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Student Experiences In College Readiness Programs: A Phenomenological Study

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STUDENT EXPERIENCES IN COLLEGE READINESS PROGRAMS:
A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY

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DEDICATION

To my loving and supporting family, (my boys) Gus, Marq, and Nicolas; it is my hope that my journey served as a reflection of what can be accomplished when those you love are your strongest foundation.

Thank you for always being there for me…

To my loving husband, Gus, whose unwavering support always gave me reassurance that I could do this; you watched over me, guided me, listened to me, supported me, fed me, and nurtured me through this whole process – you have been my greatest advocate – for this I am forever grateful…

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PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY

by

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DISSERTATION

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ABSTRACT

This study discusses the concept of college readiness initiatives and defines what educational systems expect from this level of readiness of a high school student. It demonstrates that the topic of college readiness is broad and particularly concerned with academic rigor, teacher preparedness, and administrative support systems. The purpose of this study is to examine an aspect of these initiatives that is not often addressed – how students experience these programs.

Attempts to research the topic of college readiness from the lens of the student yielded few studies on the issue. Consequently, seeking a grounded understanding of the meaning and importance of college readiness to a high school student, I focus on the student experience, founded by their understanding of college readiness, through their pathway to college. This focus afforded the opportunity to achieve a deeper understanding of what college readiness means to students; how students experience college readiness; and the impact college readiness initiatives have on their academic lives.

A phenomenological approach was employed to study the human experience as seen from their point of view, as a person lives these experiences and to describe with precision and remain loyal to the facts of this research. This study is of importance and needed to assess and improve the overall approaches we utilize as educators in the realm of college readiness. In doing this, educators would be able to better prepare students in taking a comprehensive approach of learning to be college-ready.

The results of this study yielded the identification of three essential themes as emerged from the lived experiences of each student: constructing college knowledge through high school experiences, building social capital through networks, and preparing to transition to college. The

analysis of these results allowed for the researcher to share further recommendations on how to

continue to make an impact on the lives of these high school students and their post-secondary

endeavors.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

The concept of college readiness may be defined in the context of the level of readiness a high school student receives in order to enroll and succeed in an accredited institution of higher education without the need for interventions or remediation (Conley, 2007). The college-ready student, by this definition, is expected to understand the complex pathways to college admission, to determine college financing options, and to possess the "habits of the mind" needed to succeed and persist beyond their first year of college. In addition, the student is expected to cope with acquiring the content knowledge, develop social capital, and "process key intellectual ideas" to succeed in their college education endeavors (Conley, 2007, p. 6).

While we would like to believe that graduating high school seniors are college-ready, within this context, research contends that many high school students transitioning to college find themselves in remediation, receiving some form of intervention, or not persisting beyond their first year. The body of knowledge currently shows that research on student readiness "tends to focus on the broader structural forces affecting students rather than the attitudinal or informational factors" (Gelber, 2007, p. 2254); however, to truly impact the services we provide high school students we must ask an equally important question, "How do we begin to improve educational practices without the voice of those whom we serve – the students?" There are key questions to ask students approaching the critical milestone that is high school graduation: What is the college readiness experience like for a high school student and how do they feel it prepared them for college? And, what or whom might have influenced their college aspirations?

Statement of the Problem

The current body of empirical research on the topic of college readiness is broad; and for the most part is concerned with students' academic skills, teacher preparedness, rigorous curriculum, and administrative support systems (Roderick et al., 2009). Furthermore, other research findings contend that to ensure "readiness" success, an added piece of the puzzle involves connecting solid policies and procedures to development of curriculum; assessment and accountability; educational support systems; qualified professional staff; and community and parental partnerships (SREB, 2006). Additionally, other college readiness research is focused on assessing college preparation program efficacy (Swail, 2000; Gullatt & Jan, 2003; Spence 2009). Such literature supports the notion that college readiness initiatives: 1) provide some hope to those students interested in succeeding in college (Perna & Swail, 2002), 2) improve college access for minority groups (Martinez & Klopott, 2005), and 3) have an impact on college-going rates (Gullatt & Jan, 2003). The impact of these initiatives, as research suggests, may likely be attributed to the common and comprehensive approaches used by each program to support college readiness for minority youth. These programs strive to achieve "academic enrichment, personal growth, college awareness and advising, career awareness, and parental involvement" (NACAC, 2004, p. 11). All of these components are poised to provide participating students with the information and experiences necessary to increase the students' aspirations for post-secondary educational attainment. Notwithstanding the breadth of research on college readiness initiatives, there is little empirical research, from the student perspective, that describes how do high school students' experience college readiness and how to these experiences drive their aspiration to pursue a college education. To address this void in the literature and improve upon policy and practice of college readiness, "students' experiences, pathways, and variations in their

college access journey must not remain under examined" (Irizarry, 2012, p. 307). Irizarry contends that "students feel alone, completely disconnected, and forced to navigate the often foreign terrain of school and the college-going process" (p. 307) Similarly, Conley (2005) stresses that "students shoulder an inordinate responsibility to navigate a complex system which they have no prior experience, gathering expert knowledge they only use once" (p. 131). Both Irizarry (2012) and Conley (2005) drew these conclusions directly from the perspective of the student.

The research conducted by the U.S Department of Education is particularly grounded on quantitative methodology, according to Koyama (2007) and further adding that what is accomplished by way of "representativeness" is lost in "complexity" (p. 2311). The implication is that research on the lived experiences provides a substantive perspective only found in the narrative form. One may conclude, the devoid of qualitative methods such as interviews deny researchers the tools to construct the "meanings individuals attach to events and situations, and how they frame their decisions" (Louie, 2007, p. 2242). For example, in this context of college readiness, there is data suggesting that pre-college outreach programs are increasing college aspirations. However, we still have a lack of understanding of how or why this is occurring from the student perspective. The "inclusion of students voices strengthen our understanding of how students choose, what their social or cultural tensions may be, or what are their family's expectations" (p. 2243). It is undetermined if the readiness initiative intended to support the student, creates an environment that allows them to feel connected, and enables the student to understand and navigate the complex pathways to college; the research provided by Irizarry and Conley on the student's perspectives indicates otherwise. Because incongruences appear to exist within this literature, further research is needed about the student's perspective. If we are to

respond to the needs of our students to promote their educational well-being and college aspirations; educators, practitioners, and advocates of college readiness alike may benefit from listening to the population we serve – the student.

Justification for the Study

Pathways to high school completion and college enrollment begin with: decisions, plans, and actions students make during their secondary school years (Cabrera & LaNasa, 2001). However, the path to higher education for socioeconomically disadvantaged youth, can be considered, at best, tumultuous and at worst, a barrier stricken journey (Terenzini et al., 2001). These issues are particularly reminiscent of our borderland community. There are likely many dynamics to consider when gaging how students experience their own education process. Because their journey often centers on specific academic elements of student preparation, it is noteworthy to consider how a student experiences their individual pathway to college.

A review of the literature indicates that much information exists on the impact of college readiness initiatives and the services they offer to low income minority youth (Kirst & Venezia, 2004; Gandara, 2002; Swail & Perna; 2002, Watt et al., 2007), but few offer the direct perspective of the student. In reviewing programming efforts of specific programs such as TRIO, GEAR UP and AVID, it is identified that many common strategies exist to support the student through the college application process (Gullatt & Jan, 2003; Gandara & Bial, 2001; Tierney & Hagerdon, 2002; Domina, 2009; Cabrera, 2005, 2006) but few specifically indicated if the student understood this process at all. Moreover, other studies suggest that college readiness initiatives are in need of evaluation to determine if their service components are yielding the expected program outcomes (Gandara, 2002; Tierney & Hagerdon, 2002; Perna & Swail, 2001). While program evaluation is critical to the improvement of program components,

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research in this specific area, yet again, does not appear to consider the direct perspective of the student.

Attempts to research the topic of college readiness from the lens of the student have yielded few studies on the issue. Primary keyword searches included: high school students experiences, pre-college outreach, college readiness programs, college readiness practices, high school student voices on college readiness, student experiences transitioning from high school to college, access to higher education, and pathways to college. Literature was identified primarily, but not limited to, searches on ERIC, JSTOR, Teachers College Record, SAGE publications, and by conferring with the authors of the most commonly cited works in this field. Consequently, seeking a grounded understanding of the meaning and importance of college readiness to a high school student, I focus on the student experience, founded by their understanding of college readiness, through their pathway to college. This focus afforded the opportunity to achieve a deeper understanding of what college readiness means to students; how students experience college readiness; and the impact college readiness initiatives have on their academic lives. I employ a phenomenological approach to study the human experience as seen from their point of view, as a person lives these experiences and to "accurately describe and remain true to the facts of this research" (Groenewald, 2004, p. 5). I assert this is needed if we are to assess and improve the overall approaches we utilize as educators in the realm of college readiness to better prepare our students to be college-ready when preparing to enroll and succeed in their post-secondary educational endeavors. There is a story behind each student and through this research several stories will be heard and shared. These stories will lend to possibly supporting the improvement of our educational practices and advocacy in the context of college readiness and awareness support systems and resources for our school aged youth.

About the Researcher

My interest in studying the student experience as they prepare for college is practical and academic. I am an experienced educator and higher education administrator with a primary focus on college readiness and student success, with more than eighteen years' of service in the education field. In a particular, I have a demonstrated record of student success through the GEAR UP program by establishing strong partnerships and working relationships with five of six rural schools districts and all three urban school districts in Region XIX and supporting the increase in our partner rural school districts overall college going rates. As a former GEAR UP director, I was charged with the responsibility of providing a college readiness and awareness program that strived to prepare socio-economically disadvantaged middle and high school students for a post-secondary education. GEAR UP – Gaining Early Awareness and Readiness for Undergraduate Programs is a six-year program funded by the Department of Education to expand post-secondary educational opportunities for a select cohort of underserved populations. The El Paso Community College GEAR UP Program was a $5.5M federal grant awarded in 2006 to a cohort of participants in five of the six rural El Paso county school districts for the graduating class of 2012. As a scholar, I have been puzzled by the scarcity of research focusing on the issue from the perspective of those who directly experience these programs – the students. Over the years, I have noted through my own participation in workshops, seminars, conferences and the like, that much of the scholarly discussion regarding college readiness has tended to center on academic rigor, teacher preparation, administrative support systems and P16 educational partnerships. Moreover, there also has been much discussion on program efficacy. I have long been interested in learning more about how students experience college readiness efforts and how this programming supports their college aspirations.

Remaining Chapters

The first chapter introduces aspects of college readiness and college readiness initiatives as they pertain to school aged youth. Chapter 1 further describes the statement of the problem, justification for the study, the researcher and the significance of the research. Chapter 2 discusses related literature including college readiness frameworks and initiatives, program efficacy, academic and social interventions, social capital and college aspirations and student experiences. Chapter 3 addresses the research methodology utilizing phenomenology, the setting, the selection of the participants, and data collection procedures. Chapter 4 provides the analysis and interpretation of the data specific to the meaning of college readiness to the student, student experiences as they prepare for college and fostering student's college aspirations. Chapter 5 provides conclusion to the study, implications and recommendations for further research.

Summary

Chapter 1 introduces the concept of college readiness and defines what our educational system expects from this level of readiness of a high school student. It highlights that the topic of college readiness is broad and particularly concerned with academic rigor, teacher preparedness, and administrative support systems. The purpose of this study is to examine an aspect of these initiatives that is not often highlighted – the student experience. The breath of literature on college readiness is broad, but little exists from the perspective of the student. To improve on the practice and policy of these initiatives students' experiences, pathways and variations to college access are examined in this study.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

The following review of the literature supports the perception of college readiness and college readiness initiatives as a subject of primary importance in our educational system. In many instances, as further noted by the literature, more research is needed in this area of educational reform. These college readiness initiatives "focus on providing additional or supplemental support services to disadvantaged students to help fill the gap where our education system fails" (Swail, 2000, p. 88). However, the literature does support that while student experiences in college readiness are increasingly being measured through academic discourse in some fashion or another, research is slow in providing a look at student experience shared through their personal voice. Therefore, this review categorically views college readiness from these areas: 1) college readiness frameworks 2) college readiness initiative descriptions, 3) program efficacy, 4) academic and social interventions, 5) social capital and college aspirations and 6) student experiences.

College Readiness Frameworks

What exactly is college readiness? Stanford University professor, Michael Kirst believes there are "multiple definitions with no clear consensus on which one is most appropriate" (Olson, 2006). Research suggests that before an education system can seek the redesign of a high school curriculum, in effort to support college readiness, it must first seek out an appropriate definition to what exactly does being college ready mean. Specifically, college readiness calls for academic rigor, secondary and post-secondary alignment, and stronger pre-college outreach efforts; and these elements may be implemented together or in stages. Despite

the fact that no consensus on a clear definition of college readiness exists, research does contend that the phenomenon that is college readiness is having an impact on secondary students.

The college readiness agenda for the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board (THECB) identified elements that provided guidance to support success in Texas public schools. The elements were divided into two sections: (1) effective institutional participation and (2) implementation of elements for academic success. In the area of participation, first, the creation of a "college-going" culture in every public school with appropriate curricular and extra-curricular activities has been encouraged. Second, improvements in academic rigor for secondary education students have been established by developing graduation requirements that academically challenge students to meet and/or exceed academic expectations in college level courses. Third, and most important, an alignment of exit standards with college readiness standards as well as K-12 and higher education accountability systems has been put into place. In the area of success, institutions of higher education focus on improved graduation rates and time to degree completion, strengthened developmental education programs in both 2 and 4 year institutions, highlighted the critical need for community colleges (Closing the Gaps), evaluate recruitment and retention strategies to ensure academic support throughout degree completion, and, evaluated core curriculum for the purposes of K-16 alignment.

In the spring of 2008, THECB released a 104 page document identifying standards for college readiness. It set out to define the necessary skills to excel in college level English, Math, Science, and Social Studies (Wiley et al., 2010). These standards have a specific purpose to clearly articulate (to secondary institutions) what colleges and universities expect of their prospective college-going students. Under development since 2006, THECB and the Texas

Education Agency (TEA) successfully placed these standards into action in 2012; I will expand on these developments later in the literature review.

Southern Regional Education Board (SREB) identified Texas as one of the first states to adopt college readiness standards. This regional board is a nonpartisan think tank that represents 16 states, including Texas.   SREB developed a strategic plan to identify policies and procedures on preparing students for college. It aimed to connect state policies and examine the education spectrum from early childhood to college and further focus on policies to sustain students' academic achievement along their journey to college (SREB, 2002).

This study called on a framework to answer such questions as: Are students entering high school lacking the necessary skills to obtain an education that will prepare them for the future? Are high schools not providing the education that higher education institutions require? The inferences one may draw from these questions is the possibility that students are not challenged, professional staff is not adequately prepared, and most importantly that parents lack the knowledge to help their children succeed beyond high school graduation. It was the SRE Board's belief that failed reforms occur as a "result of poor organization structure, limited community and/or partner interaction, and lack of communication to successfully align local, state, and federal educational efforts" (SREB, 2002, p. 3).

Research shows the impacts to college readiness also comes from the disjuncture between K-12 and Higher Education system and should be of genuine concern to the college readiness process, because secondary and higher education institutions "operate in separate professional worlds" (Kirst, 2006). In his research Kirst identified the problematic issues with the separation of governance between K-12 and Higher Education. He states:

Within each state and at the federal level as well, a division exists that is based on

historical and pervasive assumption that K-12 schools and post-secondary institutions

should be guided by policies exclusive to each sector. As a result, public policy "tools"

that influence one sector – funding, accountability, assessment, and governance systems,

for instance – have little in common with the policy tools that influence the other.

Moreover, there are separate state boards of education for each level, separate legislative

committees, and boards that coordinate one level without the other (Kirst, 2006 p. 1).

Kirst further identifies that the fractures in our educational systems as providing vague and

confusing messages about college access (p. 3). Kirst (2006) conclusions support other research,

that is, connecting systems and ensuring they work closely together can improve college

preparation, readiness, and completion.

College Readiness Initiatives

Pre college outreach and early intervention is important. It is the key to support,

motivate, and retain most students' interest in their personal and professional efforts throughout

their secondary school days and into post-secondary school lives. Research indicates that our

students stand a greater chance of succeeding in life if they make every effort to stay informed.

In my experience as an educator, I've lost track of the number of times I've said – "had I known

I would have done things differently" to help my students succeed. The final performance report

conducted at Cambridge Community College's GEAR UP Program indicates that 67% of a 900

member high student cohort enrolled into an institution of higher education in the fall 2012. Of

those 900, a 6 year reporting period consistently identified that on the average 80% of the student

population remained informed and maintained awareness of the college information throughout

the middle school and high school years (EPCC GEAR UP, FPR, USDE, 2013). Analysis of a

survey administered in the 1990's by the United States Department of Education (USDE) revealed that about "one-third of all colleges and universities offer at least one program designed to increase access for disadvantaged pre-collegiate students" (Perna & Swail, 2001, p. 103).

Programs such TRIO, Upward Bound, Talent Search, GEAR UP and ENLACE are some regional initiatives delivered on the borderland , providing pre college outreach efforts typically managed by institutions of higher education. Supporting the success of these programs, are the results of a 1992 national longitudinal study demonstrating that "students participating in any type of outreach program during secondary school nearly doubled the odds of high school graduates enrolling in a four year institution" (p. 103).

In general, "the services provided by pre college outreach programs aim to counter negative school or community influences (e.g., lack of rigorous curriculum, poorly trained teachers, lack of role models) by providing the missing elements that help students aspire to, prepare for, and obtain college enrollment" (Gullatt & Jan, 2003, p. 58). This statement assumes that supplemental programming will improve student performance, increase retention rates, and increase college-going rates. It further makes an assumption that the participating student learning environment will promote a positive social structure to implement such programming. This detail remains to be seen in the overall reception of the partnerships established between higher education institutions and public school districts.

It is possible that one of the keys to improving supplemental programming is through P-16 curriculum alignment and collaboration. Aligning curricula and expectations from grade to grade, as well as aligning high school graduation and college entrance requirements, ensures that students are prepared for each successive school year; aware of each successive set of

expectations; and prepared for full participation in postsecondary education (Venezia et al., 2001).

It is estimated that two out three jobs created throughout the next decade will require education and training beyond high school, according to the U.S. Department of Labor's Bureau of Statistics. The Texas Legislature "placed Texas at the forefront of the nation in advancing college and career readiness legislation" in 2006 (THECB, 2013). The state's P-16 Council developed the College Readiness & Success Strategic Action Plan, outlining very specific college access objectives and a single goal: To ensure that every Texas student is college-ready when exiting high school and has the skills to successfully compete in a global economy. Because the state of Texas recognized the need to dramatically increase the levels of expectation and achievement for its students, it further adopted across-the-board College Readiness Standards in the critical areas of English/language arts, mathematics, science and social studies (THECB, 2013). As a result, college readiness initiatives have become a subject of primary importance in the Texas education system. By way of these initiatives, the state of Texas seeks to provide early intervention and awareness programs to middle and high school students emphasizing the importance of pursuing and completing a post-secondary education. Thus, advocates of college readiness contend that "all high school graduates should be provided with the academic experiences needed to be successful in higher education" and "for the current labor market, all high school students must graduate with the knowledge and skills to succeed in some form of post-secondary studies"(Kirst & Venezia, 2004, p. 1). It is in lieu of these claims that college readiness initiatives have been established.

For the purposes of this research proposal, this section of the literature review will discuss contributions made to college readiness by TRIO, GEAR UP and AVID pre-college outreach programs.

College readiness initiatives are poised to motivate and prepare students for college access opportunities through a variety of services from college based informational sessions, specialized college campus tours, and individualized academic advising sessions (Gandara, 2002; Swail & Perna, 2002). These initiatives aid student's in navigating through all aspects of the college application process and provide academic support (while in high school) for success in post-secondary education. As student-centered programs, these initiatives are typically operated by local education agencies such as school districts, colleges, or universities; state or federal agencies; or non-profit organizations. Their general focus is to "counter the negative school or community influences by providing the missing elements that help students aspire for college" (Gullatt & Jan, 2003, p. 58). Some of the missing elements provided by these initiatives are: supporting a rigorous curriculum, providing quality teacher professional development, and establishing college advisors to support high school to college transitions. Some of the most widely discussed college readiness programs are the federally funded TRIO Programs and Gaining Early Awareness and Readiness for Undergraduate Programs (GEAR UP), and the non-profit, Advancement via Individual Determination (AVID).

TRIO, the oldest of these programs, was established under the Lyndon B. Johnson administration as a part of the War on Poverty programs (Gandara, 2001). TRIO refers to three separate programs, Upward Bound, Talent Search, and Student Support Services funded under the Higher Education Act of 1965. TRIO's primary aim was to serve economically disadvantaged students beginning in early elementary school and assist them in the educational

growth through college (Gandara, 2002). The first of the federally funded programs

"collectively known as TRIO" is Upward Bound (Gullatt & Jan, 2003).   TRIO programs are

housed on university campuses and they prepare students for higher education through "subject

matter programs" specifically in the areas of literature, composition, mathematics, and science"

(p. 59). TRIO programs differ in their target populations. Upward Bound serves high school

students, Talent Search addresses the needs of middle school through undergraduate years and

Student Support Services provide college retention services on through graduate study.

Later, "as a part of the reauthorization of the Higher Education Act of 1998, GEAR UP

was created to also serve economically disadvantage students" (Swail, 2000, p. 89). The purpose

of GEAR UP "is to foster increased knowledge, expectations, and preparation of post-secondary

education among low income students and their families -" U. S. Department of Education

(USDE, 2013). GEAR UP provides federal funded grant awards to state and to partnership

grants. State funding is disbursed to educational entities within the state, while partnership

funding is shared between local educational agencies, higher education institutions and

community organizations. "Specifically, GEAR UP requires collaboration between school

districts and university partners to ensure that curriculum standards fully prepare students for

college" (Ward, 2006, p. 59). GEAR UP serves economically disadvantaged minority students.

Support services begin when students are in the seventh grade; continue through high school and

into college. GEAR UP is unique in that its service components address entire cohorts of

students rather than a select set of individuals as a focus of intervention. Main programming

efforts include: academic interventions such as tutoring, teacher professional development, and

student and parent support services such as college information sessions and assistance through

the college application pipeline.

AVID, a college preparatory program established in 1980 to create a rigorous curriculum to prepare students for college, is noted as a school reform model with 11 essential elements to ensure that a school environment empowers students and increases a student's responsibility for their learning and likely fostering an increase in their educational expectations in order to pursue a college education (Watt et al., 2007). AVID prepares its students for college by placing them in a rigorous curriculum that will foster the development of skills necessary for success in post-secondary education. AVID students are subject to an "academic environment similar to that of college classrooms" (p. 193).

Research has shown that "pre college outreach programs improve college access for underrepresented minorities" (Gandara & Bial, 2001; Vargas, 2004). There exists a need to continue to support these programs and the overall promise they offer. It is evident that they do provide additional support systems for our nation's schools. However, I assert additional research is needed to determine how students experience college readiness initiatives and how these initiatives might support their college going aspirations.

Program Efficacy

Gullatt & Jan (2003) note that the "majority of pre-collegiate academic development programs lack significant empirical data and program study designs that would allow for a more complete assessment of the relationship between program services, activities, and the resulting outcomes"(p. 60). In this study, the researchers take a look at the history and evolution of two pre college outreach programs, discuss program effectiveness through key principles of practice, and conclude by examining the implications of these programs and school reform, particularly where policy and funding are concerned. While this piece highlights pre college programs such as Upward Bound and GEAR UP, as two of many promising early outreach programs, it takes an

even closer look at four other programs they believe "exemplify principles of practice connecting research based intervention with evaluation designs to determine program effectiveness" (p. 62). Baltimore College Bound, Career Beginnings, Sponsor-A-Scholar, and Upward Bound all focus on three common types of program development: informational outreach, career-based outreach, and academic enrichment.

In an extensive search of the literature, Gandara & Bial (2001) found only 13 programs that had some evidence of effectiveness. According to this study the programs that had the most effectiveness have the following five elements in common: 1) key personnel in a long term guidance role, 2) provisions for high quality instruction, 3) incorporation of diverse cultural knowledge (cultural connections/relevance), 4) peer group support systems, and 5) financial assistance/incentives. Many early intervention programs are similar in program structure. They also make note that even though countless of college outreach programs exist across the country, data about how they work, or for whom and under what circumstances are generally sparse. Moreover, Gandara (2002) as seen in Tierney and Hagerdorn (2002), contend that it is difficult to measure the effectiveness of K-12 intervention programs due to the lack of evaluation studies with control groups, the vagueness of basic survey design and administration, and the lack of specificity in compliance reporting when dealing with program outcomes and corresponding measures. Additional emphasis is placed on the misfortune that most data related to evaluation program efficacy is focused only on college-going rates and tends not to draw conclusions from other numeric variables such as GPA, SAT or ACT scores, and/or college placement scores.

Perna & Swail (2001) also contend "more research is required to evaluate the effectiveness of early intervention programs" (p. 104). They address multiple areas that need further exploration: "appropriate grade level intervention, characteristics of student (target)

population, parent involvement" and other elements of program management to name a few (p. 105).

According to Hossler (2006), "college readiness programs have grown rapidly and garnered attention, to date there has been a dearth of solid and comprehensive integrative reviews of relevant literature that provide insight for establishing effective college outreach programs" (p. 554). By contrast, McDonough (2004) as seen in Harvey (2008), "contends that college outreach programs have proven benefits, which include a doubling of college going rates for at-risk youth, expansion of student educational and cultural aspirations, and a boost in college enrollment and graduation rates" (p. 976). Divided on the argument of efficacy, Spence (2009) offers planning recommendations for improving the overall effectiveness of these programs. He contends that "effectiveness depends on a comprehensive and systemic approach" (p. 41) and must include the following elements: 1) maintaining a vision for success, 2) alignment of readiness standards, 3) implementation of teacher-driven decision making, and 4) the development of P16 partnerships. Ultimately, despite the varying degrees of the efficacy of programs within the literature, college readiness initiatives were created to provide underprivileged students with unique educational opportunities to build their skill set, knowledge base, social and cultural aspirations, and overall preparedness to influence their desire to pursue post-secondary endeavors. Efficacy will continue to be assessed as programs continue to develop and be implemented over time. It is critical aspect of pre-college outreach to know what works and how improvements can be made to support high school student's transition from high school to college.

<u>Academic and Social Interventions in College Readiness Initiatives</u>

Yampolskaya et al., (2006) examine the effectiveness of academic and social

interventions provided to at-risk students through specific grant services provided by GEAR UP.

This research analyzed how GEAR UP affords students the experience it is designed to provide,

and with what outcomes. The participants in this study were program participants selected from

a large urban school district in Florida. The range of participants selected reflects high school

grade levels 9th through 12th for a total of 447 students. Two variables were identified in this

study: student participation and time spent in activities. The main findings of this study indicate

while this program was implementing services in accordance to grant requirements specifically

in the areas of academic achievement, social activities, and behavioral-related services, their

research indicates there is a modest impact on the level of student participation through

specialized GEAR UP services, in promoting a student's desire to want to be active, involved,

and motivated in their own learning experience.   Essentially, the actual time spent in program

activities demonstrated value in determining what components of a pre-college program

contribute to outcomes, how these components affect at risk students, and which groups of

students require more interventions.

Bragg et al., (2005), identify GEAR UP as a mentor and support program model and

academic pathway for college access. According to this research, a central goal of their

programming is to elevate the academic performance and aspiration of students through

comprehensive mentoring, counseling, outreach, and other support services. This study sought

to examine the "existence and emergence" of alternate academic pathways to college other than

the traditional college preparatory track in 50 states including the District of Columbia. This

research also sought to identify how these pathways contribute to college transition for

underserved student populations. Similar to previous studies within this literature, this study also centers on the discussion of service components rather than how student experiences in college readiness promote higher education success.

Domina (2009) examined the effectiveness of specific and district wide academic interventions delivered to disadvantaged students through specific grant services provided by college readiness programs such as: Upward Bound, Talent Search, and GEAR UP. The participants included a "representative sample of students" selected from across the nation; the ranges of participants were chosen from 9th grade through 12th grade. There are two experiments within this study: outreach program participation (using specific programs and participants) and school wide outreach (establishing campus wide outreach to all students). The findings conclude that outreach programs when operating as silos, tend to be selective and targeting a specific population. Researchers examine the effects of minimal contact hours in service components and concluded that full program participation may provide greater impact. Domina contends that measures should exist to determine the "spill-over effects" these programs have on non-participating students (p. 144). However, the study also asserts that when an outreach program has a school wide effect it establishes a college culture that not only benefit program participants, but non-participants alike too. Overall, this study, like Yampolskaya (2006) and Bragg et al., (2005), sought to examine the effectiveness of intervention in influencing college aspirations of high school students.

Lastly, Oliva & Nora (2004) question the effectiveness of initiatives because there is a lack of communication between programmers and evaluators. Initiatives, by way of their reporting structure, provide information about an intervention and its corresponding outcome, but do not detail the processes that lead to the outcome. Oliva and Nora further contend that

"knowing the how and why of student performance is necessary to determine which factors had an impact on outcomes and to improve practices" (p. 120). Moreover, they assert that "a lack of consistent measures across similar interventions makes it difficult to assess effectiveness of such programs" (p. 120).

<div align="center">**<u>Social Capital and College Aspirations</u>**</div>

Focusing on social class, Walpole (2003) conducts a longitudinal study that observes college experiences of low and high SES students. She is particularly concerned with co-curricular and activities. In order to this, Walpole investigates the "long history of effects of social class origins on educational achievement and attainment" (p. 47). Scholars have found the students from low SES backgrounds do have hold themselves to high educational expectations and struggle to persist in their educational endeavors in comparison to their peers from high SES backgrounds prior to and during college (Astin, 1993; DiMaggio & Mohr, 1985; Lareau, 1993; McDonough, 1997; MacLeod, 1987; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991; Tinto, 1987, 1993; as cited in Walpole, 2003).

SES differences are shaped by such factors as "parental interaction styles and expectations, school structure, school experiences and expectations, as well as college costs and financial aid" (p. 48). Walpole states that low SES parents are likely to view a high school diploma as the norm; while high SES parents consider a bachelor's degree or advanced degree the norm. In addition, the definition of success will also vary within these groups: a low SES student is successful if he/she secures a full time job after high school; while a high SES student is successful attending a "good" 4 year institution of higher education. Walpole further states that "there are low SES students that go on to college," however enrollment in postsecondary studies "represents success in overcoming many obstacles" (p. 48).

Researchers have found that low SES students are less likely to attend college, more likely to go to selective institutions when they do enroll, and have unique college choice processes (Astin, 1975, 1993; Hearn, 1984, 1990; Holster, Schmit, & Vesper, 1999; Karabel, 1972; McDonough, 1997; Paulsen & St. Johh, 2002; Tinto, 1987, 1933 as cited in Walpole, 2003). "Investigating low SES student experiences and outcomes may provide in to how and the extent to which the educational opportunity structure promotes social mobility" (Walpole, 2003, p. 48).

Using a survey of data collected from over 500 students, Wohn et al., (2013) examined how "different types of social capital associated with parents, close friends, and social media were related to students' confidence about their knowledge on the college application process and their expectations about succeeding in college" (p.427) (See Table 1). Research shows that many scholars commonly use social capital as a theoretical framework to understand why some students are better at knowing about the college entry, persistence, and completion process (p.424). "Social capital is often used to explain educational outcomes because it provides a framework that takes into consideration not only the resources explicitly held by an individual but also those available to the individual via his or her social relationship" (Coleman, 1988, as cited in Wohn et al., 2013, p.426).

Table 1

Types and Sources of Social Capital

Types	Sources of Social Capital
Demographics	Gender
	Race
	SES (eligibility of free lunch)
Structural	Siblings in college
	Extended in family in college
	Parents involvement in community
	Peer norms
Immediate Network	Instrumental & Emotional support from parents & friends

Note. From "The role of social media in shaping first generation high students' college aspirations: A social capital lens, by Wohn et al., 2013, *Computers & Education* 63, p.427. Copyright 2013 by Elsevier Ltd. Adapted with permission.

Student Experiences

Adelman (1999, 2006), concludes that the important themes for students to succeed are: 1) maintaining academic momentum, 2) high achieving curriculum in high school and college, 3) student use of time as more important than place, and 4) students are front-and-center as decision-making adults. He further contends that students, not the institutions, should be the center of the story. Moreover, the key is not just in showing and telling the students about readiness, it is in providing them with every possible opportunity to be college-ready.   Adelman (2006) also asserts that communication and outreach between high schools and higher education institutions is essential. This communication would help to facilitate college readiness efforts in high school with success in post-secondary education endeavors.

The closest we arrive to a discussion of student experience through their own voice is in the examination of survey results of a reported 254 GEAR UP annual performance reports to determine 1) the "influence of a particular type of service" and 2) the influence of a service's "intensity" and "extensity" on the outcome of interest (Cabrera, 2005). In this research, Cabrera studied whether the presence or absence of a particular service component had an influence of a

student's college plan. In addition, he further studied whether or not the intent and extent to which the support service was offered did impact a student's college plans. He discovered that only the extent to which a particular support service was provided did make an impact on college going plans.

Additional research conducted by Cabrera et al., (2006), examined the effectiveness of specific comprehensive interventions provided to at-risk students through GEAR UP.   This research analyzed how this program afforded students the experiences it was designed to provide, and with what outcomes; more specifically it sought to examine "cultural and social capital development" (p. 82). The participants in this study were selected from a "large concentration of comprehensive intervention programs" in California, Texas, Florida, New York, Oklahoma, and Kansas. Ultimately, the study focused on California programs for its research. The ranges of participants were selected from grade levels 9th through 12th. A total number of participants were not specifically identified; however 180 campuses were identified as targets of the analysis. The variables identified in this study were: test scores in Reading and Mathematics, certified teachers, student participation, and students on free/reduced lunch programs. The main findings of this study indicate that comprehensive intervention programs (CIP) are at best still in great need of further study. Because these CIP programs are cumulative, this 2 year period may not have been enough for the effects to manifest themselves.   This research also shows that students are more likely to become aware of and ready for college when parents, schoolteachers and administrators, peers, and the community itself work together with students. Thus, the combined efforts of these groups may provide for the creation of an environment that guides the development of social capital within the student, thus, achieving a mutual outcome: preparing students to enter and succeed in postsecondary education.

As the previous literature identifies, college readiness is indeed multifaceted and there is truly no one way to define college readiness. It is an educational reform that is multidimensional in that it is approached through the lens of following main elements: collaborative educational partnerships, academic and social interventions, and a myriad of human and social aspects that identify how a student may prepare for a post-secondary education. While each of these elements is important to the development of college readiness as a process and serves to address and highlight programmatic issues needed for further research; the literature still does not adequately inform or provide a clear picture of whether or not the student comprehends the overall meaning of college readiness and its intended use in their pathway to college.

The limited research on the topic of how student's making meaning of their college readiness experience is centered on 1) general high school experiences, 2) social class and the journey to college, and 3) early entrance students and the impression of the first year experience. A search of the research of my specific topic yielded few contributors to student voice and college readiness.

Collatos et al., (2004) examines the various pathways that Latino students participating through a pre-college outreach program embark on in their journey towards higher education. Using an ethnographic approach and data collected primarily from 30 participant interviews, their findings identified the reasons for disproportionately low Latino students having access to higher education. In their own words, "the students explain how social and cultural capital, immigration status, poor counseling, and academic tracking negatively influence achievement and enrollment in higher education" (p. 166). The study further concluded that student narratives helped the researcher identify strategies to empower and guide students towards college access and success. Similarly, Percy-Calaff (2008) using a multisite ethnography, examined the lives of

nine successful Latino students also participating in a pre-college outreach program.   She

researched the development of college aspirations by exploring student's experiences via "school

practices, college-access programs, family involvement, and multiple worlds of the home" (p.

203). She contends that students can succeed when needs are met and when all the appropriate

support systems of family, school, and community are in place.

Over a 3 year period, Irizarry (2012) drew qualitative data collected as he followed a

group of Latino students in their final years of high school (in some cases) through their first

semester in college. He discovered that there is a need to maintain social structures to support

the distinct "caminos" (pathways) students take in pursuit of their college education. Recall,

Irizarry maintains that "students' experiences, pathways, and variations in their college access

journey must not remain under examined" (p. 307).   If we are to improve on the policy and

practice of college readiness, I contend that more information is needed to support students

through their college preparation experience. It appears clear, that an impact exists when a

student's voice is heard as established by Collatos et al., (2004). Therefore, this study will

contribute to the research of college readiness from the student's perspective.

Research Questions

If the underlying goal of college readiness programming is to facilitate pathways for high school students' to successfully transition into higher education; through various secondary program experiences and students are further expected to comprehend this knowledge intensive process, then it is necessary to ask and understand the following:

- What does being "college ready" mean to a high school student?

And to further guide this research the following supporting questions are also asked:

- How do students experience the college readiness program offered within their district?

- How do these experiences foster high school students' college aspirations?

Summary

Chapter 2 reviews literature pertaining to the multifaceted area of education known as college readiness. This section described frameworks and initiatives of college readiness initiatives as seen at through local, state and national practitioners. This is followed by an overview of program efficacy as it relates to the implementation of these programs. It further explored academic and social interventions, social capital and college aspiration aspects of college readiness; concluding with a discussion on students general experiences in college readiness programs.

CHAPTER 3

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Introduction

To learn more about how the student experiences college readiness, I employ a phenomenological methodology. Phenomenology has been referred to as a "philosophy, a paradigm, a methodology, and equated with qualitative methods of research and naturalistic inquiry" (Patton 1990, p. 68). Its origins are in the European philosophical tradition. Emerging from the philosophy of Edmund Husserl, a late 19th century German mathematician and philosopher; over time, different phenomenological schools, styles, and emphases have developed (Spiegelberg, 1982). Phenomenology has undergone refinement over the last 50 years and today there are a number of schools of thought within it as discussed in the following paragraphs. This chapter defines and describes phenomenology, epistemological theoretical frameworks, the research setting and its participants, and procedures for data collection.

What is Phenomenology?

Phenomenology is the study of "human experiences," "structures of consciousness from the first person point of view" and "characterized as a way of seeing" (Gallagher, 2012, p. 7). Phenomenologists are concerned with how people experience things and the manner in which things appear in a person's consciousness. Husserl developed phenomenology because he believed that the study of everyday people, their life world, and their lived experiences should be a new basis for human science research.

For Husserl, the dehumanizing of science was a problem and the way he sought to address it was by presenting the everyday world as a foundation of science. In Husserl's view, "phenomenology, literally meaning (the science of appearances); was a method that attempted to

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give descriptions of the way things appeared in our conscious experiences" (Gallagher, 2012, p. 8). Husserl's phenomenology has been coined '"transcendental" (Sexton-Hesse 1983, p. 5); other examples of branches of phenomenological philosophy include "existential phenomenology and hermeneutic phenomenology" (Tesch 1984, p. 1). In addition, there is Merleau-Ponty (1962) who used the expression, 'the phenomenological method', which proposed a way of understanding phenomenology from a philosophical orientation. Merleau-Ponty's (1962) methods focus on four features: "description, reduction, essence and intentionality" as common themes within phenomenological philosophy (p. 7).

Table 2

Branches and Definition of Phenomenology

Branches	Definition
Transcendental	Basic themes of transcendental phenomenology are "intentionality," "eidetic reduction," and "constitution of meaning."
Existential	Basic themes of existential phenomenology are "lived experience," "modes of being," "ontology," and "life-world."
Hermeneutic	Basic themes of hermeneutic phenomenology are "interpretation," "textual meaning," "dialogue," "pre-understanding," and "tradition."

Note. From http://www.phenomenologyonline.com/inquiry/orientations-in-phenomenology

For the purposes of this study, the data presented is derived from the qualitative methods specific to transcendental phenomenology. In capturing the essence of meaning construction through phenomenology, Frankl (1998) states that "phenomenology is an attempt to describe the way in which man understands himself, in which he interprets his own existence, far from preconceived patterns of interpretation and explanation such as are furnished by psychodynamic or socio-economic hypotheses." (p. 7)

At the core of transcendental phenomenology is meaning, a method for acquiring and collecting data that portray the essences of human experience (Moustakas, 1994).   Central

components to the application of this phenomenological methodology also include: intentionality (noesis & noema), epoche and bracketing.

In his discussion of transcendental phenomenology, Husserl (1931) included intentionality as a main component of phenomenological research. Intentionality consists of the noesis and noema. According to Schutz (1970) noesis is defined as "the process of experiencing" and noema is referred to as "the intentional object or the thing that is being experienced" (p.320). Conklin (2005) best articulated the purpose of the noesis and noema in research by stating that "phenomenological essence emerges at the nexus of the noema and noesis and that it is at this point of unity comes a harmonious and integrated understanding of the experience" (p. 7).

In addition, in phenomenological research, one must apply the method of epoche. Epoche calls for the suspension and disengagement of a natural attitude (Gallagher, 2012). According to Conklin (2005), "the epoche creates a clearing between the researcher and the world for the phenomenon to show up, possibly different than usual; it has to do with the constitution of the researcher and how researcher situates him or herself in relation to the phenomenon" (p. 9).

It is important as a researcher to separate any past knowledge or experience to the study conducted. This must be in place prior to conducting any data collection so that awareness exists to the potential for a researchers' own bias to emerge and how to suspend that bias. This type of suspension would support the authenticity of participants' personal accounts of their experiences.

Lastly, bracketing is a methodological device of phenomenological inquiry that requires deliberate putting aside one's own belief about the "nature" and "essence" of things, events and/or perceptions about phenomenon under investigation (Schutz, 1970). In phenomenological

research, the process of "putting reality into brackets" has a similar purpose to that of the process of epoche. According to (Ainsworth & Chung, 2006), "the sole purpose of epoche or bracketing is to bring our attention to play on the thing itself as given in consciousness" (p. 21). Furthermore, "it entails setting aside issues such as: 1) questioning the reality of thing experienced, 2) examining what previous opinions or theories expect, and 3) exploring personal assumptions about the experience" (p. 21) .

Phenomenology is a branch of qualitative research and philosophical inquiry that seeks a thick description of the phenomena in question; with an ultimate goal of providing the "essence" of the phenomena to arrive to its meaning (Husserl, 1964; Van Manen, 1990) as seen in Randles (2012). Phenomenology tries to "account for the presence of meanings" in the human consciousness (Fouche, 1993, p. 124) and is the science of pure "phenomena" (Eagleton, 1983, p. 55) allowing for an understanding of the particular phenomena through an individual's own frame of reference as seen in Groenewald (2004). Phenomenological methodologies contribute to a deep understanding of our "lived experiences" by bringing to light "taken for granted assumptions about these ways of knowing" (Starks & Brown, 2007, p. 1373).

Solowski (2000) as cited in Starks & Brown (2007) wrote about phenomenology as follows:

> Phenomenological statements, like philosophical statements, state the obvious and the necessary. They tell us what we already know. They are not new information, but even if not new, they can still be important and illuminating, because we often get confused about just such trivialities and necessities (p. 57).

Through close examination, this study will seek to capture the essence of the lived experiences of students participating in forms of college readiness programming and how they make meaning of those experiences to influence their college-going aspirations.

A Personal Perspective

The phenomenological approach is most appropriate for the development of this research because it allows me to deeply delve into the student experience as voiced through their personal stories to understand the "lived experience" in college readiness programming. My professional experience in education includes eight years in the classroom, in both public and private systems, and across middle and high school years. Experience in higher education spans ten years in the areas of undergraduate recruitment, admissions, student assessment, and student success programs in both two-year and four-year institutions of higher education. In addition, I managed the delivery of programs and services (across seven years) in college readiness development to more than 1,300 rural district students through a regional GEAR UP program. My observations are tempered by these experiences and although the literature indicates there are many services being provided through college readiness initiatives supporting access for high school graduates, we find many students are graduating from high school unable to comprehend and address the complex task of going to college.

These observations have fostered and created the foundation of my research and as such, helped to develop the specific questions I asked participants to further understand what meaning they give to college readiness as they prepare to transition into college. The body of knowledge tells us that college readiness is a phenomenon of local, state and national importance. It largely addresses the structural aspects of the elements of college readiness such as academic rigor, teacher development, and social support systems to include college readiness initiatives. While

these elements are critical to ensure and support a successful transition into post-secondary education; researchers also contend that an attitudinal aspect of the student experience is in need of further development throughout educational research.

For this reason, obtaining the voice of the student is beneficial to make improvements to the support systems provided to them. Student narratives fill the student perspective gap and help us better understand their thoughts, beliefs, and attitudes towards graduating from high school and moving into higher education, within the context of college readiness. Hence, I employ phenomenological methods because they are best used when a researcher is looking to establish areas for improvement to practice by challenging normative assumptions as experienced by those directly involved (Creswell, 2006).

Theoretical Frameworks

As a major contributor to the study of phenomenology, Schutz proposed that "individuals approach the life world with *a stock of knowledge* made up of common sense constructs and categories" (Goudling, 2005, p. 302). The intent of the study sought to understand how students form meaning about college readiness. Within the formation of this meaning, how did they subsequently experience college readiness programs at their schools, and how did these experiences foster college aspirations?   Four theoretical frameworks are found to be appropriate in the analysis of this study: Piaget's Constructivism Theory, Baxter-Magolda's Epistemological Reflection Model (meaning), Kolbs's Experiential Learning Theory (experiences) and Social Capital Theory (support systems).

Piaget's Constructivism Theory (Theory of Knowledge)

Piaget's constructivist theory of knowledge contended that people do not just "get" information that can immediately use and understand; they have to "construct" knowledge (Baker et al., 2007). According to Piaget, "the nature of knowledge should be studied empirically where it is constructed and developed; this can be done through the historical development of knowledge or the in the development of an individual" (p. 4).

Piaget's methodology further contends that knowledge is grown and developed through experiences. These experiences enabled people to create mental maps. These maps evolved through two complimentary processes known as assimilation and accommodation.

Assimilation – known as the incorporation of new experiences into an already existing framework.

Accommodation – known as the reframing of a mental representation of our external world to new our new experiences.

Wiske (1998) defined constructivism as a manner in which people could make sense of and understand the world they lived in. Jia (2010) best posits the basic idea of constructivism relating to students by stating the following:

Students enter classrooms with their rich previous experiences. They hold their opinion toward daily life and even universal issues; even though they do not know some issues and have no experiences, they may form special explanations and assumptions based on previous experiences as some issues appear (p. 198).

Diverse perspectives of constructivism have long existed and informed by many other theorists to include: Vygotsky (1934), Dewey (1938), Bruner (1960) and Von Glaserfield (1989) to name a few. In the latter part of the 20th century, it was Piaget that most accurately studied

cognition as a key aspect of meaning making through human thought process.   Later research

focused on cognition through brain development throughout childhood. "Motivation, interest,

engagement, deeper understanding of fewer examples, increased ownership of knowledge,

acceptance of students' prior knowledge, and the sharing of knowledge all came to be

understood as structures that support construction of meaningful learning" (Richardson, 2007).

Gordon (2009) further articulates Piaget's methodology in his statement:

> Piaget believed that to understand that nature of knowledge, "we must study its formation
>
> rather than examining only the end product" (Kamii and Ewing, 1996, p. 260). His
>
> developmental theory demonstrates that the way one arrives at knowledge is equally, if not
>
> more, important than the final result (p. 51).

To further explore how students construct meaning and develop knowledge Baxter Magolda's

Epistemological Reflection Model is also utilized to support the data analysis of this study.

Student Development Theory - The Epistemological Reflection Model

Although her research involved college students, Baxter- Magolda (1992) as cited in

Bock (1999) found that "the understanding of college students' intellectual development was at

the heart of effective educational practice" (p. 3). As a result she set out to discover what

students thought of their world. In her pursuit she discovered that the development of student's

voice contributed the cognitive development.

This study aims to explore student experiences from the perspective of Baxter Magolda's

Epistemological Reflection Model. Magolda's (1999) contributions to student development

place emphasis on how students make sense of their "educational and learning experiences" (p.

29). Her reflection model centers on patterns of knowledge. These patterns are presented in four

stages: absolute, transitional, independent, and contextual knowing and are briefly described as follows:

Absolute Knowing – "Knowledge exists with certainty and is possessed by certain authorities. Students at this stage see no place for themselves in the creation of knowledge; rather they assume that their role and the role of their peers are to obtain knowledge from teachers"   (p. 31).

Transitional Knowing – "Transitional knowers differ from absolute knowers in their concept of knowledge, view of instructors, and relationship with peers in the learning process. The certainty and uncertainty of knowledge creates a need for students to understand complex and conflicting ideas and Hearing others viewpoints becomes a meaningful way to develop that understanding" (p. 32).

Independent Knowing – "Students recognize that they have the capacity and the right to possess knowledge – to think independently. They recognize that they and their peers can assume a position of authority in creating ideas, and they expect their instructors to encourage their thinking and expression; independent knowers value their own beliefs and the beliefs of others" (p. 34).

Contextual Knowing – "Contextual knowers engage in a complex process of integrating their own voices with knowledge considered valid in a given context; their capacity to articulate and apply their knowledge determines their ability to make important contributions to the ongoing construction of human communities" (p. 36).

Baxter Magolda's model emphasizes the importance of how these "patterns of knowledge" foster the "creation of learning environments" that "empower students in and out of the classroom" (p. 39).

Kolb's Experiential Learning Theory

As the name suggests, experiential learning involves learning from experience. The theory was proposed by psychologist David Kolb influenced by the experiential works of John Dewey, Kurt Lewin, and Jean Piaget. According to Kolb, this type of learning can be defined as "the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience. Knowledge results from the combinations of grasping and transforming experience" (1984, p. 41). For the purposes of this study, experiential learning theory supports experiences that are specific to developing college knowledge through a variety of pre-college outreach programming efforts and other relevant experiences involving specific reflections of each participant.

Kolb's (1984) theory takes a more holistic approach and emphasizes how experiences, including cognitions, environmental factors, and emotions, influencing the learning process. Experiential learning theory differs from cognitive and behavioral theories. Cognitive theories emphasize the role of mental processes while behavioral theories ignore the possible role of consciousness or the subjective experience in the learning process.

Kolb (1984) further states that the definition of a transformational experience "emphasizes several aspects of the learning process as viewed from the experiential perspective. First is the emphasis on the process of adaptation and learning as opposed to content and outcomes. Second is that knowledge is a transformational process, continuously created and recreated. Third, learning transforms experience in both objective and subjective forms and lastly, to understand learning we must also understand the nature of knowledge and vice versa" (p.38).

Social Capital Theory

"Social capital theory allows for an analysis for how students approach supportive individuals and how those individuals facilitate the acquisition of information and skills necessary for college readiness" (Corwin, 2008, p. 49).   The concept of social capital for the purposes of this study looks at two specific support systems: 1) parental support and 2) high school based college advisor support. In particular, it places emphasis on the GO CENTER counselor as an institutional agent; and moreover, how students "gain access to vital resources through their relationships with institutional agents situated in the sociocultural worlds that comprise their social universe" (Stanton-Salazar, 2010, p. 5).

James Coleman's (1988) interpretation of social capital is "the most frequently cited in the educational literature related to social capital and educational outcomes" (Dika & Singh, 2002, p. 31). Coleman proposes that "social capital is intangible and has three forms: (a) level of trust, as evidenced by obligations and expectations, (b) information channels, and (c) norms and sanctions that promote the common good over self-interest" (p. 33). "Coleman's theory suggests that social capital is instrumental in the development of human capital, that is, high school graduation and college enrollment rather than dropping out of school. Coleman's theory also states that "family norms and intergenerational closure serve to promote educational achievement, motivation and engagement" (p. 40).

The Setting

The setting is Sanders High School (pseudonym), a local public high school, representative of a major feeder to regional institutions of higher education, where participants are known to be exposed to specific aspects of college readiness. This high school has a GO CENTER.   This center is an extension of the Sanders High School Counseling Department.

The Counseling Center and GO CENTER are in the very first hall of school – the 100 hall. SHS benefits from 2 Guidance and Counseling offices – 1) the Counseling Center that focuses on general counseling efforts such as course scheduling, registration, and specialized testing and 2) the GO CENTER that focuses on all items relating to post-secondary education readiness: college admissions, college testing, college and university selection and fit.

The Center is decorated floor to ceiling with various items relating to post-secondary education paraphernalia. If one were to strip the walls bare it would plainly be just a classroom. The GO CENTER is under the facilitation of a GO CENTER counselor. This individual is responsible for the knowledge intensive process that involves connecting students to college. A GO CENTER counselor is an experienced higher education professional with broad knowledge to guide students on aspects of college enrollment process.

SHS is located in the eastside of Cambridge, Texas (pseudonym), within the Cambridge Independent School District (CISD). CISD is the second largest school district in Cambridge, Texas, serving more than 44,000 students.

A socio-economic profile of CISD demonstrates some areas within the district experience higher than average economically disadvantaged populations, with a district average of 76.9%, and campuses ranging from 58.4% to 88.2% SES (See Table 3).

In addition, English proficiency levels range from 4.6% to 14.3% across the district, with a district average of 9.1%. Another significant characteristic of CISD is the At-Risk population, range from a low of 21.2% to high of 60%, with a district average of 36.9% (See Table 3).

Table 3

Socio-Economic Status for Cambridge Independent School District High Schools-Class of 2011

Cambridge ISD		Socio-Economic Status Grade 9-12				
High School Name	Graduates	Econ. Disadv.	Lim. Engl. Prof.	At-Risk	Mobility	# of Students to Teachers
Bedview	458	79.7%	11.7%	41.4%	14.6%	15.9
Del Roy	421	88.2%	8.2%	30.3%	11.4%	15.2
Sanders	464	58.4%	4.6%	21.2%	14.1%	15.3
Hoover	439	67.7%	6.4%	41.3%	17.8%	14.1
Parkview	258	76.3%	6.3%	60.0%	16.2%	13.3
Rivendale	290	87.1%	13.4%	40.4%	16.3%	13.1
Yonkers	378	87.9%	14.3%	34.6%	17.2%	13.4
Cambridge ISD HS Totals/Averages	3,051	76.9%	9.1%	36.9%	15.2%	14.3

Note. From http://ritter.tea.state.tx.us/perfreport/aeis/

CISD has 62 campuses, which sprawl through an urban area stretching from northeast Cambridge to the east and southeast areas of the city. The district employs 8,000 administrators, teachers and support staff. CISD aspires towards high reaching goals as stated in the district's vision statement:

All students enrolled in our schools will be globally productive individuals prepared to successful enroll, persist, and complete post-secondary studies in order to positively give back to local, state and nation communities as they pursue their career aspirations. *(CISD, 2013).*

The district's vision statement promises college readiness among all students; however, district data retrieved from the Texas Education Agency demonstrates that only 42% of district graduates (Class of 2011) are college ready in both Mathematics and English Language Arts. In addition, the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board (THECB) reports that only 58% of the graduating Class of 2011 is enrolled in an institution of higher education the first fall semester

after graduating from high school. These figures are slightly higher at SHS, with 51% of graduating seniors demonstrating college readiness in both Mathematics and English Language Arts and 68.5% of the graduating Class of 2011 enrolled in an institution of higher education the first fall semester after graduating from high school.

Despite the above average performance at SHS, we find the performance of the SHS graduating senior significantly lower when compared to their White counterparts across the state. The THECB reports that college readiness in both Mathematics and English Language Arts is 65% for White students; fourteen percent higher than the SHS graduating senior. This is significant since 98.5% of SHS students are Hispanic and while SHS is the highest performing high school in Cambridge ISD, the performance gaps, when measured against the performance of White students, provide compelling support to uncover more about the impact of college readiness initiatives among Hispanic students at SHS (See Table 4).

Table 4

College Readiness Indicators and Enrollment for Cambridge Independent School District High Schools

Cambridge ISD		College Readiness Indicators of Class of 2011			Enrollment First Fall Semester after Graduating from HS	
High School Name	Graduates	% Ready Math	% Ready English	% Ready Both	Class of 2011	Class of 2012
Bedview	458	59%	61%	46%	57.2%	60.6%
Del Roy	421	66%	59%	47%	61.0%	60.9%
Sanders	464	60%	69%	51%	68.5%	69.8%
Hoover	439	58%	61%	45%	55.4%	58.3%
Parkview	258	62%	44%	34%	52.7%	44.7%
Rivendale	290	60%	45%	36%	53.4%	57.8%
Yonkers	378	54%	40%	29%	53.0%	49.9%
Cambridge ISD HS Totals/Averages	3,051	59%	55%	42%	58.0%	58.6%
State (White)	107,597	78%	74%	65%	56.0%	54.8%
State	290,581	67%	64%	52%	52.2%	51.1%

Note. From http://ritter.tea.state.tx.us/perfreport/aeis/ & www.thecb.state.tx.us/

A focus on the gap in performance among ethnic groups is relevant to this study given the demographic make-up of CISD, which is 99.3 % Hispanic (See Table 5). While other demographic and socio-economic factors are equally important in the selection of the setting and participants, the focus of this study is to determine the experience and meaning of college readiness at Sanders High School and how these contribute to the high school's higher than average college readiness and performance across the district. Of further scholarly interest may be the discovery of factors that lead to the "success" at SHS. These factors may lead to the application of best practice recommendations across the district.

The selection of SHS is further supported when considering accessibility, ease of locating participants, the presence of the college readiness initiative known as GEAR UP, and long-term accessibility if necessary. Finally, the ability to conveniently access this particular setting lent

itself to the 2-3 months needed to conduct my research.   SHS is located within a 15 mile radius

of central offices, the community college and the university.

Table 5

Cambridge Independent School District Ethnic Distribution of High School - Class of 2011

Cambridge ISD High School		Ethnic Distribution Class of 2011		
High School Name	Graduates	% Hispanic	% African American	% White
Bedview	458	99.6%	0.4%	0.0%
Del Roy	421	99.5%	0.0%	0.5%
Sanders	464	98.5%	0.4%	0.6%
Hoover	439	99.1%	0.5%	0.2%
Parkview	258	99.2%	0.8%	0.0%
Rivendale	290	100.0%	0.0%	0.0%
Yonkers	378	100.0%	0.0%	0.0%
Cambridge ISD HS				
Totals/Averages	3,051	99.3%	0.3%	0.3%

Note. From http://ritter.tea.state.tx.us/perfreport/aeis/

When you first arrive at Sanders High School (SHS) there is visible movement of faculty,

staff, parents and students moving about the outside of the campus. As you walk into SHS the

hallways personify years of school pride, a huge ranger mascot, blue and orange school colors

everywhere, a multitude of class picture line the immediate entrance and first part of main

hallway. There is a certain aura of warmth about this place. There is a certain ease with which

everyone appears content with their surroundings. It's the beginning of a usual school day; I

almost always arrive right before first period. Students are moving freely through the hallways,

talking to each other, talking to teachers or administrators but ultimately engaged in the school

day from the moment to arrive; this is obvious by the social dynamics in the hallway. There are

approximately 8 main hallways throughout SHS. Each named according to the room numbers

the hallways contain. One of the best esthetic qualities of this high school is its openness and

bright light capacity – it has many windows and several garden like structures throughout the

building that form the rectangular maze that is SHS. Many of these garden structures have been

adopted by school clubs and organizations. In some cases, an adjacent classroom cares for the

area. It is these observations that give a visitor a sense of welcome to this campus.

<div align="center">**The Participants**</div>

Polkinghome (1989) as cited in Parikh (2012) suggested that 5-25 individuals who have

experienced a phenomenon should be interviewed when conducting phenomenological research

studies. To select the participants, purposive sampling was used because the interviewees had

certain characteristics related to college readiness. Specifically, criterion and intensity cases

were considered in the selection of potential interview candidates. Patton (1990) proposed that

criterion cases are those individuals that "meet some criterion" and intensity cases are those

cases that are information rich and manifest a phenomenon intensely, but not extremely, such as

good/poor students, above average/below average, etc." (p 36). The participants were current

high school seniors that had been directly served by a college readiness initiative for at least two

academic years.   The Sanders High School GEAR UP Program has been active since the fall of

2008. GEAR UP is a federally funded college readiness program. Because GEAR UP has

existed on this high school campus over a six year period, the sample selection yielded

participants that have received college readiness support in some capacity throughout high

school.   The GO CENTER and the GEAR UP Program interacted and supported each other in

all aspects of college readiness services. Since the GO CENTER served as a service center for

college information, the GEAR UP Program staff was also housed with the GO CENTER. Any

activities and events related to college awareness and readiness programming were conducted as

collaboration between the GO CENTER specialist and the GEAR UP staff.   Because this

collaboration exists, the selection of these students was narrowed by examining GEAR UP

participation records from a recent national college tour. The tour list contained the names of 50 participants all from the current senior class.

The national college tour is a one of several examples of a directive student service of the GEAR UP Program that is available to every senior class member. Typically, a national college tour will accommodate anywhere from 50 to 100 high school students per trip. Access to these student participation records was gained through the GO CENTER counselor. The GO CENTER counselor at SHS is responsible for ensuring that all graduating seniors successfully navigate the college application process and work collaboratively with any outreach partnerships promoting higher education. Part of this responsibility is ensuring that all GEAR UP cohort members are exposed to and participate in as many college preparatory services as possible. Ten student names were randomly selected from this list, of these ten, five elected to participate in this study. Due to scheduling conflicts or simply not a desire to participate, only five students returned signed consent forms indicating a willingness to participate in this study. Allie, Chris, Will, Hunter and Jessica (pseudonyms) all are high seniors attending Sanders High School and participating in the GEAR UP Program. At the time of these interviews, all five students were less than two months away from graduation. Each of them benefitted from direct participation in the GEAR UP Program for a minimum of two consecutive years.

Allie is a Caucasian female and the youngest child in her family. Raised in a lower middle class, single family household, Allie lives with her mother, older sister, and her little niece. Her older brother is currently serving in the military. Her mother completed college. She participated in the school's dance team for the first two years of high school and then decided to become more involved with student advocacy and joined student council. She dreams of going to the University of Texas at Austin and has an interest in studying Nursing.

Chris is a Caucasian male and the oldest child in his family. He has grown up in a middle class family of six, his parents and siblings, two brothers and a sister. He is particularly close to his youngest brother because he wants to be a good role model. His parents completed college and are both teachers. He is actively involved in several sports, engaged in different school clubs, and his favorite class is History. He plans to start college at the University of Texas at El Paso and study Finance.

Will is a Hispanic male and is the middle child in his family. Growing up in a middle class family, he is very close to his parents and siblings, two brothers, one older and another younger. His mother completed some college and his father completed a Bachelor's Degree. He is an active Basketball player and very involved in his academics. After high school, Will plans to attend the University of Texas at San Antonio and is interested in pursuing a degree in Business Administration.

Hunter is a Hispanic male and the only child of his parent's marriage. Growing up in a middle class family, he has an adult half-sister from his father's previous marriage. He is a bookworm. He has a clear passion for reading that has set the stage for his academic success. His father was the only parent to complete college. His intent is to pursue post-secondary studies through a PhD. Hunter's greatest interest once he finishes a Bachelor's Degree is to for a law enforcement agency like the Federal Bureau of Investigations (FBI) or Central Intelligence Agency (CIA).

Jessica is a Hispanic female and one of four children in her middle class family home. She has two sisters and a brother. Her parents never attended college. Jessica plans on becoming a nurse. Her college plans include starting her studies at UTEP and then transferring to another program in San Antonio or Lubbock.

Data Collection

To initiate data collection, I developed guiding interview questions or topics for discussion to utilize in the phenomenological research interview (Moustakas, 1994). These questions were compiled by reviewing other samples of instruments in similar qualitative studies. In addition, I focused on elements of college readiness that I felt were pertinent to understanding students' experiences. In order to ensure that the questions would provide the data needed to develop this research, a pilot study was conducted utilizing two students from Sanders High School. The first two interviewees, one male and one female, provided detailed answers to the questions. This allowed me to proceed forward with the additional interviews, keeping the first two as a part of my data collection. A copy of the questions is included in the appendix.

Semi-structured Interviews

To draw out the lived experiences of participants semi-structured interviews were utilized in this study. Semi-structured interviews provided the flexibility and "freedom to digress" from structured questions (Berg, 2009, p. 107). The flexibility of the semi-structured interview "allows for interviewers to ask a series of structured questions, permits comparisons across interviews, and allows for the pursuit of other topics areas spontaneously initiated by a participant" (Berg, 2009, p. 109).

Interviews provided the opportunity for a rich description of the students' individual experiences. Each individual interview was approximately 60 minutes in length. Selltiz et at., (1959), Spradley (1979), Patton (2002) suggest that interviews questions be constructed with "a type of outline, listing the relevant broad categories appropriate to their study" (as cited in Berg, 2009, p. 111). The interview questions were structured into three main sub topics relevant to the

each interviewee's participation in college readiness initiatives: 1) general demographics and high school experiences, 2) GEAR UP experiences and additional support systems, and 3) experiences navigating the college application process.

At the conclusion of each individual interview, each participant audio tape was reviewed by the researcher to determine if the narratives provided rich information for the researcher to make meaning of their experiences. The initial audio recording review provided the information needed to analyze the data. As a result of the audio recording reviews, it was determined that sufficient information was being produced by each subsequent interview. For this reason, each participant was visited only once for individual interviews; however, during each initial interview, the option was open to revisit any individual participant if a more detail review of the transcriptions merited further inquiry.

I did have another opportunity to meet with each of the participants in a small group setting after all of the individual interviews. During this time, we expanded further on common topics that surfaced as a result of the initial interviews. For example: all of the participants indicated (in their individual interviews) that their preparation for college began somewhere around their junior or senior year, elaborated on this topic, and further shared their experiences. To gather them in a small group setting to further addressed these similar discussion points allowed for an expanded understanding of their experience.

Table 6 provides the coding for the data analysis by interview number, code and related pseudonym.

Table 6

Coding of Personal Interview Participants

Interview & Transcription Length	Personal Interview Code Number	Pseudonym
1/10	PI1	Allie
2/10	Pl2	Will
3/10	Pl3	Chris
4/17	Pl4	Hunter
5/9	Pl5	Jessica

Each interview was taped on a digital audio-recorder. A trained transcriptionist transcribed the audiotapes using appropriate software and converting the recordings into Microsoft Word file. Upon completion of the transcriptions, these files were further reviewed and data analyzed by the researcher.

To ensure data security, during the course of this research, all data files were housed and kept securely in a locked cabinet and in further compliance with institutional research protocols, all tapes will be erased at the conclusion of the study - on or just after the researcher completes all doctoral degree requirements as designated by the University of Texas at El Paso.

Over a two month period, I visited Sanders High School to conduct interviews during a regular school day. It was difficult, at times to secure participants because school commitments were priority. There were days that we scheduled interviews, but I would have to return because of scheduling conflicts. I understood this, and I made myself available with as much flexibility as possible. Individual interviews were conducted to gauge how students experience college readiness and the development of college aspirations and to determine the factors or influences that impact this development.

Data Analysis

QSR N Vivo 10 for Windows was utilized to conduct the data analysis for this study. N Vivo 10 is software designed to support qualitative research. The utilization of N Vivo allows for data management to include "narrative data by coding, indexing passages of text, labeling categories of text, and retrieving the labeled passages across all cases" (Butcher & Buckwater, 2002). To begin to employ N Vivo 10 and initialize text analysis for this particular study, I looked to my research questions. I choose multiple overarching nodes (coding categories) to shape a thematic analysis. A node is a container that allows the researcher to categorize data. Data extracted for this research is found within the interview transcriptions. There were approximately 75 pages of interview transcriptions created for this research from which I could draw out sections of data for analysis.

For the purposes of this study, coding queries were utilized to organize data by themes. In order to do this a node hierarchy was created by using parent nodes and child nodes. Parent nodes are seen as containers that identify the emergence of themes from which data will be analyzed while child nodes are sub-nodes housing the text that relates to each emerging theme. The utilization of these nodes allows for the exploration of patterns and connections between themes. Nodes are expected to be reordered and refined within a data set until the researcher has identified specific themes and thematic statements to be used within a study.

Example:

Parent node -   College readiness

Child node - "awareness of academic preparation," "a feeling of preparation for transition"

For this study, the thematic analysis began with the initial parent nodes (themes) being drawn from and guide by the researcher's literature review. This allowed the researcher to

establish a starting point from which to develop the additional "sub-containers" where all of the child nodes could be deposited.

To begin, 12 parent nodes (overarching themes) were identified. The subsequent rereading of all the interviews resulted in an additional 80 child nodes added categorically to each parent node for a total of 92 nodes to be analyzed further. This was accomplished by reading all of the interview transcriptions line by line in its entirety. The child nodes are reflective of direct statements from all of the study's participants. These statements were reread and synthesized multiple times to arrive closer to the development of the essential themes and thematic statements. Further synthesis resulted in final identification of essential themes and corresponding thematic statements. The three themes that emerged from the data are *constructing college knowledge through high school experiences, building social capital through networks, and preparing for the transition to college.* Table 7 identifies the essential themes, thematic statements, and the numbers of references each participant referred to these statements as direct expressions from the interviews.

Table 7

Summary of references and cases presented in the Essential Themes and Thematic Statements

Essential Themes	Thematic Statement	Number of References	Percentage of Cases
Constructing college knowledge through high school experiences		119	100
	Developing meaning of college & career readiness	47	100
	Building a foundation for success through academic rigor	23	100
	Engaging in pre-college outreach programming	49	100
Building social capital through networks and support systems		82	100
	Learning from past experiences of others	30	100
	Cultivating opportunities for educational aspirations	9	80
	Valuing school based college guidance and counseling systems	43	100
Preparing for the transition into college		74	100
	Juggling multiple decisions regarding college choice	43	100
	Discovery of the self and becoming independent	22	80
	Visualizing future career aspirations	9	100
Total		275	

Ethical Considerations

Prior to conducting any research, permission to conduct research was requested and approved from the participating school district. Permission from the university was requested and granted shortly after the school districts action. A copy of the school districts letter of approved is found in the appendix. All school district and university rules and regulations were complied with as indicated by both institutional review boards. Since the participants were high school students and likely to be under the age of 18, an informed consent was obtained from both the parent and the participating students. Each of these forms is also found in the appendix section. As participants participated in this study, interviews were conducted in on the high school campus within the GO CENTER to ensure that participants were comfortable in their own element. In addition, if at any time, a participant felt uncomfortable the participant could cease to participate at any time and their information would not be further utilized. Interviews were conducted over a two month period and students visited twice. Students were assigned a pseudo name and reported in the study as such. Each participant was audio recorded. Permission to record and house this data is also included in the consent forms and is also found in the Appendix.

Summary

Chapter 3 discusses the research methodology used in this study. In particular, it defines a qualitative method known as phenomenology. This method is used to present and delve into the "lived experiences" of high school students as they navigate college readiness. In addition, it introduces the theoretical frameworks applied in the analysis and interpretation section, as well as describes the setting, the participants, and data collection of the study. Every precaution was taken when exercising the required ethical considerations in the data collection of this study.

CHAPTER 4

DATA INTERPRETATION

Introduction

Chapter 4 discusses the interpretation of the data in this study. Three essential themes emerged from the data. They are 1) constructing college knowledge through high school experiences, 2) building social capital through networks, and 3) preparing for the transition to college. Each theme contains three thematic statements supporting the overall presentation and interpretation of the data.

Constructing College Knowledge through High School Experiences

High school students have much to process when it comes to reflecting on the prospect of life after graduation. When these reflections include going to college the process becomes more daunting. As stated by Conley (2005), "College preparation is knowledge-intensive and much of that knowledge is not readily available in one place" (p. 24). Students are faced with having to address the various elements that exist within the notion of being college ready.

The current body of empirical research on college readiness is broad and largely defined by four key aspects: students' academic skills, teacher preparation, curriculum rigor, and administrative support systems (Gullatt & Jan, 2003; Perna & Swail, 2001; Roderick et al., 2009). Each of these aspects are components of college readiness that aid in preparing students with the information and experiences needed to positively influence students' aspirations for post-secondary educational attainment. Of these components, a piece is missing to further understand a more holistic definition of college readiness, and it rests in the following question - how does a high school student define college readiness?

There are three thematic statements that compose the theme of "constructing college knowledge". They are 1) developing meaning of college & career readiness, 2) building a foundation for success through academic rigor and 3) engaging in pre-college outreach programming.

Developing Meaning of College and Career Readiness

Conley (2007) asserts that the definition of college readiness must also look into how high school students deal with the multiple elements of college readiness. He further states that for a high school student, navigating the multifaceted elements of college readiness is "more complex" because the college readiness process includes factors within their high school's control and those factors that are not (p. 28). For this reason, it is particularly important that "students understand what it means to be college ready" and further "understand what they must do well as to what the system requires or expects of them" in order to successfully transition from high school to college (p. 28).

For each of this study's participants, the initial idea of being "college ready" was synonymous *with being prepared*. It meant being "mentally prepared," "feeling confident and prepared," taking classes to be "prepared," and "preparing to take care of yourself" for a new experience. Meaning, for them was limited to the knowledge they had formulated through learning and experiences they had receive and paid attention to throughout high school. Their thoughts of college readiness are not broad. This is consistent with Conley's (2007) position of students needing to understand the full meaning of college readiness.

"I think it means that you feel completely confident and prepared, and the decision that you are making is right….." [PI1, L4, pg3].

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As the literature shows, the definition of college readiness is multidimensional, this was a concept that none of the participants could fully elaborate on beyond the notion of being prepared mentally to transition from high school into college. Conley (2007) further posits that there are "several key elements of college success" – cognitive capabilities, academic (content) knowledge, attitude and behavioral attitudes, and contextual (college) knowledge (p. 5).

"To me college ready means like having the mentality of okay, I'm going to college now. Everyone says it's a lot more work, your reading and studying constantly, and I guess what college ready is. You have to mentally prepare yourself for what is going to happen [PI3, L29, pg3].

Although some participants were more focused on mental preparedness, others discussed "being college ready" from a procedural standpoint by identifying direct action steps.

To me, college ready means knowing what college you're going to attend, knowing what you're going for, having your financial aid and all your scholarships ready, and just knowing what you're going to do. What your college objective is going to be, stuff like that [PI5, L28, pg2].

Baxter-Magolda's (1999) epistemological reflection model refers to this cognitive development stage as contextual knowing – a student will formulate opinions and/or ideas without considering context of issue. It is not these students were incapable of considering the holistic idea of college readiness; it is that they were focused on only part of the process that was relevant to them in that precise moment. Allie shares an example of her experience with an Advance Placement (AP) course and the realization of preparing for college:

"Sophomore year, I took AP World History and at that point when I......that is actually one of the main points when I realized I needed to get prepared for college because I had no idea what was going on or what anything meant, and that class I barely passed it." [PI1, L5, pg7].

According to Roderick et al., (2009), college readiness by high school students is shaped by information, resources, and skills that high school students have gathered to navigate the college application process. Colleges and universities assess students on the "sum total performance in high school; therefore, it is critical that student begin their journey towards college readiness when arriving in high school" (Conley, 2007 p. 24).

"I actually didn't do any [college preparation] until this year" The first time that I actually realized that I needed to do this is in the summer [junior year], I went on my first GEAR UP trip". [PI1, L34, pg3].

The limitations to their understanding of being college ready might have been impacted by the timing of the development of college knowledge. Each participant indicated that they did not fully begin to navigate the college-going processes until late in the upperclassmen years in high school.

"Well, I didn't actually start preparing for college until the end of my junior year. It's actually when I had my first college experience" [P3, L7, pg3].

For all participants in this study, their exposure to school resources and experiences drove partial development of their college knowledge and how they derived meaning. They had each navigated the high school experience, yet only recently begin being exposed to college and career opportunities, and receiving key information to encourage post-secondary endeavors. More importantly, their meaning of being college ready lacked a more holistic and comprehensive understanding of college readiness. These participants did not benefit from a

comprehensive plan that ties academics, experiences, and networks to their overall understanding

of college readiness and being college ready.

Building a Foundation for Success through Academic Rigor

Participating in high school courses that provide academic rigor is a key element in the

college readiness process. The exposure to challenging work in secondary school may account

for fostering the likelihood for academic success in college courses. Adelman (1999) recounts

"the academic intensity of a student's high school curriculum still counts more than anything else

in pre-collegiate history in providing momentum to post-secondary education degree attainment"

(p.3).

Conley (2007) places emphasis on how the "development of culture focused on

intellectual growth will provide high school students with a more complete readiness" in

preparation for college (pg. 25). Specifically, students should be: 1) "interacting with

academically challenging content; 2) receiving cognitive strategies over a sequentially

challenging progression; and 3) receiving exposure to academic programs to cause students to

demonstrate more responsibility and control for their learning" (p. 25).

Allie recounted when she realized the value of advanced academic and her need to

further build on good study habits:

In my junior year I took AP U.S. History and I scored higher on my AP test but I didn't get

the credit, but it was then that I was really starting to realize that I needed to get ready for

college and prepare for it [PI1, L5, pg7].

Will felt that Dual Credit helped him gain insight into what a college course would be like.

Well, I do take a dual credit class and it is obviously a college driven class, and that has

shown me how a college course is, it might not be the exact same as an actual college class at

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a university, but has shown me the fast paced papers, the assignments, the test dates that it has. It has shown me that college is going to be fast paced, fast learning that I will have to adapt to [PI2, L5, pg7].

Each of the participants in this study had varied academic experiences and exposure to support programming over the course of their high school years. Some participants pursued Advance Placement courses while others elected Dual Credit courses. In any event, they all understood that these advanced academic options served a valuable purpose saving time and money through earned early college credit; if a student was successful in the class and/or passed the required exams. This is consistent with Roderick (2006) that "it is essential to link what students are doing in the present with their future plans and aspirations so they can understand the importance of their high school academic achievement" (as cited in Reid, et al.,2008). In general, all except Hunter had participated in some form of academic and/or athletic extracurricular activity over the years. Chris, Will and Jessica had been athletes, while Allie participated in Student Council. Hunter, on the hand, was a self-proclaimed bookworm.

They each recounted that they were all average to good students pursuing academically challenging courses when they could; and committing to the increased demands of their school work as best as possible while juggling other needs. They further recounted that rigorous curriculums and a strong academic (teacher) support network helped them prepare for college (Martinez & Klopott, 2005).

Engaging in Pre-College Outreach Programming

College readiness programs are poised *to motivate and prepare students* for college access opportunities through a variety of services from college based informational sessions, specialized college campus tours, and individualized academic advising sessions (Gandara, 2001;

Swail & Perna, 2002). These initiatives aid student's in navigating through all aspects of the college application process and provide academic support (while in high school) for success in post-secondary education. An example is shared by Allie as she describes her experience with GEAR UP:

> I just think they're people that help you go to college and get ready for college, and they're the ones in a different sense help you and motivate you, and make you feel like you're able to go to college. I think it was probably sophomore, junior years, around then. When I started getting more serious about school and started realizing, what exactly they were doing [PI, L29, pg5].

Moreover, these programs can foster "high school students' academic and social trajectories that are shaped by their curricular and extracurricular experiences" (Sutton et al., 2012, p. 65). "To prepare urban students for successful transition to post-secondary education, it is essential that school districts include college exploration and planning programs throughout middle and high school" (Noeth & Wimberly, 2002, as cited in Reid & Moore, 2008, p. 242).

A focal point of the Class of 2014's college readiness experience was participating in the GEAR UP Program. The GEAR UP Program provided grant funded services such as Academic Tutoring and Enrichment, Specialized Student and Parent Services, and Teacher Professional exclusively for the SHS Class of 2014.

As a compliance requirement designated by the United States Department of Education, the following criteria are key measurements expected of each GEAR UP Program (as defined by federal performance reports) for the purposes of ensuring post-secondary success: a) furthering the mission of pre-college outreach; b) improving academic performance; c) improving educational expectations; d) improving college awareness; and e) improving high school

graduation rates & college going rates (USDOE, 2013). For each of this study's participants, their GEAR UP experience was a focal point of their college knowledge learning process.

As defined in his theory of experiential learning, Kolb identified learning as "a process whereby knowledge is created by the transformation of an experience" (Kolb, 1984, p. 38). His theory on experiential learning took a "holistic and integrative" approach towards learning. Learning was constructed by a combination of "experience, perception, cognition, and behavior" (1984, p. 21).

Allie reflects on her direct participation with GEAR UP fondly as she recounts the two out of town university campus tours she attended – the first in her junior year and the second in her senior year.

The first time that I actually realized that I needed to do this is in the summer, I went on my first GEAR UP trip. I've always wanted to go to UT and it has always been the dream of my life and was so excited that I was going to go there. Then, we went and it was huge, and it was scary, and they told you everything that you needed to have to get into college and that's when I was like, really, really, I can't do this. Then we went to St. Edwards and I fell in love with the campus, and everything there, and that's where I wanted to be [PI1, L35, pg3].

These experiences transformed the way each participant viewed their college preparation process. Their ideas of the college readiness process were subject to being "formed" and "reformed" by each experience (Kolb, 1984, p. 26).

Will reflected on his college experiences by discussing test preparation and national college campus tours.

I took an SAT prep class, sponsored by, I don't know if it's sponsored, but it's tied in with the Princeton Review and a lot of that helped me prepare for the SAT…. It helped me

pinpoint my weaknesses that I can grow on and help make better….like I said the trips that

I've gone to have been a vital thing that has helped me prepare for college. It helped me

realize that college is coming up soon and I need to get on it, and start preparing for that [PI3,

L24, pg6].

Hunter's experiences with GEAR UP were a bit more varied than those of his peers.

He could recount more activities than the others. He remembered tutor support, local field trips,

and class room activities more accurately. When he thinks of GEAR UP, he recalls a program

that "helps you get some of the necessary tools needed to get you ready for college". He refers to

this

resource as the "pre-plan" and now that he has come to the transitioning point from high school

graduation to first time in college, it's up to him to carry out the "actual plan". He accounts for

the programming that began in the 7th grade and notes that "you know, GEAR UP gave me some

things that I probably wouldn't have gotten if I had never participated in this program". Each of

the participants exposure to this program served as a learning experience that was not a "single

specialized realm of human functioning such as cognition or perception; it was more of an

integrating function that involved thinking, feeling, perceiving and behaving within their social

and physical environment" (Kolb, 1984, p. 31).

Their learning experiences provided them with 1) the feeling of confidence that they each

could pursue a post-secondary educational attainment; 2) the information needed to make

informed decisions about college opportunities; and 3) the opportunities to interact in a college-

going culture. Overall, they each concurred that had it not been for their exposure to the

program, their college preparation process might have not been as easy. Each of them associated

GEAR UP with "going to college"; specifically, their immediate thoughts of GEAR UP

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surrounded activities such as, classroom presentations, field trips, local and national college tours, academic tutoring, and college advising efforts (Adelman, 1999, Cabrera & La Nasa, 2001; Gandara, 2002; Gandara & Bial, 2001; Gullatt & Jan, 2003; Kirst, 2006; Kirst & Venezia, 2004; Perna & Swail, 2001; Tierney & Hagedorn, 2002).

Piaget (1967) articulated that knowledge is internalized by learners through processes of assimilation and accommodation. Assimilation is the ability of a person to incorporate a new experience into an already existing framework. Accommodation is the reframing of a mental representation of the external world to fit new experiences. Because of their general individual preparation for college, these students had the fundamental knowledge base to construct their meaning of "being college ready". This construction of information is reflective of Piaget's theory of knowledge (constructivism), which proposes that people find knowledge and meaning from interactions between their experiences and ideas.

For each participant the process of assimilation occurred when they became more involved with the pre-college outreach efforts overtime within in their high school. For example: taking the rigorous courses, talking to college advisors, and participating in college awareness activities throughout their high school years. These resources began promoting the development of their college knowledge and fostered what would be part of their definition of being college ready. The process of accommodation as it relates to college readiness started to develop when each of these students began receiving direct exposure to a college culture or college-going activities outside of their high school campus (a view of external world).   In particular, local, state, and national exposures to college life served to be an eye-opening experience that led to processing information based on the exposure to an actual college campus/setting.

Building Social Capital through Networks

Educational research has shown that two of the most important sources of social capital for high school students are family and peers. In the context of going to college, parental engagement in their son/daughter's education has shown to have a significant influence on the post-secondary education process (Cabrera & La Nasa, 2001). "Social capital is often used to explain educational outcomes because it provides a framework that takes into account not only the resources explicitly held by the individual but those available to him/her via social relationships" (Coleman, 1998 as cited in Wohn, 2013, p. 426).

Access to social capital can also be attributed to institutional agents, these individuals can be considered "high status, non-kin, agents who hold key position of authority in a system and are well positioned to provide social and institutional support" (Stanton-Salazar, 2011, p. 2). Each participant's accrual of social capital by way of their college readiness experiences (in conjunction with their parent and counselor relationships) speaks to further fostering each participant's future aspirations.

There are three thematic statements that compose the theme of "building social capital". They are 1) learning from past experiences of others, 2) cultivating opportunities for educational aspirations, and 3) valuing school based college guidance and counseling systems.

Learning from past experiences of others

Moon (2004) argues that experiential learning is most effective when it involves: 1) a "reflective learning phase" 2) a phase of learning resulting from the actions inherent to experiential learning, and 3) "a further phase of learning from feedback" (p. 126) . Learning from past experiences of others allows for important reflections in our lives. This is particularly true if the experiences come from people that are closest to us. Allie tells the story of how life was

difficult for her older siblings as they finished high school. Her story accounts for a sister's teen pregnancy and a brother as a college drop out.

> My sister and my brother are prime examples of what I should not do, which is pushing me to do better than that; because I'm not going to for a semester and leave. But actions (their actions) are showing what I need to do [PI1, L1, pg4].

This is consistent with Moon's (2004) position on experiential learning regarding a phase of learning resulting from actions inherent to the experience of learning by example. This process of learning can result in attitudinal and/or emotional changes for the individual and can provide direction for the "making of judgments as a guide to choice and action" (Hutton, 1980, p. 51).

Jessica, although finding it difficult to discuss her parent's background, shares a more emotional story.

> My parents didn't go to college, well they did for a little bit and they didn't get to do what you want to do for the rest of your life - to enjoy your good times.....because they didn't go to college. So, they really, really want me to go to college [PI5, L14, pg4].

Allie and Jessica reflected upon learning from previous experiences from home and within their immediate families. The examples provided describe not only a past learning experience, but also how the experience of others is an influence on one's own learning (Gino et al., 2010). These experiences can be viewed as a key predictor to drive future decision making, because dependent on the type of experience, an individual may elect to charter a course for improvement on their own future actions.

Cultivating the Opportunities for Educational Aspirations

In terms of family support systems, all participants postulated that they were at an advantage when it came to parent support and encouragement regarding going to college; even though each of their parent's educational background was quite different.

Allie was raised in a single parent home and her mother completed college. Chris benefitted from college educated parents. For Will and Hunter, both had father's that completed college and mothers who did not. Interestingly, both mothers were employed by major employers in the Cambridge area, in key roles without having earned a college degree. Lastly, Jessica was the only one who neither parent obtained a college degree but she emphasized that this point, in particular, made her parents want more for her as she grew up.

Lareau (2003) provides a glimpse into the lives of a dozen families and how class, race, and family life shape each of their individual worlds. Lareau sought to identify how childrearing philosophies in middle class, working class, and poor families shaped the organization of each family's daily routine. The two types of approaches to childrearing identified in her book were *concerted cultivation* and *accomplished natural growth*.

Lareau defines concerted cultivation as "a way in which parents actively foster and assess children's talents, opinions, and skills; as well as, schedule their children's activities; they reason with them; they hover over them in and outside the home and did not hesitate to intervene on their children's behalf; and they made a deliberate and sustained effort to stimulate children's development and to cultivate their cognitive and social skills" (p. 238). Such an example of parental intervention is captured by Will:

As for my parents, they've always been very supportive of where I want to go and they've always said, 'If you want to go to college, we'll make it happen.' My mom and dad, they've always been very strict on how I do in school and how I do to prepare on anything that has to

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do with college, because they know that's my first step to my career. So, that's how they

have helped me [PI2, L11, pg4].

On the other hand, accomplished natural growth was seen as "parents viewing their

children's development as unfolding spontaneously, as long as they were provided necessities

such as food, shelter, clothing, and other basic support" (p. 238).   Allie reflects on her mom's

hands off approach to raising her.

My mom is motivational because I want to be able to do things minus my adversity if I were

to face anything. They are not making me do anything and I know I have to anyway. For

some reason, that's really pushing me [PI1, L10, pg5].

Lareau's (2003) focus on these two philosophies helped develop an understanding as to

how these strategies can both potentially foster a sense of accomplishment for all types of social

classes.   More specifically, middle class children learn to "develop a sense of self, participate in

coveted activities to improve skills, handle critical moments of glory and/or humiliation, learn to

perform (talent) and present themselves in public" (p. 241).

My mom even said "you're not staying here in Cambridge" (pseudonym). You need to leave

and experience." No matter what their experiences in college, they want me to see

something better [PI1, L10, pg8].

In the case of each participant in this study, the parents act as "contact resource agents

whose intimate social ties within the family allow them absorb and transmit broader resources to

their children" (Kim & Schneider, 2005, p. 1185). Research contends that "social capital is

positively associated with high school completion and college enrollment; in particular,

traditional family structure, parents' expectations and encouragement, and parent-teen

interactions are positively related to these two outcomes" (Furstenberg & Hughes, 1995; Yan, 1999, as cited in Dika & Sign, 2002, p. 11).

<u>Valuing School Based Guidance and Counseling Support Systems</u>

An institutional agent can be defined as a person that occupies a high level position within an organization with a "level of authority to manage and access highly regarded resources" and possessing a "high degree of human, cultural, and social capital" (Stanton-Salazar, 2011, p. 11). The GO CENTER counselor at Sanders High School's role as "institutional agent" manifested itself when, "on behalf of another, he acted to directly transmit or negotiate the transmission of, highly valued institutional support" in direct relation to developing college awareness and readiness for all his students (p. 11).

Dominic is the GO CENTER Counselor at Sanders High School. His role is to promote college awareness and readiness for all students at this campus. The overall intent of the program is to serve as a permanent post-secondary education resource for SHS students. "School counselors provide an important form of social capital when student engage in post-secondary counseling, especially when high expectations are set and institutional resources are shared, prompting students to think about and plan for their future" (Farmer-Hinton, 2008; McDonough, 2005, as cited in Savitz-Romer, 2012).

Allie revisits her experiences with the person who she knows has been the strongest advocate for her college going experience at school – Dominic. She shared stories of the times she visited the GO CENTER throughout the year. What was most present in her mind was how Dominic was consistently helping students – "come and sit down while I help her real quick or I'll be right with you". He was constantly on the move ensuring that students in his office or in the GO CENTER had what they needed.

Allie was always reassured by Dominic's presence and she knew that she would get the help she needed. When we start to discuss these last few weeks in high school, Allie reflects on the actual college application and enrollment process. While she confidently states that completing the Apply Texas process was "pretty easy," she yet again, gives credit to Dominic because "he was there, he helped her and she got it".

Chris appreciated his experiences with the one individual he knew was "looking out for him," his GO CENTER counselor - Dominic. Chris knew that Dominic was his greatest resource as he prepared for college. It's clear that Dominic continuously goes the extra mile.

Well Dominic, I mean he's always there for you. He'll answer your questions and then you're on your way, and he'll help you. He's looking out for me. I remember when I turned in one scholarship and he said, "look here's another one." I mean, that helps because it's comforting that there someone looking out for me because I mean, it's not, and you can't go through it alone. When Dominic is there, he's kind of guiding me and helping me along the way [PI3, L10, pg7].

Research shows that the development of supporting connections with adults in a school environment can foster academic success (Adelman, 1999; Martinez & Klopott, 2005; Reid & Moore, 2008). Each of the participants shared that the relationships they had with specific faculty, staff, and administration helped them prepare for college. In particular, Dominic's role as a post-secondary education guidance counselor was the most impactful of all. This is a benefit provided by the Cambridge ISD, as each of their high schools benefit from a GO CENTER counselor with a specific charge to promote college readiness and awareness.

Preparing for the Transition into College

"High school students may have a pretty good understanding of what they need to do to get into college, and of the importance of attending college for career and financial success, but they have an undeveloped and even unrealistic understanding of what it takes to successfully transition, persist and graduate from college" (Hirsch, 2010, p. 1). For the participants in this study, the discussion on preparing for the transition to college centered on college choice and becoming independent; this identified yet another example of a devoid in their comprehensive understanding of college knowledge.

An alignment should exist between student aspirations about post-secondary education and their knowledge about enrollment processes such as admissions requirements, cost of attendance, and placement exams to name a few. "Students whose aspirations align poorly with their college knowledge are likely to be less than well prepared for the challenges presented when transitioning into college" (Antonio & Bersola, 2004 as seen in Kirst & Venezia, 2004, p. 45).

There are three thematic statements that compose the theme of "preparing for the transition". They are 1) juggling multiple decisions regarding college choice, 2) discovery of the self and becoming independent and 3) visualizing future career aspirations.

Juggling Multiple Decisions Regarding College Choice

Graduating high school seniors face many decisions about their future that may lead to various degrees of pressure and stress. Deciding their career aspirations, adjusting to social and cultural behaviors, and contemplating college choice are likely some of the key pressures a graduating senior may face. This is a period of adolescence when emotions are heightened.

"Choosing a college is a complex and often confusing process, requiring that students and parents be knowledgeable of differences in institution types, admission requirements, financial aid, and indicators of institutional quality" (IHEP, 2012, p. 1).

College choice for these participants was also influenced by a campus visit to a local or state university. While campus visits do serve a purpose to receive key information about higher education institutions, it is one of several steps in the college choice process that students should explore. Four of the participants in this study indicated that they explored multiple college opportunities. In some cases the decision was based solely on college admissions acceptance or the desire to stay closer to home.

Last year, I wanted to go to a school in New York, I wanted to go to school in Kentucky. Actually, I did apply to Kentucky but as my senior year approached and it was getting closer, I became more realistic. I started to realize that I wanted to stay in Texas. I want to stay closer to my family then moving away to the upper east of the United States [PI3, l38, pg7].

These are prime examples of how students make decisions based on limited knowledge of college choice criteria. Affordability, college fit, and course of study were briefly addressed by each participant; but not in conjunction with the decision to apply to a particular college. "UT was my main focus but I've gone a little bit off track. I selected a lot of schools around there. [PI1, L13, pg8].

There are a large number of post-secondary institutions affording education opportunities for all students in the United States. Among them, two year and four year, traditional and for-profit, small and large, and/or open admissions institutions - a place for any student interested in pursuing higher education.

According to Mintrop et al., (2004) " a number of factors cause students to aspire to admission to a particular postsecondary institution, including their high school achievement level, family background, and the knowledge they have about the institution" (as seen in Kirst & Venezia, 2004, p. 232). Mintrop further posits that "students' aspirations vary in terms of how realistic they are" (p. 233).

"A pecking order of college reputation and status, coupled with the popularized notions of universal higher education has created 'college fever' where students and their families invest enormous resources in the college admissions process, sending out applications to multiple institutions, some of which are unsuitable given the students' abilities and skills" (Schneider, 2009, p. 11).

Because college information is available in a variety of ways, students and parents must benefit from a guided and standardized way to gain this knowledge. To support informed decisions, the best way to provide this guided approach is to work within the K16 pipeline. "The choices students make regarding college greatly depend on the availability, transparency and quality of information they receive. Students have access to college information in a variety of ways, via their parents, counselors, teachers, peers, college representatives and the Internet" (Cabrera and La Nasa 2000; College Board 2010 as cited in IHEP, 2012 p. 2). These contextual learning experience opportunities occur within the K-16 pipeline.

Discovery of Self and Independence

The transition from high school to college is a period of time when a graduating high school student is in search of freedom and the establishment of their independence (Schneider, 2009). Discovering one self and becoming independent is an element of the transition into adulthood. In the context of college readiness, this is a period of realization for the graduating

senior that he/she must face a new level of responsibility regarding self-sufficiency and independence.

The great degree of social, academic, and financial pressures for a first time in college student calls for support from a parent. In the case of these participants, each demonstrated a 'positive attachment' to their parents; research has shown that for "most adolescents, the notion of asserting their independence is somewhat compromised because youth rely heavily on their parents for support and advice" (p. 9).

Will shares his idea of independence:

> You're ready to start taking care of yourself, living on your own if you do go out of state or other city, living on your own, doing things on your own without always having mom and dad to help you [PI2, L21, pg3].

Hunter felt that social relationships and networking are essential in the transitioning into college.

> You've got to be ready to ask for the help when no one else helps you. You've got to make connections, networking amongst your friends, classmates, or even professors. You even have to like know the system in and out the minute you get there to college [PI4, L9, pg3].

The experiences Will and Hunter share are reflective of the theory of emerging adulthood. Arnett (2007) contends that emerging adulthood occurs between the ages of 18 and 25 years of age, and it is characterized by five distinct features: identity exploration, instability, focus on self, feeling in-between and possibilities. These features were not proposed as "universal but more as common features that occur during this most heterogeneous period of emerging adulthood" (p.2).

Arnett (2007) further posits that during life course, adolescence, emerging adulthood, and adulthood transitions are entered and existed gradually. This is consistent with the other research

that shows the most important markers of reaching adult status are: responsibility of self,

independent decision making, and financial independence; each of these criteria attained

gradually in the course of emerging adulthood (Arnett, 2001, 2003; Facio & Micocci, 2003;

Mayseless & Scharf, 2003; Nelson, Badger & Wu, 2004; as cited in Arnett, 2007).

Visualizing Future Career Aspirations

In a multi-year ethnographic study, Montgomery (2004) studies social and cultural

influences that shaped students' choice of major, career, and life path. Montgomery's findings

are consistent with the discourse from the participants in this study. She discovered that a

students' "discourse of individualism used phrases like 'It's just what I like' or 'It's what

interests me'" (p.786). Similar statements are voiced in this study:

"I wanted to be a veterinarian, but now I want to be a neonatal nurse" [PI1, L18, pg2].

"I've always been interested in the medical field and I've actually been pretty good at

classes having to do with medical content" [PI3, L13, pg2].

"I might go to UTSA for Science or Texas Tech for nursing… I really enjoy helping people

and also a lot of [people in my family] are nurses " [PI5, L9, pg2].

This is problematic because similar to their lack of a comprehensive understand of

college knowledge; each participant reflected on their preconceived notion of what their futures

might hold without considering certain social and cultural conditions and/or consequences of

future employability. These interests are not based on knowledge gained from adequate

resources and preparation regarding career preparation and exploration.

As Montgomery further posits, referring to Giddens (1979) theory of structuration

"social actors are understood as knowledgeably using social structures to their own ends; yet,

their action is shaped by those same structures and can be constrained by 'unanticipated

consequences' and "un-acknowledgeable social conditions'" (p. 786). Career decision-making skills are required of school graduates as they prepare for life beyond high school (Albion, 2000; Patton & Creed, 2001 as cited in Walker, 2006).

For the participant in this study, aspirations compose a self-ascribed future. Their career intentions, however, range from clearly decided to uncertain and ambiguous. While career aspirations clearly exist for these students, there is no indication that they have benefited from career counseling over the course of their time spent in high school. There is no detailed discussion as to whether or not their career aspirations align with real world aspects such as projected employment opportunities, specific course of study, and the time and investment needed to see these aspirations through to fruition.

This is consistent with Feller (2003) observations that "students make career choices based on scant information" (p. 263). He further asserts that students (and parents) fail to investigate whether the time and financial investment in major of choice aligned with the needs of potential employers. The potential for a misalignment between career aspirations and the needs todays workforce is another item that merits attention and has implications in the comprehensive knowledge process of understanding not only college but also career readiness.

Summary

Chapter 4 discussed the interpretation of data for this study. It examined the pre-college lived experiences of five high school seniors as it relates to college readiness. Specifically, this chapter examined the meaning of college readiness to a student, student experiences with pre-college outreach services and the formation of support systems fostering college aspirations. Each of the participants in this study shared many of their experiences as it relates to their interpretation of college readiness. Their stories have provided insight to overarching purpose of this study – to understand what it means to a high school student to be college ready.

CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSION, IMPLICATIONS & RECOMMENDATIONS

Introduction

This study examined the lived experiences of five high school seniors as it relates to college readiness. It provided a glimpse of what it means to a student to be "college ready," how students experience pre-college programming, and how these experiences further fostered their college aspirations. Chapter 5 provides conclusions of the study, implications, and recommendations for further research.

Conclusions of the Study

Each of the participants in this study benefitted from pre-college outreach resources that paved their initial preparation for post-secondary education opportunities. Academic rigor, specialized programming, and college guidance counselors were instrumental in building the foundation for their individual college readiness. Nonetheless, through the lens of these students, it is discovered, that even when resources abound, the knowledge intensive process of understanding all aspects of college readiness remains a complex process.

In summary as it relates to this study, what does it mean to a student to be college ready? The answer as voiced by the students is focused on mental or procedural preparedness to make the actual transition college – 1) having the right mind set to go to college or 2) completing the necessary enrollment steps. The participants in this study lacked a comprehensive understand of the elements of college readiness and how these elements support college awareness and readiness processes.

How do students experience college readiness programs? Each of the participants in this study constructed initial college knowledge, participated in academically rigorous courses and

engaged in pre-college outreach programming. They all benefitted from the direct participation

of the pre-college outreach program known as GEAR UP. Their exposure to this program should

have remained consistent over a six year period; yet all of participants indicated that they did not

become active in GEAR UP until their junior or senior years in high school. This is problematic,

as the intent of these services should gradually introduce aspects of college knowledge over its

length of service to the Sanders High School class of 2014 cohort. This too contributes to the

devoid in the development of the college-going knowledge and information that students are

expected to receive from this programming.

Lastly, how do these experiences further foster college aspirations? Through the accrual

of social and cultural capital provided by the relationships developed primarily between their

parents and the college guidance counselor. It is important to note, that while social capital may

consists of several networks and support systems, the participants in this study were intently

focused on the relationships established between their parents and the GO CENTER counselor.

These relationships afford a foundation from which each participant developed the confidence

and support needed to be successful while in high school and as they transition into college.

Implications for School Administration and Teachers

The overarching idea within this study was to understand what it means to a student to be

college ready. What is discovered is that despite all the resources provided to foster college

awareness; graduating high school students do not have a comprehensive understanding of the

meaning of college readiness. School district and campus level administrators should work

towards a guided, prescriptive, and standardized approach to develop college knowledge. In

order to do this, the first step is to leverage and integrate resources. This is an opportunity for

collaboration when pre-college programs such as AVID, Upward Bound, TRIO, and GEAR UP

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exist to serve within the same campus (Gandara, 2001; Gullatt & Jan, 2003; Swail, 2000; Swail & Perna, 2002; Venezia et al., 2001).

Opportunity for collaboration is not limited to these services, is it also important when providing options for college credit through CLEP, Advancement Placement, Dual Credit, and/or Early College High School programs. Administrators, faculty and staff would do well to dispel the belief that these programs are operating in silos. A system created by the school districts as true seamless K16 pipeline should aim to facilitate the college enrollment process for any prospective first time in college student.

Implications for Parents and Students

When provided with a standardized program that affords comprehensive college knowledge information, parents and students are empowered to make informed decisions. Parents and students must also be willing to fully understand and utilize this information. Parents and students alike are overwhelmed by the wealth of information that is available regarding college accessibility. To build college knowledge in a timely and continuous manner would likely change the way both parents and students approach learning about post-secondary opportunities.

College Readiness Practitioners

Leaders of pre-college outreach initiatives are tasked to provide college awareness and readiness services to thousands of students across the nation. They are poised with providing the resources that intend to inspire and motivate youth to want to pursue a higher education studies. The greatest charge this group has understanding the need to empower today's youth to become tomorrow's educated workforce. More importantly, to know, that as college practitioners they are one of multiple constituents in the support of college readiness and student success. They too

must work to leverage and integrate services to ensure that students receive the most out of pre-college readiness and awareness services afforded to them and their parents.

<u>Recommendations for Future Research</u>

There are several research recommendations that can be made regarding expanding on this research. Some of the more relevant areas of additional research include: studying other populations, key stakeholders, and examining how students choose a particular college and course of study. Specifically, the following questions might be investigated:

1. What college readiness experiences do high students have without the presence of various college readiness programs?

2. How do parents, high school administrators and faculty experience college readiness programs? Are these experiences similar or do they differ from those of their school aged children/students?

3. Historically, this region sees very few high school graduates leave the area to pursue a post-secondary education. What factors attribute to this?   Why does it appear that most students are choosing to stay close to home?

4. How are college and career readiness experiences fostered to improve on student's informed decision making when considering college fit and program of study?

<u>Recommendations for Improving Practice in College Readiness Programming</u>

As higher education administrators, faculty and staff we are all too familiar with how the lack of comprehensive college knowledge impacts high school seniors when they arrive to a college or university door step as a first time college student.   It has been my experience that most students, despite the benefit of pre-college outreach resources struggle to understand the

entire enrollment process. In stages, this process involves the following transitions – apply, admit, and enroll. Each one of these transition points in the process is anticipating a conversion.

When a student expresses an interest in a particular college, it is likely that they will do their research to learn what they can about the institution and its programs.   This study demonstrated that students make choices, numerous choices when it came to exploring colleges; however, a common factor among all of them was time spent in researching and learning about post-secondary opportunities. Each participant took a much more active role in pursuing college information as upperclassmen in high school.

The delay in preparation, I believe, predisposes the students to an overwhelming amount of information that must be processed in a relatively short period of time. If researching college opportunities, begins in the junior year of high school and college applications should be received at the beginning of the senior year –when do students really process all this knowledge and how can learn it all. This leads me to suggest that perhaps a prescriptive programming approach to early college awareness and readiness might be a better solution to absorbing this vast amount of information overtime. Research speaks to the ongoing pre-college programming efforts afforded to many high school students across the nation, often times the focus is on the program efficacy (Gandara & Bial, 2001; Harvey, 2008; Hossler, 2006; McDonough, 2004, Tierney & Hagerdorn, 2002).

The participants in this study not only benefitted from this type of service (pre-college programming) but also had key support systems to encourage a college going culture as demonstrated in their own words. However, what stands out the most is their lack of clarity as to the purpose of the programming early on. Each of these students grappled with pieces of college readiness throughout high school but did not actively become involved in the college choice

process until almost 4 years after the beginning of their pre-college outreach services. Because these services require the collaborative efforts of P-16 pipeline, there must be a great effort to ensure that a continuous balance of information is being disseminated to students early in their high school years or perhaps sooner. Adelman (2006) asserts that communication and outreach between high schools and higher education institutions is essential in facilitating post-secondary education success.

Building an Extended Support Base through High School Faculty and Staff

High school faculty and staff see students with a great deal of consistency throughout high school. In some cases, a student might have a teacher more than once over the 4 year period. Although teachers are often overwhelmed because of the increasing accountability they have, they too can serve as a potentially strong support system**.** Although this study addressed the value of parent involvement and a specific college guidance counselor, a limited amount of information was said by the participants regarding teacher support regarding going to college. There is a great deal of K16 partnerships promoting college access, in particular community colleges and universities alike are finding creating ways to prepare students to transition to college. Often times, these partnerships are formed and maintained at high administrative levels, this is to say, that collaborative efforts exists between higher education administrators and central office and/or campus level school district administrators. Planning for these programs is often filtered to key personnel to take action on any designated pre-college planning efforts. At most, these collaborative efforts when implemented within the secondary schools rest in the hands of high school counselors to carry out.

In many cases, the high school counselor is one of maybe 3 or 4 others serving an average class size of 500 plus. The counselors are still expected to carry out their guidance and

counseling duties and complex other tasks as assigned; an on-going assignment that lasts an entire academic year. Perhaps, another approach might be, as an extended professional development effort, to train teachers on the college enrollment process, develop their college knowledge as it relates to their students today. This information could be tailored into a teacher's curriculum, and with this, promote and build the consistent dissemination of college knowledge to all students. This process does not have to be reinvented, as "College Ed" curriculums exist. This recommendation is shared on the basis that the participants in this study acknowledged that academically their teachers were preparing them to graduate but, only one of them could connect college advice from a single teacher that had graduate from one of our state's flagship institutions. And another felt that her teachers did really encourage going to college. I believe that while educators prepare students to graduate perhaps a collective voice on "going to college" would further encourage students to consider the many post-secondary options available to them.

Sustainability of specialized pre-college programming efforts

Two programming efforts that stand out in this study are the impact of college/university visits and the availability of a school based GO CENTER. It may be of noteworthy cause to continue to explore opportunities for students to visit school systems outside of the local area. These experiences present a pivotal life changing realization for students. Not all high school students' benefit from specialized pre-college programs such as GEAR UP, Upward Bound, TRIO, and AVID; but school systems should proactively take an interest in investing in such opportunities. A college fit can likely be defined when a student is directly exposed to the environment – as reflected in this study. There is little left to the imagination when college campus exploring options are limited to printed literature and on-line resources. Affording these

opportunities can present its difficulties, but much like the federally funded programs that promote these experiences, exploring ways to promote college visits should be made available to students that might not otherwise have an opportunity to make this happen on their own. Although the participants in this study had the resources to venture on these trips by way of federal funding; they each contended that had it not been for these experiences they would have never known the opportunities beyond our city and county lines. This is not to say that studying locally is not an option, it is simply to address the benefit to exploring other options for post-secondary opportunities.

The GO CENTER and its support staff prove to be instrumental in assisting on all aspects of the college enrollment process. It is a tremendous endeavor to serve an entire student body particularly on a high school campus that averages a class size of 400-500 students. The GO CENTER is computer lab and a college information center intended to support student in their college-going research. These centers are typically staffed by one counselor. GO CENTER counselors, much like high school guidance counselors are in a position to be key support systems for student success. It is difficult, for me to understand why a center like this is understaffed. As we discuss the daunting experiences of getting students through the college enrollment process, it becomes clear to me that these offices should be supported in a way equal to that of the traditional high school guidance and counseling center.

"College readiness counseling is a developmental process that engages school aged students in developing post-secondary aspirations and expectations, gaining awareness of one's interests and abilities, and receiving support and information for college access and success" (Savitz-Romer,2012, p.98) and therefore, should not be limited to a single support system.The participants in this study indicated that the GO CENTER counselor was a consistent support

system in their college research process, often times indicating that because of him they were exposed to additional post-secondary opportunities they would have not otherwise explored on their own. These counselors are knowledgeable college admissions professionals that have a key role in the development of college awareness and readiness for secondary school students. In order to expand on the idea of providing a consistent message of being "college ready," promoting more pre-college outreach programs, and building on the social capital for all students to have a chance to explore going to college; an investment should be made to provide additional resources in support of this type of specialized pre-college college programming.

Implementing Policy – Institutional Agents

There is evidence of impact from an institutional agent in the accrual of social and cultural capital for students, as seen in this study. A policy that provides for the placement of a team of institutional agents at each high school in support of college readiness services would further support students in the pursuit of post-secondary readiness. The purpose of the implementation of this team is to affect systemic change to advance the rate of participation in higher education after high school graduation. These institutional agents would continue to support the work that is specific to providing college knowledge to an entire student body.

It is unrealistic to expect one agent to support the dissemination of this knowledge to all students. It is presumed that the concentration of the knowledge dissemination is only at certain grade levels, when in fact; today's higher education opportunities are open to students enrolling in college programs as early as the 8th grade.

Implementation Policy - Information Dissemination on College Access

In support of the continuity of the college awareness message, policy that promotes on-going information dissemination to parents would serve a greater purpose. In order to achieve

this, school personnel should employ a concerted effort to deliver information that is timely, relevant, and actionable as a student approaches milestones throughout middle and high school years. The purpose is to create a culture that motivates and drives the high school student's ambition towards going to college; while simultaneously affording parents the tools that will help their child make informed decisions in support of post-secondary education opportunities.

Implementing Policy - Embedding College Knowledge into a High School Curriculum

To further support the proposed seamless efforts to disseminate college information; the development of policy that promotes the embedding of college knowledge into the high school core curriculum is instrumental. It has been my experience that college knowledge curriculums can be successfully weaved in to high school courses.

As a previous director of a GEAR UP Program, one of the many services we provided was the implementation of a program called College Ed available through the non-profit organization known as The College Board.

The program is a comprehensive curriculum developed by grade level (beginning in middle school) providing appropriate lesson plans to guide students through the college access and enrollment process. With the appropriate training, any teacher could provide these specialized learning activities within their own lesson plans. Although, my experience with College Ed was supported by a federally funded outreach program; the purchase and implementation of the College Ed program could be done by any school system willing to invest the time learning about these opportunities. The monetary investment would be minimal as these resources could be purchased as a class set and are reproducible. The reproduction of these materials would significantly reduce the cost as compared to purchasing single units for every student.

Looking Back and Moving Forward – Concluding Remarks

In 2004 I began my career in higher education, an opportunity that might have never come had it not been for a candid conversation I had with a very kind professor named Dr. Jorge Descamps. While completing my Master's degree, it was the late Dr. Descamps who once said to me "maybe you are not at the right level" referring to my current career in education. I had reached a point where I knew I wanted to help students but confined to a classroom on a daily basis just was not what I was meant to do.

I began my first few years in Enrollment Services at the University of Texas at El Paso recruiting as an admissions counselor and coordinating programs for student assessment and testing this would last about two years. By 2006, an opportunity presented itself to work for El Paso Community College (EPCC) as the project director for the Gaining Early Awareness & Readiness for Undergraduate Program (GEAR UP) grant. The opportunity to provide pre-college outreach services to underprivileged school aged youth would set the stage for my true passion to unfold.

I began to learn more about college readiness, its implications for student success and how important academic rigor, teacher development, and administrative support systems were to this effort. Although these elements of college readiness continue to be important today, I have long wondered why we have failed to be more proactive in obtaining feedback directly from the students we serve. Students have stories to share. In the six years I managed the EPCC GEAR UP Program I experienced first-hand how students directly navigated the college enrollment process. For some, the chance to visit an out of town college campus changed their lives. For others, the consistent support of an experienced college counselor was great motivation. In the end, the greatest success story were those students that broke down all barriers to reach their

college dream – the homeless young lady that maintained good grades, scored well on college admissions exams and was accepted on full scholarship to UT Austin is one of my favorite stories.

These stories often go unheard because we are not currently actively seeking them out. Allie, Chris, Will, Hunter and Jessica were recipients of solid resources in their secondary environment as described in this study. Their experiences and support systems provided a wealth of resources to put them in a college going culture and develop their college aspirations. This did not guarantee that they would fully comprehend the "knowledge-intensive" process that is preparing to go to college. This study supports, as voiced by students, that there is still much work to do when it comes to helping students have a comprehensive definition of what is to be college ready.

As I conclude my dissertation journey, I transition yet again into a new role as Interim Executive Director of Outreach and Transition Services. This position will allow me to continue to support all aspects of student success through college readiness programs and partnerships. I look forward to continue to expand on my knowledge of student experiences in college readiness to continuously improve on the services we provide our college going students.

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APPENDICES

APPENDIX A

Informed Consent Letters

University of Texas at El Paso (UTEP) Institutional Review Board

Informed Consent Form for Research Involving Human Subjects

Protocol Title: Student Experiences with College Readiness Programs: A Phenomenological Study

Principal Investigator: Marisa E. Pierce

UTEP: Department of Educational Leadership and Foundations

In this consent form, "you" always means the study subject. If you are a legally authorized representative(s) (such as a parent or guardian), please remember that "you" refers to the study subject.

1. Introduction

You are being asked to take part voluntarily in the research project described below. Please take your time making a decision and feel free to discuss it with your friends and family. Before agreeing to take part in this research study, it is important that you read the consent form that describes the study. Please ask the study researcher or the study staff to explain any words or information that you do not clearly understand.

2. Why is this study being done?

You have been asked to take part in a research study of *high school student experiences participating in the GEAR UP Program*

Approximately, *(5-10) five to ten high school seniors* will be enrolling in this study at Sanders High School within Cambridge ISD.

You are being asked to be in the study because *you are a graduating senior having participated in the GEAR UP Program for at least two years consecutively.*

If you decide to enroll in this study, your involvement will last about *3-5 consecutive days with interviews taking approximately 30 minutes per day at a convenient time for you during the school day.*

3. What is involved in the study?

If you agree to take part in this study, the researcher will be visiting your campus and will be conducting 30 minute interviews per participant. In order to obtain complete student narratives (stories) of the student experiences in GEAR UP - Participants may be interviewed up to 5 times in 30 minute intervals as needed. It is anticipated that interviews may take up to 1 week per participant. The researcher is also considerate of the minor disruptions to student instructional time and will make every effort to avoid this. There will be 5 total participants. Participant interviews will be recorded. The need for recordings is to assist the researcher in the analysis/review of the interviews for the purposes of developing the data analysis chapter of the study. *The audio recordings will be stored in the UTEP Education Leadership and Foundations Office, College of Education, 5th floor, secured and locked office; where only she or her chairperson has access to these recordings*. The recordings will be used to transcribe the student experiences as shared by the participant. Each participant's experience will serve as a separate narrative for their voiced experiences. Their information will serve to determine whether common themes of their GEAR UP experiences emerge. Examples of themes could be that their experiences: 1) motivated students to want to attend college, 2) helped students through the college admissions process, or 3) helped students get exposure to different experiences.   After the project has terminated the recordings will be erased.

4. What are the risks and discomforts of the study?

There are no known risks associated with this research

5. What will happen if I am injured in this study?

The University of Texas at El Paso and its affiliates do not offer to pay for or cover the cost of medical treatment for research related illness or injury. No funds have been set aside to pay or reimburse you in the event of such injury or illness. You will not give up any of your legal rights by signing this consent form. You should report any such injury to **Ms. Marisa Pierce, Principal Investigator at (915)-471-4750** and to the UTEP Institutional Review Board (IRB) at (915-747-8841) or irb.orsp@utep.edu.

6. Are there benefits to taking part in this study?

There will be no direct benefits to you for taking part in this study. ***However, the educational benefit of this research may* help us understand *how students perceive their experiences in pre-college outreach programs like GEAR UP, their feedback might contribute to the overall improvement of future programming efforts.***

7. What other options are there?

You have the option not to take part in this study. There will be no penalties involved if you choose not to take part in this study.

8. Who is paying for this study?

There are no costs associated with this study.

Internal Funding: None

External funding: None

9. What are my costs?

There are no direct costs for participants

10. Will I be paid to participate in this study?

You will not be paid or compensated in any form for taking part in this research study.

11. What if I want to withdraw, or am asked to withdraw from this study?

Taking part in this study is voluntary. You have the right to choose not to take part in this study. If you do not take part in the study, there will be no penalty.

If you choose to take part, you have the right to stop at any time. However, we encourage you to talk to a member of the research group so that they know why you are leaving the study. If there are any new findings during the study that may affect whether you want to continue to take part, you will be told about them.

The researcher may decide to stop your participation without your permission, if he or she thinks that being in the study may cause you harm.

12. Who do I call if I have questions or problems?

You may ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, you may call insert **_Marisa Pierce at 915-471-4750, or marisa.e.pierce@gmail.com._**

If you have questions or concerns about your participation as a research subject, please contact the UTEP Institutional Review Board (IRB) at (915-747-8841) or irb.orsp@utep.edu.

13. What about confidentiality?

Your part in this study is confidential. None of the information will identify you by name. All records will be kept in *the UTEP Educational Leadership and Foundations Office, College of Education, 5th floor in a secured office, locked file cabinet*. To preserve anonymity, pseudo-names with be used for all participants and the setting. Selected participants will be asked to choose a pseudo-name that they prefer to use or the researcher may assign one as needed or requested.

14. Mandatory reporting

If information is revealed about child abuse or neglect, or potentially dangerous future behavior to others, the law requires that this information be reported to the proper authorities.

15. Authorization Statement

I have read each page of this paper about the study (or it was read to me). I know that being in this study is voluntary and I choose to be in this study. I know I can stop being in this study without penalty. I will get a copy of this consent form now and can get information on results of the study later if I wish.

Participant Name: _____Date: _____

Participant Signature:_____ Time: _____

Participant or Parent/Guardian Signature: _____

Consent form explained/witnessed by: _____

Signature:_____

Printed name: _____

Date: _____ Time: _____

University of Texas at El Paso (UTEP) Institutional Review Board

Assent Form for Research Involving Human Subjects

Protocol Title: *Student Experiences with College Readiness Programs: A Phenomenological Study*

Principal Investigator: Marisa E. Pierce

UTEP: Department of Educational Leadership and Foundations

I am being asked to decide if I want to be in this research study because **I am**

a graduating high school senior having participated in the GEAR UP Program at SHS for at least two years consecutively.

I know that to be in this study I will:

- Discuss my experiences participating in the GEAR UP program
- Participate in an audio recorded interview between researcher and student
- Visiting with researcher in the GO CENTER at SHS for a 5 day consecutive period in 30 minute time increments
- Participating in research interviews that will be conducted before, during, or after school at a suitable time so as to not interfere with school priorities and/or extra-curricular priorities
- Not be receiving compensation for my participation
- Participate on a voluntary basis
- Be asked to provide a pseudo-name for anonymity, or one will be provided for me – this will protect my privacy and ensure confidentiality of my information

I asked and got answers to my questions. I know that I can ask questions about this study at any time.

I know that I can stop being in the study at any time without anyone being mad at me. I will not get in trouble if I stop being in the study.

I know that only the people who work on this research study will know my name.

I want to be in the study at this time. I can ask about what happened in the study.

Child's Printed Name: _____

Child's Signature: _____ Date: _____

Witness or Mediator: _____ Date: _____

I have explained the research at a level that is understandable by the child and believe that the child understands what is expected during this study.

Signature of Person Obtaining Assent: _____

Date: _____

APPENDIX B

Student Interview Questions

INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

General High School Experiences & Preparing for College

1.   Tell me about yourself & your personal experiences – i.e.; general hobbies, likes/dislikes, parents, siblings, home, school
2.   Describe your future educational objectives and career plans
3.   When I say the words "college ready", describe in detail what these words mean to you?
4.   Describe what you have been doing to prepare yourself for college
5.   Describe how the following groups might have helped you prepare for college:

Peers/Friends

Parents

Teachers

School

Community

GEAR UP Experiences

6.   When someone mentions GEAR UP, describe in detail what goes through your mind?
7.   Describe your participation in the GEAR UP Program
8.   Describe, the ways that the GEAR UP program has helped you prepare for college
9.   Describe other high school experiences that have helped you prepare for college that we have not already discussed
10.   Describe the educational support you feel you received from the EHS GEAR UP advisor

Getting ready for college

11.   Describe your experience going through the college **selection** process – how did you choose your college?
12.   Tell me why you selected your particular college
13.   Describe your experience navigating the college **application** process
14.   Describe what have been the motivating factor that contribute to your educational success

APPENDIX C

Research Approvals and Protocol

January 27, 2014

Marisa Elva Pierce
3321 Wexford Drive
El Paso, Texas 79925

SENT VIA EMAIL: marisa.e.pierce@gmail.com

Dear Ms. Pierce:

This is to inform you that the Office of Assessment, Research, Evaluation and Accountability (A.R.E.A) has approved the project titled ***Hispanic Student Experiences in College Readiness Programs: A Phenomenological Study***. We have determined that this project conforms to the district's standards regarding informed consent and FERPA regulations. Your IRB number for 2013-2014 is **#593**.

Please make this letter available upon your first communication with school principals and District staff as it provides them assurance that the study meets the district's research policy. District approval does not ensure research participation from the faculty given that research subjects have the right not to participate and withdraw from the research study at any point. If you will require District data, please submit all data requests through the District Research office.

Also, please keep the office appraised of your progress and when the project is complete provide our office with a copy of your final report. The District's name cannot be used when you publish your findings without previous consent in writing.

If you require additional assistance, you may contact […].

Best regards,

District Program Evaluator

Topics to Address in the Research Proposal

Use this template to provide a description of your research proposal. All applications for review should contain the following information, presented in paragraphs prefaced by the number of the item and the underlined descriptive phrase. When not applicable, DO list the heading and then indicate N/A.

Please <u>note</u> that if this study is part of an NIH funded grant proposal, you will need to attach ONE copy of the complete grant proposal, <u>in addition</u> to the information requested below.

I.	**Title – Student Experiences with College Readiness Programs: A Phenomenological Study**

II. Investigators (co-investigators) – Marisa E. Pierce, Principal Investigator

**III.	Hypothesis, Research Questions, or Goals of the Project -**

A. Research Question(s): If the underlying goal of CISD college readiness initiatives is to facilitate pathways for a successful transition into higher education; through various meaningful post-secondary program experiences for CISD students – then it is necessary to ask the following:

   i. How do CISD students experience the GEAR UP program offered within their district?
   ii. What advantages/disadvantages do CISD students perceive as a result of participation in the GEAR UP Program?

**IV.	Background and Significance**:

JUSTIFICATION FOR THE STUDY

Pathways to high school completion and college enrollment begin with: decisions, plans, and actions students make during their secondary school years (Cabrera & LaNasa, 2000). However, the path to higher education for socioeconomically disadvantaged youth, can be considered, at best, tumultuous and at worst, a barrier stricken journey (Terenzini et al. 2001). These issues are particularly reminiscent of our borderland community. There are likely many dynamics to consider when gaging how students experience their own education process. Because their journey often centers on specific academic elements of student preparation, it is noteworthy to consider how a student experiences their individual pathway to college.

My interest in studying the student experience as they prepare for college is academic and practical. As a former GEAR UP director, I was charged with the responsibility of providing a college readiness and awareness program that strived to prepare socio-economically disadvantaged middle and high school students for a post-secondary education. As a scholar, I have been puzzled by the scarcity of research focusing on the issue from the perspective of those who directly experience these programs – the students.

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A review of the literature indicates that much information exists on the impact of college readiness initiatives and the services they offer to low income minority youth (Kirst & Venezia, 2004; Gandara, 2001; Swail & Perna; 2002, Watt et al. 2007), but few offer the direct perspective of the student. In reviewing programming efforts of specific programs such as TRIO, GEAR UP and AVID, I identified that many common strategies exist to support the student through the college application process (Gullatt & Jan, 2003; Gandara & Bial, 2001; Tierney & Hagerdon, 2002; Domina, 2009; Cabrera, 2005, 2006) but few specifically indicated if the student understood this process at all. Moreover, other studies suggest that college readiness initiatives are in need of evaluation to determine if their service components are yielding the expected program outcomes (Gandara, 2002; Tierney & Hagerdon, 2002; Swail & Perna, 2001). While program evaluation is critical to the improvement of program components, research in this specific area, yet again, does not appear to consider the direct perspective of the student.

Attempts to research the topic of college readiness from the lens of the student have yielded few studies on the issue. Primary keyword searches included: high school students experiences, pre-college outreach, college readiness programs, college readiness practices, high school student voices on college readiness, student experiences transitioning from high school to college, access to higher education, and pathways to college. Literature was identified primarily, but not limited to, searches on ERIC, JSTOR, Teachers College Record, SAGE publications, and by conferring with the references of the most commonly cited works in this field. Consequently, seeking a grounded understanding of the meaning and importance of college readiness to a high school student, I focus on the student experience, founded by their understanding of college readiness, through their pathway to college. This focus will afford the opportunity to achieve a deeper understanding of what college readiness means to students; how students experience college readiness; and the impact college readiness initiatives have on their academic lives. I employ a phenomenological approach to "accurately describe and remain true to the facts of this research" (Groenewald, 2004, p.5). I assert this is urgently needed if we are to assess and improve the overall approaches we utilize as educators in the realm of college readiness to better prepare our students to be college-ready when preparing to enroll and succeed in their post-secondary educational endeavors.

V.   Research Method, Design, and Proposed Statistical Analysis:

Provide a brief overview of your research methodology and design and your proposed analysis of the research data.

To learn more about how the student experiences college readiness, I will employ a phenomenological methodology.   Phenomenology is a branch of qualitative research and philosophical inquiry that seeks a thick description of the phenomena in question with an ultimate goal of providing the "essence" of the phenomena to arrive to its meaning (Husserl, 1964; Van Manen, 1990) as seen in Randles (2012). Phenomenology tries to "account for the presence of meanings" in the human consciousness (Fouche, 1993, p. 124) and is the science of pure "phenomena" (Eagleton, 1983, p. 55) allowing for an understanding of the particular phenomena through an individual's own frame of reference as seen in Groenewald (2004). This approach is useful because I am concerned with the "lived experiences" of high school students as they navigate the college readiness system (p. 7).

The phenomenological approach is most appropriate for the development of this research because it allows me to utilize a number of strategies: personal experience, research validity, and merit. My

professional experience in education includes 8 years in the classroom, in both public and private systems, and across middle and high school years. Experience in higher education spans 10 years in the areas of undergraduate recruitment, admissions, and Student Assessment and Testing in both two-year and four-year institutions of higher education. In addition, I managed the delivery of programs and services (across six years) in college readiness development to more than 1,300 rural district students through a regional GEAR UP program. My observations are tempered by these experiences and although the literature indicates there are many services being provided through college readiness initiatives supporting access for high school graduates, we find many students are graduating from high school unable to comprehend and address the complex task of going to college.

I intend to utilize data collection strategies such as individual interviews, focus group interviews, and document collection. To initiate data collection, I will develop appropriate guiding questions or topics for discussion to utilize in the phenomenological research interview (Moustakas, 1994). Individual in-depth interviews will provide the opportunity for a rich description of the students' individual experiences. From this point, student stories will result in the emergence of analytical categories. The narratives obtained from individual's interviews might further identify topics or items of discussion for further exploration through focus groups *if needed*. Focus groups will be beneficial in several ways: 1) determining greater insight as to why an opinion is held, 2) useful in collecting rich data, and 3) drawing a larger number of people in less time. Individual interviews and focus groups will be conducted to gauge the development of college aspirations and to determine the factors or influences that impact this development. The interviews are anticipated to be no longer than 45 minutes in length for groups and 30 minutes for individuals. The overall purpose of these strategies will be to further understand 1) how each student defines "college readiness", and 2) how this knowledge contributes to the development of their college aspirations.

Data analysis will involve the process of open coding, that is categorizing and making sense of meaning (Kleiman, 2004). In order to do this, the descriptive data obtained from in-depth interviews will be transcribed and the transcriptions interpreted to look for similarities and differences between comments drawing on common themes. These themes will then be grouped together. The analysis of the emerging themes will lead to phenomenological reduction (Van Manen, 2011) that is, finding the "concreteness" in order to articulate a structure. The data will then be interpreted to find what is important, why it's important, and what can be learned from it.

VI.   Human Subject Interactions

VII.   Identify the <u>sources of potential participants</u>, derived materials, or data. Describe the characteristics of the subject population such as their anticipated number, age, sex, ethnic background, and state of health. Please describe whether some or all of the participants are likely to be vulnerable to coercion or undue influence, and if so, what additional safeguards are included to protect their rights and welfare. Identify the criteria for inclusion and/or exclusion. Explain the rationale for the use of special classes of participants whose ability to give voluntary informed consent may be in question. Such participants include students in one's class, people currently undergoing treatment for an illness or problem that is the topic of the research study, people who are mentally retarded, people with a mental illness, people who are institutionalized, prisoners, etc. When do you expect human subject involvement in this project to begin and when do you expect it to end?

If the participants are prisoners or residents of correction facilities, the composition of the IRB must be augmented by a prisoner's advocate. Please inform the IRB if this applies to your project.

If some of the potential participants or the parents of child participants are likely to be more fluent in a language other than English, the consent forms should be translated into that language. Both English and the other language versions of the form should be provided, with one language on one side of a page and the other on the other side of the page. This translation may be completed after IRB approval of the study and consent forms. Specify here your intentions with respect to the languages of the consent forms. (If you plan to conduct your study with students from the Austin Independent School District, you will be required to provide a Spanish language version of your parental consent form.)

No participants will be vulnerable to coercion or undue influence – this study is completely voluntary.

My sample will consist of a group of Hispanic students from a single regional urban high school – Sanders High School (SHS) – <pseudo-name for High School>. SHS is located in the eastside of Cambridge, Texas, within the Cambridge Independent School District (CISD) – <pseudo-name for ISD>. CISD is the second largest school district in Cambridge, Texas, serving more than 44,000 students. A socio-economic profile of CISD demonstrates some areas within the district experience higher than average economically disadvantaged populations, with a district average of 76.9%, and campuses ranging from 58.4% to 88.2%.
In addition, English proficiency levels range from 4.6% to 14.3% across the district, with a district average of 9.1%. Another significant characteristic of CISD is the At-Risk population, ranging from a low of 21.2% to high of 60%, with a district average of 36.9%

The district's vision statement promises college readiness among its students; however, district data demonstrates that only 42% of district graduates (Class of 2011) are college ready in both Mathematics and English Language Arts. In addition, the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board (THECB) reports that only 58% of the graduating Class of 2011 is enrolled in an institution of higher education the first fall semester after graduating from high school. These figures are slightly higher at SHS, with 51% of graduating seniors demonstrating college readiness in both Mathematics and English Language Arts and 68.5% of the graduating Class of 2011 enrolled in an institution of higher education the first fall semester after graduating from high school.

Despite the above average performance at SHS, we find the performance of the SHS graduating senior significantly lower when compared to their White counterparts across the state. The SHECB reports that college readiness in both Mathematics and English Language Arts is 65% for White students; fourteen percent higher than the SHS graduating senior. This is significant since 98.5% of SHS students are Hispanic and while SHS is the highest performing high school in Cambridge ISD, the performance gaps, when measured against the performance of White students, provide compelling support to uncover more about the impact of college readiness initiatives among Hispanic students at SHS.

A focus on the gap in performance among ethnic groups is relevant to this study given the demographic make-up of CISD, which is 99.3 % Hispanic. While other demographic and socio-economic factors are equally important in the selection of the setting and participants, the focus of this study is to determine the attitude, perception, experience, and meaning of college readiness at Sanders High School and how these contribute to the high school's higher than average college readiness and performance across the district. Of further scholarly interest may be the discovery of factors that lead to the "success" at SHS. These factors may lead to the application of best practice recommendations across the district.

The selection of SHS is further supported when considering accessibility, ease of locating participants, the presence of college readiness initiatives, and long-term accessibility if necessary. Both GEAR UP and AVID programs are offered within this high school campus.

Criterion sampling will be used because all participants will have experiences in the phenomenon that is, being a member of a college readiness initiative/program (Creswell, 2006). Polkinghome (1989) as seen in Parikh (2012) suggested that 5-25 individuals who have experienced a phenomenon should be interviewed when conducting phenomenological research studies. Therefore, the range of participants selected will be from 5-7 students.   The participants will be identified as graduating high school seniors from the class of 2014 who have been directly served by GEAR UP for a minimum of one academic year. The selection of these students will be at random by working directly with the assigned Sanders High School GEAR UP program advisor and GO CENTER counselor. These two individuals have a direct connection with students that participate in the GEAR UP Program.

A.   Describe the **procedures for the recruitment of the participants**. Append copies of fliers and the content of newspaper or radio advertisements. If potential participants will be screened by an interview (either telephone or face-to-face) provide a script of the screening interview.

The identification of participants will be established with the help of the GEAR UP Program advisor and GO CENTER counselor assigned to SHS. These individuals have a direct connection with students that participate in the GEAR UP Program. The GO CENTER counselor at SHS is largely responsible for ensuring that all graduating seniors navigate the college application process. These relationships will facilitate the recruitment of participants and support the development of a trusting relationship between the researcher, students, and the college readiness counselor. The high school campus chosen for this study currently has two national college readiness initiatives - GEAR UP and AVID. Because AVID and GEAR UP exist on this campus, the sample selection will yield participants that have received college readiness support in some capacity throughout high school. Specifically, a list of all high school seniors will be requested and a selection of participants will be made at random – having met the criteria of being served for two consecutive years by the GEAR UP Program at SHS.

C. Describe the **procedure for obtaining informed consent**.

If you do not plan to obtain active written consent, specifically point this out and explain why not. Include the consent form(s) for review. Children (people under 18) need parental consent to participate in studies. Participants between 7 and 17 should be given an opportunity to assent to their participation. (See Sample Assent Forms for Children).

The procedure to obtain informed consent complies with the requirements as outlined by the UTEP IRB guidelines. Attached please find the Informed Consent form for parents, as well as the Assent Form for minors under the age of 17. It is likely, that the participants will be between the ages of 17 & 18 due to their classification – high school seniors. These forms will be presented to the SHS administration as proof of obtaining the informed consent of participants as applicable. Informed consent letters will be provided to selected participants simultaneously at their campus via GO CENTER counselor. Participants will be asked to return their consent forms between a 24-48 period. The scheduling of interviews will begin as soon as possible-upon receipt of approved consent and assent forms.

D. Research Protocol. What will you ask your participants to do? When and where will they do it? How long will it take them to do it?   Describe the type of research information that you will be gathering from your subjects, i.e., the data that you will collect. *Append copies of all surveys, testing materials, questionnaires, and assessment devices. Append copies of topics and sample questions for non-structured interviews and focus group discussions.*

Participants will be asked to do the following:

Discuss their college readiness and awareness experiences participating in their high school GEAR UP Program – the data that will be collected will be analyze qualitatively

Participate in individual audio recorded interviews

Participate in focus groups as determined by researcher

Visit with researcher in the GO CENTER at SHS for a period of 5 consecutive days in 30 minute time increments (per day) – this time frame gives the researcher 2 total hours of the participant's time over the course of five days (as needed)

Be a part of interview participation that will be conducted before, during, or after school at a suitable time for the student so as to not interfere with school priorities and/or extra-curricular priorities.

Be asked to provide a pseudo-name for anonymity, or one will be provided for them – this will protect my privacy and ensure confidentiality of my information

See Attached – Interview Questions

E. How will you protect the privacy and confidentiality of participants? Privacy can be defined in terms of having control over the extent, timing, and circumstances of sharing oneself (physically, behaviorally, or intellectually) with others. Confidentiality pertains to the treatment of information or data that an individual has disclosed in a relationship of trust with the expectation that it will not be divulged to others in ways that are inconsistent with the understanding of the original disclosure. Note that ensuring privacy of participants is different from confidentiality of data.

Privacy of participants will be protected by way of conducting their interviews on site at their high school campus within the GO CENTER. The use of the GO CENTER will be programmed in such a way to serve the exclusivity of interviews – scheduled at times when only study participants are in GO CENTER main office. The individual interviews will only be subject to the researcher, GO CENTER counselor and corresponding participant.

Confidentiality of data will be protected by ensuring that none of the information identifies the participant by their legal name. To preserve anonymity, pseudo-names with be used for all participants and the setting. Selected participants will be asked to choose a pseudo-name that they prefer to use or the researcher may assign one as needed or requested.

F. Discuss the procedures that will be used to maintain the confidentiality of the research data. Specifically, how will data be stored to ensure that it is secure and remains confidential? How will the

investigator handle that data? If the subject's responses are taped and the tape can be linked to a participant because his or her name is on an audiotape or because the tape is a videotape, precautions must be taken. These safeguards include storing the tape in a secure place (file cabinet in a locked office), limiting access to the tape to the researcher and his or her associates, and destroying the tape, if it is reasonable to do so, after it has been transcribed or the information on it has been coded. Describe the disposition of the tapes in the consent form. If the tapes are to be retained after the study is completed and they have been analyzed, explain the rationale for doing so in the proposal and state that they will be retained in the consent form.

All electronic records will be kept in my dissertation chair's office at the UTEP Educational Leadership & Foundations – COE 5th Floor Office – secured/locked office in his computer. Audio recordings will be locked in the same office as identified above as well where only I or my chairperson will have direct access to these files. Again, to preserve anonymity, pseudo-names with be used for all participants and the setting. The audio tapes will never identify the person's legal name. Coding of audio tapes will only have pseudo-names. At the conclusion of this study the recordings will be erased.

G. Please describe your research resources. Discuss the staff, space, equipment, and time necessary to conduct research and how these needs are met. Please include a description of the proximity of any resources such as emergency facilities, emergency care or medical / psychological care, and any support services. If the study necessitates Environmental Health & Safety (EHS) or Institutional Biosafety Committee (IBC) oversight and approval please describe here.

The research resources needed for this study will require me to work directly with the assigned SHS GEAR UP program advisor and SHS GO CENTER counselor. These two individuals have a direct connection with SHS students that participate in the GEAR UP Program. The GO CENTER counselor, however, has a primary charge largely responsible for ensuring that all graduating seniors navigate the college application process. These relationships are likely to facilitate the recruitment of participants and support the development of a trusting relationship between the researcher, students, GEAR UP advisor and the GO CENTER counselor. The GO CENTER office at SHS will be utilized to conduct the research interviews in 30 time frames per interviewee on a daily basis for approximately 4 weeks. This office will facilitate a table area to conduct individual interviews and set up of small audio recorder. If needed, local emergency services are within a 2 miles radius and support services are available directly within the high school campus.

VIII.   Describe any **potential risks** (physical, psychological, social, legal, or other) and assess their likelihood and seriousness. Describe alternative and potentially less risky methods, if any, that were considered as possible methods and why they were not used. If the research methods impose risks on the subjects, include evidence that may justify their use (such as previous experience with the procedures). Most studies pose some degree of risk, even though the risk may be minimal. For example, one common risk is the loss of the confidentiality of the participants' responses.

One risk that may arise in studies with children or interviews with parents about their children is the risk that you may acquire information about familial child abuse. If you acquire this information, you are required to report it to Child and Family Protective Services, 1-800-252-5400. If your study is likely to result in responses that may suggest child abuse and you do not provide anonymity to the respondents,

you must inform the parents in the consent form (and the child in the assent form) that you are legally required to report this information. Research data can be subpoenaed by a court of law, so questions about illegal activities such as drug use place respondents at risk unless the participants' responses are anonymous. A Certificate of Confidentiality can eliminate the risk of having one's data subpoenaed.

Describe the procedures for protecting against (or minimizing) any potential risks and include an assessment of their effectiveness. For all research involving human subjects research, you should understand what is meant by an "unanticipated problem" in relation to your study. Note that you are required to complete an Unanticipated Problem Form and promptly submit to the IRB office in the event that such an incidence occurs.   In some cases, studies that are greater than minimal risk, involve greater than minimal risk interventions or devices, include vulnerable populations, your sponsor and/or the IRB will require inclusion of a data safety monitoring plan (DSMP). See section 7.4 of the IRB Policy and Procedures Manual for further information.

If the study involves a procedure that introduces a physical risk, specify arrangements for providing medical treatment if it should be needed. If the study involves a procedure that introduces a psychological risk, such as the recall of a traumatic event, specify arrangements for providing psychological treatment if it should be needed. Please state whether or not you will provide payment for physical or psychological harm if it is incurred.

If your study involves deception, describe the procedures for debriefing the participants.

There are no potential risks associated with this study. It proposes to inquire solely about student experiences in the pre-college outreach program known as GEAR UP. However, if information is revealed about child abuse or neglect, or potentially dangerous future behavior to others, in accordance with state law, this information will be reported to the proper authorities.

VIII.   Describe and assess the **potential benefits** to be gained by participants (if any) and the benefits that may accrue to society in general as a result of the planned work. Discuss the risks in relation to the anticipated benefits to the participants and to society.

There will be no direct benefits to participants taking part in this study. However, the educational benefit of this research may help policy makers, educators, and practitioners better understand how students perceive their experiences in pre-college outreach programs like GEAR UP, their feedback might contribute to the overall improvement of future programming efforts. There are no risks in relation to the anticipated educational benefits.

IX.   Indicate the specific **sites or agencies involved in the research project** besides The University of Texas at El Paso. Demonstrate that PI has the resources and facilities necessary to conduct proposed research. These agencies may include school districts, day care centers, nursing homes, etc. Include, as an attachment, approval letters from these institutions or agencies on their letterhead. The letter should grant you permission to use the agency's facilities or resources; it should indicate

knowledge of the study that will be conducted at the site. If these letters are not available at the time of IRB review, approval will be contingent upon their receipt.

The additional specific site related to this research project is Sanders (pseudonym) High School within the Cambridge ISD. CISD's approval to conduct the proposed research has been submitted concurrently with this application.

X. If the project has had or will receive **review by another IRB**, indicate this. Attach a copy of this approval to this application or submit it to the Coordinator of the IRB when you receive it. The UTEP IRB will usually accept the versions of consent forms that have been approved by IRBs affiliated with hospitals or medical schools, or by the site where the research will be conducted.

Other than the research approval indicated above from CISD, no other IRB is needed.

CURRICULUM VITA

Marisa Pierce was born in Alexandria, VA. The eldest daughter of Hilton Pierce and Lucia Calderon, she graduated from Eastwood High School, in El Paso, Texas in the spring of 1989. She earned her Bachelor of Liberal Arts in Speech Communications from The University of Texas at El Paso in 1994. In 2001, she received her Master of Education degree in Reading Education with an Instructional Specialist emphasis also from The University of Texas at El Paso. During the summer of 2006 she began the doctoral program in Educational Leadership and Foundations at The University of Texas of El Paso.

While pursuing her degree, Marisa Pierce has worked in multiple enrollment service capacities for both The University of Texas at El Paso and El Paso Community College. Her role in higher education includes leadership experiences in admissions, recruitment, student assessment, and pre-college outreach services. Currently, Marisa Pierce is the Interim Executive Director for Outreach & Transition Services; a role that encompasses multiple aspects of college readiness for first time in college students.

*For questions regarding this dissertation and all its corresponding references please contact Marisa Pierce at marisa.e.pierce@gmail.com