UNDERSTANDING THE COLLEGE CHOICE PROCESS OF STUDENTS ENROLLED IN AN EARLY COLLEGE HIGH SCHOOL

Rebecca J. Mosely

A Dissertation

Submitted to the Graduate College of Bowling Green State University in partial fulfillment of the requirement for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

December 2016

Committee:

Ellen M. Broido, Advisor

Susan L. Brown,
Graduate Faculty Representative

Christina J. Lunceford

Dafina-Lazarus Stewart
The purpose of this case study was to understand the college choice process of students enrolled in an early college high school program. The program studied enrolled first-generation students beginning in 9th grade in courses that counted towards both high school and college credits. The goal of the program was to have students graduate from high school with an associate degree. I conducted individual interviews with 9 seniors enrolled in the program to better understand how they chose what they wanted to do after high school, as well as to understand in what ways participation in the program and attending college courses influenced their decisions. Additionally, I explored the ways that students saw their identity influencing their choices for ongoing education. After I completed and transcribed the interviews, I engaged with the data by reading it repeatedly to explore patterns and themes within student responses. I coded those themes and then also utilized documents that I analyzed to support or challenge what I had heard. I then took those codes and made connections to the research questions I asked to describe the findings of this study.

The findings of this study indicate the important role that personal relationships play in the college choice process, with participants sharing how relationships with faculty, staff, and peers influenced their success in the program as well as their belief in their ability to succeed in continued educational endeavors. Additionally, students shared the importance of taking college course on a college campus for their understanding of how college works, and for increasing their confidence in their ability to succeed in college. Placing this program on a college campus
also enabled students to participate in extracurricular activities and utilize resources on campus. These findings indicate the important ways that communities and higher education institutions can work together to increase access to higher education for students who have traditionally been underrepresented in higher education. In addition, these findings indicate important factors to consider when designing these educational opportunities.
This work is dedicated to my mother Susan J. Selleck, my husband Malcolm, and our niece Corrine Cianci. The support and love you all gave me as I completed this process helped keep me motivated and on track. Thanks for always believing in me.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

First, I want to thank the participants in my study. It was a pleasure getting to know you and an honor getting to hear your stories. I am so excited for the paths you have chosen to take, and wish you all the best as you continue your education.

I also want to thank my wonderful and supportive committee: Dr. Ellen M. Broido, Dr. Dafina-Lazarus Stewart, Dr. Christina J. Lunceford, and Dr. Susan L. Brown. Your commitment to my success through this process and your guidance in my work helped to make this process and this work better than I could have ever dreamed. I wish to particularly thank my advisor, Dr. Ellen Broido for continued support of me as both a person and a student. I can never thank you enough for the support you gave as I struggled with some challenging personal experiences while completing this program. Your unending support and belief in me means more than you will ever know.

I would also like to thank my extended family for their support through this process. Particularly I would like to thank my brothers and sisters, but especially Josh Selleck and Roberta Selleck. I would also like to thank my wonderful family through marriage, but especially Joyce Mosely, Emily Mosely, and Dr. Fleming J. Mosely III. Thank you all for being there to believe in me and cheer me on.

Finally, I would like to thank my friends and colleagues who continued to push me and challenge me to completion even when I was struggling to see the end in sight. Dr. Adrian Bautista, Kourtney Arcaba, and Dr. Andy Sadouskas, thanks for being my work buddies who consistently listened to my ideas, excitement, and challenges as I completed this work. Suzanne Denneen and Stevie Kelly, thanks for supporting me as I changed jobs and got to work with you wonderful folks while completing my work. There are countless other friends and colleagues
who supported me along the way, but I would like to particularly thank Heather Pipech, Dr. Kristen Lindsey, Dani Clark, Dr. Holly Assimou, Neal Graves, Kellyn Cooper, Purvi Patel, Jasmine Hamilton, Nicholas Stroup, Peter Nguyen, Jess Nickerson, Kailey Mahar, Sean Lehlbach, Kristen Glasener, and all of the wonderful students and faculty that I had the chance to work with and learn with during my time in the BGSU HIED program. Thank you all for supporting me and challenging me to grow.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CHAPTER</th>
<th>CONTENT</th>
<th>PAGE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I</td>
<td>INTRODUCTION</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Purpose and Significance of the Study</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Early College Program at Lorain County Community College</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>First-generation Students</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Research Questions</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Definitions</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Organization of the Study</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>II</td>
<td>LITERATURE REVIEW</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>First-generation Students</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Academic Preparation</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Support Networks</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>College Knowledge</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Role of Community Colleges</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Dual Enrollment Programs</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>College Choice Theories</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Human Capital</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Cultural Capital</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Social Capital</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>College Choice Model</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Summary</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>III</td>
<td>METHODOLOGY</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Section</td>
<td>Page</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>--------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>------</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Methodology</td>
<td>42</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Researcher Assumptions</td>
<td>43</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Theoretical Framework</td>
<td>47</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Case Study Research</td>
<td>48</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Institutional Profile</td>
<td>49</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Data Collection</td>
<td>51</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Data Analysis</td>
<td>53</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Measures of Trustworthiness</td>
<td>56</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Summary</td>
<td>60</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER IV: RESULTS</td>
<td>61</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participants</td>
<td>61</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>College Choice and Success in the Program: People as Support</td>
<td>63</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Influence of Teachers as Mentors in the Program</td>
<td>63</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Support From Staff</td>
<td>66</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cohort Model: We Are a Family</td>
<td>69</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family Support</td>
<td>73</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Influence of People Outside the Program</td>
<td>75</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Influence of Skills and Knowledge Gained from Early College High School</td>
<td>76</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SDEV 1 and 2</td>
<td>77</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Support from Resources Outside of the Program</td>
<td>79</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>College Now Help</td>
<td>80</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Influence of Taking College Classes</td>
<td>81</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Confidence in the College Environment</td>
<td>83</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Title</td>
<td>Page</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>----------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>------</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Financial Concerns</td>
<td>84</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Being Different Than Their Parents</td>
<td>86</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Identity and Choice</td>
<td>88</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bullying and Violence</td>
<td>89</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Race, Gender, and Socioeconomic Status</td>
<td>90</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lasting Impact of ECHSP</td>
<td>92</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Summary</td>
<td>94</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER V: DISCUSSION</td>
<td>95</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Major Findings</td>
<td>95</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Decision Making Process</td>
<td>96</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Skills and Knowledge Gained</td>
<td>98</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Impact of College Courses</td>
<td>100</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How Identity Influenced Choices</td>
<td>103</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Theoretical Framework and Findings</td>
<td>105</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Habitus</td>
<td>105</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School and Community Context</td>
<td>105</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Higher Education Context</td>
<td>107</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Societal Context</td>
<td>108</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Similarities with Past Research Findings</td>
<td>111</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Differences from Past Research Findings</td>
<td>112</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New Findings from This Study</td>
<td>115</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Implications for Practice</td>
<td>116</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Implications for Future Research</td>
<td>119</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Section</td>
<td>Page</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>----------------------------------------------</td>
<td>------</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conclusion</td>
<td>122</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>REFERENCES</td>
<td>124</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>APPENDIX A. INVITATION EMAIL</td>
<td>134</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>APPENDIX B. HSRB APPROVAL: BGSU</td>
<td>135</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>APPENDIX C. PARENT CONSENT LETTER</td>
<td>138</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>APPENDIX D. STUDENT ASSENT LETTER</td>
<td>140</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>APPENDIX E. INTERVIEW PROTOCOL</td>
<td>142</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>APPENDIX F. INTERVIEW SCHEDULING EMAIL</td>
<td>146</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>APPENDIX G. HSRB APPROVAL: LORAIN COUNTY COMMUNITY COLLEGE</td>
<td>147</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

In today’s society higher education is quickly becoming a requirement for larger sections of our population to attain and retain employment, which means that the higher education community needs to prepare for increasing numbers of students, as well as increasing access for all students (Spellings, 2006). According to the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES, 2009a), enrollment across the U.S. in higher education increased by almost thirty percent between 1993 and 2007. In addition, the NCES (2009a) projects that enrollment in higher education will continue to grow from approximately 18 million students in 2007 to approximately 21 million in 2018. With the increase in total numbers of students in postsecondary education, the populations of first-generation students, adult learners, and Students of Color are also increasing, though the enrollment gap between White students and Students of Color has not narrowed (NCES, 2009b). Even though higher education enrollment is rising, it is not remedying the more systemic issues of inequitable educational resources and attainment across race and class.

Hooker and Brand (2010) argued that one of the main problems with increasing enrollment for underrepresented groups is that many students from those groups are dropping out in primary and secondary school programs, at a rate of 7200 students per day in the United States. Hooker and Brand (2010) further noted that this dropout rate is more of a crisis now than ever because of the economic recession that the U.S. recently faced. In past recessions enrollment in higher education has increased, while typically available financing options for higher education have decreased (Barr & Turner, 2013). It is imperative that financing for higher education keeps up with the demand for enrollment as higher levels of education are linked to higher earnings, better industry, and less use of social aid programs (Baum & Ma, 2007; Hooker & Brand, 2010; NCPPHE, 2004). Decreasing the dropout rates of students in primary and secondary schools has the potential to help not only individuals to have a better quality of life, but also to increase the possibilities for innovation and growth within business in the U.S.
Research shows that students who attend college generally experience financial gain over their counterparts who do not attend (Baum & Ma, 2007; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). This financial benefit is visible even for students who do not complete a degree, though it increases as more education is attained. This increase in earnings also has a benefit to society through increased tax revenue (Baum & Ma, 2007). College-educated individuals are also less likely to be unemployed than their counterparts (Baum & Ma, 2007; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). Each of these factors means that those individuals with more education are less likely to require funds from social aid programs, thus saving the governments’ and their fellow citizens’ money.

In addition to the financial benefits of higher education, studies have found that college education has a positive impact on health, educational ability and attainment for offspring, and saving for retirement (Baum & Ma, 2007; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). Pascarella and Terenzini (2005) further indicated that individuals with a college education are more likely to be civically engaged, continue life-long learning and enrichment activities, participate in elections, and have greater cultural awareness and openness. With all of the benefits that are associated with college attainment, both for individuals and for society, it is clear that research on practices that encourage college enrollment and success are of value.

**Purpose and Significance of the Study**

The purpose of this study is to research how the Lorain County Community College (LCCC) Early College program affects the college choice process of its students. Lorain, Ohio is an ideal location for this study because Lorain is a blue-collar town west of Cleveland with very low college completion rates compared to the rest of Ohio. Only 8.7% of Lorain citizens hold a bachelor's degree versus 15.4% in Ohio in general (U.S. Census Bureau, 2011). In addition, Lorain has nearly double the number of residents living below the poverty rate as the rest of Ohio (U.S. Census Bureau, 2013). With this set of factors, a program that intends to help increase college enrollment and job placement is vitally important to this community.
The Early College program only enrolls students whose parents have not completed a college degree. These students begin taking college courses in ninth grade with the goal that these students will graduate from high school with an associate degree (LCCC, 2013). Accelerated learning programs, such as the Early College program at LCCC, have been found to be successful in helping students graduate from high school at higher rates, get better job placements after high school, and increase their chances to go on to a four-year university and complete their bachelor’s degree (Allen & Dadger, 2012; Hofmann, 2012; Hugo, 2001; Karp & Hughes, 2008).

Although there has been a lot of conjecture in the literature about the reasons for the success of accelerated learning programs, little research explores why they are successful. This could be because the students who chose to participate were already students who would be more likely to succeed. The success of these programs could also be due to the access that these students get to a college environment while still having the security of home. Finally, the process these students take in choosing to attend or not to attend a college after completing high school is unclear. These questions have not been addressed thoroughly to date and need to be in order to better assess the impact these programs can have on college access.

Research regarding accelerated learning programs has been growing over the past decade (Allen & Dadger, 2012; Hofmann, 2012; Hugo, 2001; Karp & Hughes, 2008; NCPPHE, 2004); however there are still many questions left unanswered. The majority of the published research regarding these programs comes from four states: California, Florida, New York, and Texas, which is not surprising since the community college support and systems in those states are commonly known as being better developed and utilized by those states’ populations. This makes the research regarding accelerated learning programs somewhat incomplete as those states are not reflective of all systems and programs.

Additionally, the cultural and social contexts from which the students in the research studies come may be different from those of the students in this study. For example, an area to
explore could be the role, if any, transportation plays in students’ experiences with an accelerated learning program and their college choice process. In a major urban area, public transportation may be an option for students that could make getting to a college for an accelerated learning program easier than in the more rural area of Lorain, Ohio where public transportation is almost non-existent. Research shows that proximity to colleges and universities can play a positive role in encouraging students to apply for school after high school (De Oliver, 1998; Lopez Turley, 2009), but how proximity influences participation in accelerated learning programs has not been shown. Understanding the obstacles and opportunities of different programs is important to help make them more effective.

Finally, research regarding college choice has evolved and new frameworks have been created in the past decade (Perna, 2006; Perna et al., 2008). Perna (2006) argued that a more holistic view of the factors influencing the college choice process of students was necessary to be able to understand how the context of a student’s life influences this process. To do this, she and various colleagues developed a four-layer model to explain the different contexts that should be considered including personal, school, higher education, and governmental factors (Perna, 2005; Perna & Titus, 2005; Perna, 2006; Perna et al., 2008; Perna & Kurban, 2013). Newer theoretical frameworks such as the one put forth by Perna et al. (2008) need further research to determine how well they may be generalizable. In addition, researchers need to explore the ways in which the needs of students may be met across the layers of this new model to provide support mechanisms that meet their needs instead of trying to provide a singular support method that may work for some and not others.

**Early College Program at Lorain County Community College**

The Early College High School program (ECHSP) studied here is a collaborative effort between Lorain County Community College and the Lorain and Elyria school districts (LCCC, 2013). The program enrolls students, whose parents do not have a college degree, starting in the
ninth grade and enables them to take both high school and college courses. This program is different from some other dual-enrollment programs because the goal is for students to graduate high school with both their diploma and an Associates of Arts degree (LCCC, 2015). In addition, the program works with students to make sure that the credits they earn are transferable to a four-year college or university. According to LCCC (2015) the mission of this program is to provide students with a rigorous academic experience that will provide them with the skills and knowledge necessary to being successful in completing a four-year degree. Although this might be assumed to also be the role and responsibility of the local high school, this statement shows the particular focus that the ECHSP places on the goal of making students ready for college.

**First-generation Students**

As higher education matriculation burgeons, there has been an increased interest in the support needed to encourage the enrollment and success of first-generation college students. First-generation students are defined as those students who do not have a parent who completed any college degree (Choy, 2001). Choy (2001) stated that since 1995, first-generation students accounted for 34% of the students in four-year institutions and 53% in two-year colleges. Choy (2001) found that first-generation (FG) students are at a disadvantage for enrolling in and completing college compared to their peers whose parents attended college. This is also supported by statistics from Baum and Ma (2007) that show that first-generation students of all races are less likely to complete a degree than their non-first-generation-student counterparts with the exception of those students who identify as Asian or Pacific Islander. Choy noted that FG students are more likely to be Students of Color, as well as to come from lower socioeconomic groups than their counterparts. All of these factors have the potential to make the college enrollment process and completion of college difficult for these students.

In addition to these social factors, first-generation students face a number of other obstacles. Hahs-Vaughn (2004) noted that first-generation students had lower entrance exam
scores than their peers, providing evidence that FG students are less academically prepared for higher education. Hahs-Vaughn (2004) also found that first-generation students aspired to lower levels of education than their counterparts did. In fact, research showed that the percentage of first-generation students in the college population decreased as the level of the institution increased (Hahs-Vaughn, 2005). In other words, first-generation students were recorded in larger numbers at non-degree granting institutions and community colleges than at four-year institutions. This provides a further challenge for these students because Choy (2001) found that increased educational aspiration, which Choy defined as the level of degree the students wished to achieve, was linked to increased persistence. In order to support first-generation students in both enrolling in a four-year college and persisting once there, it is essential to continue to examine the special needs of this population and determine ways to best meet those needs.

It also is important to explore the societal and structural issues that create barriers for first-generation students to attend college. Too many of the studies already described here (Choy, 2001; Hahs-Vaughn, 2004) focus on the perceived shortcomings of first-generation students as a population instead of being concerned with the ways that educational systems have helped to reinforce stereotypes about their inability to succeed. This focus on perceived shortcomings of a population rather than of systems is a hallmark of deficit thinking (Valencia, 2010). Further research needs to be conducted on first-generation students that shows their aptitude for success in a culture that perpetuates a belief that they do not have much motivation. Research should focus on how educational programs can work to combat institutionalized barriers and create confidence-building opportunities for students.

**Research Questions**

For this study, I completed a qualitative case study of graduating seniors in the Early College High School program at Lorain County Community College. The primary research question for this study was: How do students enrolled in Lorain County Community College’s
Early College program describe their decision-making processes regarding their future after high school graduation? In addition, the following sub-questions were used to further understand the main research question:

1. How did students make the decision that they made for their education after high school? What considerations did they take into account?

2. Do students participating in the Early College High School program believe they are gaining skills and knowledge that can help them to enroll in college? If yes, how so? If not, why not?

3. Do students believe that participating in a college course influenced their college-going expectations? How and why or why not?

4. How do students perceive their race, gender, and socioeconomic status influencing their experience in the program?

To answer these questions, I looked at the experiences both in and out of the early college classroom that influenced the college-going decisions of the participants. Studying the broader experiences of students was intended to allow me and others to make meaning of their experiences and to really hear the essence of how and why early college programs connect to the success of these individuals. It also enabled me to better understand who my participants were and how their identity shaped their experience with the early college program. All of these factors are important in order to better understand the many ways that the early college classroom can affect students.

By working with students to understand which experiences were important to them, I hoped to be able to help policy makers and administrators develop more effective outreach programs to support students in acquiring postsecondary education. I also hoped to find information on what experiences and interventions were most important to students to help them choose to attend college. Finally, by understanding the experiences through the students’ words, I wanted to be able
to explore differences between student experiences and determine if there are some groups or individuals who were being left behind and if so why that was the case.

**Definitions**

To help the reader understand the meanings of several terms that are used throughout this study, definitions are provided below.

*Academic preparation* refers to the ability of a student to succeed academically in college courses. A higher level of academic preparation means that students are less likely to need to take remedial classes and have typically engaged in academic or college preparatory coursework in high school. Academic preparation is most often measured by considering one or more of the following factors: high school GPA, standardized test scores, participation in academic or college preparatory coursework, the quality of the school attended, and the quality of the coursework taken (Perna, 2005).

*Accelerated Learning Programs* are programs used to support students in the high school in the process of enrolling in college. The two most frequently referred to are dual-enrollment programs where students are simultaneously taking classes at both a high school and college campus and early college programs where students are solely taking college coursework but are getting credit at the high school for doing so (Hooker & Brand, 2010). These programs can be taught on either the high school or college campus, but they result in the student receiving both high school and college credit for their work and require the collaboration of the local high schools and higher education systems (Karp & Hughes, 2008).

*College choice process* is defined as the process through which “traditional-age students go about realizing their educational aspirations (Hossler, Schmitt, & Vesper, 1999, p. 9).” Perna (2006) further indicated that this process is influenced by a complex set of experiences and policies that occur at the individual, local community, higher education, and state and federal levels.
College knowledge is “an understanding of the complex college admission and selection processes, the options available to help pay for postsecondary education, the academic requirements for college-level work, and the cultural differences between secondary and postsecondary education” (Hooker & Brand, 2010, p. 77).

Cultural capital refers to the norms and values that a family teaches their children and can be used to maintain class status and the privilege that comes with that status (Hossler, Schmitt, & Vesper, 1999; McDonough, 1997).

Economic capital is the amount of money, wealth, and belongings that a family has.

Educational aspirations are defined for this study as the level of education that a student wishes to achieve.

First-generation students are defined for this study as students whose parents do not possess any college degree but may have attended some college (LCCC, 2013).

Human capital is defined as “the productive capacities---knowledge, understandings, talents, and skills----possessed by an individual or society” (Paulsen, 2001, p. 56).

Parents in this study are those individuals who are biological parents, adoptive parents, or legal guardians of the participants.

Social capital is the term that describes the resources and knowledge that an individual has access to due to the social networks with which they are connected and can be used to refer specifically to those networks or to the understanding of norms necessary to be successful among different parts of society (Bordieu, 1986; Coleman, 1988; Perna, 2006).

Underrepresented students is used to refer to those populations who have historically and still currently enroll in and complete higher education at lower rates than others. For this study, this means those students who are from low-income families or are first-generation college students. Often this also includes significantly more students who identify as Black, Latinx, and
Native American students. This definition has been chosen based on enrollment and completion rates from Baum and Ma (2007) and the National Center for Education Statistics (2009b).

**Organization of the Study**

This dissertation consists of five chapters. In chapter one I have outlined the purpose and significance of the study, provided some basic information about the program and student population being studied, offered some definitions of terms that will be found throughout the chapters, and outlined the research questions that will be asked. In chapter two, I provide the reader with a review of the literature and research related to first-generation students, accelerated learning programs, community colleges, and college choice models as well as the theories that influence those models. In chapter three, I provide an explanation of the research method utilized for this study. In doing so, I explain why I chose this method, how it was influenced by my own philosophical assumptions, and how the data were collected and analyzed. In chapter four, I discuss the findings of the study and provide descriptions of the students’ experiences in their own words. Finally, in chapter five, I discuss the implications and recommendations that come from the findings in this study. In the final chapter, I provide educators with information that can hopefully help to increase the educational aspirations and attainment of underrepresented student populations as well as to provide evidence that programs such as the ECHSP are necessary and important ways to close the gap in who does and does not enroll in college.
CHAPTER II: LITERATURE REVIEW

In this chapter, I will give an overview of the research regarding the college choice process of first-generation students. This chapter will include sections covering first-generation students, community colleges, dual-enrollment programs, social and cultural capital, and a theoretical framework regarding the college choice process.

First-generation Students

First-generation students are students whose parents do not have a post-secondary degree of any kind. In some cases the parents of first-generation students may have completed some coursework, but these students will be the first in their immediate family to graduate with a college degree. Researchers have consistently found that first-generation students are at a significant disadvantage for attending and completing college (Baum & Ma, 2007; Choy, 2001; Engle, 2007; Lohfink & Paulson, 2005). First-generation students are more likely to be Students of Color, as well as to come from lower socioeconomic groups than their counterparts, which previous researchers have found decreases the probability of these students attending and completing college (Choy, 2001; Engle, 2007, Lohfink & Paulson, 2005). It is important to note that this focus on the individual does not take into account the systemic ways that racism and classism work against certain populations to create barriers to education, but this research is still important to explore as it makes up the majority of what is known regarding opportunities to interrupt those systems. The research regarding first-generation students can be placed in three different categories: precollege influences, transition to college, and persistence and effects of college (Terenzini, Springer, Yaeger, Pascarella, & Nora, 1996). This study focuses on pre-college influences which can be further separated into three categories: academic preparation, college knowledge, and parental involvement.
Academic Preparation

Academic preparation has consistently been shown to predict enrollment and retention in college (Bowen et al., 2010; Engle, 2007; Hahs-Vaughn, 2004; Perna & Kurban, 2013). Studies show that those students who attended less rigorous high schools were significantly less likely to earn a college degree than those who enrolled in the most rigorous high schools (Bowen et al., 2010). Bowen et al. (2010) also found that the less rigorous schools had significantly higher numbers of Students of Color, low-income students, and students whose parents had not attended college.

One of the reasons for this lack of college completion could be that less rigorous schools often do not offer college preparatory courses starting in ninth grade while the more rigorous schools do (Engle, 2007). Even when schools do offer these courses, Bonous-Hammarrth and Allen (2005) stated that there is a clear tracking that occurs in schools that pushes students who have not traditionally been considered college material into less rigorous courses than their peers who have more social and economic capital. Students who have not traditionally been considered college material are those students who identify as Students of Color, come from low-income families, and/or speak a language other than English as their first language. Tierney, Corwin, and Colyar (2005) noted how throughout U.S. history these populations have been considered inferior or unmotivated in their learning processes.

These ideas regarding the educational potential of these groups have been used, and still are used today, to explain why these populations are not attaining higher education at the same rates as their White peers (Bonilla-Silva, 2010). In addition, the continued belief in the inferiority of some populations provides schools with a rationale to continue to track these groups into non-college preparatory pathways in elementary and secondary education (Tierney, Corwin & Colyar, 2005). Valencia (2010) argued that by failing to recognize the shortcomings in schools’ policies and the ways they treat students, they are engaging in victim-blaming behaviors that put the onus of the
failure of specific populations on the population itself instead of on the broader political, societal, and educational issues. This indicates the need for schools themselves and policy makers in general to explore ways that schools can and should be involved in changing the education opportunities for students from these populations.

In order for first-generation students to have a greater chance of enrolling in colleges, they must be encouraged earlier in their high school education to take the courses that will help to prepare them for college (Bonous-Hammarth & Allen, 2005; Bowen et al., 2010; Engle, 2007). The lack of opportunity to take these courses along with the sometimes blatant tracking of students hinders the ability of first-generation students to be academically prepared to attend and succeed in college. Engle’s (2007) research confirmed this lower attainment level for first-generation students when she found that even when the courses were offered, first-generation students were less likely to take college prerequisite courses than their peers. What was not clear from this study is why this was the case. Based on what we know about tracking of students, it is important to try to understand if this gap was a result of lack of encouragement for first-generation students to take the college-preparatory courses, rather than an inherent quality of the students as seems to be implied in Engle’s (2007) study.

In addition to not having enrolled in college preparatory courses, Hahs-Vaughn (2004) noted that first-generation students had lower college entrance exam scores than their peers. One could argue that this is partially due to the fact these students have not taken the necessary coursework to score well on these exams, which causes further obstacles for college attendance for first-generation students. Another possible explanation however could be connected with stereotype threat, which has been found to negatively influence testing achievement (Steele & Aronson, 1995). Steele and Aronson (1995) defined stereotype threat as being a fear of confirming stereotypes about one’s identity group and found that the existence of these stereotypes was enough to decrease performance on exams. Whether the cause of lower college entrance exam
scores is related to academic preparation, stereotype threat, or some other factor, the impact on college attendance and success remains the same. Better opportunities to take courses that academically prepare students for college could help first-generation students to have more confidence at the same time as gaining a stronger knowledge-base to succeed on exams.

Preparation to pass entrance exams is important in increasing access to college for first-generation students, but additional attention should focus on making sure that this access includes institutions of all types and levels. Hahs-Vaughn (2004) also found that first-generation students aspired to lower levels of education than their counterparts. In other words, first-generation students enroll in larger number at non-degree granting institutions and community colleges than at four-year institutions. This indicates that even when first-generation students choose to attend college they are either choosing to attend, or are being directed to institutions where they have reduced likelihood of receiving a four-year degree. This tendency to enroll in community colleges institutions is particularly concerning because research from Shapiro et al. (2015) showed that 38.1% of students who started at two-year colleges in 2009 had earned a 4 year bachelor’s degree 6-years later, as compared to students who started at a four-year public institution, who had a 61.2% completion rate.

Lack of academic preparation thus inhibits a student’s ability to enroll in college in general as well as reduces the selectivity of colleges in which they enroll when they do make that choice. Finally, research shows that lack of academic preparation is negatively related to college retention (Bonous-Hammarth & Allen, 2013; Bowen et al., 2010; Conley, 2013). Bonous-Hammarth & Allen (2013) noted that Students of Color and first-generation students are required to take college remedial courses at higher rates than their peers, placing them at significant disadvantage for college completion. Students who need to take remedial courses in college have been shown to have higher rates of attrition than their peers (Bonous-Hammarth & Allen, 2013; Conley, 2013). Academic preparation therefore plays an important role in determining who enrolls in and succeeds
in college, and first-generation students are often at a disadvantage when it comes to being academically prepared.

Hahs-Vaughn’s (2004) research also indicated that school systems should look at the ways that they are complicit in the lower-attainment of students. What this study did not do however was take a hard look at how aspirations were defined. In reading Hahs-Vaughn’s (2004) study, one could believe that these students lack motivation or knowledge and that the responsibility for getting into higher-level colleges falls on the students. Instead, more focus needs to be placed on how schools encourage or discourage students to expand their own belief in what they can achieve. By believing in students and encouraging them to see higher levels of education as a possibility, schools may be able to increase the chance that historically underrepresented students achieve more.

With this in mind, more research needs to focus on understanding the ways in which elementary and secondary schools can encourage students to complete the coursework needed for college. In addition, further emphasis needs to be placed on understanding how aspirations for higher education are developed. The research in this section states that first-generation students have lower aspirations than their peers (Hahs-Vaughn, 2004), but this focus is assuming that the students’ actual choice in where to go to college is the same as their aspiration for where to go to college. Equating college choice with college aspiration fails to recognize the systemic factors that exist in the education system to keep these students in certain types of institutions. One area that is not clear is how first-generation students who do enroll in college gain the confidence necessary to feel that they are academically competent for college. Increasing academic preparation as well as helping students recognize their aspirations will require the government, schools, families, and other support systems for students to work together to determine new solutions motivating and encouraging underachieving students.
Support Networks

Another factor that can affect the decisions of first-generation students regarding college enrollment is the support networks they have. According to a report from the Higher Education Research Institute (2007), 47% of first-generation students who enrolled in college in 2005 stated that their parents' desire for them to attend college was one of the most important reasons that they chose to enroll. What is of even more interest is that they found that a significantly higher number of first-generation students cited parental encouragement as an important motivator over students whose parents had attended college. Research has consistently shown that parents play a pivotal role in the decisions of students to attend college (Cabrera & La Nasa, 2000; Horn & Nunez, 2000; Perna & Titus, 2005). Parents today must be allies on the path to getting their students to and through college (Tierney, Corwin & Colyar, 2005).

Cabrera and La Nasa (2000) further defined parental involvement as taking two different forms. The first of these was through motivation and encouragement. If the parents of the students wanted to make sure that their children attended college, the students themselves were far more likely to attend college. Most of the research centered on this type of support focuses on the frequency with which the parents of students have conversations with them about attending college (Tierney, Corwin, & Colyar, 2005). This type of support is the more common type of support offered by the parents of first-generation students (Perna & Titus, 2005; Tierney, Corwin & Colyar, 2005). This motivation however is not enough. Simply valuing education does not provide the students with the tools that they need to succeed.

The second way that Cabrera and La Nasa (2000) stated parents could influence students going to college is to become involved in the process early by being involved in the schools, encouraging their students to take the right courses, and saving for college. This type of involvement by the parents of first-generation students is less likely to occur. Tierney, Corwin and Colyar (2005) argued that this is because the parents of these students are less likely to have the
time, knowledge, or self-efficacy to help their students in this way. They argued that parents of
underrepresented students are less likely to believe that speaking with school officials will result in
meaningful outcomes for their students. In addition, since the parents of first-generation students
did not go to college, they often do not have an awareness of the ways in which they can assist
their students on the path to college (Cabrera & La Nasa, 2000; Choy, 2001; Terenzini et al.,
1996). What this means is first-generation students are less likely to have parents who help them
to determine which courses they should take in high school and therefore are not receiving the
encouragement from their parents to take the academic courses they need to be academically
prepared for college (Engle, 2007; Horn & Nunez, 2000).

If parents are going to help their children enroll in college preparatory coursework, they
need to have an understanding of what that coursework entails by the time their students are in
programs and found that only 70% of the programs indicated involving parents as a goal. They
also noted that in many of these programs, this involvement consisted of the parents providing
signatures for necessary forms for the program instead of actually helping parents to understand
ways they could support their students throughout the program and in the college enrollment
process. If parents are going to be able to support their children towards attaining a college degree,
schools and outreach programs need to focus on educating parents since they are likely to influence
students’ aspirations. In order to do this, it is important for educators to start connecting with
parents early in their children’s educational process on ways they can help their children succeed.

It is also important to note that a traditional focus on parents as the support system of
students is not adequate. Educators must also consider the different types of family and support
structures that may be important to these students (Tierney, Corwin & Colyar, 2005; Yosso, 2005).
Other potential support systems could be extended family groups, older siblings, teachers,
counselors and peers to name a few (Yosso, 2005). By focusing too narrowly on just the nuclear
family as support mechanisms for students, schools are ignoring cultural family norms from Students of Colors’ cultures as well as other obstacles that the parents of first-generation or low-income students often face. Some of these potential obstacles are work schedules that make it difficult for them to spend time with their children or to spend time speaking with school officials (Tierney, Corwin, & Colyar, 2005). Yosso (2005) however argued that by focusing on the broader family and community support that often surrounds Students of Color these obstacles can be overcome.

With research indicating that support of parents and other family members is vital to college enrollment, it is surprising that more programs do not work more closely with family members. Yosso (2005) argued that school systems need to work to understand the community cultural wealth that comes from Communities of Color and which can be invaluable to Students of Color in their academic endeavors. However, Yosso (2005) also noted that further research needs to be done to help educators implement this understanding in academic policies and programs. In addition, the lack of research regarding the role that personal support networks play in a student’s college choice process indicates a need for further understanding of the ways in which outreach programs can collaborate with other support systems to further increase the success of their students and their programs.

Perna and Titus (2005) stated that it is important to note that although a lot of research regarding supportive people in student’s lives focuses on family and parental involvement, peers are also important in helping to encourage college enrollment. They found that the college choice decisions of peers were often equally or more compelling to most high school students, and that this was even more important to low-income or underrepresented students than to higher income majority students. The role that peers play in the college enrollment process is one that has not been studied much (Tierney, Corwin, & Colyar, 2005). The potential negative impacts of peers regarding peer pressure and bullying have received more attention recently, but the ways in which
peers can be supportive of each other in the college enrollment process needs more research. This research could help to support the findings of Perna and Titus (2005), and to determine if there are ways in which educators can harness the power of peer groups in supporting college access.

Finally, further research needs to explore the role that high school counselors, teachers, and other adult figures play in the college choice process. As noted previously, research has found that early access to colleges and to information about college can be beneficial in increasing college enrollment (Hooker & Brand, 2010; Karp, 2012; Perna, 2006; Perna, 2013; Valadez, 2008). What is less clear from this research is what role the interactions with the individuals creating those opportunities play in encouraging college enrollment. Past researchers have found that mentors are beneficial in helping students to see higher education as an option (Levine & Nidifer, 1996), but this research focused on students already enrolled in college rather than the pathway to college. More researchers need to explore whether it is simply the opportunity for students to go to a college campus in high school that is important in increasing access, or if there is something about the relationships that students create with peers, teachers, and other administrators in these spaces that further encourages them to enroll. Information regarding best practices would provide the individuals working in these programs with the skills and knowledge they need to best serve the students in the programs.

**College Knowledge**

Academic preparation and efficacy of support networks are important factors influencing college enrollment, but there is still another obstacle for low-income or underrepresented students whose families have not attended college (Carnevale & Strohl, 2010). This obstacle is what Hooker and Brand (2010) referred to as college knowledge. This knowledge is defined as “an understanding of the complex college admission and selection processes, the options available to help pay for postsecondary education, the academic requirements for college-level work, and the cultural differences between secondary and postsecondary education” (Hooker & Brand, 2010, p.
It is clear through this statement that more than just academic preparation is needed to help students successfully enroll in college.

It is important to recognize that first-generation students are more likely than their peers to not know how to pick, apply for, enroll in, and pay for college (Hooker & Brand, 2010; Karp, 2012; Perna, 2006 & 2013; Valadez, 2008; Vargas, 2004). Valadez (2008) found that first-generation Mexican immigrant students were less likely to enroll in college even when they were academically prepared because neither they nor their family understood the steps required to complete financial aid paperwork, college entrance exams, or college applications. Karp (2012) further found when interviewing students at the beginning of a dual-enrollment college in high school program that students could not explain what it meant to be a college student. One student exclaimed, “I don’t know, I’ve never been to college!” (p. 24). Hooker and Brand (2010) argued that because the communities that first-generation students live in are less likely to possess knowledge of the college enrollment process, these students often lack access to social networks that can help them to understand the process.

In addition, the schools they attend often lack financial resources to provide students with access to technological and human supports that would help them to attend college (Vargas, 2004). Vargas (2004) stated that in order to increase college aspirations, school counselors need to promote college attendance in middle schools. He noted that funding concerns, which do not allow for adequate numbers of counselors, make it nearly impossible for this to happen. Vargas (2004) also expressed that students are less likely to receive counseling that will encourage going to college in predominantly low-income or underrepresented population schools than in higher-income and predominantly White schools.

Another area of potential support that is less successful for these students is technological outreach (Vargas, 2004). As more colleges embrace the use of technology to recruit students and to have students complete applications, those students who do not have access to computers are
being further disadvantaged (Vargas, 2004). Vargas (2004) further noted that those schools with lower socio economic status (SES) students and more underrepresented students typically have slower internet connections and less access to technology in general making it difficult for students who are interested in college to spend adequate time researching different schools and completing the online application process.

With this lack of access to personal connections with college knowledge, as well as a lack of counseling personnel and technological resources, it is important for schools and outreach programs to find more productive and accessible ways to educate students and parents in the college choice process. As part of this education, it is important for students to have the opportunity to connect to colleges “early and often” (Pitre & Pitre, 2009, p. 108). This can allow students to achieve the goal of understanding the academic expectations of college students, as well as understanding the norms of college. Pitre and Pitre (2009) argued that TRIO, one of the longest standing programs to increase college access, has been successful because of the opportunities these programs afford to low-income or first-generation students to attend summer colleges, learn about the college application process, and learn the norms of college attendance.

Karp (2012) also found that enrollment in college courses while in high school provided students with the opportunity to learn more about what it means to be a college student and the expectations of college coursework. She argued that the opportunity to practice the role of being a college student enabled the students to feel more comfortable with the idea of being in college and to feel a sense of belonging on the college campus (Karp, 2012). What is not clear from the research at this point is what impact this understanding of the expectations of college has on the types of institutions for which students choose to apply.

Beyond understanding the expectations of college students, it is also important to understand the financial implications of attending college. First-generation students are less likely to understand the financial benefits of attending college as well as the financial aid for which they
are eligible and the process by which they can obtain this aid (Cabrera & La Nasa, 2000; Hossler & Gallagher, 1987; Perna, 2013, Valadez, 2008). Valadez (2008) found that the confusion that one student experienced regarding how to pay for college, along with his family questioning him regarding financing college, was enough to cause that student to dismiss the idea of going to college. Perna (2013) further stated that some recent research seems to indicate that when these students and their families received assistance in completing financial aid paperwork, the students were significantly more likely to enroll in college. In order to understand the financing of higher education, students and families must receive more detailed information and assistance.

Although it is clear from the research presented in this section that college knowledge is important for enrolling in college, it is not clear what types of activities best increase this knowledge. It is also unclear from the research if particular experiences encourage particular choices. For example, if a student is enrolled in a dual-enrollment program where the student is attending classes at a community college, is that student more likely to continue on at that community college because the student has a level of comfort there, or is the student also likely to consider going to a four-year institution? Furthermore, it is not clear from the research what methods work best for teaching students and parents college knowledge. It is clear that there are still a number of obstacles to gaining this education, particularly in low-income areas, but it is less clear what is most effective in overcoming those obstacles.

**Role of Community Colleges**

Community colleges first appeared in the United States around the beginning of the 20th century in response to a need for more skilled workers to meet the demands of new industry (Brazzell, 1996; Cohen & Brawer, 2008). At the time, these schools were called *junior colleges*, and their main function was to provide two-year technical programs for students who would then immediately enter the work force (Thelin, 2004). However, after World War II, with the massification of higher education that was caused by the large numbers of GIs entering higher
education, enrollments at community colleges as well as the number of community colleges began to grow (Thelin, 2004). Enrollment in community colleges increased from 168,000 to 2,100,000 between 1950 and 1970 (Thelin, 2004). These numbers have only continued to grow with more than 6,200,000 students attending two-year public institutions in 2009 according to the National Center for Education Statistics (2011).

Part of the reason for the growth in community college enrollment was the new roles these institutions began to play. Community colleges were looked to as sites that could solve a variety of issues in the U.S. including increasing access to education, meeting the growing demand for technology training, solving issues of racial integration, and providing enrichment opportunities for the surrounding community (Cohen & Brawer, 2008). In addition, students began to see community colleges as an affordable option to complete a year or two of postsecondary education prior to transferring to a four-year institution (Thelin, 2004).

Because community colleges were intended to meet the needs of the masses, enrollment was open to anyone who wished to apply (Cohen & Brawer, 2008). Open enrollment practices, flexibility in responding to new educational needs, and low cost of attendance have led to larger numbers of students in general and larger numbers of students from underrepresented groups enrolling in community colleges (Philippe & Sullivan, 2005; Spellings, 2006). Choy (2001) found that community colleges enroll high numbers of first-generation students, with over 50% of the students enrolled nationally in community colleges identifying as first-generation students. It is not surprising that these populations choose to attend community colleges since they cost about half as much as a public four-year institution (Provasnik & Planty, 2008). This is important because first-generation students are more likely to come from lower SES families than their peers and the cost of education has been found to be a significant determinant in enrollment and attrition rates for these populations (Choy, 2001; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Terenzini et al., 1996). As
a result, a large number of students from low-income families and underrepresented groups
enrolled in community colleges as a way to be able to afford post-secondary education.

There are many challenges that come with this growth in community college enrollment. Comprehensive community colleges today are expected to fulfill many different needs including “transfer education, vocational training, noncredit courses, customized training for business and industry, cultural enrichment opportunities, and a host of other services” (Philippe & Sullivan, 2005, p. 2). In addition, Spellings (2006) noted that most of the fastest growing jobs today require some form of postsecondary education. She also noted that not all of these jobs require a four-year degree. With that in mind, community colleges are routinely expected to increase offerings for students to help educate today’s workforce. Because of today’s knowledge-based economy, jobs and educational programs are in constant flux requiring colleges and especially community colleges to add and change programs on a regular basis (Helfgot, 2005; Philippe & Sullivan, 2005).

The ability to respond to the needs of society is one of the greatest strengths of community colleges, but community colleges still have limits (Attewell, Heil, & Reisel, 2011; Morrest, 2013). More than half of all students who begin at community college do not complete a four-year degree (Attewell et al, 2011; Morrest, 2013). This statistic is important because the earning potential of individuals increases as they complete higher levels of degrees (Spellings, 2006). The high attrition rate that is associated with these institutions limits access to education and to financial mobility because students are not completing four-year degrees. What is not clear from this research is that students may be enrolling in community colleges with no intention of earning a four-year degree. With this in mind, one of the goals of community colleges should place heavy focus on is to encourage transfer to four-year colleges.

**Dual Enrollment Programs**

One of the ways in which community colleges have been able to support increased academic achievement for students is by collaborating with local K-12 systems to provide dual
enrollment programs. Accelerated learning programs such as dual enrollment have been encouraged for community colleges in many of their missions (Hoffman, Vargas, & Santos, 2009). Morrison (2008) argued that this is the case because acceleration programs help to meet the “strategic interests of the nation” (p. 26). He argued that acceleration programs help to combat workforce shortages by increasing educational attainment levels, making United States students competitive in a global economy, and providing opportunities to improve the U.S. economy.

The National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education (2004) further argued that increasing educational attainment has benefits both to the individual and to the state. They stated that college-educated populations increase earnings for the individual and therefore increase the tax base for the state. They also argued that college-educated individuals are healthier, are less likely to use social services, and are better informed about personal issues such as health care and retirement savings, all of which result in less demand on public resources. It is clear from these factors that the government should have a vested interest in increasing the educational attainment of its citizens.

All of these concerns about increasing educational attainment have led states to consider the ways in which they can best increase this attainment. Accelerated learning programs such as dual enrollment programs are one of the ways that have proven successful in improving educational attainment rates (Allen & Dadgar, 2012; Hoffman et al., 2009; Hofmann, 2012; Hugo, 2001; Karp, 2012; Karp & Hughes, 2008). Accelerated learning programs such as dual enrollment help

- Increase the pool of historically underserved students who are ready for college.
- Provide realistic information to high school students about the knowledge and skills they will need to succeed in postsecondary education.
- Improve motivation through high expectations and the promise of free courses.
• Decrease the cost of postsecondary education by compressing the years of financial support needed.

• Create a feedback loop between K-12 and postsecondary systems around issues of standards, assessments, curriculum, and transitions from high school to college.

(Hoffman et al., 2009, p. 44)

Hoffman et al. (2009) noted that the majority of these programs are found at community colleges, and that 98% of community colleges have high school students taking courses on their campus.

There are several different types of dual-enrollment programs and dual-enrollment programs go by various different names. Other names for these programs include dual credit, concurrent enrollment, college in the high school, joint enrollment, postsecondary enrollment option programs, and early college programs (Hofman, 2012; Hoffman et al., 2009). These programs differ based on whether they are located on the high school or college campus, whether the intended outcome is some college credit or an actual degree, and whether college or high school teachers teach the courses (Hoffman et al., 2009). In the state of Ohio, all of these programs are grouped within a program called College Credit Plus. The research on these programs is limited and consistently growing. Researchers are challenged by the fact that these programs are very different from each other in where they are taught and what resources are provided, yet research on all types of programs seems to get lumped together as if they are all the same.

Although there are clearly some obstacles in researching these programs, there are also some promising outcomes related to these programs. First, Hoffman et al. (2009) noted that these programs help to align the work that is done in K-12 education with higher education policies and practices regarding access and work to help prepare students at an earlier age. By creating an understanding in the K-12 system of what is needed to succeed in higher education, students can be introduced to college norms early in their educational career rather than waiting until it is time to enroll in college. Additionally, dual enrollment programs have been found to have a positive
relationship to “high school graduation, college enrollment, first-year college GPA, second-year persistence in college, and number of college credits accumulated after three years” (Struhl & Vargas, 2012, p. 4).

The research on dual-enrollment programs does seem to prove that these programs have benefits both for individuals and for states. What is less clear is why this is the case. Part of the reason for this lack of understanding of the success of these programs is related to the differing outcomes each hopes to achieve. For example, the *Early College High School Initiative* (ECHSI) which was started by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, has a clear set of outcomes (Jobs for the Future, 2008). According to a document from Jobs for the Future (2008), these outcomes are

1. Early college schools are committed to serving students underrepresented in higher education.

2. Early college schools are created and sustained by a local education agency, a higher education institution, and the community, all of whom are jointly accountable for student success,

3. Early college schools and their higher education partners and community jointly develop an integrated academic program so all students earn one to two years of transferable college credit leading to college completion.

4. Early college schools engage all students in a comprehensive support system that develops academic and social skills as well as the behaviors and conditions necessary for college completion.

5. Early college schools and their higher education and community partners work with intermediaries to create conditions and advocate for supportive policies that advance the early college movement. (p. 2)

These outcomes provide a road map for how ECHSI schools might support student success. However, there is still a wide range of possibilities in how each ECHSI might achieve this. How
might the outcomes differ in rural areas versus urban areas or in states with more or less coordination between these programs and the state higher education system?

Finally, the research on dual enrollment programs has focused heavily on quantitative research and not as commonly on qualitative research (Karp, 2012; Struhl & Vargas, 2012). Because of this, there is a limited understanding of how different programs and specific activities undertaken influence the success of the students participating in dual enrollment classrooms. Although we know from research that students enrolled in these programs are more likely to enroll in college (Struhl & Vargas, 2012), it is less clear why this is the case. It could be because the students enrolled in dual enrollment programs are predisposed to enroll in college, or perhaps it is something about the program itself that encourages this. Additionally, it is unclear how different types of these programs and different practices within these programs may be more or less successful as pathways to college enrollment. For example, if a program helps a student to graduate from high school with both a diploma and an associate degree, researchers should explore whether that will encourage students to continue on to complete a four-year degree, or encourage them instead to enter the workforce immediately. It is clear that more research is needed to understand the best practices in dual enrollment programs, and how these programs differentially influence the students they serve.

**College Choice Theories**

There are several overarching theories that directly influence college choice theories including human capital theory, cultural capital theory, and social capital theory (Bourdieu, 1986; Cabrera & La Nasa, 2000; Coleman, 1988; Hossler & Gallagher, 1987; Perna, 2006). These theories are further explored in this chapter to provide a better understanding of the differences between them as well as how they influence Perna’s (2006) model of college choice. Perna’s (2006) model is also discussed in more depth later in this chapter as it provides the theoretical foundation for this study.
**Human Capital**

Human capital theory reflects an economic model of college choice in which the investment of higher education is viewed as something that benefits both the individual and society (Perna, 2006). Human capital was defined by Paulsen (2001) as “the productive capacities—knowledge, understandings, talents, and skills—possessed by an individual or society” (p. 56). Human capital reflects both a commitment on the part of individuals to develop their own skills and talents through education and experience, as well as a commitment by society to invest in opportunities that can help to create human capital (Becker, 1993; Paulsen, 2001; Perna, 2006).

Human capital in higher education relies on supply and demand (Becker 1993; Perna, 2006). Becker (1993) argued that this is because investment in education is directly related to the need for more technically trained workers. He argued that as the world has become more industrialized, the jobs that need to be filled require specialized training and education (Becker, 1993). Therefore, the relationship between industry and education is cyclical. In order to have more and better industry, a country must provide skilled laborers, and in order to have skilled laborers, a country must provide quality education (Becker, 1993). Because of this, government and industries have an interest in human capital development for the potential economic growth that it brings.

Similarly, investments in human capital at the personal level are believed to increase both productivity and earnings (Becker, 1993; Perna, 2006). Becker (1993) also argued that investment in education also leads to improved health, civic engagement, and connection to the arts, showing that there are non-monetary benefits to individuals associated with increased human capital. To understand how and why human capital is gained at higher levels by some people and groups than others, theorists look at the ways that students weigh their options when considering the cost and benefit of attending higher education institutions (Becker, 1993; Paulsen, 2001). Human capital relies on a rational process in which students make choices about education by being informed of
the outcomes of those choices, but Perna (2006) noted that students who already have more human
capital have a higher likelihood of enrolling in college. Perna (2006) also noted that most of the
research on human capital and college choice reviews the choice to enroll and the choice of
college. Although this is important research, it alone does not help to illuminate why some
students are not even considering higher education.

Human capital theory is important when reviewing college choice because it provides an
essential argument for why enrollment in college is beneficial. However, human capital theory
alone is not enough to explain both the benefits of higher education, and the causes for differential
attainment of college degrees among different groups (Perna, 2006). In order to understand why
some groups invest in human capital at higher levels than others do, it is also important to
understand the roles that social and cultural capital play in the college choice process.

Cultural Capital

Cultural capital is different from human capital in that it does not relate to skills that are
necessary to a job, but rather to skills that are necessary to fitting into a specific culture (Bourdieu,
1986; Lareau & Weininger, 2003; McDonough, 1997; Perna, 2006). Bourdieu (1986) argued that
cultural capital occurs in three states: embodied, objectified, and institutionalized. The embodied
state refers to the seemingly innate characteristics and behaviors of an individual, though Bourdieu
(1986) argued that these behaviors are learned from parents and other influential adults. Embodied
capital refers to the ability to do something because of the knowledge you possess, such as a
knowledge of how to speak to elders in a community, which can often differ by community.
Objectified cultural capital can refer to those things a person owns such as fine art or musical
collections, but can also be the ability of the individual to value those items even if that person
does not own them. Finally, institutionalized cultural capital refers to the normalization of what
certain credentials confer on an individual. For example, someone who holds a college degree has
a higher level of cultural capital than someone who does not because our society values the degree
itself. Bourdieu (1986) argued that higher levels of cultural capital correspond with higher levels of economic capital because those individuals who have more economic capital have more time and money to invest in acquiring cultural capital in all of its forms.

Lareau and Weininger (2003) argued that in studying how cultural capital influences educational attainment many researchers have equated knowledge of the arts as cultural capital and have felt that it needs to be studied separately from more academic measures such as grades or standardized testing. Lareau and Weininger (2003) argued that this definition of cultural capital in educational research does not adequately cover Bourdieu’s (1986) definition. They further argued that in order to research how cultural capital affects educational attainment, a researcher must study the degree to which a student understands and complies with the norms of the educational system in which the student is enrolled (Lareau & Weininger, 2003). Therefore, cultural capital in education refers to the norms of education, both K-12 and postsecondary, that are understood by some people and not by others, but by which all people are judged.

These norms can be communicated in different ways to students. Tramonte and Willms (2010) argued that cultural capital could be conveyed in two ways: static and relational. They argued that static cultural capital refers to understanding a concept or ‘highbrow’ item such as a work of art (Tramonte & Willms, 2010). This static form of cultural capital can be learned in a classroom or through parents. They argued that relational cultural capital was learned through ongoing conversations with parents about their education that allowed students to “activate” their cultural capital (Tramonte & Willms, 2010). An example of this might be a student’s static understanding that college placement exams are required for college enrollment; in order to activate this, students would sign up for and take the placement exams. Tramonte and Willms (2010) found that simply knowing the cultural norm was not enough to develop cultural capital. Instead, they argued that in order to fully benefit from cultural capital, students had to be able to utilize the static capital they possessed (Tramonte & Willms, 2010).
Students who came from lower SES backgrounds were found to have less cultural capital and were found to be less likely to have access to resources that would help them to activate the cultural capital that they did have (Tramonte & Willms, 2010). This finding shows how cultural capital works to reinforce stratification in our schooling systems and in our society. Those students whose families already possess higher levels of social capital are more likely to participate in behaviors that help them to activate that capital, while those students with less cultural capital are less likely to have connections to resources that enable them to activate the static capital that they do possess (Tramonte & Willms, 2010). Additionally, this lack of cultural capital is used by schools in the tracking of students to keep reinforcing their place, rather than being used to explore how schools are implicit in denying access to increased cultural capital (Valencia, 2010).

Finally, lack of cultural capital has been found to have several negative correlations regarding educational attainment (Bourdieu, 1986; Lareau & Weininger, 2003; Perna, 2006). Lareau and Weininger (2003) compared students from a middle class family and a family who fell below the poverty line. They found that the adults involved in the lives of these students behaved differently in regards to norms set forth by the schools that the parents be involved in the education of their child (Lareau & Weininger, 2003). The mother of the middle class family was heavily involved with the school and interceded on her daughter’s behalf when she felt that her daughter needed support but also taught her daughter how to stand up for herself in school. Lareau and Weininger (2003) argued that this taught the middle-class students a sense of entitlement as well as enabled them to feel comfortable in challenging school officials when necessary. On the other hand, the lower SES family wanted to intercede on behalf of its child, but did not possess the knowledge or experience to do so. Because of this, lower SES parents were found to be less assertive in their interactions with school officials and were less likely to ask questions that would enable them to better support their child’s progress (Lareau & Weininger, 2003). Valencia (2010) argued that schools should find ways to encourage all parents to be involved in their child’s
education by breaking down barriers for participation and not assuming that the parents of first-
generation or low-income students place a lower value on education.

Cultural capital affects both the ways in which students are able to comply with the norms of education, and the ways in which parents can support their children in the educational process (Lareau & Weininger, 2003; Perna, 2006; Tramonte & Willms, 2010). Perna (2006) argued that students who lacked cultural capital were less likely to enroll in college and were less likely to feel comfortable and supported in the educational process. This finding points out how cultural capital can influence educational attainment.

Finally, as Lareau and Weininger (2003) pointed out, the ways in which cultural capital has been studied are somewhat lacking. The research so far on cultural capital and education seems to focus mostly on what having higher levels of cultural capital looks like and how it affects educational attainment (Cabrera & La Nasa, 2000; Lareau & Weininger, 2003; Perna, 2006; Tramonte & Willms, 2010). Researchers need to do more to understand the ways in which educational norms are communicated to students, and to understand how schools might be used to increase cultural capital for underrepresented students.

Social Capital

Social capital is the term that describes the resources and knowledge to which an individual has access due to the social networks with which they are connected (Bordieu, 1986; Coleman, 1988; Perna, 2006). Social capital can be used either to refer to the ways in which individuals understand the social norms of society that are required for individuals to be successful in different realms, or to refer to the network of people to which an individual has access (Bordieu, 1986; Coleman, 1988; Perna, 2006). Social capital provides a way for individuals to get information about processes that they might not otherwise have the time or attention to investigate (Coleman, 1988).
Bordieu (1986) noted that social capital is related to both the size of the social network and the amount of social capital that is possessed by the members of that network. This distinction is important because it indicates that the number of social connections is not enough to determine social capital. The types of people with whom students and their parents have relationships outside the home also influence the amount of social capital they possess. In addition, it is important to note that social capital can be acquired from groups and organizations with which an individual connects as well as from the social connections they have (Coleman, 1988; Hossler, Schmit & Vesper, 1999). This is important because it points to the ability of organizations to help individuals gain social capital that they might not have access to based solely on the people they know.

Social capital is directly related to college choice because who students and their parents know has a direct impact on what they know about both the process for and importance of attending college (Hossler et al., 1999). Hossler et al. (1999) further argued there are three ways social capital can influence the college choice process. First, they stated that social capital helps to determine a student’s predisposition to attend college and knowledge about attending college. Coleman (1988) argued that social capital is attained through the relationships children have with their parents as well as the relationships their parents have with other adults. Perna and Titus (2005) further found that the social capital possessed by parents was an important factor in determining the predisposition of students to attend college. They found that parents who had attended college had a greater understanding of the college environment and were therefore able to convey norms and standards to their children regarding college preparation and attendance. This was not the case for students whose parents had not attended college, which in turn resulted in a reduced likelihood that these parents’ children would enroll in college.

A second way that social capital can influence college choice is that it can be acquired outside the home (Hossler et al., 1999). They argued that this means that the influence of
socioeconomic status and parental education levels can be mitigated by increasing other means to educate students and help prepare them for college. One such resource could be middle school and high school counselors. McDonough (2005) argued that middle school and high school counselors could have either a positive or a negative impact on the college choice of students depending on how well they are prepared to support their students to take the steps necessary to prepare for college. Hossler et al. (1999) further argued that the influence of these counselors tends to become greater during the high school years when students have made the choice to go to college and are trying to decide where to go. This information indicates that these relationships with individuals who have the social capital needed to understand the enrollment process can be an important step in helping students who may otherwise lack this social capital.

One downfall with the idea that counselors help students to enroll in college was supported in Valadez’s (2008) study of first-generation immigrants when he found that the assumption that some counselors make about what students know and need to know regarding college can be harmful. For example, Valadez (2008) found that a counselor who did not understand how little his student and the student’s parents knew about the enrollment process and because of this was expecting the student to convey necessary steps in the enrollment process that the student did not understand to his family. The alienation the student felt from this experience as well as the lack of confidence the student had in his ability to enroll in and succeed in college resulted in his choice not to enroll. Valadez (2008) argued that if the counselor had better understood how foreign the process of enrolling in college was to this student, the counselor may have been able to help him make the transition. Instead, the obstacles seemed insurmountable to the student, and the counselor felt frustration towards the student for not enrolling instead of exploring why this was the case.

Another place that social capital can be gained outside of the family is in college preparation programs (Perna & Titus, 2005; Swail, 2005). Swail (2005) argued that “precollege
programs often provide meaningful, individualized contact between a youth and an adult that is not typically available in the communities or schools from which they hail” (p. 186). Karp (2012) further noted as stated previously in this chapter that access to college coursework on a college campus for high school students had a positive impact on college enrollment. Participation in precollege programs has the potential to provide students with an understanding of the norms of college attendance even when their parents may not understand those norms, giving them access to social capital that might otherwise not be accessible.

Finally, social capital is not determined by a single choice or action (Hossler et al., 1999). Students, families, and school officials consistently influence each other through on-going interactions. This means that social capital is an evolving aspect in a student’s path towards college that can have positive and negative impacts through the entire journey. Valadez (2008) found this to be the case based on the cyclical relationship between counselors not understanding the lack of social capital of students and the students and their families in turn becoming overwhelmed with the prospect of college attendance. This caused a school system, which had previously seen potential in a student for college attendance, to believe that there was no hope in getting that student to enroll.

Yosso (2005) argued that this type of belief that Students of Color do not possess college potential comes from a view of social capital that is too narrow and advocated instead for an understanding of the types of capital that Communities of Color have and how that capital can support Students of Color. She stated that extended families and communities can provide forms of capital that can help Students of Color succeed (Yosso, 2005). One of these forms was aspirational capital, which Yosso (2005) described as the ability to go through challenging times and still have hope, which could lead to increased persistence. Yosso (2005) also stated that social capital in Communities of Color often is found through working with individuals within the community to help complete enrollment processes or apply for scholarships. When one member of
the community has experience, it is often shared with the larger community for the benefit of all (Yosso, 2005). The ability of students to experience Yosso’s (2005) description of capital is limited to the extent to which the community in which a student is raised comes together in the ways that Yosso expressed, but it is important to note that there may be more forms of capital than are expressed through dominant culture.

In any case, social capital has been shown to have an impact on college choice. It is less clear what practices and interventions are most influential in increasing the social capital of students. Perhaps this is connected to Valadez’s (2008) findings that even those professionals who are well meaning in helping students enroll do not understand the context in which those students live well enough to truly be of assistance. What is clear is that further research needs to explore how social capital is most effectively increased for students, and how much the increase of social capital plays a role in college enrollment.

**College Choice Model**

Each of these forms of capital, human, cultural and social, is influential in Perna’s (2006) college choice model (Perna, 2006; Perna et al, 2008; Perna & Kurban, 2013). This model explains the college choice process through “four nested contextual layers” (Perna & Kurban, 2013, p. 12). These layers start inward and move outward and consist of

1. the individual’s habitus (or student and family context)
2. the school and community context
3. the higher education context
4. the broader social, economic, and policy context (Perna & Kurban, 2013, p. 12).

Perna and Kurban (2013) stated that human capital theory is at the center of this theory, but that the theory also takes into account the differing levels of resources and knowledge to which students have access. This is important because it allows a researcher to examine how a student’s “situated context” (Perna, 2006, p.116) is integral in the college choice process.
Perna (2006) argued, “both the proposed conceptual model and the student choice construct assume that there is not one set course leading to college enrollment but that multiple routes are possible” (p. 116). With this in mind, she argued that each of the four layers plays a role in the college choice process for students. The first of these layers is habitus. Habitus is related to both social and cultural capital and is the understanding and beliefs that come from an individual’s surroundings (Perna, 2006; Perna & Kurban, 2013). The first layer therefore reflects the individual’s college-going aptitude, expectations, and knowledge.

Habitus can be influenced both by the individual and by the organizations or schools in which the individual participates (Perna, 2006). McDonough (1997) defined the second part of this as organizational habitus, or the ways that schools can either reinforce or interrupt social inequalities. Tracking systems in schools that place students in certain types of courses based on race or class are one way that this can happen (McDonough, 1997). Another way that organizational habitus plays out is in the ways that the schools themselves have different levels of resources (McDonough, 1997; Perna, 2006). Perna and Titus (2005) reinforced this idea by showing that one of the most important factors in whether or not students enroll in college is the number of resources they can access at their school. This second level of school and community context reflects the ways in which educational resources can influence the college choice process either positively or negatively.

The third layer of the model is the higher education context. Perna (2006) argued that higher education institutions influence the college choice process for students in several ways. First, she argued that through marketing colleges can provide students with information about college attendance. In addition, Perna (2006) stated that the actual culture of the schools influences who applies, as students are more likely to attend schools that appeal to them and where they feel they would fit in. Third, higher education institutions set the minimum admission standards for who will be able to enroll in their school due to a set academic standard, which limits
the ability of some students to apply (Perna, 2006) and pushes others out completely. Finally, Perna (2006) noted that colleges and universities determine the number of students who can enroll in their programs, further influencing who will be able to attend. This last way that higher education influences the college choice process is growing more important as more students are choosing to go to college, and therefore are competing for similar numbers of enrollment spaces, which Perna (2006) felt may lead to increased cost as demand for higher education increases and supply does not keep pace. Although some educational institutions may be able to increase their numbers, some of the more selective institutions will not be as easily able to do so, or may choose not to do so. This will continue inequity in educational access as students who have traditionally been underrepresented in higher education will likely remain underrepresented in more selective colleges that do not have specific and strong programs to combat that inequity.

The final layer of this model is the social, economic, and policy context (Perna, 2006; Perna & Kurban, 2013). Perna and Kurban (2013) argued that this layer takes into account changes in demographic patterns, the economic landscape, and policies influencing college access and finances. They further stated that this layer takes into account the ways in which K-12 policies and programs influence the achievement levels of students in that system, as well as the way that the programs offered at schools can influence the knowledge students have of the college enrollment process. This area shows how initiatives such as the Early College Program at Lorain County Community can influence the college choices of the students served. In addition, the fourth layer takes into account the ways in which financial aid policies regarding state and federal aid influence college enrollment (Perna, 2006, Perna & Kurban, 2013). Perna and Kurban (2013) argued that both funding for higher education institutions in general and the cost of higher education influence who attends college.

Overall, this model takes a holistic approach to considering the ways in which the college enrollment process is influenced. Perna (2006) noted that this model shows that
although college choice is ultimately based on a comparison of the benefits and costs of enrolling, assessments of the benefits and costs are shaped not only by the demand for higher education and supply of resources to pay the costs but also by an individual’s habitus and, directly and indirectly, by the family, school, and community context, higher education context, and social, economic, and policy context. (p. 119)

Understanding the roles that each of these layers plays in the college choice process is critical for understanding the ways in which this process differs for students in a particular area or from a particular group. It is necessary to look at each of these layers to understand how to create effective interventions.

**Summary**

Higher education attainment has many benefits to individuals and to society, which helps to make clear why increasing the number of individuals with postsecondary education is important. However, although education, social, and economic researchers seem to consistently agree that this is the case, there is less agreement on how to increase this attainment level and how to specifically support the enrollment of underrepresented groups. This is evidenced by the fact that first-generation college students are still at a disadvantage for both enrollment and attainment (Baum & Ma, 2007; Choy, 2001; Engle, 2007, Lohfink & Paulsen, 2005). With this in mind, further research needs to be completed to determine what types of outreach are most effective in encouraging college enrollment and attainment for all students.

Dual enrollment programs such as the Early College Program at Lorain County Community College provide one way in which underrepresented student populations may be successfully supported in the college choice and enrollment process. Although this is the case, there is still limited research on these accelerated learning programs. More research is needed on what practices and aspects of these programs influence the college choice process. In addition, research is needed to determine if completing an early college program with a college degree has an impact
on a student’s choice to either continue with further education or not. Furthermore, little is known about the students who choose to enroll in these programs and their motivation for higher education coming into the program. It is easy to say these programs are successful just by looking at statistics, but statistics do not tell the full story.

Finally, as is evidenced by the Perna et al. (2008) college choice model, many factors need to be taken into consideration when attempting to understand the college choice process. This speaks to the need to understand how the community context in which the student is located differentially impacts their college choice process. Most of the research on dual-enrollment programs to date has been conducted in major urban centers. It is unclear how these programs affect students in more rural or spread out areas. This study will address many of these unclear areas by exploring the college choice process of students in their final semester of the Early College Program at Lorain County Community College. Students will be asked to share their experiences within the program, and the experiences that have helped them to make their decision regarding their plans after graduation. In addition, this study will examine the ways in which the communities in which the students live influence their plans. Finally, this study will explore the ways in which the achievement of an associate degree at the same time as a high school diploma influences the students’ decisions regarding their future. By exploring this program and these students, researchers may be able to gain a better understanding of how the social structure of a community interacts with the structural context of an outreach program to influence the college choice process of students.
CHAPTER III: METHODOLOGY

As stated previously, I completed a case study of graduating seniors in the Early College High School program at Lorain County Community College. The primary research question for this study was “How do students enrolled in Lorain County Community College’s Early College program describe their decision making process regarding their future after graduation?” In addition, the following sub-questions were used to further understand the main research question.

1. How did students make the decision that they made for their education following high school? What considerations did they take into account?
2. Do students participating in Early College program believe they are gaining skills and knowledge that can help them to enroll in college? If yes, how so?
3. Do students believe that participating in a college course influenced their college-going expectations? How and why?
4. How do students perceive their race, gender, and socioeconomic status influencing their experience?

Methodology

I chose to conduct a case study to answer the aforementioned questions because of my beliefs regarding the nature of reality. As a researcher I tend to operate ontologically from a social constructivist lens. Social constructivists strive to understand knowledge and reality from the lens and context of those who live it (Jones, Torres, & Arminio 2006). I believe that individuals have different experiences and perceptions of events based on various factors such as cultural norms, gender, knowledge and experience. Therefore, knowledge is constructed by individuals and social interactions rather than existing as an absolute truth.

As a researcher, I believe that my job is to attempt to understand the way in which those that I research understand their own experience and come to know things. Epistemologically, I believe that I can only understand what my participants know by interacting with them and with
the setting in which their experience occurs. For that reason, case study was ideal because it allowed me to immerse myself in the stories and experiences of my participants. Additionally, case study research is particularly useful for my research because my goal was to understand the specific factors of a single program that influenced college choice of a single cohort of students, and case study is used when a researcher is working within such parameters (Creswell, 2007; Glesne, 2006; Jones et al., 2006; Stake, 1995).

I recognize, as someone who believes truth is subjective, my own experiences and values had the potential to color the way that I designed my study and the ways in which I interpreted my findings. As a qualitative researcher, my goal was to do my best to recognize how my values influenced my findings and to make that process clear to the reader. Creswell (2007) stated that qualitative researchers recognize the ways in which their values, or axiology, influence their study and findings. With this in mind, it is vital that I share my values and background to help my readers understand how my findings and my interactions with my participants may be impacted by them. Additionally, as I wrote my findings, I continued to examine how my values were influencing the way I interpreted my data, and will share with my reader why and how my values may have influenced my findings.

**Researcher Assumptions**

As a White, middle-class woman who has recently completed my coursework towards a doctoral degree, I recognize that I bring my own assumptions to this project because of the importance I place on higher education. I was raised by two parents with college degrees. My mother was an elementary school teacher and continued taking college courses throughout her teaching career, and my father worked as an environmental safety officer. Both of my parents placed a strong emphasis on the importance of education. I cannot remember a time in my life as a child when one or both of them were not enrolled in classes, whether that was my mother’s ongoing coursework that was required to maintain her teaching certificate, or my father’s enrollment
in foreign language classes as he had a desire to become fluent in multiple languages. This inevitably had an impact on my expectations regarding college. There was never a time when I did not know that I would be attending college.

The program studied for this project involves students whose parents have not completed any college degree. I believe I was fortunate to have two parents who valued higher education and instilled that value in me. Similarly, my assumption is that parents who have not earned a college degree may not be instilling in their children the same value for higher education that my parents did, or that at a minimum, they may not have the knowledge regarding higher education that my parents had from their own experiences. My assumptions regarding the role that families play in encouraging higher education for all their children clearly colored the research process. The questions I chose to ask, my responses to the participants’ answers, and my interpretation of the information shared by students was influenced my experiences and values. With this in mind, I worked to ensure that I accurately portrayed the voices of my participants regarding their college choice process.

In addition to my assumptions about education, it was also important for me to recognize how my upbringing in a predominantly White, rural, farm community was different than the upbringing of these participants from more urban towns in an industrial area that has lost most of its industry. As a child, I spent most of my time outside playing on our 29 acre farm. This is remarkably different from what the participants of this study experienced growing up. The responsibility of helping to maintain a working farm, as well as the freedom to know that I could safely roam our land for hours without my parents worrying, left me with a strong work ethic and a confidence in my ability to be independent. Having not grown up in an urban industrial area, I cannot possibly assume that I understand how that experience influences the characteristics of the participants.
My study was also influenced by my understanding of family and the ways in which education connects back to the family unit. In my family, there are six children. As the fourth of six, I was able to watch the ways in which my older siblings connected to education or other choices after high school. My oldest sister went to college and achieved a four-year degree and promptly moved far from our family to begin her career. Our family valued the opportunities that education provided to allow each of us to move on to bigger and better opportunities. Education was not viewed as something that would necessarily result in any of us giving back to the family in any significant way.

Because of this view of education as a pathway to something disconnected from the family, I am aware that my view of the importance of family and the role of family in the education process was potentially quite different from that of my participants. I believe that K-12 systems need to involve families in the process to help students achieve postsecondary education, but I am also aware that the ways in which families should be involved need to take into consideration the cultural values of different family units. I grew up in a household with two parents and many siblings. We were close as a nuclear family, but did not have much connection to our broader family as we saw them very infrequently. Others in my study may have had different parental experiences or extended family connections that influence their values, views, and expectations. Ignoring the ways in which family structures influence students’ choices effectively removes the ability for educators to make a meaningful connection with those families and their students.

A final connection to my family that influenced my study is the way in which my family addressed the financing of higher education. Although many factors of my upbringing were different from my participants, one part of my upbringing does connect, which is growing up for most of my early life in a lower-income family. Although I always knew that it was an expectation that I attend college, I also knew that I would be paying for it myself because my family was too poor to help financially. For most of my life before going to college, only one of my parents...
worked at a time. In addition, running a small farm that did not make money took most of the money we did have.

Growing up poor definitely influenced my work ethic in high school because I knew I needed to work hard to be a good candidate for scholarships. It also influenced the colleges I considered because I knew, or thought I knew, that affording a private school was beyond my financial reach. Although my family was not able to help me financially with college, they were able to help me to understand the steps to secure my own funding. I was fortunate to be able to pay for my entire undergraduate career by attaining scholarships and working on campus. Because of this, I understand how much work can go into funding education. On the other hand, I was fortunate to have a family who understood enough of the process to help me through it. I am aware that not all students have the same opportunities either to understand how to apply for scholarships, or to get the scholarships even if they do apply.

As a professional who works in the field of higher education, I have seen many students who struggle each semester to pay for their education. I have also supervised young professionals who are coming out of college with very large college loan debts. Many of these students and professionals had little or no understanding of how funding higher education worked, and how loan debt would impact them later in life. I believe there is a lack of transparency about how college financing works, what types of financing to seek out, and the impact that the choices students and their families make will have on a student after college. I believe that schools and government agencies have a responsibility to students and families to help them navigate the college funding process.

Another way in which my beliefs impacted the way I approached this study is connected to my interest in social justice and in ensuring that all people have equal access to education and resources. I recognize that this is not currently the case in our country. I also recognize that the support and resources that have traditionally been put towards increasing college attendance have
not always taken into consideration how different populations and/or individuals may best be served in improving access. Throughout my career in higher education, I have been consistently troubled by the lack of understanding of and support for students who do not identify as White.

In addition, I have seen how universities do not always serve the needs of the communities around them. In several of my previous jobs, the institutions were located in very racially and economically diverse areas. Also, several of these institutions have been located in cities where English and Spanish speakers are equally common. Although the area surrounding the institutions was diverse, you would not have known this by looking at the population of the college. Although I believe that some efforts were made to increase this diversity, they were too little too late.

My understanding of both the K-12 system as someone who has a bachelor’s degree in French education and someone who grew up with a teacher for a mother has also influenced my interest regarding this study. It is clear to me that in order to rectify the imbalances in access to education, starting at the higher education level is not enough. Higher education administrators and K-12 administrators must collaborate to help close the attainment gap.

**Theoretical Framework**

The theoretical framework that most influences this study is college choice theory. The model I chose is one researched by Perna and multiple colleagues (Perna, 2006; Perna et al, 2008; Perna & Kurban, 2013). This model is influential because it looks at the totality and intersectionality of influences on college choice. This model reflects the influences of students’ personal and family background, school and community context, higher education context, and socio-political context on their college choice process (Perna & Kurban, 2013).

As a researcher, I appreciate the aforementioned theoretical framework because it recognizes that the college choice process is complex and is influenced by many different factors. It also takes into account the different ways in which the combinations of these experiences can influence this process. This theoretical framework helped to inform the ways in which the
questions I asked in this study were framed, and required me to consider the responses of the participants in relation to the various layers of the model.

**Case Study Research**

For this project I chose to conduct an explanatory sociological case study. Sociological case studies such as this one attempt to explore “society, social institutions, and social relationships (Hancock & Algozzine, 2011, p. 36). Explanatory case study designs are used when a researcher wants to explore how different experiences influence different outcomes (Hancock & Algozzine, 2011). In the case of this study, how does participation in the early college program influence the college choice process of the participants?

Case study research is done when the researcher is working within a bounded system (Creswell, 2007; Glesne, 2006; Jones et al., 2006; Stake, 1995). In other words, the sample and timeframe to be studied have end points. For this study, I interviewed students from one currently enrolled class of seniors. In this way I was able to complete this study within a bounded system.

Additionally, case study designs can either be intrinsic or instrumental (Stake, 1995). Intrinsic case studies are used when the researcher is most interested in studying a specific individual or group, while instrumental case studies use the case to study a broader phenomenon (Stake, 1995). The purpose of this study was to understand the college choice process of the participants; thus it was an instrumental case study because I used this specific population to understand a broader issue.

Hancock and Algozzine (2011) noted three characteristics of case study research including who is to be studied, where and when the study takes places, and how the results are shared. First they noted that case study research typically focuses on an individual, organization, or a phenomenon that is representative of what the researcher hopes to study. In this study, I explored one cohort of students in one organization. This allowed me to explore the experiences of a group with some shared experiences on their path through the early college program. This also connected
with the second characteristic of case study design because the research was conducted during one semester with one cohort at the same institution, thus creating the bounded aspect of the study.

The final aspect of case study design stated by Hancock and Algozzine (2011) is the way in which the results are reported. They noted that case study designs provide rich and detailed results because of the ways in which the data are collected. The results of this study are written in such a way that the words of participants are clearly shared with the reader. This helps to paint a vivid picture of these participants’ experiences in the early college program and in their surrounding community. This description allows the reader to have a better understanding of the ways in which the college choice process of these students is impacted.

The benefit of conducting a case study, according to Jones et al. (2006), is that it allows the researcher to uncover how or why something is happening. In this study where I hoped to understand the college choice process of students in a specific program, this seemed to be the perfect choice of methodology. One distinguishing feature of case study is that because it is specific to one case, or in this instance one class, the findings may not be generalizable. It is my belief however, that in order to be able to truly understand why students are choosing to enroll or not in higher education, we must first understand their experiences and motivations.

**Institutional Profile**

The Early College High School program studied here is a collaborative effort between Lorain County Community College and the Lorain and Elyria school districts (LCCC, 2013). Lorain and Elyria are two rural suburbs west of Cleveland. The school districts enroll 7500 and 6500 students respectively (NCES, 2012). Between half and two-thirds of the student population at each of these schools are eligible for free lunches, indicating the relatively low income status of the populations served (NCES, 2012). In addition, both schools are relatively racially diverse with Elyria having more than half of its population identify as People of Color, and Lorain having three-quarters of its population identify as People of Color (NCES, 2012). The economic status and
racial identity of the students served by the Elyria and Lorain school districts makes them ideal participants in a college access program such as ECHSP.

The Early College High School program further narrows the students enrolled by selecting students, whose parents do not have a college degree, starting in the 9th grade and enabling them to take both high school and college courses. This program is different from some other dual-enrollment programs because the goal is for students to graduate high school with both their high school diploma and an Associate of Arts degree (LCCC, 2013). In addition, the faculty work to make sure that the credits that students earn are likely to be transferable to a four-year program. According to LCCC (2013), the mission of this program is to provide students with a rigorous academic experience that will provide them with the skills and knowledge necessary to successfully complete a four-year degree.

The program currently enrolls around 280 students from the high school populations of the two schools from which they are selected. In order to be eligible for this program, students must be the first in their nuclear family to complete a college degree. In addition, students’ school attendance records, disciplinary records, and grades are taken into account as well as their score on the 7th grade Ohio Achievement Test (LCCC, 2013). Once students are determined to be eligible for the program the final selection of the students is done through a lottery system (LCCC, 2013), though it is unclear how this lottery is conducted.

ECHSP provides students with free tuition, fees, books and tutoring (LCCC, 2013). In addition, students receive transportation from their high school to ECHSP (LCCC, 2013). Both of these make it easier for low-income students to participate in this program. The program is funded with support from the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation (LCCC, 2013). To encourage students to succeed in the program, students are responsible for paying for any classes they do not pass (LCCC, 2013). This consequence helps to ensure that the students who are chosen for the program do not take lightly the opportunity they have received, and to make sure that students are working
hard to achieve the goals of the program. To further ensure that students are successful in the program both students and their parents must attend a new student orientation program once the students are selected for the program (LCCC, 2013). Through the funding of the program, and the outreach and support offered from the program to students and their families, ECHSP involves all interested parties in the education process of the students.

**Data Collection**

I began my data collection by reviewing some of the information that is available online regarding the program to understand how ECHSP was organized and implemented. In my review of information online, I paid particular attention to the recruitment documents that were shared with the students and the public. In addition, I reviewed the course catalog to better understand how the academic program was organized. Prompted by participants’ references to, staff and educational resources that were offered by LCCC and ECHSP for them, I reviewed those documents as well as information about success coaches (LCCC, 2016), and about the some of the required courses in the program (LCCC, 2015). Bowen (2009) stated that by reviewing documents, qualitative researchers can “verify findings or corroborate evidence from other sources” or to “provide supplementary research data” (p. 30). By reviewing these documents, I attempted to gain a better understanding of the program prior to beginning my interviews with the students, as well as to find confirmation of patterns once I had completed my interviews.

I conducted interviews with participants drawn from one cohort of seniors enrolled in the early college program. In order to best understand the experience of this class, I sent an email inviting all 65 of the students in the class to participate in the study (Appendix A). To encourage participation I offered a $25 Amazon gift card to all those who were chosen to participate. Once students volunteered for these interviews, I planned to use a purposeful sampling method to select 8-10 students who represented diverse racial, socioeconomic, and gendered backgrounds (Jones et al., 2006). However, since only 9 of the 65 students who received the email responded, I
interviewed all of the respondents. The nine respondents did however represent a diverse set of backgrounds in regards to race, gender, interests on campus, high schools that they would have attended if not going to ECHSP, and areas of study.

In conducting my study, I followed the ethical guidelines set forth by the Human Subjects Review Board at Bowling Green State University (HSRB approval letter is Appendix B). Because there was a chance that I would be interviewing minors, I asked that all participants have a parent or guardian sign a consent form (Appendix C) that indicated the purpose and requirements of this study. Students were also given clear instructions about their participation in the study and were asked to sign an assent form (Appendix D). Students and parents were told how the information would remain confidential, the purpose of the study, the fact that personally identifying information would be removed, what participation in the study would require of them, and how they would be compensated for their time. Students were also told that they could choose not to answer questions if they felt uncomfortable, and that they could choose to stop participating at any time without penalty.

The questions asked in these interviews (Appendix E) related directly to the research questions I hoped to answer in this study. Stake (1995) noted that in case study research, interviews are the key to “discovering and portraying the multiple views of the case” (p. 64). As such, he noted that the goal of an interviewer in case study research should be to create some broad questions that get at the overarching topic of study with multiple probing follow-up questions. This allows participants to share their unique experience regarding the topics at hand. Stake (1995) also argued that because of the stories that participants often wish to share, it is easy as a researcher to get sidetracked and not get the key questions answered. For this reason, he advised that a researcher should attempt to limit opportunities for participants to stray from the set interview protocol in order to be able to best develop an understanding of the phenomena studied across participants.
To collect data from the interviews, I recorded each session and then transcribed it later. Recording the interviews allowed me to have the most accurate representation of what the participants have said. It also allowed me to rehear their words in their own voice and tone later so that I could more accurately assess the meaning they placed behind their words. In addition, I took notes on my interview protocols (Appendix E). This helped me to remember pivotal comments that stood out to me in the moment of the interview, while still maintaining eye contact and rapport with the participant. Each of these interviews lasted between 30 minutes and one hour as this is typically found to be the most productive interview length (Glesne, 2006). In the student interviews, I was hoping to understand from participants what their experience has been and how it has impacted their decisions about their future. After completing the transcription of the interviews, I sent each student the transcript of their interview and asked for written feedback by email if they wished to add any thoughts to what they had already shared.

I conducted the interviews in an on-campus location of the student’s choice. I did this to try to create a sense of comfort for the students. By allowing the students to choose the location of the interview, I was able to gain a sense of their personality before ever asking a question. Some of the students wanted to meet at the coffee shop, another scheduled a private room, another still completed the interview outside of his place of employment on campus, and the remaining students asked me to choose a location on campus. By meeting in different locations on campus, I was also able to get a better feel for the space on campus and to see how the students interacted with that space.

**Data Analysis**

In case study research the goal is to create a detailed depiction of the case (Creswell, 2007). To do this, researchers must use a “recursive process in which the researcher interacts with the information throughout the investigative process” (Hancock & Algozzine, 2011, p. 62). Hancock and Algozzine (2011) argued that continuously immersing themselves in the data allows case study
researchers to ensure that they are asking the right questions to get the information they will need. In addition, they argued that as researchers attempt to interpret the data they have collected so far, they are able to ask new questions that may become pertinent once they have a basic understanding of the initial data.

In order to make sure I was interacting with the data throughout the process, I began transcribing the interviews immediately after completing them. This allowed me to make sure that if I had questions about what someone had said, I could circle back to them and ask the questions. In addition, it allowed me to see what other questions I wanted to ask that I did not initially consider. By doing this, I was able to ask later participants questions related to aspects of the program about which I had no knowledge before conducting my first interviews and hearing about them from the first participants.

As I collected data, I needed to begin to interpret it, which I did by following several different forms of data analysis. The first of these is categorical aggregation in which I looked for multiple instances within the data of the same topic (Stake, 1995). Another form of analysis that Stake (1995) advocated is direct interpretation in which I looked for a single meaningful comment from which I could develop ideas. In looking for both the single and multiple instances, I was able to discover patterns that were then used to help to make the data applicable to others (Stake, 1995). This process required reading and rereading the data multiple times to understand fully what the participants said.

In addition, as with most forms of qualitative research, this process of reading and interpreting the data required me to be self-reflective (Creswell, 2007; Glesne, 2006; Jones et al., 2006; Stake, 1995). This process was necessary in order to make sure that the meaning that I drew from the data was not a result of inherent researcher bias, but was instead supported by the words of the participants. Hollway and Jefferson (as cited in Glesne, 2006, p. 166) listed four questions that researchers should ask as they are interpreting data including:
1. What do you notice?

2. Why do you notice what you notice?

3. How can you interpret what you notice?

4. How can you know your interpretation is the ‘right’ one?

When considering the answers to these four questions, researchers can help to ensure that they are catching all of the salient points of the data. Glesne did point out that the final question is a bit tricky as one of the hallmarks of qualitative research because there is no ‘right’ answer, but she argued that asking this question causes researchers to pause and make sure that they are considering other possible meanings of the data.

As I began to analyze the data, my first process was to highlight those comments that stood out to me as being important using both categorical aggregation and direct interpretation. I did this for each of the interviews completed, as well as with the documents I reviewed. Once I read each of these items once, I did so a second time again highlighting as I went along. I conducted this second reading because I wanted to start making connections between comments and ideas that were found more than once.

After completing this highlighting process, I began to create codes that connected similar ideas. As suggested by Stake (1995), I created codes that connected with my interview questions to find different patterns within the data. Stake (1995) noted that most frequently the researcher is able to do this in a formal pattern by looking for patterns in the responses to questions; however, he also noted that sometimes these patterns emerge unexpectedly as well. I found this to be the case particularly when I had a single statement that really resonated with me. I would then look at what other participants had shared to see if that statement had connections elsewhere in the interviews, or if it was just one individual’s experience. It was often through this exploration that I found patterns that I may otherwise have missed.
Throughout the coding process I continually tried to make sure that I had adequate instances of each code to make a compelling argument. In addition, I tried to make sure that the instances I found were able to bring a picture of that code to life for the reader. Finally, I made sure that the codes that I assigned connected with the main questions of my study as Stake (1995) noted that it is vital for the researcher to keep these in focus when completing data analysis. By reviewing my original questions, I was able to discern what findings I had that related to each, and to be able to share those findings in a logical way with the reader.

In addition to finding these patterns within my interview transcripts, I used the codes that developed to analyze the documents that I used. Bowen (2009) stated that thematic analysis can be used to analyze documents for themes that are connected to codes found in interview transcripts. Bowen (2009) also argued that by connecting themes from interviews and documents, a researcher can create an integrated understanding of a phenomena. By using the codes and information that seemed pertinent in my interviews, I was able to find connections in documents I had already found such as the Student Handbook and ECHSP website. In addition, Bowen (2009) said that through this process, researchers should look for more documents to support other themes that they find in their other data collection methods. I did this when students began discussing success coaches as important by finding more information about what that position entailed at LCCC (2016).

**Measures of Trustworthiness**

In order to ensure that this study is useful, I worked to ensure that readers see the findings as trustworthy. Lincoln and Guba (1985) stated that in order to show that a qualitative study was trustworthy, the researcher needed to show that the findings were credible, transferable, dependable, and confirmable. I will now describe how each of these was completed in this study.

First, it is important to show that the findings are credible. Lincoln and Guba (1985) stated that there are many ways to establish credibility; however, the one that I used was persistent
observation. In order to achieve persistent observation, Lincoln and Guba (1985) noted that it is important for the researcher to pay close attention to those things that are being shared that most directly influence the research questions at hand. They noted that this is important to avoid missing these factors while paying more attention to something tangential that may be interesting but is not connected (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). To ensure that I was persistently observing, I began coding my data as I completed interviews. This allowed me to take notice of items that seemed to be connected as well as those that did not. Lincoln and Guba (1985) noted that by doing this, a researcher can begin to see where an item that may at first seem unrelated can be found to be important or not.

Persistent observation also allowed me to pay attention to what later participants were or were not sharing immediately and ask follow-up questions if I wanted to know more about something a prior participant had said. For example, one participant may have talked extensively about how the other students in the program were influential in their college choice process. A second participant might not bring this up at all unless asked a more direct question. The answer to this question allowed me to confirm whether what the first student said was a pattern, or a single experience.

A further method I used to establish trustworthiness is that of triangulation. Lincoln and Guba (1985) stated that triangulation can be used to show credibility, dependability, and confirmability. They noted that triangulation is a process through with the researcher connects findings from several different documents or sources to show that the findings are accurate. Through this study, I used documents I collected and my interviews to show how my findings are supported through multiple sources in order to add credence to my findings.

Additionally, I used thick description of my observations and my participants in my writing to achieve transferability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Stake, 1995). This means that in my writing I used quotes and details to paint a vivid picture of what these students were experiencing. This use
of quotes supported my understanding of the themes I found with actual concrete data. By using direct quotes, I attempted to help the reader to see the experience of these students through their own eyes. I was also helping the reader to understand how my findings may transfer to their setting.

Another method I used to establish trustworthiness through confirmability was by keeping a researcher’s journal (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). In this journal, I kept schedules of when each part of the process was completed and how much time each item took. For example, I noted the date and time of each interview so that as I continued to work through my data I could remember when I learned what. I also used the journal as suggested by Lincoln and Guba (1985) to note my thoughts, feelings, and reflections throughout the process. This enabled me to see how my own thoughts and values were impacting my findings. For example, I realized early in my interviews that my beliefs around how race, gender, and socioeconomic status would impact the students did not match what they were sharing with me. I had to take a step back because it shocked me that they were not seeing ways that these impacted their experience. By trying to place my own view of how race, gender, and socioeconomic status must have impacted their choices, I was failing to see that for them, this was something that, although important to them, was far less important than their own goals and aspirations. In addition, I failed to take into account how their own cognitive and social development might limit their ability to respond to those questions; at 18 years old, they did not yet have the developmental capacity to critically reflect on these aspects of their identities.

Finally, I used the journal to note any decisions I made related to the research itself. This allowed me to note why I chose to change or add to my study as my study progressed. For example, anytime that I added follow-up questions to what I was asking because of something I had heard from a participant, I noted it in this journal so I could remember why and when I added it. This journal was extremely useful in the writing process of my study because it helped me remember what I was thinking or feeling at specific times during the process.
The final way that I helped the reader to know that my findings are trustworthy is to share any limitations of the study. Glesne (2006) stated that by admitting those things that researchers are not able to control, they are better able to help the reader understand to what degree and under what circumstances the findings are accurate. In this study there were a few limitations including sampling method, ability to conduct follow-up interviews with participants, and ability to know what choices they finally make about their college attendance.

The first limitation came from the way that I was able to sample students. I sent my invitation email out to all of the students in the class. I was hoping to have a large enough group of students from which I could then make sure that my participants were representative of the larger cohort. What happened instead was that I only received responses from nine students so I used all of the students who responded. Although nine students out of 65 possible participants in not a bad number, it did not allow for me to consciously choose participants. In addition, students who self-selected into the study may have already had something that made them more likely to choose to continue their education than other students who did not respond.

The way the participants came together does not however negate the findings of this study. It does leave room to believe that the findings of this study may not have been recognized by all of the students in the cohort but instead just by the few who responded. With that said, the students did not seem to all represent a singular friend group, academic interest, or extracurricular interest on campus, leading me to believe that the sample remained fairly diverse in experiences.

A second limitation was in my ability to conduct follow-up interviews or emails with the students. Because I chose to interview students during their final semester in the program, it limited their time to follow-up on what I wrote. As I noted previously, few of the students responded regarding their interview transcripts. Furthermore, I ideally would have sent the participants information about my findings in this study, but due to timing, most of them had moved on from ECHSP and were no longer checking their emails to confirm my findings. This
once again does not negate the findings, but did require me to really support what I found thoroughly with direct quotes from the participants.

A final limitation of this study lies in my inability to know what actually happened with these participants. I intentionally set my study within a timeframe to understand the college choice process as it was happening. To do this, I interviewed students in their last semester of the ECHSP. This comes with a limitation though of not being able to know whether or not the students actually followed through with attending a new college. The students indicated many ways that participation in ECHSP influenced their plans for college, but I cannot confirm whether those plans were actualized. Although this was not one of the original goals of my research study, this information would have been a logical conclusion to this study.

Once again, this final limitation is not something that negates the findings of this study, but it does recognize the limitation of being able to see what effect the findings have as students go through their continuing educational career. The findings of this study indicate best practices for getting students to want to go to college. They also indicate ways to help increase students’ confidence, skills, and knowledge around the enrollment process.

Summary

The purpose of this study was to understand how enrollment in an early college program influences the college choice process of participants. I conducted a sociological explanatory case study to explore this topic. Through this study, I was able to understand the ways in which the early college program, personal experiences, community, and larger socio-political aspects interact to influence students on their path towards the future. I hope the next two chapters help readers to understand this as well.
CHAPTER IV: RESULTS

In this chapter, I present the results of this study regarding how students enrolled in an Early College High School program describe their process of deciding what to do after graduation. I will first provide a brief description of the participants in this study. After the descriptions I will share the stories of my participants in direct response to the research questions posed of: How do the students describe their decision making process, what skills and knowledge did the students get from the program that helped them with their process, did participation in college courses influence their choices, and how do they perceive their identity influencing their experience in the program and choices for after the program?

Participants

For this study, I conducted interviews with nine seniors in one Early College High School program. All of the participants were the first in their family to participate in the program, though one of them had another sibling who had subsequently enrolled in the program. Additionally, the education level of the participants’ parents ranged from less than a high school diploma for one of the participant’s parents to some college work for three of the participants’ parents. The majority of the participants noted that their parents had started working immediately after high school. In addition four of the participants specifically noted that their parents were unable to go to college as they needed to get a job due to the birth of a child.

Another commonality between the participants relates to the income level of the families. Seven of the nine participants stated that their families fell in the category of earning between $25,000 and $50,000 per year, and the remaining two participants stated that their family earned less than $25,000 per year. Many of the participants noted that they felt that this income placed their families in a lower or lower-middle income bracket. However, one of the participants indicated that because her family was better off than many of the people that live near her, she felt
that even though in most people’s mind her family is lower income, it makes her family feel like they are better off financially than they really are.

Three participants identified as male and the remaining six identified as female. In addition, three participants identified as White, three identified as African American, two identified as Hispanic, and one identified as multiracial. When asked about ethnic identity several of the students who described themselves as a single race described their ethnicity as being much more complex. One student who identified as White indicated that he also had Puerto Rican and Native American ethnicity. One student who identified as African American, also spoke about having Puerto Rican ancestors, and one student who identified as Hispanic, clarified that his ancestors were White, Puerto-Rican, and Spanish. In discussions with the participants, many of them described the diversity of the participants in this program as one of the things that they felt made it feel inclusive and enriching.

Finally, of the nine participants, eight planned to enroll in college in the Fall of 2016. One student planned to take a year off to earn money and try to narrow down what he wished to study when he returns to college. Two of the participants planned to return to a community college to further their degrees. One of these intended to complete her Licensed Practical Nurse degree and the other to take the coursework necessary to transfer into a sports medicine program at a four-year college. The remaining six participants planned to attend four-year institutions in the fall. Five of the six wanted to attend in-state schools and the remaining participant wanted to attend a private liberal arts school out of state. The six students who were going to four-year colleges planned to study the following:
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Area of Study</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Xavier</td>
<td>Mechanical engineering and entrepreneurship</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Susie</td>
<td>Biology with an intention to continue on for a law degree in hopes of becoming a patent lawyer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Glaceon</td>
<td>Computer science in hopes of becoming a video game designer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sky</td>
<td>Early childhood education to become a teacher</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Andi</td>
<td>International business and accounting</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brooklyn</td>
<td>Graphic design, creative writing and advertising</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**College Choice and Success in the Program: People as Support**

When thinking about what helped the students successfully complete the Early College High School Program as well as make determinations about their future goals after high school, students repeatedly talked about the importance of the people in their lives. This included individuals both associated with the program, as well as others who were not connected to the ECHSP at all. In the following sections, we will explore the many ways that faculty, staff, peers, and family have played a role in influencing students’ choice.

**Influence of Teachers as Mentors in the Program**

In deciding what they wanted to do after they completed the Early College High School Program (ECHS) students repeatedly discussed how their teachers influenced their decisions as well as their success in the program. Ben stated that he owed his success to all the teachers that….the high school teachers here….that helped the early college students before we head into the college courses. They focus more on the college readiness area and helped us learn various ways to solve problems and easier remembering type of situations. Ben stated throughout the interview that he still has problems remembering things, but that the skills he learned from the teachers during his first few years in the program continued to be useful to him as he progressed through the remainder of his time in the program.
In addition to the teachers in the first two years of the program, during which all of the
students are still together in classes as if they were still in high school, many students discussed the
important role that the teachers who taught the actual college classes that students took during their
junior and senior years played. Susie talked extensively about the importance of one of her science
teachers, Dr. K. Dr. K. provides opportunities for students to work on AIDS research in the micro-
biology lab. Susie spoke at length about this experience being meaningful in her choice of college
and her choice of career. Because of her work with Dr. K, Susie attended lectures with scientists
who discussed their careers. It was through these lectures that Susie first learned about patent
lawyers, but she stated that Dr. K. was the person who really helped her to see this as a viable path
when she described the following interaction with him:

I was talking to Dr. K. about it, and I was like you know I don’t know what I want to do
with my biology degree. I know I want to do something in science, but I feel like I could
do well if I could write as well because I’m good in English. And then he was like, you
know before, I guess before he was going on to be a professor he was, I guess somebody
came to him and asked him if he wanted to be a patent lawyer because of his microbiology
degree. And he was telling me all about that and how in northern California, that’s where a
lot of them are. And he was telling me all about the career and I was like ‘Oooh that would
be very good for me.’

Through her work with Dr. K, Susie was able to find a professor who genuinely cared about her
future and who took the time to listen to her and provide her with experiences and advice that have
helped her in her time at the Early College High School Program. Susie’s example of faculty
members taking an interest in students beyond the classroom was not limited to Dr. K. She also
indicated the influence of other faculty on her decisions for after high school when she said

They all had high expectations and they were like, you know I think you should do
something, you know kind of crazy, like become a lawyer or something like that. And I’ve
always had that in the back of my mind, like I think I want to be a lawyer. And so, I’ve had that, and they said you know after you’re done with that, go back and be a professor because they think I should do higher education and do English and things of that sort. They’ve had good observations and I ended up turning out exactly how they thought I would.

Susie found the mentorship and care that the faculty put into students in this program to be vital in her experience with the program, and she was not alone in this sentiment.

Brooklyn similarly indicated that her teachers played an influential role in her experience when she said:

Basically, I have to thank all of my teachers because they weren’t just teachers they were mentors, and they really showed me how to be myself. (pause) I’m trying to think, like how do I explain, like I can’t like tell you enough how much these people impact our lives. And like the office, I mean they’re all great and everything, the counselors are very here to help you. You don’t really see the office a lot but your teachers are like your everyday you see them. They want to see you succeed. Like we’re all here because we want something out of life. And so basically they’re like, ‘you have the power to do this’ and rather than just tell us that they give us the tools, they guide us to do that. And they’re like you have more power than you know. There’s so much in you that you just need to unleash, and they just teach us how to use that and go towards a good cause.

This quote illustrates the importance of the confidence that the teachers at the college instilled in students. Once the students saw that the teachers believed in their ability to be whatever they wanted to be, they could see the path forward for themselves.

Finally, in addition to the role the teachers played in encouraging the students academically, they were also discussed by several students as being people the students could talk
to and get advice about personal issues that did not involve academics. Sky talked about the importance of having teachers as mentors for more than academics when she said:

> It is also great because we can really get to know our professors and they take an interest in us. We can get connections and stay connected to them. I have a professor from my freshman year that I am still very close with. I also have a teacher who I call by his first name. Not in front of the dean because she would be mad, but when she is not around, I am like hey Ross, here is what is going on in my life and he listens and gives advice and it is really helpful to have someone who will just listen and give advice.

The ability to see the teachers as people who genuinely cared about more than just her academic life was something that Sky valued and felt made her experience in ECHSP complete. Whether it was an interest that teachers took academically or personally in the students, it is clear that the staff at this college really took the success of the students to heart. The compassion and commitment that they showed to the students I interviewed was repeatedly evident.

**Support From Staff**

In addition to the support that students felt from the faculty they studied with, they also clearly indicated the importance of key staff in the program in their success in the program as well as in their decisions for what to do after graduation. One of the positions that was mentioned by several students was the success coach. Several students indicated that the success coaches helped to keep them on track and explore possibilities for future study. In explaining the role that the success coaches played, Janai said:

> We have success coaches that are provided by the Early College. They actually like look at our grades and make sure that we’re doing good. If we have like a poor grade in something they usually call us in and talk to us about what’s going on, or if we need help, what can they do to help. So they’re always there for us.

Ben also shared his experience with the coaches when he said
The Academic Success Coaches really help out the uh…student body by giving them as much assistance as they need. And uh…like one of the success coaches. I’m not going to name the name…. but she really tries to connect with the students and push them for the best and I thought that was really appreciated and helpful to the students.

This constant support throughout the program was discussed by several students as being very important to their success in the later years of the program when there is less consistency among the courses that students take.

Although Janai and Ben saw the benefit of the success coaches in their focus on helping students succeed academically, that is not the only way that students described their impact. Andi shared that beyond the success coaches’ concern about academic success of students, was a concern for the students as people when she said:

We have like great success coaches here. Um and so, it is not even all about like academics. If you have any questions about like anything in your life and you just need somebody to talk to, they’re really easy to talk to.

For Andi, the concern shown by the coach for individuals was something that helped her to connect to the program and to keep her motivated throughout the program. Through the personal relationship, this coach was able to encourage students to succeed in the classroom and beyond.

Whether it is through the personal relationships these coaches form, or the focus they help to place on the ongoing academic success of the students, the success coaches were mentioned routinely through my interviews as having played a significant role in the lives of students in the program.

In addition to the success coaches, the guidance counselor was also stated as someone who was helpful in supporting students as they prepare to transition to life after the Early College Program. Isabella said about the guidance counselor:
She’s like helped a lot and like I don’t feel like if I message her or email her a bunch of times that like I’m a burden and putting stuff on. I feel like there’s just enough help and they’ll bring like College Now in. She will help you with your FAFSA and stuff like that. She’s helped a lot.

The importance of having people who would help fill out forms or complete other preparatory work for applying to colleges was echoed by Susie who said:

And so they’re really on us about you know doing our personal statement but they’re very helpful when it comes to that. Like I’ve had multiple people help me with that and with recommendations and they give us the resources for like a database of scholarships and um…they give us stuff for scholarships in our area.

Students consistently discussed the importance of the support the staff gave them while at the same time pushing them to do more, and helping them to gain skills and confidence through the challenges. By working alongside the students to help them complete tasks like the FAFSA and personal statements, the students shared a sense of feeling more confident in what they were doing, and in knowing that they were following the right steps. Several of the students indicated this assistance in completing the college application process as significant in their steps towards entering college.

Finally, in addition to the statements from students regarding the importance of the staff at the Early College High School Program in helping them succeed in the program and in prepare to go away to college, several students also indicated the sense of comfort they got from knowing that even when they went away to college, they would still have the support of those staff in their new endeavors. Andi summed this up when she said:

I know that whenever I go off to BG if I ever need anything, I can always call someone in Early College and they’ll be there for me to help me out. Even if I wanted to come for the weekend and be like hey can you tutor me in this? Or you know….I would have that
support. And that’s just what I really love about it and um. I don’t know… I feel like they just prepared me to just go out there and um…..yeah.

The confidence that Andi shared in her ability to continue receiving support from staff in the program, was something that she felt gave her more confidence in her ability to succeed when she did go away to school. Knowing that there were people in the program who cared about her success both then and in the future was a motivating factor for Andi.

Although faculty may help the students to see how they can succeed academically by preparing them inside the classroom, the staff in this program also played a vital role by giving students the support and challenge they needed to succeed in the program in general. LCCC (2016) intentionally took the care to create the success coach position which they indicated was a person who is there to help students with academic and personal needs. LCCC shared information on its website about how to access these coaches and what kinds of support these staff offered (LCCC, 2016). The care that these staff members took to get to know their students, and the structure that the program provides by having staff members keep an eye on the academic progress of the students seems to be important in helping the students to complete the program successfully. In addition, through the relationships students form with the staff on campus, they are getting access to mentoring and resources that help them to take the next step and actually apply for college after the program is complete. Each of these roles that the staff members play are influential in helping students succeed.

**Cohort Model: We Are a Family**

A final support group associated with the Early College High School Program was the students’ peers. Repeatedly students referred to their peers in ECHSP as their family. The students talked about the connection that was forged by not knowing many people upon entering the program. Glaceon described the transition to the program as follows:
When you’re here you kind of have to connect with everybody in your grade level because you’re all working together towards the same thing so that’s a little bit of an extra something. Like this person knows what I’m going through because they’re here too, like they have most the same classes and they know what’s going on, and even if I don’t they probably do, so somebody can help you with that. It helps a lot, like you have a lot of people doing the same thing you are. I mean they get to go into their specialized trees but the base line classes are mostly the same so it helps a lot.

The students repeatedly indicated that because they were able to forge relationships by taking all of the same classes together in the first two years of the program, they were able to create a community of peers for support that felt like a family.

Ben described his transition to feeling like family as being a little slow but very important when he said:

I think you should know that in Early College it takes a few years for everyone to feel like family. But it gets to the family status and you know….the students they’re best friends or enemies. It’s the same for both high school and everywhere else. It’s just a little bit more in tune with each other just because of how close and small this uh…..what do I say…um…program is.

Several of the students shared that they feel that the cohort worked to bring students closer together because they were all coming from different schools prior to the Early College program. Since students had not had years already to forge long-lasting friendships, they had to seek out new ones.

Isabella saw these new relationships as an opportunity to learn from others and took the family metaphor further when she further explained:

I met so many people here who taught me so many different things, and there are so many different people of different sexualities and how they like represent themselves….and no one says anything because it’s just like a family….even though you may not like one of the
people they’re still family. It’s a small class….and like you all….you help as many people as you can because they are your brothers and sisters. Teachers are like your mom and dad. It’s just like a family.

The sense of being accepted for who students were and for the variety of racial, socioeconomic and gender identities that peers possessed was echoed by most students. The sense of belonging discussed as students describe their ECHSP family was a clear factor in helping students to succeed.

In addition to the sense of belonging, several students also indicated the healthy sense of competition and motivation they got from their peers. Susie reported being impressed by her peers’ work ethic and involvement:

Yeah, my peers, I’m just like so impressed by everyone. They’re just all such hard workers and they really just motivate me to do so much better. Because like, a lot of them they have their jobs on campus, and they’re working, and then they have their school stuff, and then they do their extracurricular activities. Yeah, they’re just really impressive. So I really draw a lot of inspiration from a lot of them.

Susie was inspired by the amount of responsibilities her peers undertook, and chose to become more involved herself through her interactions with her peers. She credited her involvement with helping her to decide her major and giving her opportunities to visit college campuses.

Susie was not the only one inspired by her peers. In fact, Andi described Susie as her motivation when she said:

I have my best friend….well we call it sisters but and you know the weird thing was we met each other….well we knew each other but we really didn’t until we both joined Dr. K’s research lab and then we decided to run as class officers together. Um, and Susie’s really…she’s helped me. Like she has motivated me and um….because like, I’m ok at studying and stuff but she’s like….I think she’s a genius. And so, she has motivated me to
like strive harder and to take on different challenges and so we kind of do everything together and so we face most of these things together and so it’s like…..I want to say that we push each other and even though we’re not going to the same college that we’ll still have that and we’ll still be able to help each other out when we’re gone.

The motivation that Andi described here was evident even when I went to conduct the interviews with both Andi and Susie and found both of them working on school work together in the campus coffee shop both times. This was similar for many of my interviews. I routinely saw students sitting together and working on academic projects. Students indicated that it was important for them to recognize that unlike their prior schools, students would support their desire to do well academically and that doing school work together was just a common thing that was done at Early College High School.

Finally, Sky spoke of the motivation that her peers gave her not only in relation to her peers in her grade, but also to those who came before her cohort and those who would come after. She stated “My friends in the program, like we all have the same goal. We all want to be better than students who are not in the program, and we all want to be better even than the class before us.” Although several students indicated how helpful it was to have older cohorts support them through the program, they also felt that there was a sense that because those cohorts had succeeded that they not only could succeed, but that they should do so at higher levels than the previous cohort. In addition, they felt a responsibility to make sure that future cohorts succeeded even as they were trying to be the best cohort ever.

The support and inspiration that students felt from their peers, parallels the support that they felt from the faculty and staff. The combination of networks of people to support students was repeatedly described by students as vital to their success in the program. If any one of these support networks was not there, one could arguably see that the students would have missed out on an important aspect of personal enrichment that this program offers. By finding ways to help
students connect with academic, practical, and personal support people on campus, this program helped to connect students to a variety of possible supports that enabled their ultimate success in the program, and helped them to strive to do more both academically and personally.

**Family Support**

In addition to asking students to share who supported them in the ECHSP, I also asked them who supported them outside the program. Although not everyone discussed support people outside of the program, those who did discuss them commonly talked about family members as supporters. A common feeling from those who mentioned family support was that even though college was not something their parents completed, their family still wanted them to succeed in this program. To illustrate this, Brooklyn said:

> I mean my family….my mom is very supportive. I mean if I, like she wasn’t even good in school, like she wasn’t bad but she didn’t have that like learning capacity. So she tries to help me if I need something, like if it’s flashcards, I’m really big about making flashcards for class….I’m like could you read through these with me? And she will. She’ll be like ok what’s this, what’s this’, what’ this? So I can rely on her to help me and that helps me prepare, but basically it’s like I did this by myself.

Although Brooklyn recognized the limits of her mother’s ability to help her with her academics, it is clear from this statement that she did feel that her mother attempted to be there for Brooklyn in ways that she could.

Brooklyn was not alone in feeling that the support from her family was limited. Many students did not mention any support from their family even when prodded specifically about it. Andi further discussed the sense she had of this limited support for students in the program when she said:

> Then I also feel like I have a better support system than most other people that go here. Um, because most of them….I mean my mom….she works….but she works while I’m at
school….and so when I go home, I have my mom and my dad who’s always there. So it’s like most people, I mean sometimes you just have a single mom who works all day and you’re by yourself and you just have to do things by yourself. I mean like one of my friends….she has a mom and a dad but they aren’t…they’re not together….so her mom works and basically she works and has to take care of her sister. So it’s kinda like I just feel like I have that….I have a better support system, so I’m able to actually do different things.

Andi recognized the struggles that other members of her cohort had to face, and recognized that because she did have family support, she was able to be involved in more of the opportunities that the campus offered. She later indicated that because of her family, she did not have to work or take care of siblings and was therefore able to participate in the yearbook club and a leadership retreat on campus.

The final student who mentioned support from her family was Isabella who discussed her cousin as someone who inspired and motivated her. She said:

My cousin is like the biggest impact. Like before, freshman and sophomore year, I didn’t really have the best of grades and then me and her got like instantly close for my junior and senior year and my grades have like been like amazing. I have almost straight A’s now and my GPA has risen from a 2.8 to a 3.1. So like, when she gets really good grades, I’m like, I want to be like that, like made me do a little bit better. So I feel like she’s put a little bit of her good gradeness on me.

Even though Isabella’s cousin is not in the program, the ability to see someone else in her family succeeding academically motivated her and helped her to see that she could do well too.

Although many of the students did not mention their family members supporting them academically through the program or in helping them choose what to do after the program, the majority of them did indicate that their parents had been part of the reason why they chose to apply
for the program in the first place. None of the students interviewed indicated that their family had played any role in their college choice process other than one of the students who discussed her parents taking her to a campus visit, and one other student who talked about asking her older brother for advice. On the other hand, the underlying support that the students felt from having supportive family members may have been the emotional support that they needed to succeed in the program and to make their choices for the future. Students were not often able to verbalize the support they received from family members, but that does not mean that it did not exist in ways that they will understand later in life.

**Influence of People Outside the Program**

The final set of individuals that students discussed as supporting them through the program as well as helping them make choices about their future after the program, were neither connected to the program nor family. Very few of the participants mentioned people that fell into this category, but those who did really felt that these individuals had been influential in their success. Ben discussed one of his friends from outside of the program who helped him when he said:

I do have my friend that lives down the street that is basically my brother. Not by blood uh…who helps give me a lot of support and uh…going through the transitions of going to a regular middle school and going to a college and…he just gave me a lot of mental support.

Ben also mentioned at a different point in the interview that it had taken him some time to get connected within the program, so it is perhaps not surprising that he was the only student who really talked about a friend who was a peer outside of the program being a great support for him. What was surprising to me was that Ben was the only person who mentioned a friend from outside of the program as a support system. In fact, very few of the students stayed in touch with people from the schools they had attended prior to coming to ECHSP. It was as if once they entered the Early College Program, the severed ties with their friends and connections from before. When questioned about this, none of them seemed to be particularly bothered by this fact, and some even
mentioned that they did not have strong social or mentoring relationships at their prior schools, so they did not feel that there was anyone or anything to miss.

In addition to Ben’s mention of his friend, only one other student mentioned someone from outside of the program or their family as a support and that person was an adult mentor. Sky said “I was involved with Big Brothers/Big Sisters and had a mentor. She would talk to me and give me advice and motivation to do what I needed to do.” Sky felt that her relationship with her ‘big sister’ was helpful in transitioning to the program, as well as in making it through the program. She also indicated that they would discuss the process for enrolling in college and making the decision of where to go.

Although Sky and Ben both did indicate the importance of people outside of the program to their success, they also only listed one person each who fit this role. What is most notable in this area is how disconnected the students in ECHSP seem to be from the community around them. None of the other students interviewed felt that anyone from outside of their family or the program had played a role in their success in the program, or their decisions for after the program. This could be because of a structural choice of the ECHSP. Nowhere in any document that I researched, or in any of my interviews, did community connections come up as a goal of the program. The program itself seems to focus solely on what is happening at LCCC or at the student’s home high school rather than on a broader connection to the community (LCCC, 2013). This is truly interesting in consideration of Perna’s model since the community in her model is viewed as a support mechanism for college access.

**Influence of Skills and Knowledge Gained from Early College High School**

Beyond the individuals that supported the students through the program, another factor that students brought up repeatedly was related to the experiences and knowledge they gained from the program. Students discussed this in connection with courses offered, job experience, outside resources that were brought in, and the simple impact of being enrolled in college courses on a
college campus. Andi summed up several of these items at once when she discussed how working for the financial aid office on top of taking courses gave her experiences she would not have otherwise had. She said:

Being enrolled in this program I got to experience some of the accounting side of things and the biology side, which I would have had to take more time in class when I would go into pharmacy so I really got a feel of both sides and helped me really decide what I wanted to do and now I have more the college experience so when I go off to college, I’ll kind of know how things are. I won’t be completely lost like I would have been if I were going to a normal high school.

This recognition of the importance of being able to explore several different career options and course options was a common discussion. The following sections will explore the ways in which the opportunities presented by the Early College High School Program influenced the success of the students as well as their college choice.

**SDEV 1 and 2**

The first way in which students felt that the program prepared them for success both in the ECHSP as well as in their attainment of college admission was through the SDEV (student development) courses that all students were required to take during their first two semesters in the program. All students were required to complete SDEV 101 in order to graduate with an Associate degree (LCCC, 2015). According to LCCC (2015), SDEV 101 covers “personal responsibility, motivation, goal setting, learning styles, emotional intelligence, study skills, life-long learning, career and academic planning and completion” (p. 9), and SDEV 102 covers “personal responsibility; motivation, personal, academic and career goal setting; learning styles; study skills; decision-making; problem solving; and priority management” (p. 9). These courses helped to prepare students for the college courses they would be taking during high school and for their future beyond ECHSP. When talking about these courses, Glaceon said:
They have hit us with a few like college preparation classes, SDEV, like so there was the intro to college pretty much like 101. Then we did 103 for uh, it was like getting a resume, doing mock interviews and getting ready for when you’re out of college you know how you are gonna apply for jobs and make yourself look really good. Just cool tips like that.

Personal finance class….it wasn’t fun, per se but it was really useful.

Glaceon further talked about these classes having influenced his choice of where to go to college by helping him to understand debt and how to avoid getting into financial trouble. He indicated that he chose to go to an in-state school because he did not want to have a lot of debt when he finished and related that choice as having been connected with the knowledge he gained in SDEV classes.

Sky further discussed how she used knowledge from these courses in her college enrollment process when she said:

Like our SDEV classes. We had to take them our freshman year and they taught us how to do all kinds of things for college like how to apply, how to write papers, and we created a college resume. I actually used that for my applications to college.

These courses seem to take the place of the knowledge that parents who have attended college would be able to pass along to their students, but they even seem to go a step further by providing practical life skills such as budgeting, that not all parents would see as related to college success. The ability to learn useful skills that would go on to help the students in the ECHSP as well as after was something that almost every student I spoke with mentioned as having been useful. Although many of them expressed sentiments similar to Glaceon regarding not being exciting classes, they also all felt that they had benefited from the knowledge and skills gained in those courses, and many discussed how they used those skills in the process of applying for and choosing a college.
Support from Resources Outside of the Program

In addition to the SDEV courses that students took, they also expressed the importance of having the program and the college outside of the program, bring resources to the students. The first of these outside resources was mentioned by Xavier when he discussed access to college advisors.

You know you get to talk to college advisors. You get to talk to um uh admissions officers from colleges. They have college fairs here so that you know they really have this whole floor with tables set up with colleges you know wanting you to come to them. There’s the University Partnership on campus which isn’t offered anywhere else where you get a four-year degree from a university here at community college. And uh…its there’s so many different opportunities…so it’s almost limitless what you can find here.

The access to college admissions staff was routinely mentioned by students as helpful in introducing them to options that they may not have otherwise considered for college. Susie discussed the importance of this a little further when she said:

We have a college fair, which the high school students can go to, but we can volunteer for it and help with that. Meet with the representatives and…yeah we have a lot of stuff we can do. For the college practice. And because we’re on the college campus, we can go to the people in Enrollment Services and talk about that or University Partnership…you’re right here in the center of where you can figure out the next steps.

Susie noted the importance of being on the college campus to access all of these resources.

Although any student in the area could attend the college fairs, or could meet with the Enrollment Services staff, Susie understood that for her, having all of these occur in a space where she already was, and a space in which she already felt comfortable, made attending these opportunities more likely for her than for a student who was not in the program.
College Now Help

In addition to the access that was provided by being able to speak with admissions counselors at college fairs, Susie also discussed the help that was provided by staff from College Now when she said:

But they have a lot of resources for us to get scholarships and they’re always posting about scholarships and we have a college now representative and she’s always helping us as well. They keep track of what we’re doing so I won’t fall behind when it comes to applying for stuff.

Isabella also expressed an appreciation for the support of the College Now staff that ECHSP brings in when she said “I feel like there’s just enough help and they’ll bring like College Now in. She will help you with your FAFSA and stuff like that. She’s helped a lot.” College Now is an organization that works to help individuals from middle school through adults have better access to college by providing advising around college access, financing and retention (College Now, 2016). By bringing College Now to campus, ECHSP is able to augment the abilities of their own staff in supporting the students as they work on financing their future education.

Access to the College Now resources, as well as the college fairs, enrollment staff and coursework that the ECHSP offers its students is clearly viewed by the students as something that has helped them in accessing college beyond the ECHSP. Each of these factors by themselves would be helpful, and many may be offered by other high schools as well. The difference noted by the students interviewed, however, is how common these opportunities were on their campus. In fact, on one of the days that I was interviewing candidates, a college fair was being set up to happen later that afternoon. By having ready access to these resources, each of the students interviewed felt that they were better prepared for the process of applying for and getting accepted to college.
Influence of Taking College Classes

In addition to feeling that they were supported in the process of getting into college, the students also consistently expressed a feeling as being prepared for their future college. One of the ways that students discussed gaining this confidence was through taking college coursework. Every student interviewed felt that taking actual college courses on a college campus was a different experience from taking courses at a high school. Glaceon outlined this difference when he said:

With the high school classes, if you weren’t in class or you missed something or you just didn’t care the high school teacher would always nudge you back on course. Catch you up and all this extra just little uh shove you back on course to make sure you’re doing everything you have to. With the college classes it’s largely up to you to make sure you get the work done you do everything that you have to do. And if you miss it it’s your fault not just because. Like it’s, the grade you get is because you did that amount of work. You put in that much effort and you weren’t just pushed back on track.

For Glaceon, this change in responsibility was an important factor in feeling that he was prepared for future college coursework. His statement was often echoed by other students who felt that there was a shift in responsibility between high school classes and college classes, and that college classes pushed students to be more responsible for the outcome of their grades.

Andi took this example further by outlining the difference between college courses on a college campus and college course at a high school when she said:

I think the college classes is what really prepared. And too, because your professors treat you like an actual college student. Even though some of them know that you’re not they still treat you like one. And, mostly at a normal high school you still like can take college classes but your teachers are your high school teachers and so they already know you and they’re trying to make the curriculum, I mean they’re trying to apply it to you, but they’re
making it easier and giving more leeway because you are a high school student and they already know you. So I feel like having those college classes that treat you like normal college students they’re preparing us in a different way for college.

For Andi, it was not only a change in personal responsibility for grades, but also a recognition that being in college classes with other college students created a different atmosphere for her than if she had been taking college courses with only other high school students. Andi’s quote shows how her confidence in her ability grew because she felt she was not being treated like a high school student. Whether her assertion that college courses on a high school campus are easier is correct or not, her belief that she was capable of doing college coursework was positively influenced by being in courses with other college students, and sensing a greater requirement of personal responsibility.

The confidence students gained from being in college classes at a college campus was echoed by many students as something that they felt would aid them in succeeding in their future collegiate work. Sky displayed this confidence when she said:

Because of going here, I know how professors work and what they expect from me. I have been going to class with other college students so I feel that I really know what I need to do in classes when I go to school next year.

Xavier further indicated this confidence when he said:

It’s so different taking college classes. You know it’s been four years now so um…we know what to expect. We know what professors expect from students. Um…so going in to college with a couple of years of experience and we’re going to be more than ahead of the game. We’re going to be ready to take it on and uh ready to graduate.

The confidence and skills that students gained from taking college courses at a college is something that helps to set this program apart from programs that do take place on a high school campus instead of at a college. Although there is arguably a benefit to attaining any college credits
during high school, the added benefit of the confidence gained by these students is important to note, when thinking about the potential for on-going success in the college environment.

Confidence in the College Environment

In addition to the confidence that students got from being in college classes, they also discussed the important knowledge they received from being on a college campus, and getting to experience the college environment. Janai said, “Being here also like….being in the college setting also really helped me like know what to expect when I go to college. Not be as, I don’t know….nervous or unaware of what to expect.” Janai felt that the ability to see how a college worked while still in high school helped her with knowledge that was not just related to the classroom, but also with the ability to know what to expect of a college campus.

This ability to understand how a college works was echoed by Brooklyn when she said:

I mean I definitely feel like I am prepared. I’ve been here for four years now. And I just feel like I know what to expect with college. I was actually just talking about this the other day with my friend and she was like “Because we’re, um even though we can be considered juniors, we’re still like incoming freshmen with junior status so it’s like we’re here with all of these freshmen who have never been to college a day in their life. They don’t know what to expect. They don’t know like how to email professors and do all this.” That’s crazy, I’m just, it comes so natural to us because we never had like that real high school.

Brooklyn was able to see skills she had gained from being on a college campus that helped her to know more than some of her peers who were entering the same college as freshmen after high school, but who had not had the college experience that she had yet. The confidence that she gained from having skills that will help her when she goes away to school was noticeable.

Students repeatedly spoke about how they felt that this understanding of the college environment will benefit them as they go to different colleges next year. Glaceon said: “It’s an environmental factor. You spend so much time in the, in the thick of it, and this is a college that
when you go somewhere else it’s just a change of scenery not a change of atmosphere.” His description of a change of scenery being what he expects when he goes away to school showed the confidence he felt in his skills to be able to adjust to the new scenery because he already had experienced the scenery at one institution. This is something he argued he would not have felt or experienced if he had remained at a traditional high school. Isabella echoed this feeling when she said:

I think it just prepares me for college…mentally and physically….because, like if I was going away, I would already like….nothing…..like nothing would really change except for being in a new environment. And I just feel like they really set you up for success and they want the best that you can get. Which is like, the best thing to ever ask for.

Attending college classes on a college campus gave students confidence in their academic ability to succeed, but these quotes illustrate how students felt that they were prepared for the college experience beyond the classroom. Being enrolled in an Early College High School Program that was located on a college campus gave these students the skills that they needed to be able to navigate campus offices and culture in ways that they felt classes on a high school campus would not do.

Financial Concerns

Although all of the students interviewed felt that the program helped them to increase skills, knowledge, and confidence necessary for attending college after high school, they did still note some concerns that influenced their plans for after graduation. The first of these was financing their education and their life. Janai discussed her plans for after high school as being heavily influenced by a combination of financial concerns and her experience in the program when she said “I just, I like helping people and being an STNA really inspired me to want to move up within the nursing career. You know…better pay.” Janai further explained during the interview that as part of the Early College High School program, she received the training to become a state
tested nurses aid (STNA), and that her experience as an STNA solidified for her the desire to get more education as a nurse. Janai indicated that her choice to remain at a local community college to continue her education was also due to concerns about graduating with her nursing degree without having loans or putting financial strain on her family.

Janai was not alone in her discussion of the importance of finance in her decisions. Glaceon spoke of his choice to enter the ECHSP in the first place as related to finances when he said:

I mean in all honesty it was kind of an easy way to make it so I didn’t have to stay in college that long so I wouldn’t rack up as much debt cause I already have some necessary credits and that was another really large driving factor is its fiscally responsible.

Glaceon also indicated that he chose to go to school in state so that he could be close to his family and so that he would not have to take out as many student loans. He expressed concern about being in debt when he graduated and indicated that by staying in state, he would have very little if any debt at the end of his undergraduate education.

The decision to stay at an in-state institution because of financial concerns was echoed by Isabella:

I had planned to...before to attend Michigan State University, but then I got my financial slip and it was just like way to much so then reality hit so I’m going to stay here for a year or two and then I’m going to transfer to like Ohio State or Cincinnati.

Isabella found the potential of having significant debt from going to college as a barrier to going to the college of her choice. She indicated that the program did help with applying for financial aid and scholarships, but that many of these were not applicable for out-of-state tuition and expenses. She found that if she stays at the community college, she will be able to get scholarships to cover the remainder of her credits that she needs to take before transferring.
Finally, even though most of the students discussed the importance of finding scholarships and financial aid to help fund their education, all but one of them seemed to feel confident in their ability to do so. Ben was a bit different from the others because he plans to take a year off so that he can save money for his education. He said:

I plan on working for a year just so I know I have fall back money for uh scholarships or college funds I would need, and then after the year I would go back to college to pursue in whatever I feel like I want to go for. I’m still undecided at the time what I should be.

Ben was unique because he does not yet know what he wants to do when he does attend college. He felt that rather than spend money on classes that may not lead to anything, he would rather wait and work for a year and try to narrow his interests. Although this may at first glance not seem connected with the concerns of others, Ben very clearly indicated an intent to continue his college education, but recognized that he could not afford to go to school for a long time without going into debt. He chose instead to take some time to better understand his interests and save for his future before jumping into something that he may regret and that may put him in debt.

Whether money influenced the type of school attended, the location of the school, or the choice to take some time off, it was clearly an influential factor that students considered when making their plans for after ECHSP. Each of these students illustrated how financial concerns impacted their choice of program of study or institution. Although these students feel prepared to attend college, there are still factors like finances that limit some of their options when it comes to where they can go and what they can study.

**Being Different From Their Parents**

Another concern that many of the participants expressed was the desire to have a different life than their parents. The students interviewed universally spoke positively of their parents when asked, but each of them also expressed a desire to do more or be different than their parents. Sky stated this most clearly when she said:
Well, I knew I did not want to be like my mom. I mean she is good mom and all, don’t get me wrong, but I did not want to be like her. She had kids young, my dad too, he has a bunch of kids. My mom has raised us a single mom and I knew I did not want to do that.

Sky indicated that the desire to have a different life from her parents has been a huge motivating factor for her in choosing to enroll in the ECHSP as well as her choice to continue with a college education after graduation. Sky indicated that because her mother had children early and did not have a college education, financial concerns were constant. She shared that although she values her mother, she does not want to have the responsibility of a single mother with little chance to have a good career. Sky saw attending college as the path to achieving that career.

Much like Sky, Xavier recognized the hardships that his parents faced because they were not college educated. He shared that his decision to enter ECHSP and his choice to go to college being heavily influenced by the struggles he saw his family experience when he said:

I thought it would be a great opportunity for my future. Um…its, I’m a first generation college student. Neither of my parents went to college…uh my father was a very blue collar worker. He worked at the steel mill in Lorain and my mom was a stay at home mom for a while. Uh, but my father ended up passing away when I was six so it was me and her and so uh college has always been a really important thing. Uh that was not really pushed on me or pressed, but really emphasized the importance. You know, to have a good future, not have to work three or four part-time jobs…uh to just live for your own sake and keep your own head above ground.

Xavier recognized that in order to have a more financially stable future, he would need a college education. He has worked three jobs while in ECHSP to be able to ensure that he has money to help support his family right now, as well as to put money aside to help fund his education.

Finally, Susie indicated how both her family and her identity combined to help her decide what she wanted to do after college when she said:
Umm…I think it makes me wanna just strive to just keep growing and advancing and just like being a Black female, I feel like. Like there’s a lot of opportunities. Like people want you to be an engineer and stuff, but actually I went to a talk the other day and they said, ‘there’s not a lot of Black female lawyers ’ that are young or whatever. And I was just like, Oh, that’ll be me. So I think it just makes me wanna just strive for greatness and really just prove what I can do. And….to make it so my family isn’t in the lower income area. Stuff like that.

Susie shared that her mom is unable to work, and she does not know her father. She expects to have some responsibility for her mother’s care in the future and wants to make sure that her career goals allow her to have the financial freedom to meet that responsibility. In addition, she indicated how being a Black female makes her want to strive even harder to make something of herself in a field where there are not many women of color.

The concern of doing better than their families is something that caused each of these students to strive harder in their academic endeavors. For these students, doing better included having better job opportunities, not having to work as many jobs, having a more secure home life, and doing more than they felt was expected of them because of their identity. Each of these students expressed an understanding of the struggle that their parent(s) faced in trying to raise them, and indicated that they wanted to have an easier road forward by having a better education. The goal to do better than the generation before is not a new one, but for these students it was particularly important in helping them choose their futures. Although the ECHSP itself may not have had direct influence on the desire to do better than family, it did provide the necessary skills and resources to allow these students to see this as a more realistic possibility for their futures.

**Identity and Choice**

When asked questions about how their identities impacted their choices around enrolling in ECHSP and their future plans, many of the students struggled to make direct connections to race,
gender, socioeconomic status and their decisions. I knew when asking this question, that it might not be a question that students were prepared to answer based on their cognitive and social development; however I wanted to create space for them to speak about this in case there were significant ways that they saw their identity influencing their experience. Although students did not make many connections between their identity and experiences, they did indicate two important ways that they felt this program was either influenced by their identities or that their choice to participate in the program was a result of their identities. These were related to the sense that everyone in the program was treated the same, and to the feeling that they did not really fit in at their prior institutions and were afraid of school violence there.

**Bullying and Violence**

Personal safety was a concern that some of the students discussed as being a factor in helping them choose to enroll in ECHSP. When asked why she chose to enroll in the ECHS program, Brooklyn stated

My main thing, I went to Amherst high school before, or not high school, but their school district. I went to Amherst and absolutely hated it. I was bullied a lot and so it wasn’t it a good time for me so the main point was getting out of there so it really didn’t matter where. And so then I heard about this program and I’m like, that’s an amazing thing. I mean who gets their associate’s degree graduating from high school.

Brooklyn’s choice to enroll in the program was directly influenced by her fear of being bullied if she stayed where she was. Isabella echoed Brooklyn’s concern about bullying when she said “I didn’t really want to attend Lorain High because it’s just something that…I just felt that I would have kind of been bullied in a kinda way.” Brooklyn and Isabella, like several of the other students interviewed, saw this program as an opportunity not only for a better education but for escaping a negative school environment in hopes of a better one.
In addition to a fear of being bullied, there was a general concern among students of the violence that they feel exists in the public high schools. Ben illustrated this when he said:

I know a lot of middle school students who get into a lot of fights so I believe that there’s a lot of fights over at Lorain High even though they push for uh…non-violence over there, there’s still some acts of violence.

Ben was less concerned about being bullied himself than he was with being in an environment where fighting was common experience. As noted in a previous section, the students felt safe when they came to ECHSP because fighting was an almost non-existent factor at the college.

Concerns for their safety were common among the participants. Though there was not one single identity that made these students a target, each of them felt that they were at risk for some form of violence at the local schools. What is unclear from this study is if this is a common concern of all students enrolled in the public schools, or if it was a more common concern for these participants. What is clear however is that the students interviewed felt that they were or would have been targeted in some way if they had remained at a regular high school. Although this definition of identity might not be clearly connected to the ways in which I originally defined identity, it was a connection the students themselves made. Although they were not always clear in their quotes about why the bullying occurred, they shared that it was connected to who they were as an individual.

Race, Gender, and Socioeconomic Status

When the students were asked questions about how their race, gender and socioeconomic status influenced their experience in the program and their decisions for what to do after the program, many struggled to answer the questions. The questions I asked regarding identity can be found in Appendix E but in general I asked them how they saw their race, gender, or socio economic status influencing their experience in the program or their choices about the future. I asked these questions after asking them to identify their race, gender, and socio-economic status in
order to help them to understand which identities I was interested in understanding. It was very common to have to ask several probing questions to get any answer to these questions. In follow up questions, I often would ask the student if her or his experience would have been different if it were completely different from her or his real identity. For example, if I was interviewing a White middle class woman, I might change the question to ask “If you were a Puerto Rican wealthy male do you think your experience would have been different?” Even after asking these probing questions, the students really felt that the experience would not have been significantly different. This could be a result of their current development, or it could be that they had never given much thought to it before.

When asked how their race, gender, or socioeconomic status influenced their experience in the program, a common response from students was that none of them saw their identity impacting how they were treated in the program. Glaceon illustrated this when he said:

No, that’s, that was a non-factor. The fact that I am a White male means nothing. It’s all about your attitude. If you come in here thinking it’s going to be a breeze, you come in here not caring you’re going to have a much harder time than just anybody. So the upper-class white guy comes in here just thinking it’s going to be a breeze will do infinitely worse and have much more problems than any other race or gender that could be in that class. That’s not a factor it’s just your willingness to participate and do work.

Glaceon felt that work ethic had more influence on a student’s experience than their other identities did.

Glaceon was not alone in his belief that commitment to the program was more important than other identities. Xavier who identified himself as Hispanic similarly stated that:

Everybody kind of gets the same program…um not exactly program…um the same experience. No one’s treated differently. Um…..everybody has the same opportunity.
Everybody gets the same chance for extra credit or the same chance to come in and study. Um….so there’s no difference in the education or the experience. Xavier recognized that there are opportunities for success provided by the program, and that it is up to the student to take advantage of those opportunities.

Finally Isabella, who identified as a Mexican woman, argued that because there is no cost associated with the program, it enabled students from different socioeconomic backgrounds to be on a level field. She indicated that this factor was what led her to feel that everyone had a similar experience in ECHSP when she said:

Because you’re just treated the same here. Like you don’t need a lot of money to be in this program, cause they pay for everything….and here, you are very accepted….no one judges you at all….it’s just like a big family and everyone fits in. There’s no judging at all.

She indicated that the family atmosphere described previously also played a role in the feeling that everyone had the same opportunities.

Each of these statements indicates how students felt that the ECHSP treated them all with the same level of respect and opportunity. What was not recognized by any of the students when asked these questions was the impact of their different family situations on their participation in the program. Perhaps this is a positive thing that allows students in the program to feel that they are all on equal footing within the program, or perhaps it is something that the program is doing naturally to help provide equity for students in the program. What is clear, is that all students interviewed felt that this program gave them a chance to succeed regardless of their race, gender or socioeconomic identities.

**Lasting Impact of ECHSP**

Although these students did not have the traditional high school experience, they did not feel like there was much they missed out on, and instead felt a huge sense of achievement. Several of the students indicated ways that the program influenced this sense of achievement that they did
not feel would have come from a traditional high school. Xavier shared his sense of achievement when discussing why he did not choose to continue to participate in high school sports. Since ECHSP is run through the local school districts, students could choose to participate in extracurricular activities at the local high school, but only Xavier did. He chose to do sports at the high school for one year, but beyond that he only participated as a fan. He made this decision to not participate in extracurricular activities at the high school because he said “You know…it’s either over-achieving or doing the thing that you’re supposed to do and you have the high school experience so to say.” Ben further discussed this idea of achieving more in saying:

Yeah we missed out on the basic high school experience, but in some way I’m glad I did…because I just feel like if I went to the regular high school….my uh….intelligence would not be challenged like they are here. So I wouldn’t have any reason to uh….push for a better education.

Participants in this study universally felt that they were better prepared for their future because of attending ECHSP and had no regrets from missing out on the traditional high school experience.

In addition, ECHSP gave these students an opportunity to explore who they are, and who they want to be in the future. Susie shared her experience of self-discovery by saying:

I’m just so different than I imagined myself. I’ve just . . . reached just so many goals that I didn’t even have. Like and I’m presenting to like professors from Harvard, and like….It’s just crazy to me how much I’ve changed and how much I could advance in this program. Like they just give you so many opportunities and so many resources that you can really just flourish.

Susie recognized the personal growth that she experienced in this program as being something that she would not have achieved in the same way if she had remained in an environment where she was not challenged to do more than she knew she could. She also recognized, as many of the other
students did, that the resources they had access to would not have been possible at a regular high school.

What is most impressive about the experience that these participants had in the ECHSP is how universally they want to do more and be more with it. Xavier illustrated this desire to achieve great things in the future when he said

We kind of wanted to have a betterment for the future generation because no one’s going to do it if we don’t. We can’t expect to have our kids do it if we just…uh…we’re too lazy to do it ourselves. So this program is one of my favorite things that I’ve been a part of. It’s probably the most life-changing thing I’ve been a part of…and I know a lot of the students here could say the same. I’m not sure where a lot of us would go, or what opportunities we would have got without this program.

Through this program, the participants in this study were supported, encouraged, and inspired to do more than they could have thought possible when entering the program as ninth graders.

Summary

The Early College High School Program participants indicated many ways in which this program benefited them in their road towards higher education. As I illustrated in this chapter, through the support of faculty, staff, and students, the participants of this study were motivated to do more than they originally thought they could. In addition, the individuals associated with the program encouraged students to explore areas of study that they would not have considered if they had not been part of this program. Through intentional coursework such as the SDEV classes, as well as through programming at the college outside of class, the students were able to understand how colleges work, how to pass college courses, how to enroll in colleges, and how to get financing to help fund their education. The students repeatedly discussed the importance of physically locating this program on a college campus in increasing their college knowledge as well as for increasing their confidence levels.
CHAPTER V: DISCUSSION

In this study, I explored how students enrolled in an Early College High School Program (ECHSP) described their decisions making process regarding their future after graduation. In addition I wanted to understand how participating in this program did or did not impact the students’ sense of preparation for going to college through skills, knowledge, and a general sense of preparedness. Previous research on programs such as the Early College program at LCCC has found positive connections from these programs in helping students to graduate from high school at higher rates, get better job placements after high school, and to increased chances that students will go to a four-year university and complete their bachelor’s degree (Allen & Dadger, 2012; Hofmann, 2012; Hugo, 2001; Karp & Hughes, 2008). The purpose of this study was to better understand if this was in fact the case for this specific type of accelerated learning program, and if so why.

In addition to wanting to understand how and why this program influenced students’ decisions about their future, I wanted to explore how the college choice model put forth by Perna and Kurban (2013) applied to students in this program. Perna and Kurban (2013) put forth a four part model indicating that the factors that impacted a student’s college choice consisted of the student’s habitus, school and community context, higher education context, and greater societal context. Throughout the remainder of this chapter, I will explore the findings of this study in relation to Perna and Kurban’s (2013) theoretical model. In addition, I will explore areas for further research and practice.

Major Findings

In the next sections I will discuss the major findings of this study. These findings will directly address the research questions I asked regarding how participation in the Early College High School Program influenced the college choice process of the students involved. I will review findings concerning the following:
1. How did students make the decision that they made for their education following high school? What considerations did they take into account?

2. Do students participating in Early College program believe they are gaining skills and knowledge that can help them to enroll in college? If yes, how so? If not, why not?

3. Do students believe that participating in a college course influenced their college-going expectations? How and why or why not?

4. How do students perceive their race, gender, and socioeconomic status influencing their experience in the program?

**Decision Making Process**

The first question I explored in this study was what factors participants in the Early College High School Program considered in deciding if and where to attend college. Although there were many factors that influenced this process for the students, three themes stood out including confidence in program of study, finances, and proximity to home. These themes were echoed almost universally among the participants in this study.

The first of the themes was program of study. Students consistently stated that it was important that their chosen field of study was not only offered at their chosen institution, but that they felt the program was strong. This in itself is not that surprising, but what was notable in this theme was the role that participating in courses and organizations in ECHSP played in helping the students to narrow down their area of interest. Students described the positive influence of having role models and advisors in the program who were able to help them as they searched for programs of study that fit their career and education goals. This also came through in the way that students described their ability to explore both work and study in fields such as the sciences, health professions, computers, and accounting. It is important to note that most of the students indicated that they did not know what they wanted to study in college when they started ECHSP, but almost
all of them had defined this by the time they left. The confidence the students felt in knowing what they wanted to study when they continue their education should help them to start their college career with a sense of purpose. This sense of purpose and direction is something that Arum and Loksa (2011) indicated is a key factor in helping students to complete college.

A second theme that students indicated was important was the financial burden or accessibility associated with the school. All of the students addressed this as one of the factors that caused them to enroll in the program in the first place. The recognition that completion of this program would potentially allow them to only pay for two years of a college degree was one of the major highlights of enrolling. As they came to the end of the program, students still described the importance of the financial decisions they had to make regarding where they were going to school. One student stated that she was able to go out of state to finish her college career because she only had two years left. Going out of state would have been out of her financial reach otherwise. Several other students discussed the decision they made to stay at an in-state school to be able to get a good education that was not as expensive as the out-of-state schools they were considering initially. Other students found that they could continue to achieve their educational goals at the same or other community colleges to make sure they did not have college debt.

In addition, almost all of the students shared how important it was for them to have access to and knowledge of scholarships for which they could apply. Repeatedly students discussed how advisors in ECHSP helped them to locate and apply for scholarships to the institutions of their choice. By decreasing the financial burden of on-going education in this way, students were able to have more choices in where they went to school. In addition, students became aware of the importance of working with schools to determine which institutions would best be able to meet their financial needs. Each of these factors increased the financial accessibility of on-going education for the students involved in this study.
The final theme that students described regarding their college choice process was the proximity of their chosen campus to their home and to the support networks including their families and those supports they had gained through ECHSP. Several students indicated the importance of being close, but not too close to family members. They described the importance of being able to get home if they needed to, but also the importance of being able to create their own place away from home. The majority of the students interviewed also stated that they were happy to know that they could come home and still go to people at ECHSP for help with academic, personal, or administrative concerns related to college. Several students also indicated that they knew they would be able to reconnect with the other students who kept them motivated to complete ECHSP when they came home. Students indicated that they felt that this on-going connection to the program and to their peers from the program would help them to be successful as they continued their education.

**Skills and Knowledge Gained**

Beyond the general themes that I explored regarding the college choice process, I also wanted to know if there were skills and knowledge that the students gained in the program that helped to influence their college choice. In this area I also found three common themes including understanding how college works, skills gained from their student development courses, and the assistance they gained in completing all of the forms necessary to apply for and enroll in college.

The participants in this study routinely stated that understanding how to get involved on campus and how to complete college coursework were very influential in building their confidence as they chose what to do after the ECHSP. One of the most common ideas I heard from the participants was that because of ECHSP, they would be a step ahead of all the other first year students who would be starting in the fall. The students felt that they had an understanding of how to participate and succeed in their future college and that going to a different school was just going to be a change of scenery.
As students discussed further what skills they had gained through ECHSP, they acknowledged the role that taking courses with college professors played in helping them to understand what would be expected of them as they continued their college experience. Participants also indicated the importance the ECHSP’s location on a college campus was in helping them to understand all of the out-of-class opportunities they can get involved in. They believed getting involved would help them make a connection to their new campus in the same way they were able to do at the ECHSP campus. It is not surprising that these experiences helped the students make the decision and take the steps to enroll in on-going postsecondary education since Pitre and Pitre (2009) found similar results in their study regarding TRIO programs that the understanding of college norms helped to increase access to college for low-income and first-generation students. These skills were not necessarily taught in a classroom, but they increased participants’ confidence as they continue their higher education careers.

In addition to the skills that students learned just by being at the college campus, there were other skills that they learned from two courses that were offered during their first year in the program, Student Development 1 and 2. Unlike learning through experience, these courses gave the students classroom knowledge of what would be expected of them as they attended college, how to apply for college, and what skills they should work on honing during their time at ECHSP to make them strong candidates when they did apply to college (LCCC, 2015). Many of the participants discussed how these courses helped to prepare them for what it would be like in their final two years of the program when they would be expected to choose their own courses and complete their education in a manner very similar to a college student.

Beyond just preparing students for taking college course work, the student development courses also gave students the tools they needed to understand personal finance, how to create a resume, how to write a personal statement for college, and how to apply for college. The majority of the students interviewed for this study stated one or more ways that they used the skills and...
knowledge they learned from these courses in their application process to colleges. Several also discussed how these courses really helped them understand how debt works, and inspired them to work hard to either have a job during their time in the program and/or to apply for scholarships and grants so that they did not incur large debts because of their on-going education.

The third theme in participants’ comments was the skill of actually filling out the college applications and financial paperwork. These skills were taught throughout the program, but students repeatedly acknowledged the role that success coaches, teachers, advisors, and College Now staff played in helping them continue to hone these skills as they applied to colleges. Students recognized that having these supporting staff members as they were going through the application process helped them to feel more confident, and also gave them individuals to ask for advice and revisions of applications. None of the students interviewed stated that anyone outside of the program had really helped them with the minutia of completing the multitude of forms that are part of the application process. However, many participants shared that without the support of staff at ECHSP it would have been more difficult for them to complete this process.

**Impact of College Courses**

Beyond the general skills and knowledge just discussed, I explored directly the role of taking college courses in the college choice process. Within this area, there were four main themes including helping to determine their area of study, recognizing the ways that faculty impacted them outside of class, understanding what teachers expect, and gaining a level of responsibility for the outcome of their efforts.

The first theme was the role that taking college courses played in helping students to determine their future major. Students shared that taking college courses allowed them to explore a variety of areas that they might be interested in studying before they had to declare a major at a four-year program. Some indicated that taking courses helped them either confirm or weed out study areas that they thought they might like. For some participants taking these courses
confirmed their interest, others were able to discover that they were not very good at these courses, or did not really enjoy them. Others indicated the importance of being able to take exploratory courses in areas that they had not previously considered and discovering that they truly loved that area. A final participant indicated the role that being able to get a certificate in her chosen field played by allowing her to gain some work experience in that field while still attending the ECHSP. In her case, this work experience solidified her desire to continue to get a more advanced degree in that field. No matter what the outcome was for these students in taking these courses, almost all of them described taking these courses as really helping them to narrow down what they wanted to do next.

Beyond the role that they courses themselves played, students discussed the importance of connecting with faculty both in and out of the classroom. One of the ways that students were able to do this was by working with a science professor in his lab doing research. For one student this opened doors for her and helped her to find a field of study that she had not previously considered. For another student, participation in this lab helped confirm that she did not want to be a scientist, but still gave her skills that helped her to see herself as a competent college student. Another student discussed how she loved one of her courses so much that she asked the professor if she could help TA the course in a subsequent semester, which she stated gave her confidence in her ability to lead. The commitment of faculty at Lorain County Community College to the students in the ECHSP program is notable. They not only gave the students opportunities to succeed in the classroom, but also welcomed them in groups that were also populated with students who had already graduated from high school. This ability to be viewed as on the same level with older students was something that the participants of the study argued was very important in increasing their confidence in their abilities as college students.

This participation in courses and clubs with students who had already graduated from high school helped the participants of this program in their classes as well. Because the students were
enrolled in courses with high school graduates, they got the sense that teachers were not making their courses easier for them because they were in ECHSP. Because of their ability to take college courses with college students, the participants universally felt that they will be successful when they do continue their college courses at a new institution. There were several participants who noted that they felt that this would have been very different if they had taken the college courses with only other high school students, or with high school teachers. Students indicated that they felt that if these same courses had been offered on a high school campus, the professors would have been much more lenient and would have allowed students to do less work than the professors at the ECHSP required.

The belief that courses would have been taught differently or students would have been treated differently if these had been courses at a high school campus, directly leads to the final theme related to how college coursework influenced students. All of the participants in the study indicated the importance of learning how to be more responsible for their work. Students indicated that in college courses, faculty members expected them to be much more self-directed than what they had experienced or heard that their friends had experienced in traditional high schools. Some of the participants acknowledged that this was something that they struggled with at first because even though the success coaches were keeping an eye on students to make sure they did not fall too far behind, the day to day completion of the course requirements was much more autonomous. Some indicated that this was still a struggle for them, but that they appreciated learning it now, so that when they went away to continue their studies, they felt confident that they would be able to stay on task. They felt that their peers may struggle to acclimate to the expectations in college courses at the same time that they are transitioning to a new home and new phase of their lives.

The roles that taking college courses played in helping students to explore areas of study and in helping them to gain confidence in their abilities as college students were one of the most notable findings of this study. This is particularly important because it helps to put an emphasis on
one of the factors that separates the program studied here from other alternative high school programs. Whether the beliefs of these students regarding the difference in rigor of courses taught at a college versus college courses taken at a high school are accurate or not is not as important as recognizing that the confidence gained from doing so in this way was highly influential to these students.

**How Identity Influenced Choices**

The final question that I explored in this study is whether or not the participants’ race, gender, or socioeconomic status had any role in their college choice or their participation in the ECHSP. When I asked questions regarding this, most of the students were very confused at first, and I frequently had to probe with examples to get an answer. What was most notable however was the sense that students had that the ECHSP experience was not heavily influenced by their race, gender, or socioeconomic status. Several of the students noted that because they all start from the background of being first-generation students, they came in on level ground. It was also common to hear from participants that the program did a great job of making them all feel that they were equal. The major differences that the students saw that were related to identity had to do more with a person’s work ethic than they did with any other identifier. Students repeatedly stated that the students who had been successful in the program learned how to work for what they wanted and how to ask for help when they needed it.

Students also universally said that neither race nor gender played a role in the decision that they made regarding continuing their education, or their choice of major. Several students did however acknowledge that coming from a low-income background influenced both their participation in the ECHSP initially, as well as their choice of college going forward. I have already discussed the financial impact that attending the ECHSP had, as well as the benefit of being able to afford in-state tuition more readily than out-of-state tuition. However, the direct
connection that the students made to their families’ financial status and their choice of where and how to continue their degrees was notable.

Although the connection to low-income status and college choice was meaningful, none of the students saw this as a negative. They indicated that they were proud that they were able to take two years off of the time that they would have to pay for college and felt that they had made an excellent and wise decision when they enrolled in ECHSP. Similarly, all of the students affirmed how excited they were about the schools that they would be attending next. Almost all of the students saw ECHSP as a first step towards having a better future than their parents had, while at the same time respecting the life their families have. The knowledge that the students gained from this program, as well as their goal to do better for themselves and their families through their participation in this program and in their future studies is something that had a strong influence on their success in ECHSP and something they and I believe will continue to play a role in their success in their on-going education.

**Theoretical Framework and Findings**

The findings of this study were numerous and notable. It is next important to put these findings in the context of the theoretical model I employed. Perna’s (2006) model focused on four major areas to consider concerning college access including habitus, social and community context, higher education context, and societal context. In the next sections of this chapter, I explore how the findings in this study connect with the chosen theoretical framework.

**Habitus**

Habitus, as described by Perna and Kurban (2013), refers to a student’s individual college going expectations and beliefs. These beliefs are both internally and environmentally influenced. In this study, I found that the majority of the students indicated an intention to attend college that began prior to their enrollment in the ECHSP. However, few of them indicated that they had given much thought to what this would look like, or how they would go about accomplishing their goal
of college prior to enrolling in the program. In addition, while students indicated that family members were generally supportive of their engagement in ECHSP and their choice to go to college, they did not feel that family members had actually helped them to enroll. Family members, rather, were seen as support people, encouraging the students to go to college, even if the family members themselves did not fully understand how to get the student there. Among students there was a common sense that they wanted to attend college so that they could have better job opportunities and a more stable financial future than their family. This sense of wanting to do more embodied the goals that these students had set for themselves to create a better life for them and their families.

Another way that I found the participants college-going expectations to be influenced came through their commitment to their cohort. As I discussed previously, the students almost universally referred to their cohort as their family. The sense of pride that these students took in each other also influenced their own confidence, pride, and sense of competence. Sky discussed how her peers in the program had influenced her own desire for success when she said “My friends in the program, like we all have the same goal. We all want to be better than students who are not in the program, and we all want to be better even than the class before us.” This sense of wanting to do more and be better shows how peer support systems that the program encouraged influenced Sky’s internal sense that she could and should go to college after ECHSP.

**School and Community Context**

In addition to the support provided by family and cohort members, McDonough (1997) also explained that schools could create an organizational habitus by disrupting societal inequities. This program arguably did this just by its nature of supporting students whose parents had not completed college. The identities of the students in this study mirrored what is commonly described regarding first-generation students being from lower-income, families of Color (Choy, 2001; Engle, 2007, Lohfink & Paulson, 2005). All but three of the students were Students of
Color, and all of the students indicated that their family income was less than $50,000 per year, with most of the students indicating that it was either less than 25,000 or very close to that amount.

What is most notable in this area is how unconnected the students in ECHSP seem to be to the community around them. Because of this I wonder what local, community support and resources they might be missing. Even without those other resources however, the students described how the community they found on the college campus supported their success. For some students this was their involvement in student organizations while for others it was holding a campus job. In each of these cases, the students described how their experiences helped them to better understand how to succeed in college and how those experiences helped them to narrow down the educational program that they wanted to attend after completing ECHSP.

One clear example of how the school helped students to increase their understanding of the college experience was provided by the faculty member who ran the young scientists program. Several of the students interviewed stated that their involvement in that program opened their eyes to the possibilities that exist within education, as well as gave them the confidence to realize that they had what it takes to be successful in college. In addition, through their work with this group, the students were given the opportunity to travel to other campus and present their findings. By involving these students in the research process, this faculty member also was able to show them that they were capable of work that they never knew existed.

In addition to the opportunities that were naturally provided to the students by being located on the college campus, ECHSP was able to further disrupt social inequities by providing these students with knowledge regarding higher education that was referred to by Hooker and Brand (2010) as ‘college knowledge.’ This knowledge was defined as “an understanding of the complex college admission and selection processes, the options available to help pay for postsecondary education, the academic requirements for college-level work, and the cultural differences between secondary and postsecondary education” (Hooker & Brand, p. 77). The ECHSP taught this
knowledge through required student development courses as well as through providing on-going coaches and outside resources for the students, who helped them to complete the college enrollment process. Although these coaches were useful, it is important to note that skills, encouragement, and help in completing the process alone were not enough to overcome the obstacle of college finance for these students. The participants indicated repeatedly that financial concerns had a direct impact on their choice of college. Those who were able to get significant financial support to attend other schools further from home or with a higher cost did so, while others chose to stay closer to home because of their concern about debt.

A final way ECHSP provided college knowledge was by being located on a college campus. This location enabled the students to understand the difference between the educational experience they received and the educational experience they would have received had they remained on a high school campus. The students universally cited the experience of taking courses on the college campus with other college students as being one of the main reasons they felt that they were prepared to continue their towards their goal of attaining a four-year degree on another college campus.

Higher Education Context

The ECHSP experience gave students additional support in what Perna (2006) referred to as the higher education context. In this area she said that colleges and universities could influence attendance by helping potential students find their fit, recognizing how admissions standards impact access, and exploring how enrollment numbers affect access. The last two of these were influential for students at the beginning of the program, as an admission requirement of ECHSP is that students are first generation college students. In addition, there are a limited number of spaces available in the program, and not all students who apply are admitted. With this in mind, the program is influencing access to education by who they choose to admit and who they do not. Because the ECHSP does not admit all eligible students and instead uses a lottery system, there are
still students who are eligible, but left out of the opportunity. In order to further increase access, the program could look at ways to provide this opportunity for all of the eligible students, instead of providing access to some and not others.

Beyond the admission process to ECHSP, the program provides opportunities for the students participating in the program to gain a sense of what options for on-going education exist through the programs they bring to campus. Several of the students discussed the importance of meeting with admissions staff from other colleges during college fairs. By planning college fairs for the students, the ECHSP was able to help students connect with staff from different colleges and find the fit that worked best for them.

In addition to helping the students connect with different institutions through the college fairs, several of the students mentioned the importance of meeting with guidance counselors and success coaches on a regular basis. Students stated that these individuals were there to help them succeed in ECHSP, but also to help them make informed decisions about what to do after the graduation from the program. These staff helped the students to research institutions that carried their chosen field of study, as well as to help them find scholarships to fund their education. The experience the participants had with this program was influential in helping them to determine their next educational step, even if that step was to not go to college right away.

**Societal Context**

The final area of the theoretical framework used in this study is the societal context. Perna and Kurban (2013) described this area as taking into account the broader societal issues such as demographic patterns, the state of the economy, and policies that are in place regarding college access and college finances. The ECHSP program directly impacts this area of the model. By enrolling first-generation students in an area of the state where unemployment is high and college completion is low, ECHSP is attempting to provide opportunities for growth and education in a space in which those educational opportunities are less likely to occur naturally. In other words,
without as much support from the habitus, school and community context, and higher education context as may be available in areas where there is greater college completion, more economic prosperity, or more access to college, programs like ECHSP help confront these inequities.

One of the easiest ways that this program does this is by making college more affordable for students. By providing students with the opportunity to complete two years of a college degree for free, this program is limiting the concerns that these students will have regarding paying for the remainder of their education. Participants repeatedly expressed the impact that being able to complete these two years debt-free played on their college choice process. For many it made the difference between being able to go away to college and having to attend college locally. Others saw that completing an associate’s degree gave them skills they are able to use to get a better paying job while continuing their education, thus cutting down on loans for school. For still another, completing these two years allowed her to go to an out-of-state liberal arts college. This was something she had always dreamed of doing, but recognized would not have been financially possible without having two years already completed.

In addition to the financial impact of this program, many students stated that they were able to get scholarships and financial aid from their college of choice because of the work that the program did. Some students indicated that this was due to the support they received in completing the paperwork for aid, as well as in the constant work of the ECHSP staff in making sure they were aware of scholarships for which they could apply. Others indicated that it was the educational experiences and opportunities themselves that gave them skills that would later allow them to qualify for scholarships and aid that they may not have been as seen as competitive for without the ECHSP. Whether it is through the completion of the first two years of college or the support in receiving funding for future education, it is clear that ECHSP has played a role in shaping opportunities for students in an area of the country where those opportunities would have been far less likely to exist without this program.
ECHSP further considered the societal context in which it was located by placing an emphasis on reaching out to students who were the least likely to already have the supports that the program provided in place. It is important to note that any student in Lorain County is able to participate in college courses for free, but only first-generation students were eligible for this program. By focusing on students who are more likely to come from low SES families, which is a population that has consistently been shown in the literature as having a higher rate of college attrition (Choy, 2001; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Terenzini et al., 1996), ECHSP tried to provide access to higher education for students who may have otherwise not had it.

Although ECHSP did great work in helping to increase access to higher education for its participants, the program was limited in the number and type of students who could participate. Although the program did help the students who were enrolled, it is unclear how this did or will benefit the broader community from which these students came. There are many students who remained in the high schools who might have benefited from more education regarding the college enrollment process or how to finance one’s degree, but this program did not work to educate the broader population. Instead, the program used its resources to support a chosen few. Although supporting this small group of students is better than doing nothing at all, it does not do much to address the economic or educational concerns of the broader community in which the program is housed.

A final societal connection to the program can be seen by looking at the state of primary and secondary schools in the country when it comes to creating safe learning environments. Several of the participants indicated that part of their reason for choosing to apply for ECHSP was related to fear of ongoing bullying and violence in the traditional high schools in the area. By providing an alternative option to high school, the students who participated in this study were able to feel safe in their learning environment. While this program gave this safety to these students, it did not address the safety issues that they discussed in the primary and secondary schools. More
work needs to be done to make our schools free of bullying and violence to make all types of education safe and inclusive.

**Similarities with Past Research Findings**

Beyond the theoretical framework used in this study, there many other resources used to frame my research questions. In this study, I found that many of the past findings were supported again with the results of this study. The first of these is the importance of support systems. Perna and Titus (2005) found that the peer decisions around college enrollment were influential in the college choice process and that this was particularly the case for low-income students. This proved true in this study as well. All of the students indicated the importance of having peers in the program to inspire and motivate them. In addition, they referred to this cohort as a family, showing how much they had come to rely on one another. Additionally, they talked about their desire to do better than the cohort before them. The bond that they developed as a cohort led them to want to succeed for each other as much as for themselves.

In addition to having strong support systems, another area that was shown in previous studies to be important for college achievement was having college knowledge (Hooker & Brand, 2010; Karp, 2012; Perna 2006 & 2013; Valadez, 2008; Vargas, 2004). Karp (2012) found that enrollment in college course-work enabled high school students to have an understanding of what was expected of them once they enrolled in college. This was something that every student in this study also expressed. By taking college courses, the students believed they had gained an understanding of what college faculty will expect of them when they continue their education. Additionally, they were confident that they have the ability to meet faculty members’ expectations as they continue their studies since they were able to successfully complete college courses in ECHSP. The skills that students learned in taking these courses gave them the embodied cultural capital that Bourdieu (1986) discussed and which Tramonte and Willms (2010) argued was vital to students’ success in education.
In addition to the coursework increasing cultural capital, participation in ECHSP increased the social capital of the participants. Social capital refers to the information that students have access to because of their social networks (Bourdieu, 1986; Coleman, 1988; Hossler et al., 1999; Perna, 2006). By participating in this program, students were able to connect with other students, teachers, advisors, college admissions counselors, College Now counselors, and college students. By gaining access to these various individuals with experiences, skills, and knowledge that they did not have previously, students were able to learn how to enroll in and finance their continuing education. The students repeatedly stated that connecting with these individuals helped them to complete a process that they previously did not understand.

It is not surprising that this study found several areas that confirmed previous findings. The support that students received from ECHSP matched well with previous findings. This was expected considering most educational programs should be designed based on tools and techniques that have been proven successful in achieving the goals of the program. ECHSP utilized many of the best practices found in research studies.

**Differences from Past Research Findings**

Although there were several similarities in the findings of this study and findings of previous studies, there were also notable differences. The first of these pertains to Engle’s (2007) study that showed that first-generation students were less likely to take pre-requisite courses. Although this study does not directly contradict this assertion, it provides insights as to why this may be the case. The students who participated in ECHSP were all first-generation students who took not only college pre-requisite courses, but also took courses that were of interest to them to help determine a future major. This leads to a question of whether the students are in fact less motivated to take college pre-requisite courses or whether they are simply lacking the knowledge and support to understand that they must take those courses to go to college. Although having the correct academic preparation is important for enrollment in college, connecting lack of this
education to low aspirations seems to be an easy way out of taking the responsibility for helping the students to realize a college education by providing them with the necessary resources, knowledge, and skills to be able achieve their goals.

Similarly Hahs-Vaughn (2004) found that first-generation students aspired to lower levels of education than their counterparts. The participants in this study did not reflect this finding. They were all motivated to complete at least a four-year degree with several of them discussing their plan to continue their education even beyond their bachelor’s degree. This leads me to question whether first-generation students actually aspire to lower levels of education, or if they just do not see higher levels of education as a possibility. Levine and Nidifer (1996) argued this exact idea that first-generation students do not lack aspiration, but what they do lack is a general sense that they could go to college. Levine (1996) compared the idea that the first-generation students would go to college with the idea of him buying a yacht. Buying a yacht was a completely foreign idea to him and not something he had ever considered. Similarly, going to college was not something these students had experience with so they similarly had not considered it. The majority of the students in this study indicated that they had thought about attending college before participating in ECHSP, showing their aspiration. Whether they would have in fact gone on to college without this program is unclear, but what is clear is that this program provided them with the support, knowledge, and skills to enroll in college and confidence in their ability to succeed in college.

The majority of the literature focuses on lack of skills and knowledge or lack of educational aspiration as a cause for students failing to enroll or choosing to attend community colleges or less rigorous colleges (Bowen et al., 2010; Engle, 2007; Hahs-Vaughn, 2004; Levine & Nidifer, 1996; Perna & Kurban, 2013). Although this may in some ways be true, it downplays the important role that financial needs play in the college choice process. What I found in this study is that even after the students had gained all of the skills and knowledge needed to enroll in college and complete
financial aid forms, and after gaining an understanding of college norms through coursework, the most important factor to students in their college choice was being able to finance their education. The students in ECHSP are better prepared than most high school students to attend college yet only one of the participants of this study is attending an out-of-state institution and that same student is the only one attending a private school. All of the other participants indicated how important educational cost was to their choice of institution. One student wanted to go to school out of state and had all of the necessary drive and academic skills and was accepted to the institution of her choice. She made the hard decision to return to a school closer to home because the financial burden of her chosen school was too much for her and her family. The cost of higher education is something that most families struggle with, but it clearly has a differential impact on low-income students.

A final area of this study where differences were found from previous studies concerns findings that show the important role that parents play in helping students decide to attend college (Cabrera & La Nasa, 2000; Horn & Nunez, 2000; Perna & Titus, 2005). In this study, this finding regarding parents’ roles was less clear. Several of the students did indicate that parents had encouraged them either to participate in the ECHSP or to attend college in general, but the majority of the participants did not indicate this. In addition, even those students who did indicate that parents encouraged them to attend did not describe their parents as being part of the process of applying to college. What was clear about the way that parents influenced the desire of these participants to get a college education was in their desire to do better than their parents. The lack of support from parents does not negate the previous studies’ findings but does show that more research needs to consider how parental involvement or lack thereof that drives first-generation students to further their education.

Although some of my findings contradict past research, they do not negate the work that these researchers have done. Instead, my findings indicate a need to consider other reasons why
the statistical data found in quantitative studies may be occurring. As stated in a previous chapter, the majority of the research on accelerated learning programs and access to college for first-generation or low-income students is quantitative. Although statistics have their place, they do not always help a researcher to understand the reason for the findings. By listening to students’ stories, researchers may be able to better understand the causes of the statistics.

New Findings from This Study

In addition to finding similarities and differences from the research that already exists, there are a few new ideas that emerged from this study. The first of these is related to the role that the counselors and teachers in accelerated learning programs play in increasing access. It may seem obvious that one of the ways that they help is by teaching students and providing them with knowledge about enrolling in college. What is less clear from previous research is how important their personal relationships with students are. The students in this study repeatedly stated that it was important for them to know that their success coaches and teachers not only cared about them completing their classes, but were also invested in their personal and extracurricular growth. The individuals that students stated were most influential were those who had taken time outside of the classroom to help them to explore areas of study, to explore their own personal development, and to encourage them to try things that they did not know even existed before entering ECHSP. The support of these individuals was an important factor in the college choice process of these students.

In addition to the personal support that faculty provided, students repeatedly stated how important it was to them that the faculty treated them the same as other college students. Karp (2012) stated that taking college courses in high school was important to increase college access. What was less clear from Karp’s (2012) study was why this was the case. Through this study, the participants shared that it was not only important to complete college course work, but that it was important that they took these college courses on a college campus with college students who had already completed high school. They stated that by taking classes on a college campus with
college students they knew that the faculty members were not taking it easy on them. Most of the students felt that if the same courses had been taught on a high school campus with only other high school students, they would not have had as much rigor in the courses. The confidence they gained from taking these courses at the college was influential in their belief that they will be able to succeed in college coursework as they continue their education at a new institution.

**Implications for Practice**

Several findings from this study have implications for ways alternative high school programs can increase students’ confidence in their readiness for college. The first of these factors is making sure that the program occurs on a college campus so that the students can take courses with other college students. The confidence that the students expressed gaining from knowing that the teachers were treating them like any other college student had a notable impact on their belief that they could succeed in college courses anywhere. In addition, there was some additional impact for students in believing that because the course were taught on a college campus, they were automatically more rigorous than they would have been if they were taught at a high school. There is no proof from this study that the classes were in fact more rigorous than similar classes at a high school, but the simple belief that they were was enough to make the participants feel that they had achieved more than peers at the high school.

A second practice that should be explored in order to increase college-going skills and confidence is the use of a cohort model. The students in this study repeatedly shared how their peers had influenced their success within the program as well as their aspirations for after the program. By encouraging the students to bond through taking common courses early in the program, the ECHSP gave the students social networks that helped to keep them motivated when they were no longer in class together. In addition, the cohorts were encouraged to support the success of the cohorts behind them. The students expressed a sense of pride and competition that each cohort had that caused them to strive to be better than the cohort before them. This resulted in
a sense of not only wanting to succeed as individuals but as a family, which in turn resulted in wanting to support each other’s success. Many of the students expressed how their peers had helped to keep them on task and to encourage them to try things that they would not have otherwise tried. The use of peers to encourage success should be further explored and utilized as a best practice.

A third implication for practice is the important role that faculty and staff both in and out of the program play in the success of students. Students consistently expressed how their work with success coaches and College Now staff helped them to complete the application process for college as well as paperwork for financial aid. In addition, they shared how the success coaches would check in to make sure that they were on track and had access to resources they might need. The participants clearly understood that these individuals cared about their success and wanted them to not only go to college, but to go to a great college and succeed. Faculty members were also consistently discussed as playing a major role in influencing the students. Some of this came from the way they taught their classes, while other students discussed how helpful it was to be able to discuss life issues with a faculty member. Other students also discussed how working with a faculty member outside of class influenced their choices for on-going education. The direct impact that faculty and staff who care had on the choices these students made was clear throughout this program. This indicates the need for similar programs to encourage faculty and staff to build meaningful relationships with the students both in and out of class in appropriate ways. The impact of having an adult who knew they could do more than they thought they could was huge for these participants.

The final implication for practice is to find ways to involve students beyond the classroom in the college experience. The students in this study consistently discussed how participation in clubs, jobs, and research played a major role in their success in the program, and in their decision of whether and where to go to college. Whether there was a direct connection to the program or
not, knowing that they could access all of the same opportunities on campus as a student who was not in the ECHSP program allowed these students to explore involvement in ways they had not previously done. Through their involvement in campus activities and jobs, students in this study were able to get real work experience, improve their leadership skills, make decisions about what they did and did not want to study further, and gain confidence in their abilities as speakers, writers, designers, and scientists. The opportunity to go to other campuses or on overnight retreats with other students gave these participants the opportunity to gain a sense of pride in their abilities as well as a sense of independence. Many of the students indicated that the opportunity to explore their own abilities in this way increased their confidence in their ability to be successful in going away to college. Other programs should look at the way that they set up their programs to ensure that students can have the opportunity to connect to the campus beyond the classroom in order to ensure this additional layer of learning and self-discovery.

Each of the implications for practice listed here are of particular importance now because as I was conducting this research, the Ohio Department of Higher Education (ODHE, 2016) introduced a new dual enrollment program called College Credit Plus. The intent of this new program is to provide more students with more and different opportunities to take college credits while still in high school (ODHE, 2016). The downside of this program for Lorain is that it helped to cause a change in the ECHSP. Lorain announced in February 2016, that the program would continue funding for the students from Lorain who were already enrolled, but that no further students would be enrolled in the program from Lorain city (Harper, 2016). Instead Lorain City Schools (LCS) created a new program called Titan College (LCS, 2016). This program is still allowing students to take college credits, but is doing so at the Lorain high school (LCS, 2016). Students may still choose to take courses at a college campus, and in fact, the new College Credit Plus program expands the schools at which students can enroll to include both public and private institutions (ODHE, 2016). However, transportation is no longer provided for the students to take
those courses on a college campus, which will likely make taking courses outside of the high school a challenge for some. With all of the benefits that the students in this study described that related directly to taking courses on a college campus, this change, while attempting to benefit more students, seems to be shortsighted. It does not appear that any assessment was done of the students enrolled in ECHSP to determine what factors were encouraging their success. With all of the implications I listed here, it is my hope that students are still able to attend at least some of the courses on a college campus in the future.

**Implications for Future Research**

The findings of this study indicate that there are many factors of an Early College High School Program that can encourage students to enroll in college. However, this study does not explore what happens once these students arrive at their new college campus. Although I was able to understand students’ perceptions of their preparedness to continue their higher education, I was not able to explore how those perceptions match with the reality that occurs once they arrive on campus. Further research into their on-going sense of preparedness could provide more insight on which of the experiences, skills and knowledge they gained are important to their successful transition to a four-year institution. Similarly, the research could show what skills and knowledge if any, students felt were lacking after their experience in ECHSP that would have been useful as they tackled the next portion of their education. This on-going research should also follow these students through to the completion of their degrees, or to whatever alternative path they may choose to attempt to understand how their participation in the ECHSP influenced those on-going choices.

In addition to more research on the students from an ECHSP like the one studied here, more research is needed on other types of alternative high school programs to understand if there are other ways of preparing students for college that are equally effective. In this study I explored one program that put together a set of factors to increase student success that included building a
cohort, training the students on skills that would allow them to apply to colleges and be successful in college courses, and giving the students the opportunity to test those skills on an actual college campus. What is not clear is how successful this program could have been if any of these experiences were removed. For example, would an early college high school program that was housed on a high school campus be as effective in preparing students for postsecondary education? Could students gain many of the same skills the students in this study gained if they were given the student development courses only and had not taken other college classes? All of the participants in this study indicated the importance of taking classes on a college campus with college students. Would taking classes on a college campus in addition to taking regular high school classes have the same affect on this sense of preparation?

Another area for future research should be to better understand the factors that influenced some students who enrolled in the ECHSP to persist and complete the program, while others did not. Because this study only included students who were graduating from the program, there was no ability to understand what led students who did not complete the program to opt out of it. Many of the participants of this study shared reasons that they believed students did not complete the program including lack of work ethic, missing friends, and not feeling like the program was what they wanted educationally, but without actually being able to speak with the students who left the program, it is impossible to know what led to these students’ departure from the program. Understanding the factors that lead to attrition from the program could help to develop better methods for early intervention with those students who started but did not complete the program.

In addition to concern for who can benefit from the program on an individual basis, another area for further exploration is the benefit to the local community of having this program. As stated previously, the ECHSP program seemed to do an effective job of increasing skills, knowledge, and access to higher education for the students enrolled. What is unclear is what if any benefit this has to the broader community in which the program is housed. Is this type of program only benefiting
individuals, or are there broader benefits for the home community? Baum and Ma (2007) found that completing a college degree increases financial earnings, saving for retirement, and health while decreasing unemployment for an individual. What is less clear is what benefit individual educational attainment has for the community that these students come from originally. Do they eventually come back to the home community to improve economic conditions by starting businesses? Do they come back to their community to pay it forward and educate other students on how to access a college education? Perhaps the benefit is that these students do not return back to their home community and go somewhere else where they hold a job and do well for themselves thus providing less financial burden on a locale. Any of these possibilities could be true, but there does not seem to be much if any research that shows the direct benefit of programs like ECHSP to the community in which they are housed. More research should be conducted that focuses more closely on the benefits to a community and not just the benefits to an individual or society as a whole. By doing this research, we may be able to find other positive factors associated with programs such as ECHSP that would encourage more funding for these types of programs to exist.

A final area for further research is to examine whether involvement in extracurricular activities on a college campus has a different impact on college choice than does similar involvement at a high school. There is research that focuses on the positive impact taking college courses in high school has on college access (Karp, 2012), but not much if any research that looks at the role that being involved in extracurricular activities has on college access or choice. Several of the students in this study attributed their choice of college and major to their involvement in activities beyond the classroom. These activities included the gaming club, young scientists group, leadership council, and campus jobs, to name a few. More research needs to explore the ways that participation in these types of extracurricular activities may have similar or different influences on college choice than being involved in high school or community activities. Without participation in these activities, the students studied may have found the same career path, but it is unlikely that
they would have found it so soon since they were able to provide direct insight into how participation in those activities impacted their choices.

**Conclusion**

The nine participants of this study were an amazing group of individuals. Their goals for the future were inspirational and I believe they will achieve them. They were able to find a support system at the ECHSP that encouraged them to do more than they thought they could when they entered the program. Their achievements by the end of the program would be remarkable for any student and point to their own drive and aspirations, as well as the commitment they had from and to the ECSHP.

Through their time at the ECHSP, the students were able to gain skills that will help them to be successful in any college classroom. This was consistent among all of the students whether they indicated that school had always been easy for them, or whether they indicated that it still was a challenge. In either of these cases, the knowledge these students learned about how to succeed in a college classroom is something that they recognize as being an asset to their continuing education. Through these classes, students were able to explore their own struggles with motivation and procrastination, and to understand how in the end their grade depended on their efforts.

In addition to the skills that they gained, the students also gained a valuable social network of peers, staff, and faculty that helped them through the program, and that they believe will continue to help them as they move on to the next chapter of their lives. These networks were intentionally built among a group of students who did not have much in common at the beginning of their time together. Many of them did not know anyone else who had enrolled in the program at the beginning. At the end, the students saw their cohort and the faculty and staff as a family who had their success at heart. The support from this group went beyond an academic level to a
personal level, leaving many of the students both proud and sad to be leaving the program after graduation.

By supporting the students both in and outside of the classroom, the ECHSP program enabled the participants to create cultural and social capital. The confidence that these students gained from the work of this program is remarkable and is something that needs to be achieved in the education of all high school students. It may be impossible to have all students participate in a program like ECHSP, but there have to be ways that traditional high schools can achieve some of the same outcomes as this program. Perhaps one of these ways would be partnering more with local colleges to teach actual college courses in the high school where the college students come to the high school. Or, perhaps, it could happen by teaching a course like the student development course for all students in all high schools. Exposing students to the idea that a college education could actually be a possibility earlier in their education could open doors for individuals who might not otherwise consider it.

The benefits of higher levels of education for individuals and society are clear. Equally clear is a need to provide socially just educational opportunities for all. As a country we need to continue to explore the ways in which we can increase access to education for all individuals regardless of race, gender, socioeconomic status, or the educational history of their families. Not everyone needs or wants to go to college, but everyone should have the opportunity, knowledge, skills, and resources to be able to make an educated decision about whether or not they wish to have that education for themselves.
REFERENCES


Ohio Department of Higher Education. (2016). *College Credit Plus*. Retrieved from https://www.ohiohighered.org/content/college_credit_plus_info_students_families


APPENDIX A.

INVITATION TO PARTICIPATE EMAIL

Dear Student,
My name is Rebecca Mosely, and I am a student at Bowling Green State University in the Higher Education program. I am conducting a research project to help understand the experiences of students enrolled in the Early College High School Program. My hope is to understand better how participating in this program influences students’ goals for after High School.
Students who volunteer and are selected to participate in this study will complete one hour-long interview with me. In return, you will receive a $25 gift card for Amazon. In order to participate, I must receive a signed assent form from you and a consent form signed by a parent or guardian. The parent consent form is attached to this email. The assent form will be signed by you at the time of the interview if you are chosen to participate. To be considered for participation, your parent consent form must be completed and returned to me via email by (insert date). From those forms returned, I will select participants. If you are selected, I will contact you by email to schedule a time, date and location for our interview.
Please feel free to email me at rmosely@bgsu.edu if you have any questions. Thanks.
Sincerely,

Rebecca Mosely
APPENDIX B.

HSRB APPROVAL: BOWLING GREEN STATE UNIVERSITY

DATE: March 16, 2015
TO: Rebecca Mosely
FROM: Bowling Green State University Human Subjects Review Board
PROJECT TITLE: [626950-3] Understanding the College Choice Process of Students Enrolled in an Early College High School
SUBMISSION TYPE: Revision
ACTION: APPROVED
APPROVAL DATE: March 16, 2015
EXPIRATION DATE: August 14, 2015
REVIEW TYPE: Expedited Review
REVIEW CATEGORY: Expedited review category # 7

Thank you for your submission of Revision materials for this project. The Bowling Green State University Human Subjects Review Board has APPROVED your submission. This approval is based on an appropriate risk/benefit ratio and a project design wherein the risks have been minimized. All research must be conducted in accordance with this approved submission.

The final approved version of the consent document(s) is available as a published Board Document in the Review Details page. You must use the approved version of the consent document when obtaining consent from participants. Informed consent must continue throughout the project via a dialogue between the researcher and research participant. Federal regulations require that each participant receives a copy of the consent document.

Please note that you are responsible to conduct the study as approved by the HSRB. If you seek to make any changes in your project activities or procedures, those modifications must be approved by this committee prior to initiation. Please use the modification request form for this procedure.

You have been approved to enroll 10 participants. If you wish to enroll additional participants you must seek approval from the HSRB.

All UNANTICIPATED PROBLEMS involving risks to subjects or others and SERIOUS and UNEXPECTED adverse events must be reported promptly to this office. All NON-COMPLIANCE issues or COMPLAINTS regarding this project must also be reported promptly to this office.

This approval expires on August 14, 2015. You will receive a continuing review notice before your project expires. If you wish to continue your work after the expiration date, your documentation for continuing review must be received with sufficient time for review and continued approval before the expiration date.

Good luck with your work. If you have any questions, please contact the Office of Research Compliance.
at 419-372-7716 or hsr@bgsu.edu. Please include your project title and reference number in all correspondence regarding this project.

This letter has been electronically signed in accordance with all applicable regulations, and a copy is retained within Bowling Green State University Human Subjects Review Board's records.
DATE: August 10, 2016

TO: Rebecca Mosely

FROM: Bowling Green State University Human Subjects Review Board

PROJECT TITLE: [626950-5] Understanding the College Choice Process of Students Enrolled in an Early College High School

SUBMISSION TYPE: Continuing Review/Progress Report

ACTION: APPROVED

APPROVAL DATE: August 15, 2016

EXPIRATION DATE: August 14, 2017

REVIEW TYPE: Expedited Review

REVIEW CATEGORY: Expedited review category #7

Thank you for your submission of Continuing Review/Progress Report materials for this project. The Bowling Green State University Human Subjects Review Board has APPROVED your submission. This approval is based on an appropriate risk/benefit ratio and a project design wherein the risks have been minimized. All research must be conducted in accordance with this approved submission.

Please note that you are responsible to conduct the study as approved by the HSRB. If you seek to make any changes in your project activities or procedures, those modifications must be approved by this committee prior to initiation. Please use the modification request form for this procedure.

All UNANTICIPATED PROBLEMS involving risks to subjects or others and SERIOUS and UNEXPECTED adverse events must be reported promptly to this office. All NON-COMPLIANCE issues or COMPLAINTS regarding this project must also be reported promptly to this office.

This approval expires on August 14, 2017. You will receive a continuing review notice before your project expires. If you wish to continue your work after the expiration date, your documentation for continuing review must be received with sufficient time for review and continued approval before the expiration date.

Good luck with your work. If you have any questions, please contact the Office of Research Compliance at 419-372-7716 or hsrb@bgsu.edu. Please include your project title and reference number in all correspondence regarding this project.

This letter has been electronically signed in accordance with all applicable regulations, and a copy is retained within Bowling Green State University Human Subjects Review Board's records.
APPENDIX C.

INFORMED CONSENT FOR PARENTS OF STUDENTS ENROLLED IN THE LORAIN COUNTY COMMUNITY COLLEGE EARLY COLLEGE PROGRAM

Introduction: Your child is being asked to agree to participate in a study examining the college choice process of students enrolled in the Early College High School Program at Lorain County Community College. My name is Rebecca Mosely, and I am a doctoral student in the Higher Education Administration Program at Bowling Green State University under the advisement of Dr. Ellen Broido. Your student was invited to volunteer to participate in this study because he or she is a senior in the Early College High School program at Lorain County Community College.

Purpose: The purpose of this study is to explore how the Early College High School Program influences a student’s choices about post-high school goals. Through this study, I am trying to understand which experiences students have had within and outside of this program that have influenced their decisions about what to do after high school. This is important because it will help educators continue to learn ways in which these types of programs can benefit students and the community. Each student participating in this study will also receive a $25 Amazon gift card for their time.

Procedure: If your child is chosen to be part of this study, your child will be asked to complete one interview with me that will last approximately one hour, and will be recorded using a voice recorder to help ensure accuracy. During this interview, I will be asking your child about their experience in the Early College program and how participating in this program has influenced their decision regarding their plans for after high school. In addition to the interview, I may send a follow up email to your child if I find that I have any remaining questions. Finally, I will share my early findings with all participants once I have completed interviews and begun my analysis of the data so your child may comment further if they choose to do so. Once I have received signed parent consent forms, I will invite 8-10 students with signed forms to participate in this study. Please know your child must also agree to be part of this study. If you and/or your child do not consent to this study, your child will not be part of this study. In order for your child to be invited to participate in this study, I must receive this signed form no later than March 15, 2016.

Voluntary nature: Your child’s participation is completely voluntary. Your child is free to withdraw at any time. Your child may decide to skip questions or discontinue participation at any time without penalty. Deciding to participate or not will not affect your student’s grades or your child’s relationship with Early College High School at Lorain County Community College, or your child’s relationship with Bowling Green State University.

Confidentiality/Anonymity Protection: In order to maintain confidentiality of my participants, all data collected in this study, including audio files will be stored in a locked file on my personal computer. My computer is also password protected to prevent access by others to this information. In addition, all consent forms will be stored separately in a locked file cabinet. In writing my findings, I will not use your child’s name, and will attempt to make sure that other
people cannot tell that I am writing about your child from the quotes I use and how I describe your child.

**Risks:** The risk of participation in this study is no greater than that of daily life.

**Contact information:** If you have any questions about this study or about your child’s participation in this study, you can contact me at 440-935-3608, or by email at rmosely@bgsu.edu. You may also contact my advisor, Dr. Ellen Broido at 412-379-9391 or by email at ebroido@bgsu.edu. You may also contact the Chair, Human Subjects Review Board at 419-372-7716 or hsrb@bgsu.edu, if you have any questions about your child’s rights as a participant in this research. Thank you so much for your time.

I have been informed of the purposes, procedures, risks and benefits of this study. I have had the opportunity to have all my questions answered and I have been informed that my child’s participation is completely voluntary. I agree to allow my child to participate in this research.

______________________________  ______________________________
Parent Signature                      Date

______________________________
Name of Student
APPENDIX D.

INFORMED ASSENT FOR STUDENTS ENROLLED IN THE LCCC EARLY COLLEGE PROGRAM

Introduction: You are being asked to volunteer to participate in a study examining the college choice process of students enrolled in the Early College High School Program at Lorain County Community College. My name is Rebecca Mosely, and I am a doctoral student in the Higher Education Administration Program at Bowling Green State University under the advisement of Dr. Ellen Broido. You are being invited to volunteer to participate in this study because you are a senior enrolled in the Early College High School program at Lorain County Community College.

Purpose: The purpose of this study is to explore how the Early College High School Program influences a student’s choices about post-high school goals. Through this study, I am trying to understand which experiences students have had within and outside of this program that have influenced their decisions about what to do after high school. This is important because it will help educators continue to learn ways in which these types of programs can benefit students and the community. Each student involved in this study will also receive a $25 Amazon gift card for their time.

Procedure: As part of this study, you are being asked to complete one interview with me that will last approximately one hour and will be recorded using a voice recorder to help ensure accuracy. In addition, I may send a follow up email to you, if I find that I have any remaining questions. Finally, I will share my early findings with all participants once I have completed interviews and begun my analysis of the data, in case you wish to read it and comment further, though this is not required of you. In order for you to participate in this study, you must agree to participate by signing this assent form.

Voluntary nature: Your participation is completely voluntary. You are free to withdraw at any time. You may decide to skip questions or discontinue participation at any time without penalty. Deciding to participate or not will not affect your grades or your relationship with Early College High School at Lorain County Community College, or your relationship with Bowling Green State University.

Confidentiality/Anonymity Protection: In order to maintain confidentiality of my participants, all data collected in this study, including audio files will be stored in a locked file on my personal computer. My computer is also password protected to prevent access by others to this information. In addition, all consent and assent forms will be stored separately in a locked file cabinet. In writing my findings, I will not use your name or write about you in a way that other people can easily know that I am writing about you.

Risks: The risk of participation in this study is no greater than that of daily life.
Contact information: If you have any questions about this study or about your participation in this study, you can contact me at 440-935-3608, or by email at rmosely@bgsu.edu. You may also contact my advisor, Dr. Ellen Broido at 412-379-9391 or by email at ebroido@bgsu.edu. You may also contact the Chair, Human Subjects Review Board at 419-372-7716 or hsrb@bgsu.edu, if you have any questions about your rights as a participant in this research. Thank you so much for your time.

I have been informed of the purposes, procedures, risks and benefits of this study. I have had the opportunity to have all my questions answered and I have been informed that my participation is completely voluntary. I agree to participate in this research.

______________________________    Date
Participant Signature
INTERVIEW PROTOCOL FOR STUDENT INTERVIEWS

Time of interview:
Date:
Location:
Interviewee:
Explanation of project:

Thank you so much for agreeing to participate in my study about Early College participation and college enrollment. The purpose of this interview is to hear from your point of view how participation in the Early College program has impacted your future aspirations. I am going to be asking you a series of questions. Please know that I am not looking for a right or wrong answer but am looking for you to share your experience. If at any point you are uncomfortable with a question I ask, you can skip that question and we can move on to another.

I would like to ask your permission to record our interview today. This is so that I can be sure that I am representing our conversation accurately. When I write my findings, I will use what we have discussed to develop overall themes. As such, I may use some of your quotes to illustrate the theme. However, in my writing I will not share your name or any information that could make you personally identifiable. If at any point in our conversation you would like to ask me to pause or turn off the recorder, I will be happy to do so. It also is OK not to answer any of the questions. I will also be taking notes as we talk to help me remember key points or questions that I may want to ask as follow-up.

Do I have your consent to record our interview today?

Yes or No

What questions, if any, do you have before we begin?

Questions:

1. What made you choose to enroll in this program?

2. What are your plans for after graduation? (College, work, military…….)
   a. Why have you chosen these plans?

   b. What steps have you taken/do you plan to take to achieve these plans?
c. Prior to enrolling in this program what did you think you would do after high school? (College, work, military….)

d. Why?

e. How has enrolling in this program changed or confirmed those intentions?

3. What have you learned in this program that you believe will benefit you with your future goals? Think beyond just the academic learning here. (Potential probes regarding application process for college, military, or jobs; financing education; other resources provided to help with goal setting and future planning…)

4. (Asked only of those planning to enroll in college in the fall): Do you feel that you will be prepared for college?

   a. Why/Why not?

   b. How has participation in the Early College program impacted this feeling?

      1. Has taking college coursework influenced this feeling? Why/how, specifically/why not?

      2. Are there resources that have been provided that influence this feeling Why/how, specifically/why not?

      3. Have your friends in or out of the program impacted this feeling? Why/how, specifically/why not?

5. Are there people or organizations beyond/outside the Early College program who have helped to prepare you for your future plans?

   a. Who?

   b. How?
6. What concerns do you have as you prepare for your future (make this specific to what they have stated to be their plans)?

   a. Are you doing anything to address these concerns? Please explain.

7. How are your plans after high school similar to or different from your peers who are not enrolled in this program?

   a. How are you different from your peers who are not enrolled in this program?

   b. How do you think your preparation for your plans after high school is similar to or different from that of your peers outside this program?

The next set of questions I am going to ask relate to your personal identity. Please remember that if at any time you do not feel comfortable answering, you may ask me to move on to the next question.

8. How would you describe your gender? (offer helping text if needed, i.e., male, female, trans*)

9. How would you describe your race and ethnicity? (offer helping text if needed, i.e., White, Black, Latino/a)

10. Which of the following categories of yearly income best describes your family?

    a. Less than $25,000
    b. $25,000-$50,000
    c. $50,000-$75,000
    d. $75,000-$100,000
11. In which income level status do you think that your family income places your family?

   a. Lower income
   b. Middle class
   c. Upper middle class
   d. Upper class

12. What is the highest education level of your parents? (Probes: What was their last grade completed? Did they complete any formal degrees or certificates after high school? Did they complete any coursework at a two- or four-year college or university? Please explain.)

13. Do you feel that your experience in the Early College Program has been different because of your identity? Please explain. (Why/How/why not)? (Probe: do you believe your experiences would be different if you were from a different race or ethnicity, gender, or income level.)

14. Do you feel that your identities that you just shared have influenced your future plans? Please explain. (Why/How/why not)? (Probe: do you believe your experiences would be different if you were from a different race or ethnicity, gender, or income level.)

15. Is there anything you feel I should have asked regarding your experience in the Early College Program that I did not, or is there anything else you would like to add? Please explain.

Thank you so much for participating in this interview today. Once I have findings regarding this study, I will share my findings with you by email to make sure that I am using your words accurately. At that point, feel free to share your thoughts with me if you feel I have misrepresented any of your responses.
Dear Student,

Thank you so much for your interest in participating in my study regarding your experience with the Early College High School program. You have been selected as one of the participants. I am writing this email to schedule a time and location that works best for you for a one-hour interview.

Please let me know what days and times work best for you. Also, if you have a location where you prefer to meet, please let me know where it is. If you are no longer interested in participating in this study, please let me know, and I will not contact you further. Thanks and I hope to meet with you soon.

Sincerely,

Rebecca Mosely
APPENDIX G.

LCCC IRB APPROVAL

Ms. Rebecca Mosely,

The Lorain County Community College IRB has approved your request to conduct research. Your request titled "Understanding the College Choice Process of Students Enrolled in an Early College High School" was found to be exempt under code 45 CFR 46.101(b), 45 CFR 46.101 (b) (2) and CFR 46.101 (b) (3). We wish you the best as your study moves forward. Please contact us should you have any questions or concerns.

John R. Crooks, Ph.D.
IRB Secretary
Lorain County Community College
jcrooks@lorainccc.edu
(440)366-7793

4/29/2015