to students being adequately prepared for postsecondary transition. In Title 1 schools, funding models allocate dollars toward college and career readiness interventions. These resources are provided to expose economically disadvantaged students to college and career opportunities and support them in postsecondary enrollment. The counselors in this study discussed funding as a needed resource to help students become interested and better prepared for postsecondary enrollment. Further, the findings revealed that limited staffing was a barrier to students as counselors were not able to allocate the time they felt they needed to support students in postsecondary transition decision-making.

RQ 1: How Do Counselors Perceive the Equity and Accessibility of College and Career Readiness Programs Available Within the Duval County School District?

College and career readiness programs and practices are varied and complex. The high school counselors in this study acknowledged that CCR program offerings are the result of federal and state initiatives facilitated by program coordinators in their high schools. The counselors frequently discussed three CCR programs: GEAR UP, AVID, and ETS, which is a TRIO program. These programs have eligibility requirements for

participation. For example, GEAR UP takes a cohort approach, and students must enter the program in the seventh grade. Excluding federal and state programs, the counselors acknowledge that college and career programs, in a formal sense, are not created in and on behalf of the high school. This reality interferes with students' access to college and career programs. In DCPS, the existing CCR programs are not offered in every Title 1 School. Most of the schools represented in this study have one federal, state, or national program available to their students, as reflected in Table 5.

Table 5. *College and Career Readiness Programs*

	School 1	School 2	School 3	School 4	School 5
GEAR UP	X	X			
ETS	X			X	
AVID			X		X

Note. Information is compiled from Duval County Public Schools (n.d.-d; n.d.-e) and Florida State College at Jacksonville (n.d.).

This study did not investigate why these programs are designated for a specific school but focused on the counselor's experience with what was present. The counselors in this study acknowledged that formal programs were limited. In the Duval County School District, students have the right to attend any school through what the district calls school choice. Therefore, it is likely that if a student transfers schools, they may not have access to a program in which they were once participating. The counselors did not explicitly discuss how a change in school would affect students participating in a program, but it was insinuated that they would somehow be impacted.

The counselors in this study recognized the challenges with equity and accessibility of college and career programs, so instead leverage counseling practices to

support students in their readiness. In discussing their approach to postsecondary transition planning with students, it was evident that the counselors were attempting to follow national models on counseling approaches to college and career readiness. The College Board National Office for School Counselor Advocacy (2010) identified eight components of CCR counseling to yield positive results. Of the eight components, four became most apparent through the semi-structured interviews, including:

> 1. College Affordability Planning: Provide students and families with comprehensive information about college costs, options for paying for college, and financial aid and scholarships.
> 2. College and Career Admission Processes: Ensure that students and families have an early and ongoing understanding of the college and career application and admission processes.
> 3. Transition from High School Graduate to College Enrollment: Connect students to school and community resources to help the students' overcome barriers.
> 4. College Aspirations: Build a college-going culture based on early college awareness by nurturing students' confidence in their ability to aspire to college. (College Board National Office for School Counselor Advocacy, 2010, p. 3)

College and career counseling and a proactive approach to providing resources to students were discussed by the study participants, but the discussion was limited to mostly junior and senior student populations. In relation to equity in college and career counseling, this study found that absent formal programs, freshman and sophomore students did not have the same access to college and career counseling conversations

as more advanced high school students. This occurrence for freshman and sophomore students specifically is consistent with research that suggests that students in underserved populations such as Title 1 schools generally receive insufficient guidance from their high schools for college preparation (Tsai et al., 2022). I recognized from the interviews that there are external factors that influence the counselor's ability to offer this support to students in lower grades. The counselors felt that these factors were beyond their control.

RQ 2: How Do Counselors Perceive Student Preparedness for College? How Do Counselors Perceive Student Preparedness for a Career?

The findings in this study reflected a unanimous perspective from the counselors regarding student preparedness for college. Students were generally viewed as unprepared for college but more prepared for a career. The counselor's perception of students' career preparedness was largely impacted by the percentage of their student body who were already working. This viewpoint is slightly inconsistent with existing research that argues that there is a lack of career readiness in students due to the quality of high school counseling alongside the absence of educational assessments that could construct a deeper meaning for students, to aid in their career decision-making processes (Conley, 2015). Nonetheless, the counselors in this study cited specific reasons to justify their viewpoint on student preparedness.

First, except for high-achieving students, other senior students specifically were viewed as lacking the academic background to excel in postsecondary education. The educational curriculum was quoted as an element that could be improved to better prepare students. This aligns with existing research that contends that the high school

curriculum does not adequately prepare students for college enrollment, leaving students underprepared and uninformed (Mokher & Jacobson, 2021). In relation to the curriculum and students' ability to process and regurgitate information, critical thinking was highlighted as an absent component of holistic readiness, whether college or career. The National Education Association (2012) defines critical thinking as "the ability to compare evidence, evaluate competing claims, and make sensible decisions" (p. 8). In relation to learning, critical thinking skills support students' ability to problem-solve, make sound decisions, and reason (Kramer et al., 2021). The counselors in this study perceived a large population of their graduating class to not have the academic skills for college. Their perspective of student preparedness for college is consistent with data for DCPS schools that show a trend of below state averages for immediate enrollment in a Florida postsecondary 2-year or 4-year institution (Florida Department of Education, 2021).

Secondly, student non-cognitive development, specifically their interpersonal skills, communication, self-efficacy, and motivation, were found to impact both college and career preparedness. The counselors in this study experienced students who did not believe in their skills or ability to attend college. Before CCR counseling, these students would have already dismissed the idea that college was a possibility for them, either because of their beliefs in themselves or their lack of communication with school counselors. For underserved student populations, Lindstrom et al. (2022) recognize how low self-efficacy beliefs impact student preparedness and suggest that these students should receive additional support when they are disengaged and have "limited aspirations for the future" (p. 232).

The barriers that students experience were depicted as influencing their minimal preparation for college and drive toward a career. Familial responsibility and financial strain were two commonly discussed barriers that influenced the choices students made about their future. Bettencourt et al. (2022) noted that although low-income students aspire to attend college, going is often impractical due to financial constraints and the view of college as unaffordable. The feasibility of immediate college enrollment is then forfeited for entrance into the workforce due to the perceived notion of increased financial stability (Bettencourt et al., 2022). The counselors' viewpoints in this study were consistent with research findings, often citing specific examples of students who were already working and chose to continue in the workforce due to the perceived notion that other options were not feasible.

RQ 3: What Additional Support is Needed, if Any, for Students in the Duval County School District to Address Barriers to Being College and Career Ready?

Several barriers prevent students from being ready for college and careers, such as academic preparation, self-efficacy, and financial and familial responsibilities. The counselors in this study discussed these barriers and offered solutions and resources that could help them better serve their students. Consistent with existing research (e.g., Castro, 2020; Kim, Hoskins et al., 2021; Mokher & Jacobson, 2021), student academic preparation was a barrier considered by all the counselors. The rigor of the school curriculum was viewed as unhelpful in preparing students for postsecondary education. Specifically, the counselors spoke to students' reading levels and the degree to which the current curriculum induces critical thinking. According to the counselors in the study these elements relate to students' self-efficacy in the domain of college academic

achievement. Students were described as having a limiting viewpoint of their future which influenced their participation in college and career planning. The college readiness theory speaks to holistic readiness and recognizes that students must have personal aspirations and believe in their abilities (Conley, 2008). The counselors in this study all discussed the ways they challenge students' limiting beliefs and how they support them in building personal confidence. However, the counselors conversed about time constraints that restrict one-on-one time with students, as well as the resources they need to further support their students.

Counselors are leaders in postsecondary transition discussions but should not be alone in this work (G. Johnson, 2017). According to G. Johnson (2017), counselors need broader educational system and community support. Every counselor in this study brought attention to understaffing and their need for additional counselors so that they can offer more college and career planning support to the entire student body. This would allow college and career conversations to start earlier, specifically with freshman and sophomore students. The American School Counselor Association (Rakestraw, 2023) recommends that the counselor-to-student ratio be 250:1 with the intention that counselors spend more direct time with students. Research suggests that a smaller student caseload for each counselor increases the likelihood that students have the opportunity to engage with counselors to discuss postsecondary transition plans (Bryan et al., 2009; Danos, 2017). For each of the five schools reflected in this study, the counselor-to-student ratio exceeds the 250:1 recommendation. The ratios range from 350:1 to 550:1. Additionally, changes in staffing loads were described by the study participants as a way to reduce administrative barriers and allow the counselors to be more present with

students. Per Ellis and Helaire (2021), “the college readiness counseling that low-income and racial-ethnic minority students receive is driven by the resources available to counselors, the college information counselors disseminate, and the expectations counselors have for students they advise” (p. 168).

In addition to district administrative support through additional staffing, more community support was found to be a needed help for students and counselors. A method of support, only mentioned by one counselor in the interviews but worth noting, was support from alumni in the community. Specifically with regard to African American students in urban schools, A. Johnson (2017), through a survey of former students in two Jacksonville, Florida’s urban high schools, found that alumni could contribute to students’ college preparation, self-efficacy, spirituality, and relationship building through visibility. Similarly in a study to understand the barriers Latinx students face in pursuing postsecondary education with a goal of building resilience, Rivera et al. (2019) discussed the Ford Driving Dream Program, a collaboration between businesses, community stakeholders and an urban school district, and highlighted how this partnership motivated and empowered students.

Finally, and most widely discussed, parental presence was raised as the most critical support needed to help students overcome barriers to being college and career ready. In fact, most counselors rated parents as primarily responsible for students' postsecondary transition plans. Ellis and Helaire (2021) suggest that “college readiness is shaped by parental educational beliefs and expectations, and parental behaviors that advocate for their children’s academic development and degree attainment” (p. 167). The counselors in this study all expressed discontent with parent visibility and engagement.

Student motivation toward college and career preparation was described as often negatively impacted by parental absence. Many suggestions for student support were presented by the counselors, but parental involvement was described as most critical for students and their transition post high school.

Recommendations

There remains an intentionality to "prepare marginalized students for postsecondary opportunities" (Raines & Talapatra, 2019, p. 257). The findings presented in this study are mostly consistent with research on college and career readiness for underserved student populations. The counselors' experiences with CCR transition planning warrant attention from school and district leaders. From remedies for cohesive programs to interventions that mitigate barriers to students being college and career ready, the following recommendations could be conversation starters to help counselors better serve their students.

Recommendation 1: Create a Task Force for CCR Program Development, Monitoring, and Evaluation

In secondary education, when programs are created for system structures, they are usually done broadly and systematically with a goal of equitable access for all students (Robinson, 2018). Policy and practices are constructed and evaluated using quantitative data points, like graduation rates. This study found that policies and mandated CCR practices, at the district level, do not consider qualitative data reflective of individual school or student needs. School counselor collaboration with district personnel is viewed as critical to the development and implementation of programs that support urban students with varying needs. Therefore, I recommend that district leaders adopt a multitiered system of support (MTSS) approach to CCR program development,

monitoring, and evaluation using a task force inclusive of Title 1 high school representation, with student and parent feedback. Such a MTTS framework, per Morningstar et al. (2018), includes several principles: (a) schoolwide support for family, students, and staff; (b) utilizing data for problem solving and decision-making; (c) prevention systems to improve students' academic skills; (d) progress monitoring; and (e) consistency in using pragmatic methods and interventions. The incorporation of counselor feedback on a task force that follows this model could prove worthwhile for the future design of CCR programs and the evaluation of program outcomes with a focus on underserved student needs.

Recommendation 2: Invest in Students' Cognitive and Non-Cognitive Development

Savitz-Romer and Rowan-Kenyon (2020) describe non-cognitive skills as the behavior and mindset needed to succeed in college and career. In student learning outcomes, non-cognitive skills such as motivation and self-efficacy have positive associations with GPA and persistence (Savitz-Romer & Rowan-Kenyon, 2020). In the realm of college and career preparedness, Nagaoka et al. (2013) suggest five non-cognitive elements to be infused into college and career counseling and programs, including academic behaviors, academic perseverance, social skills, learning strategies, and academic mindset. The scholars discuss these elements practically:

(a) Academic Behaviors: Student participation in class discussions, study habits, homework completion, and regular class attendance,

(b). Academic Perseverance: Ability to focus despite obstacles, setbacks, or distractions,

(c). Social Skills: Behaviors that improve social interactions, such as empathy, cooperation, and responsibility,

(d) Learning Strategies: Tactics to aid in memorization, thinking, and learning, and

(e) Academic Mindset: Belief in oneself, including learning ability and degree of belonging in academic settings (Nagaoka et al., 2013, pp. 47, 48, 49).

It is recommended that DCPS construct a college and career readiness program that is grounded in these five elements. Holistic preparation for college and career goes beyond academic skills and offers training and counseling in elements that support students' critical thinking, self-efficacy, social awareness, and intrapersonal development. Encouraging students in these five categories and including each as conversation starters in postsecondary transition planning creates an environment where students have the autonomy, confidence, and tools to actively contribute to healthy decision-making regarding their future plans.

Recommendation 3: Design a Year-Round Academic School Calendar

Student achievement outcomes are believed to be positively impacted by continuous academic calendars (e.g., Finnie et al., 2019). This type of schedule of annual learning is designed to redistribute the days within a school year to lessen non-instructional days in the summer, to maximize favorable student learning outcomes (Finnie et al., 2019; Fitzpatrick et al., 2019). The year-round academic calendar is especially significant for economically disadvantaged students as it lessens what Fitzpatrick et al. (2019) call summer learning loss. Per Finnie et al. (2019), a "source of the educational achievement gap is learning loss during summer breaks experienced

especially by students from low-income families, probably because they lack resources for educational summer activities available to more affluent students" (p. 2). Further, the year-round academic calendar and continuity of learning offer potential additional benefits to students, such as increased cognitive performance, reduction of maladaptive behavior, and increased opportunities for tutoring and intensive learning (Finnie et al., 2019).

Recommendation 4: Partner with the Community to Support Students with Basic Needs Post High School

Low-income, first-generation, and other underserved student populations face greater challenges when navigating college and career options. These students could be a product of intergenerational poverty and thus lack support systems to assist with unique needs associated with college enrollment, whether it is living costs, food, clothing, or transportation. Systems to support students in postsecondary transition with basic needs require district, high school, community, and college collaboration. G. Johnson (2017) discusses the CARE model, introduced by Foss et al. (2011), as a systematic solution to support impoverished students. The CARE model is grounded in the idea of collaboration and relationships to understand the experiences of disadvantaged individuals, to remove barriers and expand opportunities (Foss et al., 2011).

For underserved students, several barriers exist in postsecondary transition, but one of the barriers found to be most prevalent in this study was financial strain. The CARE model, with a collaborative approach to creating opportunities for students to combat barriers such as financial strain, can result in more scholarship opportunities from the district and the community for students who are interested in attending college.

Typically, scholarships are awarded and disbursed to students for tuition and living expenses once college courses begin. However, they do not always account for expenses related to the student transitioning from high school to the postsecondary environment. A CARE model comprised of district leaders, counselors, teachers, parents, the community, and college leaders can work together to develop resources to alleviate students' financial burdens and assist students in transition who may not feel confident in their ability to enroll in college because of financial need. For students who do not immediately attend a postsecondary institution, the CARE model should also incorporate social workers or professionals alike to help students navigate governmental resources related to food and housing assistance. This degree of collaboration can be constructed at the high school level and be comprised of alumni who work in various professions and have a desire to assist students in navigating postsecondary transition. In its simplest form, this partnership is a network of people who will support a student with basic and financial-related needs, so the student is free to make a choice about their future without anxiety.

Recommendation 5: District Investment in Parent and Family Engagement

Parents are the foundation for student learning, academic achievement, and aspirations. At the secondary school level, parental support and engagement have positive effects on student behavior, social and emotional well-being, and high school completion (Jensen & Minke, 2017). Jensen and Minke (2017) discuss parent engagement in broader terms and extend the support to include families, acknowledging a village and inclusive model for student outcomes. To support students, communication using a village approach should be shared in a clear and collaborative way with the goal of consistent and continued parent engagement. Specifically, Jensen and Minke (2017) assert that

"there should be a bidirectional flow of information and shared responsibility for outcomes" (p. 170). Presently DCPS facilitate parent and family engagement in Title 1 Schools through their Parent and Family Engagement Center utilizing a parent and family engagement plan that is drafted annually (Duval County Public Schools, n.d.-f). Therefore, it is recommended that Duval County Public Schools continue to invest in parent and family engagement, with a central focus of strengthening the partnership between the school and the parent by:

(a) frequently evaluating communication and engagement practices used to disseminate academic information, including events and academic enrichment activities, for accessibility, inclusive language, and message target,

(b) providing training and coaching opportunities to parents to offer skill building so parents are equipped to engage their children in conversations about education, career goals, and overall wellness, and

(c) continuing to deploy engagement facilitators or family-school liaisons who will work with teachers, parents, and administrators to solve problems related to individual student/parent needs.

Jensen and Minke (2017) report that the liaisons typically share similarities in language and culture with the family to better serve the student and family. Engagement facilitators should approach relationship building with respect, empathy, and persistence (Jensen & Minke, 2017).

Recommendation 6: Diversify Counseling Staff

Staffing shortages were reported as being a barrier to the counselor's ability to adequately serve students. Additional staffing was suggested as a remedy by each

participant; however, it is recommended that not only should the district hire additional counselors, but also diversify new hires. Currently, there are 198 counselors in the district; 92% are female and 8% are male. Of the 16 male counselors, 62% are White, 25% are African American, and 13% are Asian (Florida Department of Education, n.d.-j). Representation is reported to have a noted influence on students' engagement with postsecondary counseling and programs (Ford, 2022) and is often associated with race and ethnicity (Fletcher, 2023; Lindstrom et al., 2022); however, representation in gender should not be discounted.

The discrepancy in proportion of male to female educators is a concern on a national level and has brought about programs and campaigns tied to reducing the deficit (Strachan, 2020). Per Strachan (2020), the Department of Education added verbiage to its Teacher Education Assistance for College and Higher Education (TEACH) campaign that called for enhanced efforts to recruit and hire male ethnic minority teachers. The relationship between student performance and gender representation stems from the theory of role models and their influence on outcomes. Dee (2005) describes the "role-model effect" as the relationship between the mere presence of a teacher with demographic similarities to a student, and the student's academic motivation. Therefore, it is recommended that DCPS increase counselors within the district but also place intentionality in diversifying the staff, specifically recruiting and retaining male counselors.

Future Research

This qualitative study gathered the perspectives of African American female high school counselors. Although research acknowledges the significance of representation of

race and ethnicity on student engagement (Fletcher, 2023; Ford, 2022; Lapan, 2017), this study is limited to the viewpoint of individuals in a relatively narrow demographic group. To expand on this work, future research should (a) repeat this study in DCPS using individuals from other sociopolitical spheres, such as White female counselors, to investigate a potential counter-narrative; and (b) diversify the sample of participants to also capture the perspective of male counselors. In DCPS, male counselors account for 8% of the population. Due to the size of the male population, purposeful sampling must be the intended strategy to select not only the school but also the counselor, in order to capture the viewpoint of male counselors. This intersectional analysis could further investigate if and how race, gender, and other counselor demographic characteristics influence student outcomes with regard to college and career readiness engagement. In the educational context, student success outcomes improve when students share space with culturally responsive adults who share similarities in race, ethnicity, and values (Fletcher 2023; Ford, 2022). This study summarizes the point of view of counselors who share similarities with some of the student population in terms of race and ethnicity, but it does not, in its totality, account for a shared similarity in gender.

The findings of this study offered a slightly conflicting narrative regarding student readiness for careers. Research suggests that vulnerable student populations are often not adequately prepared for college or careers. However, the findings of this study indicate that counselors perceived students to be more prepared for careers than college. Future research to explore this phenomenon and its causes, specifically for underserved students or students from Title 1 high schools, could benefit the conversation on student preparedness. College and career readiness is complex and often conjoined; however, at

its root, they are two separate degrees of readiness that require individual but complementary skill sets.

Additionally, future research could further explore parent involvement and the impact it has on underserved student choices as it relates to choosing college or career. This phenomenon should be explored in two separate studies. In one study parents would be used as participants and in another study, students would be used as participants to investigate a complete narrative. Research should not only assess parent involvement at the secondary level but also at the postsecondary level. In postsecondary education, parent engagement is equally as critical; however, it is limited due to federal laws concerning student privacy. Future research can explore the parent engagement dynamic within the limitations of student privacy to assess the degree of impact parent engagement can have for students entering the postsecondary space. Research can also examine counterproductive forms of parental engagement and the degree to which they can affect students' autonomy and decision-making.

Finally, future research should replicate this study in Title 1 high schools in neighboring metropolitan districts of similar size, including an out-of-state district such as Cobb County Schools of Georgia. This study found that college and career practices within individual schools are not created equal. Because barriers to college and career readiness can be geographical, expanding the study to more schools may result in elucidating challenges students face which were not discussed by participants in this study. Additionally, college and career readiness and workforce readiness initiatives can be constructed at the state level and disseminated to districts and, ultimately, individual schools for implementation, as evidenced by Transitional Intervention, a career and

college readiness program in Kentucky (Xu et al., 2023), and the Early Assessment Program of California (Spence, 2009). Thus, new findings and perspectives on program access, as well as barriers that students face at the time of postsecondary transition, may emerge from an expanded study territory.

Conclusion

This study aimed to understand the college and career readiness offerings in Duval County Public Title 1 high schools, focusing on program access, student preparedness, and barriers to postsecondary transition. Conley's (2008) theory of college readiness was a grounding principle in this study as it encapsulates holistic preparedness. Conceptualized within the social cognitive theory, the SEL framework, and choice theory, this study explored how low-income and other underserved student populations are provided with the academic and non-academic skills to be prepared for college and careers from the perspective of high school counselors. The findings of this study were consistent with research that discusses barriers underserved student populations face, often to a greater degree than their peers. This study found that additional and continual resources are needed to support students in postsecondary transition. Notably resources are needed that could help counselors better support their students.

Most significantly, this study sought to gain the high school counselor perspective on day-to-day realities. This allows for an in-depth understanding of student needs to be infused into systems that govern CCR practices at the district level. The experiences of the high school counselors can help district leaders better understand the school's individual needs. The collective perspective of high school counselors in this study can also be shared with community leaders and higher education administrators to help them recognize how a shared approach to readiness benefits students in underserved schools.

Higher education administrators can use the findings of this study to ensure a proactive approach to serving underserved students, with an emphasis on encouraging parental involvement. However, it is recognized that postsecondary institutions are limited by privacy laws included in the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (1974), and the degree to which they can share student information with parents. Yet this does not negate the importance of parental involvement and the way in which it can alleviate student stress, particularly in the first year of enrollment, and support the student's academic growth (Kiyama et al., 2015). With this understanding, higher education institutions should continue to engage parents, creating a community of support and partnership for student learning. Finally, postsecondary institutions can also use the school counselors' thoughts on student preparedness to develop academic interventions to set up incoming students for success.

The findings in this study illustrate a need for programmatic activity that supports students in postsecondary transition beyond academic ability. It shows that students need equitable access to programs that will help them overcome barriers to postsecondary transition, specifically barriers related to cognitive and non-cognitive skill development. Holistically, the findings in this study highlight the simple thought that there is more work to do.

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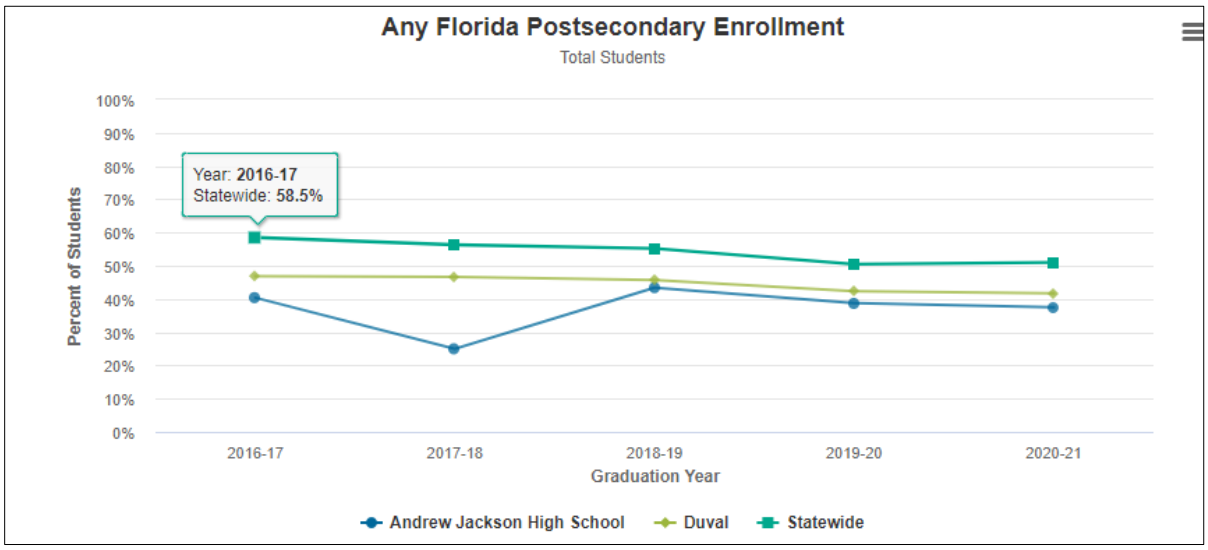
Appendix A

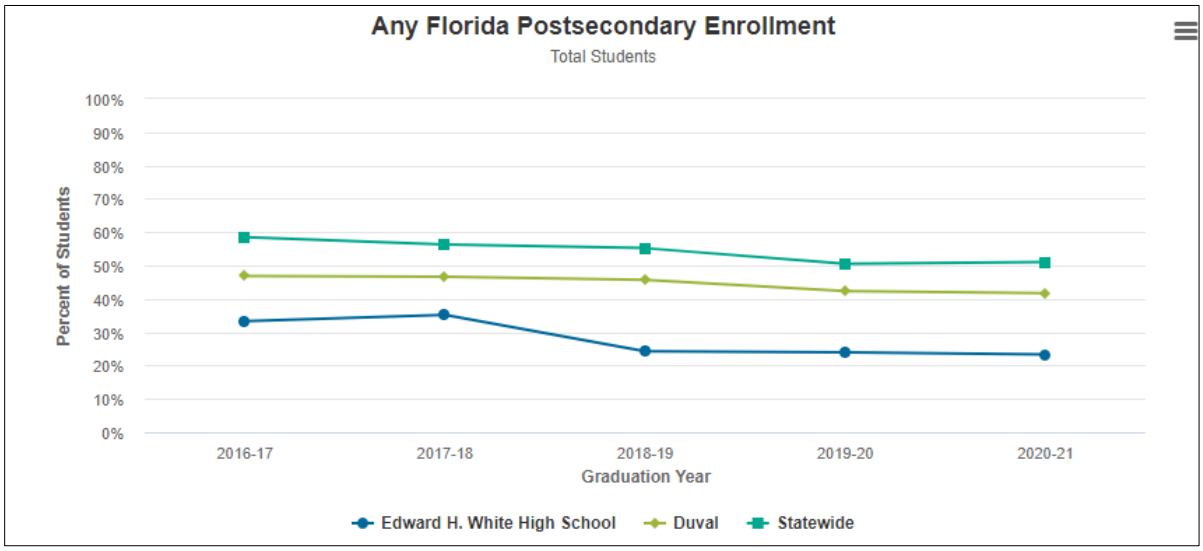
Study Participants' Historical Florida Postsecondary Enrollment

The figures were created by the Florida Department of Education (n.d.-b; n.d.-d; n.d.-e; n.d.-f; n.d.-g; n.d.-h) to show graduation and postsecondary rates for high schools, with district and state comparisons. The data come from each school's High School Report Card.

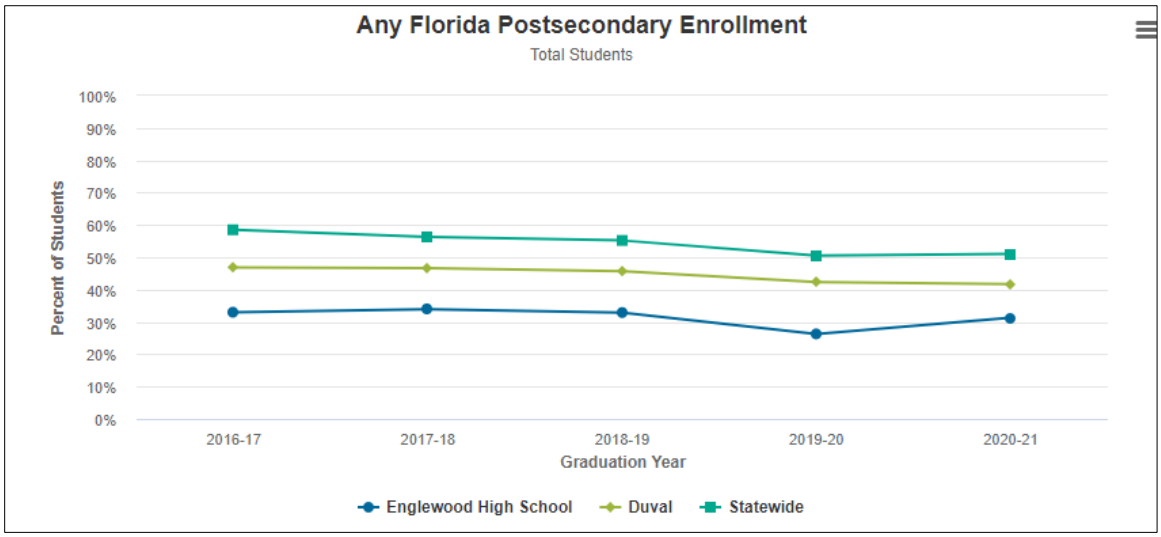
I. Andrew Jackson High School



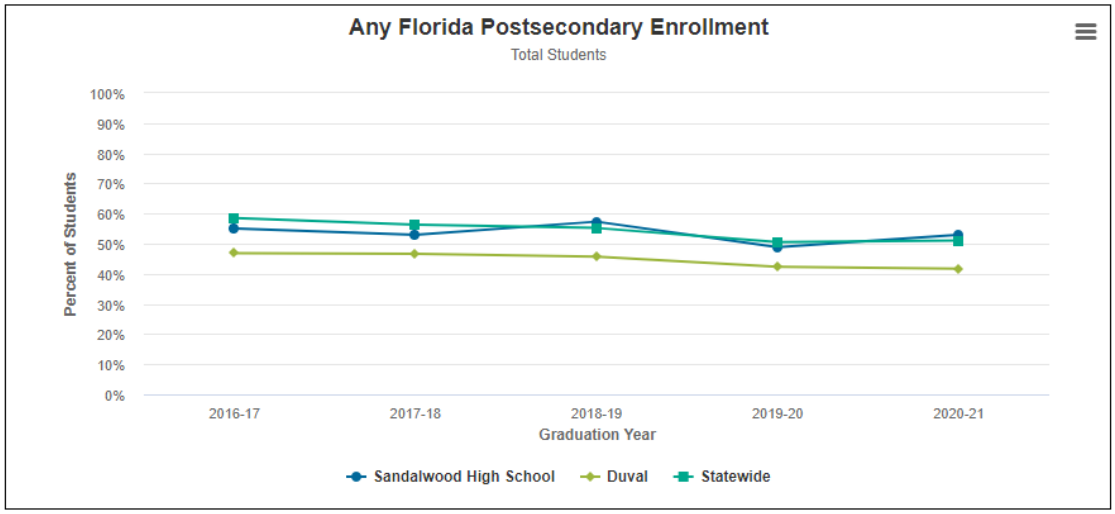
II. Edward White High School



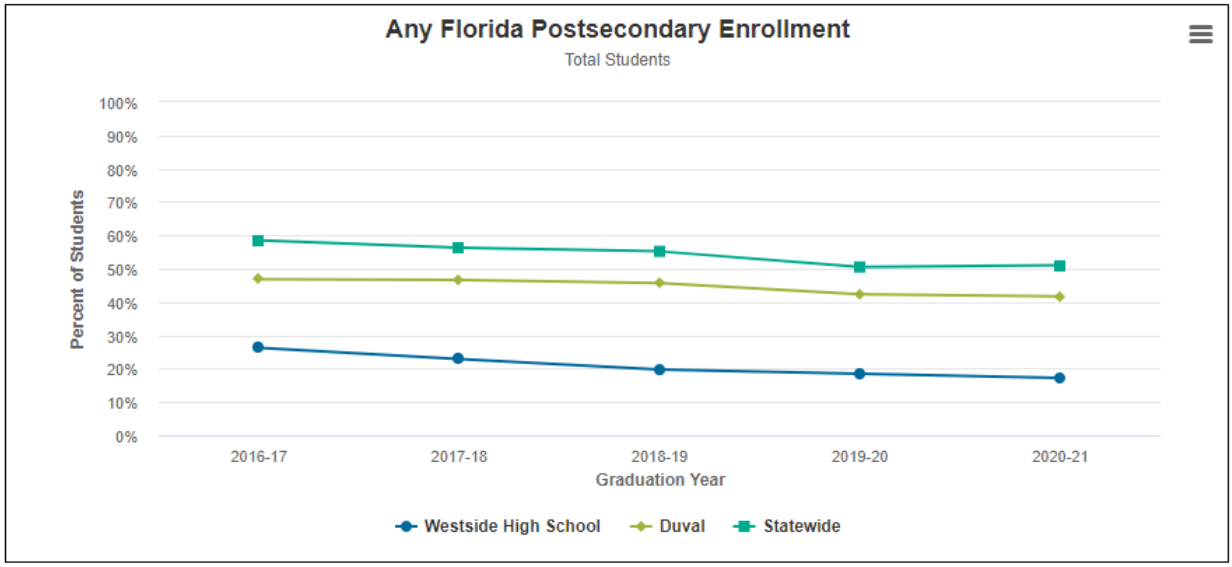
III. Englewood



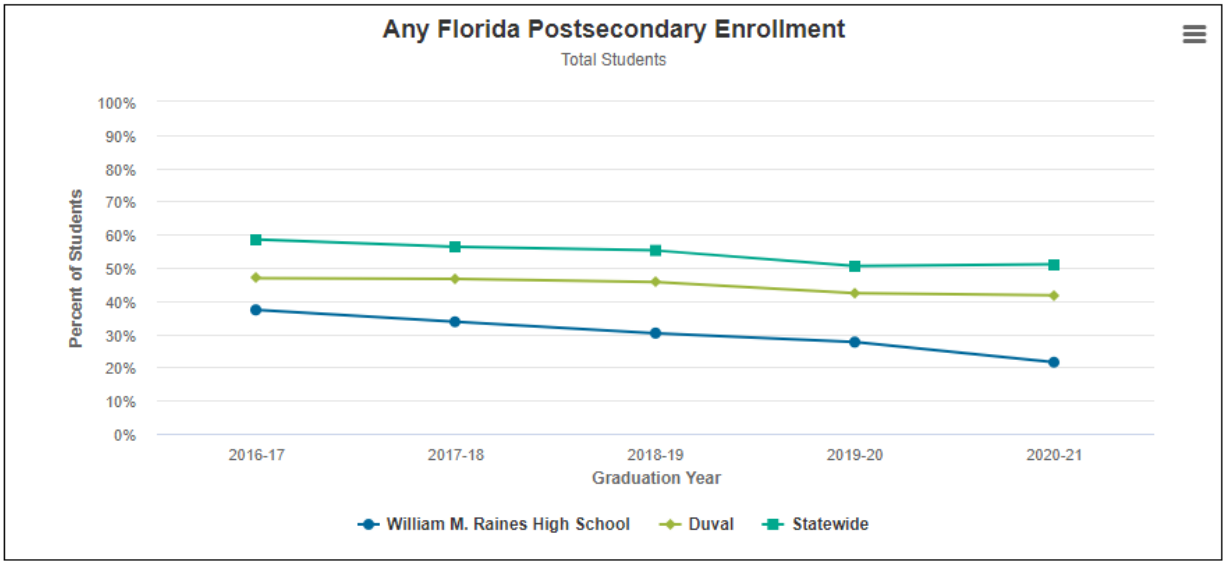
IV. Sandalwood



V. Westside High



VI. William M. Raines



Appendix B

IRB Approval

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

PROTOCOL EXEMPTION REPORT

Protocol Number: 04486-2024 **Responsible Researcher(s):** Jamie Bush

Supervising Faculty: Dr. Odessa Downing & Dr. Hanae Kanno **Co-Investigator:** n/a

Project Title: *College and Career Readiness in Title 1 High Schools: A Study of Program Access, Student Preparedness, and Barriers to Postsecondary Transition.*

INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD DETERMINATION:

This research protocol is **exempt** from Institutional Review Board (IRB) oversight under 45 CFR 46.101(b) of the federal regulations, **category 2.** If the nature of the research changes such that exemption criteria no longer apply, please consult with the IRB Administrator (irb@valdosta.edu) before continuing your research study.

ADDITIONAL COMMENTS:

- *The approved study is authorized to begin in the Duval County Public Schools (**02.28.2024**).*
- *In keeping with established informed consent processes, interview recordings must include the researcher reading aloud the consent statement, confirming participant's understanding, and establishing willingness to take part in the interview. Participants must be offered a copy of the research statement.*
- *Signed consent is not collected. Consent is established by the individual's active participation in the interview.*
- *Exempt guidelines **prohibit** the collection, storage, and/or sharing of recordings. Exempt protocol guidelines **permit** the recording of interviews provided recordings are made to create an accurate transcript. Upon creation of the transcript, the recorded interview session must be deleted immediately from all devices.*
- *Upon completion of the research study all data (e.g. data, pseudonym list, email lists, transcript, etc.) must be securely maintained (e.g. locked file cabinet, password protected computer, etc.) and accessible only by the researcher for a **minimum of 3 years**. At the end of the required time, collected data must be permanently destroyed.*

☒ ***Please submit any documents you revise to the IRB Administrator at tmwright@valdosta.edu to ensure an updated record of your exemption.***

Elizabeth W. Olphie *02.27.2024*

Elizabeth W. Olphie, IRB Administrator Date

Thank you for submitting an IRB application.
Please direct questions to irb@valdosta.edu or 229-259-5045.

Revised: 06.02.16

Appendix C

Participation Email

Dear Study Participant,

My name is Jamie Bush, and I am a doctoral student at Valdosta State University. I am also a product of the Duval County School system and a graduate of William M. Raines High School. I am writing to respectfully ask for your participation in an interview as part of a research study entitled ***"College and Career Readiness in Title 1 High Schools: A Study of Program Access, Student Preparedness, and Barriers to Postsecondary Transition."*** The study aims to examine college and career readiness programs in Duval County Title 1 Schools to take a closer look at program accessibility, barriers to postsecondary transition, and student preparedness.

You will receive no direct benefits from participating in this research study. However, your responses may help us learn more about barriers students face while navigating college and career readiness and their overall degree of preparedness. There are no foreseeable risks involved in participating in this study other than those encountered in day-to-day life.

This study involves two interviews, each lasting approximately 45 minutes to one hour. The interviews will be audio recorded to accurately capture your thoughts, opinions, and general perspective of college and career readiness in the district. Once the recordings have been transcribed, the tapes will be destroyed. **Your participation in this research study will be kept confidential.**

Your participation is voluntary. You may choose not to participate, stop responding at any time, or skip any questions you do not want to answer. You must be at least 18 years of age to participate in this study. Your participation in the interview will

serve as your voluntary agreement to participate in this research study and your certification that you are 18 or older.

If you are willing to participate and speak with me, please respond to this email with your consent. Once I receive your response, we can schedule interview times that are most convenient for you.

Thank you in advance for your participation.

Kind regards,

Jamie Bush, MBA
Doctoral Student
Valdosta State University

*Questions regarding the purpose or procedures of the research should be directed to **Jamie Bush** at **jambush@valdosta.edu**. This study has been approved by the Valdosta State University Institutional Review Board (IRB) for the Protection of Human Research Participants. The IRB, a university committee established by Federal law, is responsible for protecting the rights and welfare of research participants. If you have concerns or questions about your rights as a research participant, you may contact the IRB Administrator at 229-253-2947 or irb@valdosta.edu.*

Appendix D

Semi-Structured Interview Questions

Good morning/afternoon (Participant's Name):

Thank you again for agreeing to participate in this study. My research focuses on college and career readiness in Duval County Public Schools, specifically Title I Schools. It is an exploratory case study titled ***College and Career Readiness in Title 1 High Schools: A Study of Program Access, Student Preparedness, Barriers to Postsecondary Transition***." The purpose of this research is to examine college and career readiness programs in Duval County Title 1 schools to take a closer look at program accessibility, barriers to postsecondary transition, and student preparedness. I want to learn more about program offerings, the challenges students face as they navigate post-high school transition, and how both affect students' overall preparedness.

There are two interviews involved in this study. Each will take approximately 45 minutes to one hour. The questions for the first interview are focused on your experience with college and career programming, programs that are offered at your school, and program accessibility. The second set of interview questions will focus on student preparedness and the challenges students face as they plan for college and career post-high school. Please be reminded that your participation is voluntary. You may choose not to answer a question or discontinue this interview at any time. Finally, I want to remind you that your personal identifiers, including your name and school, will not be directly associated with any of your answers in the final report.

This interview will be recorded; however, the recording will be kept confidential and destroyed after this study. Before I begin recording, do you have any questions? Thank you. The recording will now begin.

Initial Interview

Q 1:	College and career readiness is synonymous with postsecondary transition planning. Can you tell me about your experience with preparing students for college or career? **PROBE:** Can you provide an example?
Q 2:	What college and career readiness programs are offered at your school? **PROBE:** When did the programs begin? Tell me about them. Do you find it hard to keep students engaged in these programs?
Q 3:	Do all students have equitable access to college and career readiness programs? **PROBE:** Why? Why not?
Q 4:	4. Does your school partner with community organizations to facilitate college and career readiness training? **PROBE:** Why? Why not?
Q 5:	Do you believe that community support benefits college and career readiness efforts for students? **PROBE:** Why? Why not? If at all, where is additional support needed?
Q 6:	6. How do you form relationships with your students? **PROBE:** Tell me about methods you use for relationship building. How do your students respond?

Follow-Up Interview

Q 1:	Do you think representation of race, ethnicity, and gender matter among instructional leadership and administration in postsecondary transition planning?
Q 2:	On a scale of least to most important, can you rate the role of parents, teachers, counselors, school administration, and students in postsecondary transition planning? **PROBE**: Can you explain your rating?
Q 3:	Do you think students at your school are adequately prepared for college? Do you think students at your school are adequately prepared for a career? **PROBE:** Why? Why not?
Q 4:	Based on your experience and discussion with students, what do students perceive as a barrier to college enrollment? **PROBE:** Can you tell me more about the barriers? What, if anything, can be done to help students overcome these barriers?
Q 5:	Based on your experience and discussion with students, what do students perceive as a barrier to career and life readiness? **PROBE:** Can you tell me more about the barriers? What, if anything, can be done to help students overcome these barriers?
Q 6:	Based on your experience, what can be done to improve student preparedness for college? What can be done to improve student preparedness for a career?