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### Ready or Not: An Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis of Early College Graduates' First-Year Experiences

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Ready or Not: An Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis of Early College Graduates'  
First-Year Experiences

By  
Jennifer Elizabeth Wilson

A Dissertation Submitted to the  
Gardner-Webb University School of Education  
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements  
for the Degree of Doctor of Education

Gardner-Webb University  
2018

## Approval Page

This dissertation was submitted by Jennifer Elizabeth Wilson under the direction of the persons listed below. It was submitted to the Gardner-Webb University School of Education and approved in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Education at Gardner-Webb University.

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“Human salvation lies in the hands of the creatively maladjusted.” – Martin Luther King, Jr.

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“If you’re someone people count on, particularly in difficult moments, that’s a sign of a life lived honorably.” – Rachel Maddow

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“Let yourself be drawn by the stronger pull of that which you truly love.” - Rumi

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– Emma Stone

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“Yesterday I was clever, so I wanted it to change the world. Today I am wise, so I am changing myself.” – Rumi

Jennifer, love,

“The question isn’t who’s going to let me, it’s who’s going to stop me.” – Ayn Rand

## **Abstract**

Ready or Not: An Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis of Early College Graduates' First-Year Experiences. Wilson, Jennifer Elizabeth, 2018: Dissertation, Gardner-Webb University, College Readiness/First Year Postsecondary/Phenomenology/Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis/Early College High School/First-Generation College Student

Current frameworks of college readiness fail to address the impact of college readiness on the postsecondary educational experiences of traditionally underserved students such as low socioeconomic and first generation. The purpose of this study was to utilize the interpretative phenomenological analysis approach to investigate the first-year postsecondary educational experiences and understandings of the graduates of an early college high school in western North Carolina. The phenomenon studied was the use of early college high school experiences in a first-year college or university setting. The researcher employed the use of individual interviews to explore the transfer of college readiness instruction into participants' first year of postsecondary education experiences. Examination of the scripted qualitative data collected from interviews revealed four major themes of college readiness: exploring identity, academics, student mindset, and networking. The researcher recommendations addressing the uniqueness of the early college graduate involved organizational goal setting to increase early college high school's control over their academic culture. Additionally, a longer-term consideration of each student's educational pathway is recommended (through the end of their first postsecondary year, at least) when making organizational choices that impact student academics. To increase control over the academic culture would be to directly address student mindsets in all aspects of the academic day. For the early college, the themes communicated a need to intentionally address the nontraditional status of students and align their college readiness efforts, classroom instruction, and organizational decision-making with the sociocultural barriers in mind for both students and their families.

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## **Chapter 1: Introduction**

The U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (2018) reported lower unemployment rates and higher weekly earnings for individuals who had earned a bachelor's degree or higher versus those who had earned a high school diploma or partial high school credit. Meanwhile, American College Testing (2017) declared that one third of the nation's tested graduates did not meet college readiness benchmarks in any of the four tested subjects: science, math, reading, and English. While a record number of students are enrolling in colleges each fall, not all are college ready and many do not complete their postsecondary education achieving degree completion. In fact, each year in the United States, millions of students begin college lacking the necessary skills and content knowledge to enroll and successfully complete freshman-level courses (National Center for Education Statistics, 2016).

The National Student Clearinghouse (2016) revealed students' average completion time for a bachelor's degree, should they persist in college, was a little more than five years. Statistics also exhibited significantly lower college readiness, enrollment, and persistence to a four year degree for America's typically underserved students such as low-income and/or minority students (American College Testing, 2017; National Center for Education Statistics, 2016). Equal access to college readiness efforts continues to be a nationwide concern. "The achievement gap remains an elusive and persistent challenge and is further complicated by the fact that nationally little or no progress has been made in helping traditionally underrepresented students achieve college readiness" (Kaniuka & Vickers, 2010, p. 166).

### **Background of the Problem**

Federal TRIO programs such as GEARUP, Upward Bound, and Talent Search work with underserved populations at various levels including elementary, middle, and high school, to

improve access to undergraduate programs (U.S. Department of Education, 2018). The early college high school reform movement, developed in 2002 in the United States with financial support from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, was a high school reform model focused on the college readiness of underserved students. The foundation provided funds to create early college high schools in multiple states throughout the United States. These schools furnished opportunities for traditionally underserved students to earn college credit while gaining experience taking college courses during high school (Jobs for the Future, 2014).

In 2004, North Carolina marshalled the Early College High School Initiative facilitated by the North Carolina New Schools Project with funding from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundations and other sponsors (Education Commission of the States, 2018). These schools paired with community colleges, state colleges and universities, and even private colleges and universities to provide first-generation and low-income students with college readiness programming and access to college courses starting as ninth graders (Education Commission of the States, 2018). The program delivered positive results in high school graduation rates, associate degree completion rates, and college enrollment (Berger, Turk-Bicakci, Garet, Knudson, & Hoshen, 2014).

### **College Readiness**

Various federal education initiatives stimulated a closer look at the state of college readiness in the nation's schools: No Child Left Behind (NCLB), Race to the Top, and the Common Core Standards Initiative (CCSI). NCLB required states to adopt college ready standards in reading and math, while Race to the Top encouraged states to make ambitious college ready plans for all four core subjects, and the CCSI provided the college ready standards for educational institutions to use in their instruction (Zinth, 2012).

Various researchers have reported on the essentials of college readiness listing skills and content they believed most essential to the college-going student: creativity, critical thinking, problem-solving, openness, willingness to address new and difficult content, and the ability to work with a diverse population of peers and faculty members (Barnes, Slate, & Rojas-LeBouef, 2010; Dymnicki, Sambolt, & Kidron, 2013; Zinth, 2012). While these skills were beneficial to all students, a guiding framework was needed to address college readiness at its optimum and consider all the appropriate supports needed for all students, especially underserved students.

**Conley's framework and college readiness.** David Conley, a professor of education at the University of Oregon, former founder of the Educational Policy Improvement Center (EPIC), currently Inflexion, and first-generation college graduate, studied college and career readiness extensively and authored dozens of books, articles, and reports on the subject in recent decades. This research led to the four-part framework he contended would delineate the essentials of college readiness: key content knowledge, key academic skills, key learning skills, and key college knowledge (D. Conley, 2007b). Figure 1 demonstrates the particular components of each of the four recommended facets of the framework.

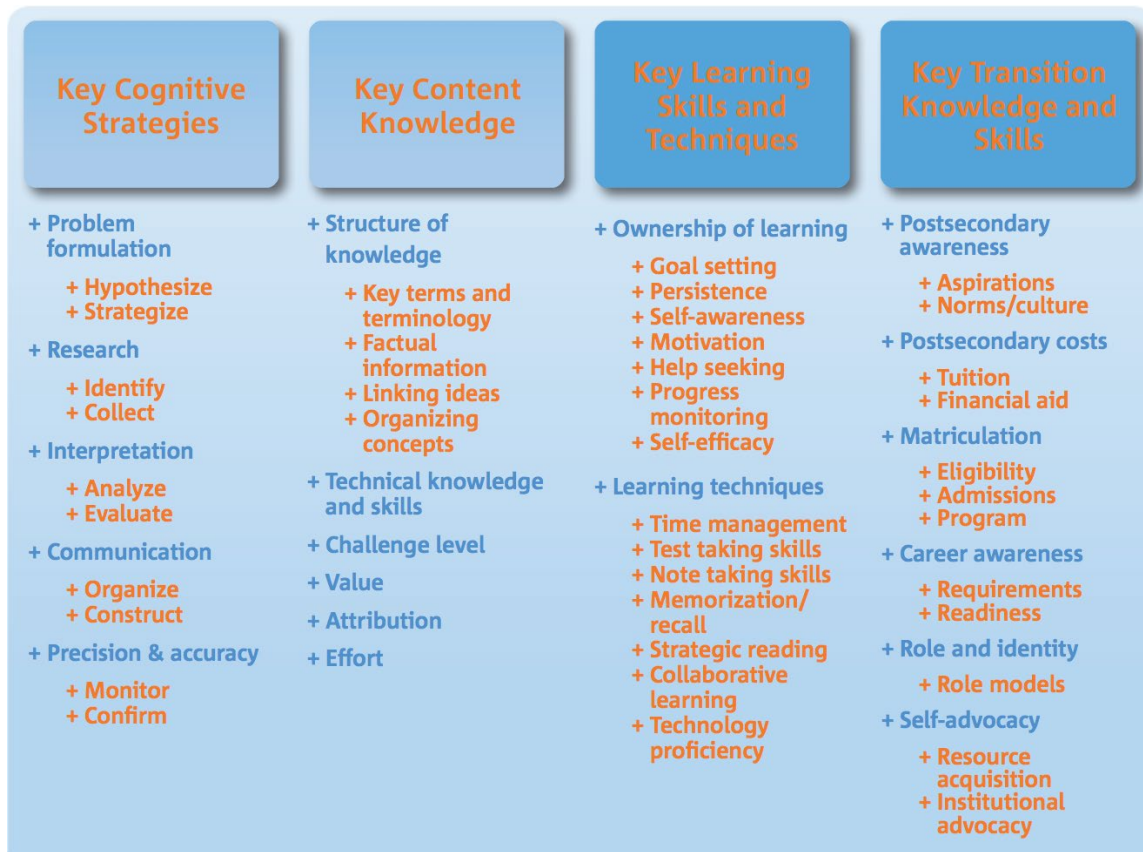


Figure 1. Illustration of Four Facets of College Readiness. From “A Complete Definition of College and Career Readiness”, by D. Conley, 2012, *Educational Policy Improvement Center*, p. 3. Copyright 2012 CCR Consulting Group. Reprinted with permission (Appendix A).

D. Conley’s (2007b) framework, seen in Figure 1, was widely accepted by researchers as the premise for a general definition of college readiness, not specifically for underserved populations (Barnes et al., 2010; Venezia & Jaeger, 2013; Welton & Martinez, 2014). The framework was used as the underpinning for multiple studies regarding college readiness programs nationwide (Barnes et al., 2010; Collins, 2015; Day, 2017; Dymnicki et al., 2013).

An increasingly important issue, however, has been the college readiness of underserved populations, and while many researchers verified D. Conley’s (2007b) framework, some posited the need for more cultural and racial relevance and more focus on the social and emotional aspects of college readiness (Castro, 2013; Strang, 2018; Welton & Martinez, 2014).

The issue of college readiness continues to grow nationwide. States employed considerable efforts to improve college readiness at all levels, yet at public colleges and universities nationwide, over half a million students were enrolling in developmental and remedial courses in the first year of college (Butrymowicz, 2017). Researchers suggested that college readiness, effectively differentiated to be relevant to first-generation, low-SES, and minority students, could improve students' first-year experiences and persistence to degree attainment (Barnes & Slate, 2013; Barnes et al., 2010; Castro, 2013; D. Conley, 2007c; Matteson, 2013).

### **Early College High Schools**

According to D. Conley (2007b), college readiness encompassed content knowledge, learning strategies, skills, and techniques that allowed the student to be successful at a postsecondary university without the need for remedial coursework. These skills and concepts could be embedded into existing curricula or taught in readiness courses or programs in or out of the traditional high school setting. Some programs started engaging students as early as elementary school, while some began in the last two years of high school. Many of these programs offered academic assistance and college information counseling. Research on college access programs indicated they increased high school graduation and college enrollment rates (Harvill, Maynard, Nguyen, Robertson-Kraft, & Tognatta, 2012; Plummer, 2014).

Early college high schools, developed in 2002, were designed to encourage the enrollment of underserved groups such as first-generation, low-income, English language learners, and minority students (Jobs for the Future, 2014). Almost one third of early college graduates completed a two year degree as part of their high school program (Jobs for the Future, 2014). These high schools also delivered college readiness instruction to all students as part of

their high school experience. Early college high schools in North Carolina allowed students to enroll in the ninth grade; however, the targeted population remained aimed at students with low socioeconomic status (SES) and first-generation students (Nealy, 2005).

The site used by the researcher, Rural County Early College (RCEC), included a population of 80% first-generation students. Students completed a four or five year college readiness program designed to deliver instruction on key learning skills and techniques and key contextual skills and awareness during their four or five years at RCEC. The college readiness program was delivered through seminar courses, one per grade level, that met every other day throughout the year during student's tenure at RCEC. Additionally, students graduated with transferable college credits earned in entry level freshman courses before entering a postsecondary college or university.

### **Statement of the Problem**

Early college high school students, in what are categorized as Cooperative Innovative High Schools in North Carolina, had opportunities to receive college readiness instruction in addition to high school and community college dual credit experience. North Carolina early colleges employed Jobs for the Future's (2014) common instructional framework which incorporated aspects of the four facets of D. Conley's (2007b) college readiness framework and a strong emphasis on the three Rs: rigor, relevance, and relationships. The populations of most early colleges in the state were a majority of traditionally underserved students, but the majority percentage varied by school. These students were often enrolled in college readiness seminars that accompanied high school and college-level courses. Graduation rates of early college high schools boasted little to no dropouts; and nationwide, a larger percentage of those early college high school students were enrolling in postsecondary institutions than peers who remained at

traditional high schools (Berger et al., 2014; Nealy, 2005).

College readiness at the high school level, while beneficial especially for early college high school students, took on a new form when the student enrolled in a college or university for the first time. Course content may have been more rigorous than expected or the social experiences failed to mimic those of one's high school causing feelings of confusion, inadequacy, and loneliness. A gap existed between a student's college eligibility and readiness for college. In 2015, fewer than 60% of students nationwide who enrolled in a postsecondary educational institution demonstrated persistence by continuing their enrollment in a second postsecondary year at an educational institution (National Student Clearinghouse, 2016). Students who did not reenroll often had student loans but no degree to obtain the employment needed to repay them. Students experienced significant challenges in the novel higher education environments, and many translated those difficulties as an indication that college was not for them (Nora, Barlow, & Crisp, 2012; Padgett, Johnson, & Pascarella, 2012; Wolniak & Engberg, 2010). Some early college graduates were a part of the 40% of students nationwide who do not reenroll in a second year, despite the opportunities afforded during the high school experience received.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study was to utilize the interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) approach to investigate the first-year postsecondary educational experiences and understandings of the graduates of an early college high school in western North Carolina. Examination of the participants' experiences was used to determine how participants translated their early college high school experience into their lived experiences at college or university during their first year. The phenomenon studied was the use of early college high school

experiences in a first-year college or university setting.

### **Significance of the Study**

Early college high schools were created to immerse underserved students in a college-going environment in preparation to be successful in higher education. Still, nearly 40% of students enrolling in college or university were dropping out nationwide, and some of those students were early college graduates from North Carolina (National Student Clearinghouse, 2016). The National Student Clearinghouse study shed light on the challenges faced by first-year college students who had attended the same early college high school.

Each participant possessed similar college readiness preparation and translated their experiences into different environments with new expectations and unfamiliar norms. Early college high schools have proposed to prepare students for college, career, and life; the types, sizes, locations, and academic expectation of the colleges the graduates attended, however, varied greatly. North Carolina early college principals and community college liaisons could utilize the themes generated to more effectively tailor college readiness instruction in the future.

There was little research that described the college readiness experience from the students' perspective. In many cases, the literature focused on the academic outcomes and the intention to reenroll. It was clear the need for student voice in first-year college experiences was significant. The researcher did not study the effectiveness of the readiness program but the means through which students translated their college readiness programming into their lived experiences in their first and second year enrolled in college or university. Additionally, the study added the college student voice to the conversation about college readiness.

### **Research Question**

This study used the IPA approach to examine and describe the lived experiences of the



participants. The operational word for a phenomenological study is describe. “The aim of the researcher is to describe as accurately as possible the phenomenon, refraining from any pre-given framework, but remaining true to the facts” (Groenewald, 2004, p. 44).

This study sought to answer the following overarching research question: How do students from an early college high school translate their college preparation into their first-year postsecondary college or university lived experiences?

### **Research Site**

The early college where the study participants attended high school, RCEC, recently celebrated its 10-year anniversary. The school’s inception took place in the fall of 2006 with an original class of 30 students and three educators, one of whom served as the principal. In 2018, RCEC had five grades of students: ninth, tenth, eleventh, twelfth-graduating and nongraduating, and thirteenth. Enrollment was 246 students and included 64 ninth graders, 62 tenth graders, 50 eleventh graders, 38 twelfth graders, and 32 thirteenth graders. There were 19 educators at RCEC.

The school was located on a community college campus in rural southeast United States. The faculty and staff used half of the oldest building on campus and one third of a newly renovated building for the early college high school. The students took college classes in all of the buildings on campus. The school offered two programs to complete a high school degree and an associate degree: the four year program and the five year program.

From 2015 to 2018, RCEC increased targeted enrollment per year from 40 students to 65 students, while maintaining their population goal of 80% of first-generation students. The program allowed students to concurrently complete the requirements for a high school diploma, and an associate degree if desired. The associate degree was either a college transfer degree or a

terminal degree in any of the programs available at the community college. Previously, the school was affiliated with North Carolina New Schools. This guiding organization and grant program worked with the state to align the high school and community college curricula and arrange for reciprocity with many state higher education institutions in an attempt to improve educational opportunities for first-generation college students.

RCEC's mission was to prepare students for college, career, and life in a nurturing environment through the use of innovative instructional practices and the infusion of technology. The school employed the common instructional framework which included collaboration, scaffolding, writing to learn, literacy groups, questioning, and classroom talk as well as an emphasis on the three Rs: rigor, relevance and relationships. Students were required to read, write, think critically, and talk aloud with teachers and peers about the material in every class, every day. The students began college classes in their ninth-grade year, taking a health and PE class and communication skills at the college level. The number of college classes taken per semester increased with each grade level, and the type of classes changed into major-specific courses in the eleventh grade when students declared their community college major. Many of the community college courses counted for high school credit, and the school refers to these as dual enrollment courses. The existence of these dual enrollment courses allowed students to participate in concurrent degree programs at different institutions (high school and community college). The students participated in a mandatory, year-long college readiness seminar course during each year of attendance. The course utilized many of the elements of D. Conley's (2007b) college readiness facets. High school degree completion at RCEC contained a community service component, requiring approximately 150 hours of service per student regardless of choice to complete a four or five year program.

## Overview of Methodology

**Phenomenology.** The study utilized a phenomenological research design.

Phenomenological research is considered the “design of inquiry coming from philosophy and psychology in which the researcher describes the lived experiences of individuals about a phenomenon as described by participants” (Creswell, 2014, p. 14). Implementation of this design was used to explore experiences from the first-person viewpoint (Holman, Pascal, Bostan, Hojbota, & Constantin, 2015; Pierce, 2015; J. A. Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). Specifically, the IPA approach was utilized. This qualitative approach was used to examine how people made sense of a major life experience (J. A. Smith et al., 2009). “IPA is phenomenological in that it is concerned with exploring experience in its own terms” (J. A. Smith et al., 2009, p. 1). The IPA was chosen to allow graduates to describe their first-year postsecondary experiences after graduating from RCEC high school.

***Qualitative methods.*** The researcher employed the use of individual interviews to explore the transfer of college readiness instruction into participants’ first year of postsecondary education experiences. “An IPA study typically involves a highly intensive and detailed analysis of the accounts produced by a comparatively small number of participants” (Larkin, Watts, & Clifton, 2006, p. 103). The researcher employed semi-structured interviews with participants, each lasting at least 60-90 minutes. “The researcher in a phenomenological research study should endeavor to conduct and conclude the participants’ interviews within a very reasonable time period ... and allow for any additional follow-up interviews to be conducted, in case of any verifiable confirmations” (Alase, 2017, p. 14). Two semi-structured interviews were conducted to reach saturation in the description of the experience.

## Definition of Terms

**College ready.** The college ready student can “succeed in entry-level, credit bearing college courses” in a program that leads to a baccalaureate degree or career pathway-oriented training program “without the need for remedial or developmental coursework” (D. Conley, 2012, p. 1).

**Early college high schools.** Early colleges “provide underserved students exposure to, and support in, college while they are in high school” (Berger et al., 2014, p. iv).

**First-generation student.** The United States Department of Education operationally defined first-generation students as “students who had parents with no postsecondary education experience” (Redford & Mulvaney Hoyer, 2017, p. 1).

**Persistence.** Persistence is the continued enrollment (or degree completion) at any higher education institution — including one different from the institution of initial enrollment — in the fall semesters of a student’s first and second year (National Student Clearinghouse, 2016).

**Retention.** Retention is continued enrollment (or degree completion) within the same higher education institution in the fall semesters of a student’s first and second year (National Student Clearinghouse, 2016).

**Socioeconomic status.** Socioeconomic status includes “income ... educational attainment, financial security, and subjective perceptions of social status and social class” (American Psychological Association, 2018, "Education and Socioeconomic Status").

## Limitations and Delimitations

**Limitations.** The limitations of the study were found in the research design itself. The focus of the IPA was on a major life event. This transition to college involved more experiences

outside of college readiness, and the structure of the IPA allowed participants to describe their experiences in a way that was comfortable and sometimes deviated from specific college readiness topics to include other experiences that strongly impacted the participants' first year of postsecondary education. The researcher assumed the participants were being truthful in their responses. Also, the size of an IPA is traditionally small and only focuses on a particular event; therefore, the results were focused and not as generalizable as other forms of research.

**Delimitations.** A delimitation of the study was the researcher's choice to limit selection of students to those who completed the full four year term at RCEC. The population was also limited to participants who had completed two semesters or a full year of postsecondary education. That decision limited the number of participants and therefore affected the generalizability of the findings. The interview location was the same for all in-person interviews. Interviews were scheduled at times that suited the participants' schedules. The method of interview was in person or virtual, depending on the availability of the participants. Again, the chosen method might have an unintended effect on the interview responses and might affect overall conclusions. Last, the researcher selected only one early college from which to select participants. Extrapolation of results could be limited based on the school's demographics, community, and more.

## **Organization**

Chapter 1 included an introduction into the phenomenological dissertation and the background of the problem the researcher wished to explore. The research design and methodology were then presented and explained. The significance of the study was discussed, along with the statement of the problem and purpose of the study. The research question was then stated. Definition of terms and organization of the dissertation were also presented.

Chapter 2 includes a thorough literature review supporting the study. National college readiness, components of college readiness, and current aspects of college readiness are presented. Perspectives of parents, teachers, students, and all stakeholders in the college readiness process, are discussed. The populations of early college programs and impact are examined. Early college high schools are explained, and first-year postsecondary education experiences are explored.

Chapter 3 discusses the methodology utilized and the literature to support such designs. The study procedures are detailed and explained. Ethical considerations of the unique style of research are revealed and addressed. Limitations and delimitations of the study are restated.

Chapter 4 presents the data and the results of the IPA through the exploration of themes through the student voice.

Chapter 5 relates the results to D. Conley's (2007b) college readiness framework. The researcher also offers suggestions for early college practice and framework modification; along with suggestions for future research.

## **Chapter 2: Literature Review**

### **Introduction**

Chapter 2 presents the research on college readiness efforts in the United States. The literature review addresses the current measures of college readiness and state of college readiness both nationally and within the state of North Carolina. With early college high schools as the focus of this interpretative phenomenological study, the literature highlights the currently accepted definition of college readiness and the framework developed to address it. The literature highlights stakeholder perspectives on college readiness including students, parents, high school teachers, and college professors. The traditionally underserved populations in college readiness, first-generation, low-SES, and minority students, are presented along with specific needs and supports for these populations. The researcher explored some of the overarching impacts of college readiness or the lack thereof. High school college readiness reforms are reviewed, and the early college high school initiative is introduced and explained in terms of its supports for readiness and specific populations. Last, the researcher examined the first year of college for students by expanding upon supportive educational environments, relationships, employments, and essential habits for success.

### **National College Readiness**

Withdrawal from college early in students' academic pursuits has caused alarm and focused attention on the lack of readiness in preparing for the demands of the unique collegiate environment (André, 2018; Cline, Bissell, Hafner, & Katz, 2007). Even in populations considered more academically prepared, the need for remediation in order to continue with studies is becoming more common (Cline et al., 2007). There have been various attempts in educational reform aimed at preparing students for continuing education through a measurement

of effectiveness of such approaches is still needed in order to continue supporting reforms for meeting the various student populations' needs (Venezia & Jaeger, 2013). The use of similar terminology and metrics of success in college readiness is a step in the right direction to assist reform advocates in clarifying "what is transportable, effectively, across different context and scaling needs" (Venezia & Jaeger, 2013, p. 120).

### **College Readiness**

In 2017, more than two million high school graduates took the ACT college entrance exam. This number represented only 60% of the nation's high school graduates that year (American College Testing, 2017; Gewertz, 2017). The ACT college entrance exam contains four subject area assessments used to determine college readiness (American College Testing, 2017). Students who meet benchmark scores in three of the four assessments are deemed college ready (D. Conley, 2007c). Thirty-nine percent of graduates nationwide who took the ACT met benchmarks in three or four of the subject areas (American College Testing, 2017). The state of North Carolina requires all of its graduates to take the ACT while juniors in high school; and while 100% of North Carolina's 2017 graduating class completed the assessment, only 18% of met three or four of the ACT's college readiness subject area benchmarks (American College Testing, 2017). North Carolina graduates earned an average composite score of 19.1 which fell below the national average score of 21 (American College Testing, 2017; Gewertz, 2017). Many of North Carolina's college eligible graduates joined the other 20 million students who enrolled in postsecondary education in the fall of 2017 regardless of individual college readiness.

Research demonstrated "the overall development of a student toward college readiness is influenced through courses, programming and interactions" (McCormick, 2015, p. 145). Preparing students for postsecondary education must include the use of various learning



strategies and coping skills (D. Conley, 2007c). Many skills students need in order to be prepared for continuing education are developed throughout high school, but a gap still exists in the transition to college; and current college readiness measurements do not address this gap (D. Conley, 2007c). Attempts to address this gap resulted in an increased reliance in college entrance examinations with “meritocratic and stratifying consequences” (Deil-Amen & Tevis, 2009, p. 141). The process of a student’s transition into the postsecondary setting was not well investigated through the use of entrance exams such as the SAT and ACT; therefore, even students who seemed prepared based on these standardized tests were still underprepared upon entrance into college (Deil-Amen & Tevis, 2009; Venezia & Jaeger, 2013), which has become a leading cause for the early withdrawals in postsecondary settings (André, 2018; Cline et al., 2007).

Initiatives in educational reform are developed with the goal of preparing students to continue academic pursuits to degree completion. In order to meet this goal, initiatives such as the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) need to implement standards with “strong scaffolding—connecting curricula and instruction” (Venezia & Jaeger, 2013, p. 120) to support educators in preparing students for college; and currently, national or state standards supporting such scaffolding do not exist.

College readiness was defined by D. Conley (2007c) and reiterated by myriad researchers as the “level of preparation a student needs to enroll and succeed – without remediation – in a credit-bearing general education course at a postsecondary institution that offers a baccalaureate degree or transfer to a baccalaureate program” (p. 5). D. Conley (2007c) described the college ready student as “able to understand what is expected in a college course, can cope with the content knowledge,” and capable of gleaned “key intellectual lessons and course dispositions”

(p. 5). College ready students were also defined as capable of “understanding the culture and structure of postsecondary education and the ways of knowing and intellectual norms of this academic and social environment” (D. Conley, 2007c, p. 6).

### **Conley’s College Readiness Framework**

D. Conley’s (2007c) college readiness framework included four facets: key content knowledge, key cognitive strategies, essential academic behaviors, along with contextual skills and awareness (college knowledge). Students who possessed these skills would, theoretically, be able to understand what is presented in a college course, handle the level of content presented, and glean the content and understandings that were objectives of the course (D. Conley, 2007c).

**Key content knowledge.** D. Conley (2007c) extrapolated content knowledge as including writing and research as well as a collection of academic core courses delineated as English, mathematics, sciences, social studies, world languages, and the arts. It was suggested in several studies that inability to handle the rigor of college courses factored heavily into students’ choice to withdraw after the first year of college (André, 2018). Degree attainment was higher for students who entered college with a stronger background in math and English (Berger et al., 2014). Delivering a high school curriculum that is college ready requires alignment of the course’s content standards with that of college entry-level courses (D. Conley, McGaughy, Kirtner, Van der Valk, & Martinez-Wenzl, 2010). Students reported a lack of academic readiness in the first year of college or university and some cited it as cause for withdrawal (L. R. Young, 2011; R. L. Young, 2014).

**Key cognitive strategies.** The key cognitive strategies purported were openness, inquisitiveness, analysis, reasoning, argumentation and proof, interpretation, precision and accuracy, and problem-solving (D. Conley, 2007c). These strategies, developed over time,

would become habit to allow the college ready student the ability to pursue intellectual activities and meet the demand for critical analysis of text and the development of a written reflection of the nuances of the text (Cline et al., 2007; D. Conley, 2007c).

**Key academic behaviors.** These behaviors were suggested by D. Conley (2007c) as those that generated a greater sense of student “self-awareness, self-monitoring, and self-control of a series of processes and behaviors necessary for academic success” (p. 16). Self-management is a skill essential to the college ready student (D. Conley et al., 2010). While many high schools communicate the need for study skills, note-taking skills, and time management, few schools deliver carefully designed and thoroughly structured programs of instruction that teach students how to practice these essential skills (D. Conley et al., 2010). College and university students reported the desire for instructors to have spent less time telling them how essential these skills were but instead to have intentionally taught them how to use the skills to study, take notes, and manage a college time schedule (L. R. L. Young, 2011; R. L. Young, 2014).

**Key contextual skills and awareness.** D. Conley (2007c) suggested certain privileged information was “necessary to understand how college operates as a system and culture” (p. 17). Some research suggested that college readiness was significantly influenced by the noncognitive skills that differ for individual students depending on school level and family background (Cline et al., 2007; Padgett et al., 2012; Venezia & Jaeger, 2013; L. R. L. Young, 2011). L. R. L. Young (2011) characterized college knowledge as more than application processes and college essays, rather it should be associated with the transitions into college for students.

Even when students meet or surpass the academic parameters of the ACT and are deemed to be prepared for the culture and structure of postsecondary education (D. Conley, 2007c),

literature revealed the need for remediation still existed in these students (Cline et al., 2007). Students experience true college readiness benefits when they “learn in environments where adults intentionally emphasize the value and attainability of postsecondary education” (D. Conley et al., 2010, p. 19). In these communities, students receive “clear messages that their educational community has high expectations for them and believes in their ability to be successful” (D. Conley et al., 2010, p. 19).

### **Additional Perspectives/Components of College Readiness**

There are additional components in preparing students for postsecondary education lacking in current frameworks, such as D. Conley’s (2007c) four facets, that demand attention in order to fully investigate college readiness. Students, parents, teachers, and counselors provide different perspectives on college readiness; and researchers “need to tap into and engage a variety of stakeholders” (Yamamura, Martinez, & Saenz, 2010, p. 142) to improve college readiness efforts. Castro (2013) noted current frameworks lack the ability to “provide guidance in the development and evaluation of” (p. 305) interventions along with little attention being paid to the impact racial and socioeconomic inequality have on students’ college readiness.

**Stakeholder perspectives.** Parents play a crucial role in college readiness by enrolling children in college readiness programs, encouraging children to aspire to college, being involved with children’s instructors and their own possession of college experience (Leonard, 2013; Yamamura et al., 2010). There is a need to address parental levels of college knowledge in accessing information and resources on the current higher education settings to fully prepare students and provide them a knowledgeable support system when entering college (Yamamura et al., 2010). Yamamura et al. (2010) found generational differences were present when examining parental ideas of success for students.

“Teachers’ perspectives were surprising in that collective responsibility seemed to supersede their professional responsibility” (Yamamura et al., 2010, p. 141). Supportive teacher-student relationships in high school were emphasized in multiple studies involving students with positive postsecondary educational experiences (Gaskins, 2009; Woods-Weeks, 2017).

Yamamura et al. (2010) found that a “focus of renewed efforts toward equal educational opportunities in Texas and a strong college-going culture has been aimed at the link between communities and schools”; to improve college readiness, educators “recognize the importance of community and the need to be inclusive of the community outside of the school walls” (p. 127). Day (2017) reported that teachers often had a different view of students’ college readiness than the students reported themselves. Teachers noted that while students performed well academically, they were still lacking in the areas of college-level writing, time management and communication, and critical-thinking skills (Day, 2017). Padgett et al. (2012), while highlighting the plight of first-generation students, claimed “intuitively, college experiences that have been empirically tested as good practices should theoretically benefit students; however, our findings indicate that the effects of good practices were not a universal benefit for first-generation students” (p. 261). “One vital step in quelling the aforementioned academic dilemmas may be differentiation; offerings of a variety of well-developed, clearly-focused, career-path options linked to community college and 4-year university majors” (Barnes & Slate, 2013, p. 7).

**Student perspectives.** Parents are often the first source of information for students to access information on college. Students reported that parents played an indispensable role in “recruitment and enrollment, financial support, and emotional guidance” (Leonard, 2013, p. 192). Deil-Amen and Tevis (2009) reported students’ perceptions of their “college identity in

high school have repercussions for them once they enter college and either confirms or reorients their initial framework, further emphasizing the need to begin college readiness preparation early in students' careers" (p. 169). Supporting this notion, Florence (2017) revealed that student confidence during the early transitioning phase into college can be a positive influence when uncertainties in academic performance arise.

Along with parental involvement, students highlighted the importance of teachers' high standards in their classrooms. Leonard (2013) found students in an early college were required to complete makeup work and continue working on assignments until they succeeded; and rather than letting students slip through the cracks, parents were contacted for additional support. Starting parental support in the high school setting is important for fundamentally shaping students to seek support when troubles arise (Deil-Amen & Tevis, 2009). In fact, students reported utilizing "a parent (85%) and/or guidance counselor (80%)" (Leonard, 2013, p. 193) when it came to support. A positive revelation by Woods-Weeks (2017) was "the presence of at least one supportive adult was a protective factor that enabled students to achieve academically and develop resilience" (p. 148), further emphasizing students' need for a supportive network early in their high school careers. Another study highlighted an interesting clarification regarding teachers' influence on students' perceptions of college readiness. McCormick (2015) found that while parents, teachers, and counselors were the most influential on the college readiness perceptions of their students, extracurricular advisors and coaches were reported by students as the least influential people regarding readiness for college, along with participants' peers, siblings, and employers. If students are spending time in clubs and sports to prepare themselves to be well-rounded students for college, the club advisors and coaches could be missing an opportunity to contribute to students' feelings of self-efficacy in regard to college

readiness.

### **College Readiness and Underserved Populations**

College readiness is an even larger challenge for underserved populations such as students from low-income households, students whose parents have no postsecondary educational experience (first-generation students), and minority students (most notably Black and Hispanic). Researchers agreed negligible differences were noted nationwide in addressing the college readiness of traditionally underrepresented groups (Kaniuka & Vickers, 2010; Padgett et al., 2012; R. L. Young, 2014).

These underserved, underrepresented populations, most notably first-generation college goers (often from low-income households and minority populations), require exposure to good practices for undergraduate work and support for using these practices upon entering college to increase their likelihood of success (Padgett et al., 2012). However, the reality was often that high school teachers felt less professional responsibility for the college pathways of these students, as they felt the child's college pathway had already been determined by high school (Yamamura et al., 2010). In contrast, high school teachers, community leaders, and superintendents all felt responsibility for the collective students' college readiness (Yamamura et al., 2010).

Low-income, minority, and first-generation college students need to perform well on college entrance exams like the ACT to gain acceptance into a postsecondary institution, exams for which they are woefully underprepared. It has been suggested that this need to perform well “appears to negatively affect motivation and increase anxiety for some of these low-SES students from underrepresented groups who are seeking admission” (Deil-Amen & Tevis, 2009, p. 168). Meanwhile, less than one fourth of the underserved population test takers met three of the four

college readiness benchmarks on the ACT in 2017 (American College Testing, 2017). “As college degree attainment becomes the prerequisite for an adequate standard of living, discussion of college access and persistence especially among low-SES students, has remained a priority among researchers, educators, and policy makers” (An, 2012, p. 424).

### **Impact of College Readiness**

Traditionally underserved students often report similar levels of intention to enroll in a postsecondary institution as peers; however, a large number of these students “stray from their intended postsecondary plans in the summer between high school graduation and immediate college entrance” (McCormick, 2015, p. 149). McCormick (2015) also reported that this trend is not uncommon for many high school graduates, not just underserved students, but lack of college readiness perception could be a problem for the typically underserved students.

College educated parents transmit certain skills to their children because they are familiar with the processes involved with enrolling and attending postsecondary school (Padgett et al., 2012). College readiness offers students the opportunity to experience a diverse cross section of peers and professors given that they possess the necessary interpersonal and social skills (D. Conley, 2007c). Other studies have discovered that students’ belief in their own college readiness affects the degree to which they viewed faculty members as cultural agents to expand educational horizons (Schademan & Thompson, 2015). “Only 14% of the low-income, first-generation students transferred to four-year institutions compared to 50% of their most advantaged peers” (Engle & Tinto, 2008, p. 12) within the same time frame after high school graduation. While many school systems attempt to improve college readiness programming or incorporate college readiness into curriculum, long-term initiatives should address students’ ability to adapt to diversity in many forms so all populations can acquire the navigational



capacity to successfully transition to college or university (Yamamura et al., 2010).

### **Early College High Schools**

Early college high schools began to appear in the United States in 2002 to improve postsecondary opportunities for traditionally underrepresented youth as part of the Early College High School Initiative (Jobs for the Future, 2014). The early college high school concept created smaller, supportive environments in which students attended high school and earned an associate degree simultaneously (Jobs for the Future, 2014; Ndiaye & Wolfe, 2016; Zalaznick, 2015). These high schools were designed and operated using many of D. Conley's (2007b) college readiness framework suggestions.

Each early college high school has a partnership between its school district and a local postsecondary institution, typically a two year community or technical college (Jobs for the Future, 2014). These college courses were offered at little or no cost to the students and provided money-saving, transferable credits upon entering college or university (Zalaznick, 2015).

The early colleges were designed as small high schools that offered students a curriculum culminating in a high school diploma along with transferable college credits or an associate degree in college transfer; this pathway increased enrollment rates for underrepresented students (Kaniuka & Vickers, 2010; Ndiaye & Wolfe, 2016; Zalaznick, 2015). Within the last decade, early colleges have produced impressive results, raising outcomes for the low-income, first-generation, and minority students for whom they were designed.

American Institutes for Research and SRI International examined a random sample of early college high schools all over the United States, and the results indicated that early colleges were producing significant results for the underrepresented populations they were designed to

serve (Berger et al., 2014). Early college students were more likely to enroll in college than their peers (Berger et al., 2014; Zalaznick, 2015). The schools provided a curriculum based on rigor, relevance, and relationships through the development of learning communities (Berger, 2009). Faculty engaged students in comprehensive learning environments that developed academic and social skills, including the skills and behaviors specific to college life (Berger et al., 2014).

Considering that early colleges typically partnered with two year or community colleges, there was concern that the environment would deter students from pursuing degrees at four year colleges and universities (Berger et al., 2014). Despite the location choice for early colleges, their students “did not appear to enroll in two-year colleges at the expense of four-year college enrollment” (Berger et al., 2014, p. 18). Bearing in mind the percentage of early college graduates who reported achieving an associate degree in addition to their high school diploma, two year community colleges may not have been an option for them.

The study revealed that the percentage of early college students who went on to attend a bachelor’s degree granting institution was not significantly larger than students in traditional high school settings, 54.4% for early college graduates and 51.1% for traditional high school graduates (Berger et al., 2014). However, that was especially significant for early college graduates as they embodied typically underrepresented students who often lacked college readiness skills to be successful at a four year institution (Berger et al., 2014). Early college low-income students reported the largest gains in that they were over eight times more likely to attend college than their low-income peers (Berger et al., 2014). These were especially exceptional outcomes for early college graduates “given that most are youth who typically fall through the cracks of America’s public K-12 schools and our postsecondary institution” (Jobs for the Future, 2014, p. 2). An additional bonus for early college high school graduates was the time-saving and

money-saving factors of the dual enrollment courses. One nationwide study of dual enrollment participation and degree completion revealed that students who participated in dual enrollment programs in high school reduced their time to degree by two months (Hughes, 2016).

Additional studies illustrated that early college high school alumni felt like their program provided effective support for the application process and the enrollment in a postsecondary institution (Berger, 2009; L. R. L. Young, 2011). These studies also indicated the strong impact supportive teacher-student relationships had on alumni of early college high schools and its positive impact on their self-efficacy (Woods-Weeks, 2017; L. R. L. Young, 2011).

### **First-Year Postsecondary Educational Experiences**

A student's first year of postsecondary college or university is essential in laying the groundwork for their "attitude, behaviors, skills, knowledge, and habits of mind on which their subsequent academic and occupational preparation and success will depend" (Reason, Terenzini, & Domingo, 2007, p. 293). Students who lack the content knowledge, skills, and behaviors outlined by D. Conley (2007c) may find difficulty coping with the system. This is a particular problem for traditionally underrepresented groups as these students enter their first year without the skills to "transfer their efforts into sound educational practices rather than designating effort to navigate blindly through the complex college milieu" (Padgett et al., 2012, p. 259). Many first-generation, low-income, and minority students enter college lacking the college readiness skills deemed necessary and spend their time getting lost in the new environment so drastically different from their high school experience. Early college graduates represented some of these first-generation, low-income, and/or minority students. These students enrolled, however, equipped with the college readiness programming of the Early College High School Initiative.

In addition to the significant academic differences between high school and college, the

social experiences and transitions of the individual impact their ability successfully transition to their first year of college. Numerous studies have shown that low-income, first-generation students experience the highest drop-out rates and were more likely to leave postsecondary education after their first year regardless of the type of school they attended (Engle & Tinto, 2008; Schademan & Thompson, 2015). The existing research theorized that first-generation students lag behind their peers because they are unprepared to interact with faculty, unfamiliar with the college environment, and lacking the cultural knowledge shared by parents who had attended some form of college (Padgett et al., 2012). Furthermore, these underprepared students were less likely than their college ready peers to think they needed academic counseling or tutoring during their first year of college (Melzer & Grant, 2016). None of the research, however, delineated if these first-generation students were early college high school graduates.

Researchers suggested that students' high school experiences strongly impacted their perception of their own college readiness and informed practices during their first year of college or university (Wolniak & Engberg, 2010). It has been conclusively shown that early college students were far more likely to return to college for a second year of postsecondary education; 86% early college graduates versus 72% nationally persisted to a second year of college (Jobs for the Future, 2014), yet additional research suggested that the academic resilience and overall success of college students was "attributable to what happened to [them] during their first year and not to the characteristics they brought with them to college" (Reason, Terenzini, & Domingo, 2006, p. 164). This information begs the question: Is the college readiness provided before enrollment as important as how the students use it when they arrive at college or university?

**Supportive educational environments.** Considerable research recounted the factors that supported a student's success within their first year of college and the factors that led to student dropout within or after the first year. The campus environment played a strong role in students' postsecondary lives (Gaskins, 2009; Reason et al., 2007; L. R. L. Young, 2011; R. L. Young, 2014). Supportive educational environments allowed students to engage in strong faculty-student interactions, cocurricular activities, and campus activities with peers (Gaskins, 2009; Reason et al., 2007). "The extent to which their institutions provided a coherent first year was also a statistically significant contributor" (Reason et al., 2006, p. 169) to first year college students' academic competence as evidenced through their first and second semester GPAs. One study revealed that the engagement in college activity on a supportive, open campus contributed to student emotional and academic satisfaction which led to improved life satisfaction (Krumrei-Mancuso, Newton, Kim, & Wilcox, 2013). Each of these studies reported a factor of student self-reported success to be a campus environment component for which it would be difficult to prepare in high school but remains no less essential to the student's college success.

**Student employment.** "Other programs that benefited students' first-year success experiences included part-time jobs, involvement in student organizations, and residential living-learning communities" (W. B. Davidson, Beck, & Milligan, 2009, p. 186). Many first-generation and low-income students were required to work part-time jobs or take work study positions through the college or university in order to finance the ancillary expenses of being a college student and in some cases to pay tuition, fees, and purchase or rent textbooks. When these traditionally underserved students had to work to pay for postsecondary education expenses in addition to meeting the increased academic demands of college-level coursework, they found the challenge to be overwhelming and discouraging (J. V. Davidson, 2016; Magee, 2014; Tym,

McMillion, Barone, & Webster, 2004).

A study of first-generation students and enrollment intentions after the first year of postsecondary education was carried out by Magee (2014) who revealed that first-generation, low-income students who felt confident about their facility in maintaining employment obligations and satisfactory academic performance positively impacted intentions to enroll in an additional year of college. Early college students are primarily underserved students; and while high school programming offered opportunities for increased enrollment and college transfer credits, employment is often a requirement in order to continue at college or university.

**Campus programs and activities.** Students' willingness to participate in campus programs and activities impacted their first-year experiences. It was demonstrated that students who engaged in particular campus programs that "fostered development of motivation and aspirations" (J. V. Davidson, 2016, p. 180) positively impacted academic resilience during the first year of college.

**Academic major.** A student's choice of major determines the course schedule, the professors with whom they will engage, their academic peer group, and often overall satisfaction with their postsecondary academic pursuits. College major choice or change of major can have significant impact on students' enrollment intentions and overall college satisfaction in the first year (J. V. Davidson, 2016; Magee, 2014). A student's major choice informs the types of classes in which the student will engage and what skills will be needed to be successful in the chosen field. "Student engagement in educationally purposeful activities [was] positively related to academic outcomes as represented by first-year student grades and by persistence between the first and second year of college" (Kuh, Cruce, Shoup, Kinzie, & Gonyea, 2008, p. 555). Many early college graduates have completed nearly all of their general education requirements for

their first years in college or university and, as freshmen, often enroll in academic major courses with peers who have attended the school for one or two years already.

**Familial relationships.** Family plays an important role in many aspects of life; in this case, first year college students reflected on the ways in which familial relationships impacted college experience throughout multiple qualitative studies. For those traditionally underserved by the educational system, such as first-generation, low-income, and minority students, the connection to family and the role family played in the importance of education was pivotal to understanding persistence, success, and eventual attainment of a college degree. Simply stated, “the emphasis families placed on the importance of education was the key factor in the success students experienced through their educational paths” (J. V. Davidson, 2016, p. 155). Also notable in the non-first-generation population was that previous experience of any kind with postsecondary educational settings in the parents’ past was “powerful and influential enough that parents’ interpersonal relationships with their children likely reinforced the values, norms, and expectations about the collegiate experience that [they] use to navigate through the first year in college” (Padgett et al., 2012, p. 259), unlike their first-generation peers.

Latina students reported an intense reliance on their families’ “motivational and emotional support ... through the struggles [to] overcome any doubts they encountered throughout their first and second semester in college” (Carielo, 2015, p. 141). It was also suggested that familial support was one of the strongest indicators of enrollment intention for first-generation students (Magee, 2014); however, Magee (2014) noted in a few cases that missing familial connections as well as unsupportive families had a negative impact on enrollment intentions.

Early college graduates face the same familial relationship concerns as other first-

generation peers. Some early colleges, however, offered family seminars to bridge the gap in parental education and experiences that first-generation families lacked.

**Relationships at college.** It is thought that a first-year student's "perception of the support they received" from the college or university was "the single greatest influence on their development of academic competence" (Reason et al., 2006, p. 164). If this fact is true for all first-year students, the impact of college relationships on the student's grades could be significant. As students adapt to a new environment and being away from family members, they need increased and diverse support structures and academic mentors; professors and other peers can provide the new supports and resources (J. V. Davidson, 2016). First year college students received both academic and nonacademic supports from professors leading to the development of positive college relationships which were attributed to better academic performance, resilience, and enrollment intentions (J. V. Davidson, 2016; Kuh et al., 2008; Magee, 2014; Reason et al., 2006). In courses where students were required to take responsibility for daily activities, decisions, and tasks, they became more invested and committed to academic performance and to the college or university overall (Kuh et al., 2008). Relationships with peers could be equally substantial for first year college students. Strong peer relationships could be beneficial, especially for first-generation students who know much less about college environments than their non-first-generation peers. Peer relationships could "help offset feelings of isolation" (Magee, 2014, p. 50) and ease the transition experience for first-generation students. It seemed that college relationships were essential to successful transition to the first-year experience and Kuh et al. (2008) posited that "advisors, counselors, and others who have routine contact with students must persuade or otherwise induce [students] to get involved with one or more ... activities or with a faculty or staff member" (p. 557).



College relationships, proven essential, could be considered part of the key contextual skills and awareness D. Conley (2007c) referred to in the college readiness framework. A wide variety of skills and concepts could be involved in preparation for college relationships.

**Student behaviors, habits, and skills.** When students drop out of college or university, several reasons are cited, but often the students could have avoided dropping out if they had possessed certain skills and behaviors that would have allowed better acclimation to the new environment (Barnes & Slate, 2013; D. Conley, 2012; Reason et al., 2007; Schademan & Thompson, 2015). Students enter their first year with certain traits that define their behaviors. Even first-generation students who receive little college knowledge from families reported converting parents' work ethic and the value placed on their own educations into improved academic behaviors and increased determination (J. V. Davidson, 2016).

D. Conley (2007b) cited several key habits for the college ready student: intellectual open-mindedness, intellectual curiosity, inquisitiveness, precision and accuracy, problem-solving skills, time management, self-monitoring, and study skills. One study with first-year college students focused on academic competence and deduced that the participants' time management and study skills were highly predictive of the first semester GPA (Krumrei-Mancuso et al., 2013). Another study indicated that first-year college students who were self-aware and truly understood personal strengths had a more positive outlook on degree completion (Soria & Stubblefield, 2015), while another suggested that students' self-regulated learning skills are often low in the first year (Thibodeaux, Deutsch, Kitsantas, & Winsler, 2017). Early college high school college readiness programs incorporated the elements of D Conley's (2012) key learning skills and techniques.

Traditionally underrepresented students, specifically first-generation college goers,

should receive targeted supports to encourage both academic and social resilience and success in graduating from college. First-generation college students, like many peers, need to learn “improved decision making by delaying gratification, guidance regarding fulfilling responsibilities and acting conscientiously when faced with challenging situations” (Melzer & Grant, 2016, p. 102). “Students who lack skills for responding to stress and time pressures may rely on procrastination or avoidance and would therefore likely benefit from interventions that focus on coping with stress and increasing confidence for managing academic demands” (Krumrei-Mancuso et al., 2013, p. 261).

### **Summary**

Chapter 2 delineated the research on college readiness for all students in the United States utilizing a focus on traditionally underrepresented populations to determine specific needs. The researcher reported the nation’s readiness benchmarks from ACT and the current research used to create an overall definition of college readiness. College readiness was then investigated through the perspectives of high school and college-level students, high school and college-level teachers, and other stakeholders. The researcher surveyed literature on college readiness of traditionally underserved students and explored the impacts improved college readiness could have on these students. The early college high school initiative was discussed as a possible solution to the college readiness of first-generation, low-income, and minority students. Summarily, the researcher explored and categorized the minimal literature on first-year college experiences and noted little student voice in the research.

The literature discussing the potentially beneficial skills and habits of the college ready student abounded, while student reports on actual experiences in translating those skills into the new environments were minimal.

Chapter 3 chronicles the methodology used in this interpretative phenomenological study. The researcher will introduce the elements of the study and how it was conducted to gather data for the purpose of answering the research question.

### **Chapter 3: Methodology**

This chapter will reaffirm the purpose of the research study, restate the research question, introduce phenomenology and phenomenological research designs in general, and elucidate the IPA design that was utilized in the study. The researcher provides personal perspectives on the utilization of the phenomenological approach to answer the research question. Chapter 3 describes the study design, study setting, participants, and study procedures; including the data collection and analysis processes. Ethical considerations for the study are discussed, along with the study's limitations and delimitations.

#### **Study Problem**

Current frameworks of college readiness fail to address the impact of college readiness on the postsecondary educational experiences of traditionally underserved students (Castro, 2013). Even students deemed college ready through objective scores experienced substantial challenges during the transfer from high school to college (Padgett et al., 2012; Wolniak & Engberg, 2010), yet the literature exploring this phenomena from the students' points of view was minimal.

The study utilized IPA to investigate the research question: How do students from an early college high school translate their high school college preparation into their first-year postsecondary college or university lived experiences?

#### **Phenomenology**

Phenomenology is a type of qualitative research that studies the "conscious experiences of phenomena from the first-person point of view" (Privitera & Ahlgrim-DeLzell, 2019, p. 295). There are several common qualitative research approaches displayed in Figure 2. Through the use of the table in Figure 2 and supplementary literature, it was determined a phenomenological

approach was most appropriate for the study (Creswell, 2014; Privitera & Ahlgrim-Delzell, 2019; Sauro, 2015; J. A. Smith et al., 2009).

Method	Focus	Sample Size	Data Collection
Ethnography	Context or culture	—	Observation & interviews
Narrative	Individual experience & sequence	1 to 2	Stories from individuals & documents
Phenomenological	People who have experienced a phenomenon	5 to 25	Interviews
Grounded Theory	Develop a theory from grounded in field data	20 to 60	Interviews, then open and axial coding
Case Study	Organization, entity, individual, or event	—	Interviews, documents, reports, observations

*Figure 2. Common Forms of Qualitative Research. From 5 Types of Qualitative Research ("Summary"), by Sauro, 2015, Denver, CO: MeasuringU. Copyright 2015 by MeasuringU. Reprinted with permission (Appendix A).*

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The researcher excluded other options of qualitative research by working through Figure 2. Ethnography was excluded because it examined cultures or context; narrative was excluded because the researcher intended to examine multiple experiences; grounded theory was excluded because the researcher did not intend to develop theory; and case study was eliminated because the researcher did not intend to use an organization or certain stamp in time (Sauro, 2015).

The phenomenological approach, when used in the educational setting, explores and investigates the impact of conscious experience on various aspects of education (Privitera & Ahlgrim-Delzell, 2019; J. A. Smith et al., 2009), such as college readiness. A conscious experience is “any experience that a person has lived through or performed and can bring memory in such a way to recall that experience” (Privitera & Ahlgrim-Delzell, 2019, p. 295). The phenomenological approach commits to exploring experiences through the first-person point of view (Hustad, 2015; Pierce, 2015; Privitera & Ahlgrim-Delzell, 2019; D. W. Smith, 2013; J. A. Smith et al., 2009).

The phenomenological research design is used to understand the lived experiences of the subjects through interviews, observations, and video; though the primary method of the phenomenological approach is in-depth interviews (Privitera & Ahlgrim-Delzell, 2019; J. A. Smith et al., 2009). After the interview with the participant, the researcher was to construct a narrative “to describe or summarize the experiences” by first identifying things that “bring an experience to memory of consciousness” described by Privitera and Ahlgrim-Delzell (2019) as objects of awareness (p. 295). Objects of awareness “tend to direct conscious experiences and also illuminate the intentionality of a participant’s conscious experience” (Privitera & Ahlgrim-Delzell, 2019, p. 295). The idea of the phenomenology research design is to investigate lived experiences and gather reflections of the lived experiences (Hustad, 2015; Pierce, 2015; Privitera & Ahlgrim-Delzell, 2019; D. W. Smith, 2013; J. A. Smith et al., 2009).

Qualitative research can be performed through many nonexperimental approaches and therefore effort should be directed into determining the most appropriate approach. J. A. Smith et al. (2009) suggested exploring the type of research question to be used in order to determine the appropriate qualitative research method. The use of students’ first-year experience in the

research question narrowed the field to IPA (J. A. Smith et al., 2009). Experience was part of both phenomenology and IPA, but how the experience was used was what determined the final selection of the study design. IPA focused on the meaning making of the experience, rather than just the understanding of a concept (J. A. Smith et al., 2009). J. A. Smith et al. (2009) stated the “prime reason for choosing IPA over any other qualitative approach should be because it is consistent with the epistemological position of your research question” (p. 46). The research question sought to understand how early college high school graduates made sense of their first-year experiences at college or university, so IPA aligned with the question.

### **Overview of Interpretative Phenomenology**

J. A. Smith (1996) developed the dual nature qualitative approach, IPA, and stressed there was “no single, definitive way to do an IPA”; and while conducting such research, one “may find [themselves] adapting the method to [one’s] particular way of working and the particular topic [one is] investigating” (J. A. Smith, 1996, pp. 54-55). J. A. Smith et al. (2009) clearly articulated, researchers who employed the IPA approach must

Be wary of methodologism or methodolatry. These cautionary terms remind us that, from the perspective of most qualitative researchers, methods are understood not to have stand-alone integrity. They do not, by themselves, produce meaningful outcomes. They are not, in and of themselves, guarantees of quality. As researchers, we must be creative in our application of these methods. Successful data collection strategies require organization, flexibility and sensitivity. (p. 46)

The purpose of the IPA approach was to “focus upon people’s experiences and/or understandings of particular phenomena” (J. A. Smith et al., 2009, p. 46). The research question should be “about people’s understandings, experiences and sense-making activities ... [the

question should situate] within specific contexts, rather than between them” (J. A. Smith et al., 2009, p. 47). Developing research questions for qualitative research is generally difficult.

Salmon (2003) specifically addressed the difficulties of nonspecific research questions when he stated,

... concepts developed in a study can equip researchers or practitioners to think or act differently in future. Findings can help to identify new hypotheses. Findings can simply be incompatible with prevailing assumptions; what transfers is the need to rethink those assumptions. (p. 27)

Due to the unique flow of IPA research, questions and answers are “necessarily open and it may be that [the] study deviates from what [the] original question is” (J. A. Smith et al., 2009, p. 48). Due to these reasons, the study’s research question was open and nonspecific to allow for the nondirectional flow of data.

Researchers often use secondary research questions to further delve into the data, though this concept is difficult to achieve in the IPA approach “because they can only be answered at the more interpretative stage, and because, given the open nature of qualitative data collection, [it] can’t be certain that [the researcher] will be able to answer them” (J. A. Smith et al., 2009, p. 48). Secondary research questions infer “something about the meaning of the account which is quite external to the account itself” (J. A. Smith et al., 2009, p. 48).

The IPA is a “recently developed and rapidly growing approach to qualitative inquiry” used to examine “how people make sense of their major life experiences” (J. A. Smith et al., 2009, p. 7). There were many reasons for selection of the IPA orientation; J. A. Smith et al. (2009) stated,

The orientation of researchers towards these objects of interest (experiences,



understandings) is generally open and often explicitly process-oriented. For example, “exploring” has been used more commonly than any other verb to state the IPA researchers’ actions and intentions in relation to their chosen objects of interest. “Investigating”, “examining” and “eliciting” are the next most common alternatives. Again, these are consistent with IPA’s inductive procedures, and its focus on the interpretation of meaning. (p. 46)

The IPA merges three qualitative approaches: phenomenology, hermeneutics, and idiography (J. A. Smith et al., 2009). IPA “seeks to understand in detail how an individual experiences a phenomenon from a particular perspective within a particular context and is concerned with ways in which people make sense of their experience and meaning to life events” (Malhotra, 2015, "Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis"). This unique approach of phenomenology includes a subjective and reflective process of lived experiences (Malhotra, 2015). Figure 3 provides a detailed graphic of IPA.

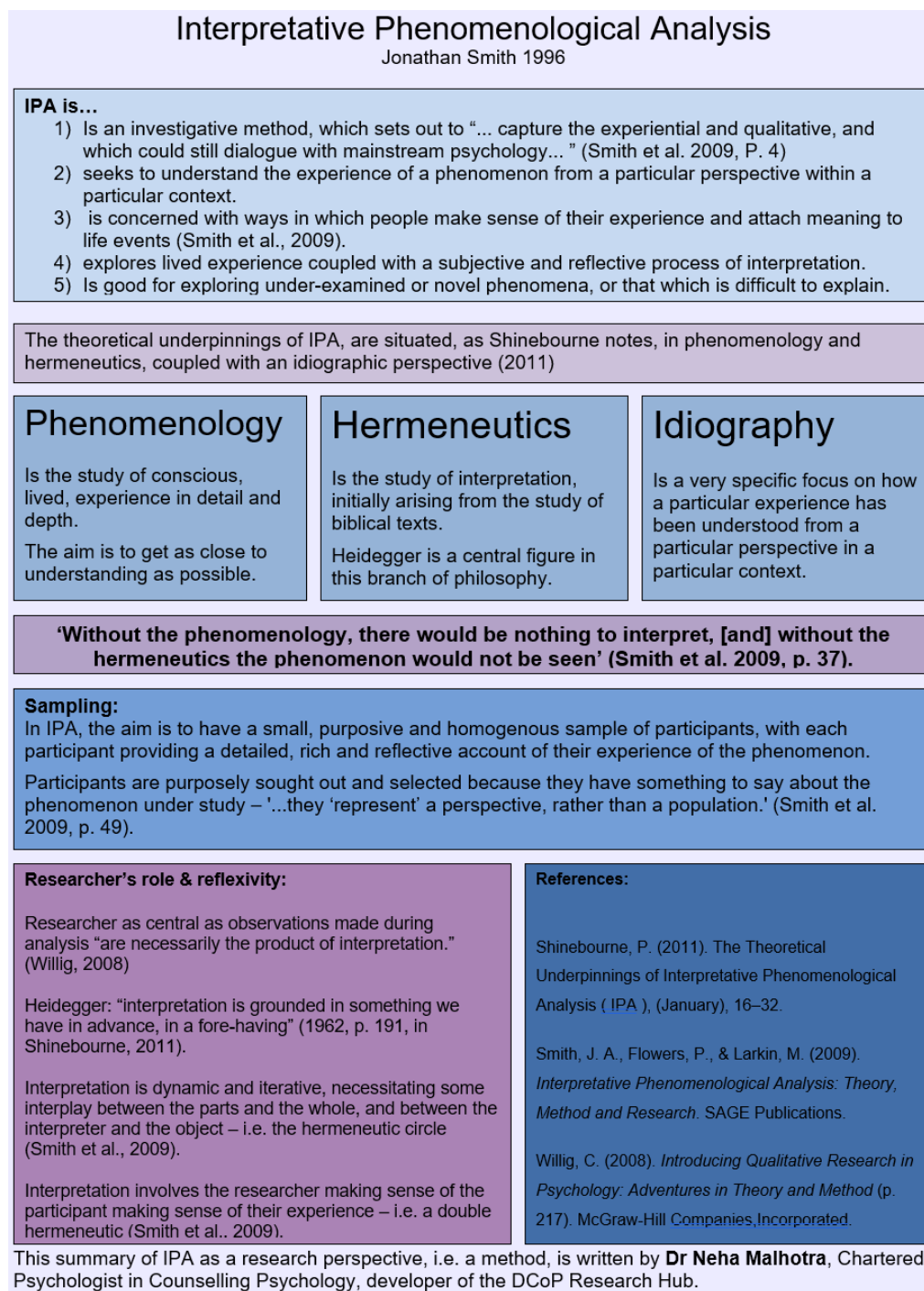


Figure 3. IPA Detail Graphic based on Smith, 1996. From *Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis* (n.p.) by Malhotra, 2015, Leicester, England: The British Psychological Society. Copyright 2015 by The British Psychological Society: Division of Counseling Psychology. Reprinted with permission (Appendix A).

After consulting Figure 3 to better understand the theoretical underpinnings of IPA, the researcher intended to echo Malhotra's (2015) instruction of the IPA by examining the experiences of the graduates of an early college high school (individual) in western North Carolina. Examination of the participants' experiences was used to determine how they translated their early college high school experience (phenomenon) into their lived experiences at college or university during their first year.

Malhotra (2015) stated the importance of IPA in "understanding under-examined phenomena or novel phenomena, or that which is difficult to explain" ("IPA is for"). This sentiment further supports how IPA was used to reveal the lacking components of current college readiness frameworks mentioned by Castro (2013) and Yamamura et al. (2010).

### **Personal Perspective on the Phenomenological Approach**

The researcher was a former instructor at the early college high school. In light of the researcher's experience with the research site, it was deemed appropriate that the design of the study be open to allow the participants to fully express their meaning-making experiences during their first year and not be limited by the researcher's point of view on the college readiness at the site. The researcher wished to refrain from establishing the use of a rigid framework to develop the study's research question to account for elements of such framework that may be missing to effectively support specific underserved populations.

### **Study Design**

The study was a qualitative, IPA research study that explored the college preparation experiences of RCEC high school alumni as lived during their first year at college or university. The study consisted of individual interviews in which the researcher gleaned information about the participants' lived experiences during their first year of postsecondary education with regards

to the college readiness received during their early college high school experience. The researcher subsequently completed the interpretation phase of the IPA given the understanding of the described experiences.

### **The Participants**

Consistent with procedures in selecting population samples for the IPA approach, the sample for the study was selected purposively because of its ability to offer insight into a particular experience (Creswell, 2014; Malhotra, 2015; J. A. Smith, 1996; J. A. Smith et al., 2009; J. A. Smith & Osborn, 2008). Participants were selected on the “basis that they [could] grant ... access to a particular perspective on the phenomena under study” (J. A. Smith et al., 2009, p. 49). The participants for the study were “drawn from a population with similar demographic/socio-economic status profiles” (J. A. Smith & Osborn, 2008, p. 56), from the alumni of RCEC high school classes of 2016 and 2017. These graduating classes were selected by the researcher because their members had completed either one or two years of college at the time of data collection. The researcher believed this choice yielded participants with the richest data offerings on a first-year college or university experience given they had most recently experienced it. Also, students from these two graduating classes participated in the same college readiness programming during high school.

All participants completed, or attempted to complete, two semesters (or 1 year) of postsecondary education. J. A. Smith and Osborn (2008) stated, a “distinctive feature of IPA is its commitment to a detailed interpretative account of the cases included and many researchers are recognizing that this can only realistically be done on a very small sample size” (p. 56). There existed 38 potential participants.

Table 1 reveals the participants from the graduating classes of 2016 and 2017 from

RCEC who were chosen to participate in the research study. These individuals met the criteria of attendance at RCEC for four or five years and met all of the school's graduation requirements including full participation in college readiness seminar and the required number of community service hours. The students who agreed to participate in the study and engaged in the interview process are displayed in Table 1.

Table 1

*Participant Demographics*

Participant*	Gender	Race	Low SES*	FGS*	College*	Age
Brenden	Male	White	Yes	Yes	Regional State Col./ Tower State Uni.	21
Leah	Female	White	Yes	Yes	Tower State University	19
Roxxy	Female	White	Yes	Yes	Middle State College	20
Seymour	Male	White	Yes	Yes	Regional State College	21
Silvia	Female	Hispanic	Yes	Yes	Middle State College	19
Luana	Female	Hispanic	Yes	Yes	City University	20
Matthew	Male	White	No	No	Faith University	20
Ben	Male	White	Yes	Yes	Regional State College	20
Thomas	Male	White	Yes	Yes	Horizon State University	21

\*Note. SES=socioeconomic status, FGS=first-generation student. Participant names used in study are pseudonyms. College names used are also pseudonyms.

Individuals from Table 1 were invited to participate in the research study based on the aforementioned characteristics and participant availability within the study's timeline.

## Study Procedures

The researcher contacted potential study participants via alumni communications, email, and professional and social media routes. Potential participants were given an invitation to participate in the research study. Appendix B provides an example of the communication sent. Once participants completed the informed consent, an interview time and location (either physical or virtual) was confirmed.

**Data collection.** In order to collect rich data, the researcher allowed participants the opportunity to “tell their stories, to speak freely and reflectively, and to develop their ideas and express their concerns at some length” (J. A. Smith et al., 2009, p. 62). The researcher used semi-structured interviews, the preferred method in the IPA approach (J. A. Smith & Osborn, 2008). Interviews used in qualitative research are often thought of as conversations with a purpose that is informed by a research question (J. A. Smith et al., 2009).

The study included in-person and virtual interviews; therefore, location and time were dependent on participants’ availability. The semi-structured interviews, scheduled in person with participants, were held at a convenient location/local to the participant attending the interview. Virtual interviews were held via web conferencing system Zoom, if participants were unavailable for an in-person interview. When virtual meetings were held, participants were asked to locate in a quiet/private location that had reliable Internet access.

The role the researcher took was one of a facilitator where “the participant talks, and the interviewer listens” (J. A. Smith et al., 2009, p. 57), rather than a role of an active participant in the conversation. For the IPA, it was suggested that the interviewer develop a set of questions that he/she would like to ask in the order most appropriate for the participant but acknowledging during the interview process things can and do change (J. A. Smith et al., 2009). It was important to note that IPA was particular for its approach to the interviewing process. J. A. Smith and Osborn (2008) instructed,

The investigator has an idea of the area of interest and some questions to pursue. At the same time, there is a wish to try to enter, as far as possible, the psychological and social world of the respondent. Therefore, the respondent shares more closely in the direction the interview takes, and the respondent can introduce an issue the investigator has not

thought of. In this relationship, the respondent can be perceived as the experiential expert on the subject and should therefore be allowed maximum opportunity to tell their own story. (pp. 58-59)

Interview questions, seen in Appendix C, were developed in order to be open and allow for the participant to talk at length with limited verbal input from the researcher (J. A. Smith et al., 2009; J. A. Smith & Osborn, 2008). This approach in interviewing “facilitates rapport/empathy, allows a greater flexibility in coverage and allows the interview to go into novel areas, and it tends to produce richer data” (J. A. Smith & Osborn, 2008, p. 59).

### Interview Research

J. A. Smith et al. (2009) developed a guide to assist in the development of the in-depth interview questions. There were several types of questions utilized such as descriptive, structural, comparative, and evaluative. Figure 4 displays how these questions differed.

- *Descriptive* – Please could you tell me what you do in your job?
- *Narrative* – Can you tell me about how you came to get the job?
- *Structural* – So what are all the stages involved in the process of dispatching orders?
- *Contrast* – What are the main differences between a good day and a bad day at work?
- *Evaluative* – How do you feel after a bad day at work?
- *Circular* – What do you think your boss thinks about how you do your job?
- *Comparative* – How do you think your life would be if you worked somewhere else?
- *Prompts* – Can you tell me a bit more about that?
- *Probes* – What do you mean by ‘unfair’?

*Figure 4. Some Kinds of Questions for In-depth Interviews. From Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (p. 60) by Smith et al., 2009, Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, Inc. Copyright 2009 by Sage Publications, Inc. Reproduced with permissions of Sage Publications, Inc. in the format Thesis/Dissertation via Copyright Clearance Center (Appendix A).*

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Figure 4 was used to guide the researcher in crafting questions to elicit responses that got

to the meaning making of a major life experience. The researcher's questions, located in Appendix C, were categorized as descriptive and evaluative to align with their lived experiences as well as structural and comparative to address their current lived experience with that of the phenomenon. Additionally, the interview questions were aligned to D. Conley's (2007b) college readiness framework.

Table 2 presents the researcher-created interview questions and their alignment, if any, to the four facets of D. Conley's (2007a) college readiness framework.



Table 2

*Interview Questions Aligned to Conley's College Readiness Framework*

Interview question	Interview	Question type	Framework relationship
Describe your living experience.	1	Descriptive	No specific alignment*
Describe your classroom experience.	1	Descriptive	Contextual skills and awareness
Describe your involvement in campus events, activities, or courses that positively impacted your first-year experience.	1	Descriptive	No specific alignment*
Were there any first-year experiences that were impactful in a negative way?	1	Descriptive	No specific alignment*
Describe your relationships with faculty during your first year.	1	Descriptive	Academic behaviors
How was your credit transfer experience from the early college to your college or university?	1	Structural	Contextual skills and awareness; Content knowledge
Are you on track to get a bachelor's degree?	1	Structural	Contextual skills and awareness
What has surprised you most about your first-year college experience?	1	Evaluative	No specific alignment*
How do you feel about the atmosphere of your campus?	1	Evaluative	Contextual skills and awareness
How academically prepared did you feel in your first-year courses?	1	Evaluative	Content knowledge; Academic behaviors
Were there any courses that were a particular struggle for you?	1	Evaluative	Content knowledge; Academic behaviors; Cognitive strategies
What courses did you enjoy the most? Why?	1	Evaluative	No specific alignment*
How was your first year of college or university different than your last year at the early college?	1	Comparative	No specific alignment*
How was your living experience different than that which you were used to before enrolling in college or university?	1	Comparative	No specific alignment*
How did the academic environment (created by both professors and students) at college or university compare to that of the early college experience?	2	Comparative	Academic behaviors; Cognitive strategies
How did you study while enrolled in early college? How did you study during your first year of college or university? Were there skills you carried over?	2	Comparative	Academic behaviors

(continued)

Interview question	Interview	Question type	Framework relationship
What and how often did you read in classes during early college?	2	Descriptive	Content Knowledge
What could early colleges do differently to help students be college ready the first year?	2	Evaluative/ Descriptive	No specific alignment*
What could early college students do differently to better prepare themselves for college the first year?	2	Evaluative/ Descriptive	No specific alignment*

\*Note. Questions were based on other research on SES, FGS, and first-year experiences and may not have specific alignment to Conley's framework.

Table 2 presented the interview question, a notation of when in the interview process it was asked by the researcher, the question type, and the element of the college readiness addressed by the question created from research on college readiness and first-year postsecondary experiences. When a participant recalled anything specific about their first-year experience, the researcher engaged in narrative questioning to provide context and explore possible connections to the student's college readiness.

Figure 5 was utilized by the researcher to address any types of questions that could limit the collection of meaningful data about the participants' lived experiences. Researchers can inadvertently guide participants in their responses through the use of incorrect verbiage, and this scenario should be avoided if possible.

- *Over-empathic* – I can imagine that your job is quite boring – is that right?
- *Manipulative* – You've described your job as quite repetitive. Is it even worse than that?
- *Leading* – So I don't suppose you'd say that your job is rewarding?
- *Closed* – So you've been working here for five years then?

*Figure 5. Types of Questions to Avoid. Adapted from Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (p. 60) by Smith et al., 2009, Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, Inc. Copyright 2009 by Sage Publications, Inc. Reproduced with permissions of Sage Publications, Inc. in the format Thesis/Dissertation via Copyright Clearance Center (Appendix A).*

Figure 5 was an essential tool for the researcher in developing questions for interviews that avoided leading the participants in a particular direction or closing off the flow of data within the interview.

It was recommended to limit the number of questions to between six and 10 in order to keep the interview time between 45-90 minutes (J. A. Smith et al., 2009). The interview agenda also includes the use of prompts to further explore participants' responses (J. A. Smith et al., 2009; J. A. Smith & Osborn, 2008). Figure 6 displays the prompts used, when needed, during the interviewing process.

- Why?
- How?
- Can you tell me more about that?
- Tell me what you were thinking?
- How did you feel?

*Figure 6. Interview Prompts. Adapted from Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (p. 68) by Smith et al., 2009, Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, Inc. Copyrighted (2009) by Sage Publications, Inc. Reproduced with permissions of Sage Publications, Inc. in the format Thesis/Dissertation via Copyright Clearance Center (Appendix A).*

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Using the prompts in Figure 6 along with the interview questions assisted the researcher in gathering the most meaningful data from the interview process. The researcher's interview agenda can be found in Appendix D.

Interviews were recorded and then transcribed. With the uniqueness of the IPA approach, J. A. Smith and Osborn (2008) explicated,

The interview does not have to follow the sequence on the schedule, nor does every question have to be asked, or asked in exactly the same way, of each respondent. Thus, the interviewer may decide that it would be appropriate to ask a question earlier than it appears in the schedule because it follows from what the respondent has just said.

Similarly, how a question is phrased, and how explicit it is, will now partly depend on how the interviewer feels the participant is responding. (p. 63)

The number of interviews per participant in the IPA was another deviation from more traditional methods of phenomenology. While Seidman's (2006) three-interview approach is standard for phenomenological studies, even he observed that modifications will be made to the approach to fit the research situation but noted, "as long as a structure is maintained that allows participants to reconstruct and reflect upon their experience within the context of their lives, alterations to the three-interview structure ... can certainly be explored" (pp. 21-22).

Alase (2017) advanced that "the study should keep the interview invitation to one interview per participant. However, only if there is a need for a follow-up interview shall the researcher contact the participants for additional interviews" (p. 15). Detailed examination of other IPAs completed within the field of educational research revealed that the majority collect data from participants during one semi-structured interview that lasts at 60-90 minutes (Gardner, 2011; Kreisberg, 2017; McCall, 2014; Seldis, 2017; Stratton, 2013; Sully, 2018; Vincenti, 2013). Significantly less chose two interviews, but some of those chose to divide their questions into two major themes and ask them in different stages (Hanson Becker, 2015; Kefor, 2015; Laurenceau-Medina, 2014; Taylor, 2015). A small number chose to remain with Seidman's (2006) three interviews for phenomenological studies (Edmond, 2014; Norwood, 2017; Pombrio, 2016; Wiley, 2014), but many of those admitted to using the first interview to develop rapport with the participant. In this case, the researcher developed rapport with the participants through experience at RCEC.

As previously noted, the number of participants was limited to a small pool of graduates with similar demographics, and usually the number of interviews per participant is the means

through which rich data are gathered (J. A. Smith et al., 2009). Research supports the use of between one and six interviews per participant (J. A. Smith, 1996; J. A. Smith et al., 2009; J. A. Smith & Osborn, 2008). J. A. Smith et al. (2009) explicated, “most studies have adopted straightforward designs: recruiting small homogeneous groups of participants, and collecting data from them once” (p. 52), which was why the researcher selected two interviews per participant. The first interview was used to address the interview questions and the participants’ lived experiences. The second interview followed up on information gathered and explored during the first interview and was significantly shorter. Some participants required additional time to cover the questions dedicated to the first interview due to the participant’s willingness to share their experiences. Interviews were limited to 90 minutes. If all questions were unable to be asked during this time frame due to the 90-minute limit, they were asked in the second part of what the researcher considered interview one. Interview two was utilized to further explore the participants’ experiences shared in interview one. Three participants required additional interview time (interview one, part two) to cover questions assigned to be asked in interview one (interview one, part one).

**Semi-structured interviews.** Literature suggested rapport as one of the critical components of interviewing, which was one reason the researcher decided upon interviews, as there were established relationships with the participants (J. A. Smith et al., 2009).

***In-person interviews.*** The primary means of interviewing requested was in person. The researcher contacted participants and arranged a convenient time and location for each participant. Each interview lasted 60-90 minutes. Seidman (2006) admitted that while there was no magical number, more than 1 hour was needed to explore the participants’ lived experiences, but 90 minutes was sufficient to be respectful to the participant’s time and needs.

**Virtual interviews.** In the case where participants were not able to meet in person for interviews, virtual interviews lasting 60-90 minutes were conducted utilizing the video conference system Zoom.

**Data analysis.** The first step in the data analysis was to listen to the transcript at least once and then to read and reread the participants' responses (Privitera & Ahlgrim-DeLzell, 2019; J. A. Smith et al., 2009; J. A. Smith & Osborn, 2008). The repetitive reading of the responses allowed the researcher to "immerse oneself in some of the original data" (J. A. Smith et al., 2009, p. 82). The next step in the data analysis was the initial noting of interesting and significant data by the researcher. In IPA data analysis, "meaning is central, and the aim is to try to understand the content and complexity of those meanings rather than measure their frequency" (J. A. Smith & Osborn, 2008, p. 66).

"This step examines semantic content and language use on a very exploratory level. The analyst maintains an open mind and notes anything of interest within the transcript" (J. A. Smith et al., 2009, p. 83). An example of initial noting described by J. A. Smith et al. (2009) was used to guide the data analysis. Using the exploratory comments, the researcher searched for patterns and connections across the themes. The emergent themes were developed similarly to the process detailed by J. A. Smith et al. (2009).

The results section will continue to describe the reflections from participants with quotes to illustrate how the researcher arrived at the description (Privitera & Ahlgrim-DeLzell, 2019). "As the clustering of themes emerges, it is checked in the transcript to make sure the connections work for the primary source material—the actual words of the participant" (J. A. Smith & Osborn, 2008, p. 72). During this process, the researcher was "drawing on one's interpretative resources to make sense of what the person [was] saying, but at the same time one [was]

constantly checking one's own sense-making against what the person actually said" (J. A. Smith & Osborn, 2008, p. 72). Once one interview was analyzed, the researcher moved to the next and repeated the process (J. A. Smith et al., 2009; J. A. Smith & Osborn, 2008). Once all interviews were analyzed, the researcher examined similarities and differences within the data (J. A. Smith & Osborn, 2008). "Once each transcript [had] been analyzed by the interpretative process ... superordinate themes" (J. A. Smith & Osborn, 2008, p. 74) were constructed. Data were grouped within each superordinate theme and analyzed a second time. During this stage of the process, some data were recategorized when the researcher examined each theme against personal biases. The third reread revealed several strong subordinate themes. The original transcripts were read again by the researcher to remain focused on the students' college readiness experiences. Additional, equally relevant subordinate themes emerged. The researcher reflected on specific demographics, the students' unifying early college experience, and the commonalities within participants' descriptions of their experiences at different types of college and universities both in and out of state.

### **Measures to Ensure Validity**

**Member checking.** The final stage of the IPA was the write up or narrative story. Themes were taken and transformed into narrative accounts and explained (J. A. Smith et al., 2009; J. A. Smith & Osborn, 2008). The inclusion of actual participant responses to support such narrative was of the upmost importance (J. A. Smith, 1996; J. A. Smith et al., 2009; J. A. Smith & Osborn, 2008). Member checking was employed with each participant at each stage of analysis to ensure the accurate representation of subject perspectives (Privitera & Ahlgrim-Dezell, 2019), combining smaller themes into larger overarching themes when available. A report was made using the etic perspective, which was using the researcher's perspective to

describe the participant's experience, including quotes from the participant and an example of the description (Privitera & Ahlgrim-Delzell, 2019).

**Rich description of data.** The researcher included a thorough description of the participants' experiences both in their own words and in the researcher's discussion of emergent themes. "When qualitative researchers provide detailed descriptions of the setting ... or offer many perspectives about a theme, the results become more realistic and richer" (Creswell, 2014, p. 202).

**Researcher bias.** The researcher was a former instructor at RCEC and knew the potential participants professionally. The researcher was also a teacher in the college readiness seminar program and in the mathematics department. "Good qualitative research contains comments by the researchers about how their interpretation of the findings is shaped by their background, such as their gender, culture, history, and socioeconomic origin" (Creswell, 2014, p. 202).

**Peer debriefing.** The use of peer debriefing provided a level of accuracy to the accounts provided. The researcher located a peer reviewer to review the data collection and subsequently developed emergent themes. Additionally, the peer reviewer asked questions of the researcher "so that the account [would] resonate with people other than the researcher" (Creswell, 2014, p. 202).

### **Ethical Considerations**

"Ethical research practice is a dynamic process which needs to be monitored throughout data collection and analysis" (J. A. Smith et al., 2009, p. 53). Qualitative researchers must understand and address that they "explicitly identify reflexively their biases, values, and personal background, such as gender, history, culture, and socioeconomic status (SES) that shape their



interpretations formed during a study” (Creswell, 2014, p. 187). To uphold ethical standards, researchers must be direct in how their experiences may shape interpretations made by actively seeking evidence to support interpretations and conclusions (Creswell, 2014; Privitera & Ahlgrim-Delzell, 2019).

### **Limitations and Delimitations**

**Limitations.** The limitations of the study are found in the research design itself. “Each different option in methodology and study design has particular limitations. These limit the extensivity to which the study can go, and sometimes affect the end result and conclusions” (Simon & Goes, 2013, "Limitations"). The focus of the IPA is on a major life event that involves more experiences outside of college readiness, allowing participants to describe their experiences in a way that is comfortable. This description may deviate from current definitions of college readiness to include other experiences, limiting the conclusions that might be drawn. In addition, the researcher assumed the participants were being truthful in their responses, but it was not possible to be certain that all experiences described were completely accurate. Third, the size of IPAs is traditionally small and only focused on a particular event; therefore, the results were concentrated and not as generalizable as other forms of research. J. A. Smith and Osborn (2008) stated, “this is not to say IPA is opposed to more general claims for larger populations; it is just that it is committed to the painstaking analysis of cases rather than jumping to generalizations” (p. 56).

**Delimitations.** Delimitations are “factors that can restrict the questions you can answer or the inferences you can draw from your findings” (Anonymous, 2012, "Acknowledging Weakness vs. Defining Boundaries"). “However, they are based on intentional choices you make a priori [...] about where you’re going to draw the boundaries of your project”

(Anonymous, 2012, "Acknowledging Weakness vs. Defining Boundaries"). A delimitation of the study was the researcher's choice to select students who completed the full four or five year term of the early college. The population was also limited to participants who attended two semesters (or a full year) of postsecondary education; therefore, the overall number of participants was limited and did not include all members of each graduating class. The interview location was the same for all in-person interviews. Interviews were scheduled at times that suited the participants' schedules. The method of interview was in person or virtual, depending on the availability of the participants. Again, the chosen method might have an unintended effect on the interview responses and might affect overall conclusions.

### **Summary**

Chapter 3 presented the purpose of the research study; displayed the research question; discussed the phenomenology approach; and explained phenomenological research designs in general and, in particular, the IPA design utilized in the research study. The researcher also provided personal perspectives on the phenomenological approach for the study. The study design, study setting, participants, and study procedures including the data collection and analysis processes were detailed. Ethical considerations for the proposed study were listed, along with the proposed study's limitations and delimitations.

Chapter 4 describes the interviewing process and the themes of the study. Each participant is introduced in the context of the study, and the researcher delineates the superordinate and subordinate themes that emerged during the analysis of the qualitative data.

## **Chapter 4: Results**

### **Overview**

Chapter 4 presents the results of the study through the voices of the participants. The researcher introduces the emergent themes gleaned from interpretative analysis of the qualitative data collected through the interview process. The researcher determined four major themes were presented in the data. Some of those themes presented themselves in different ways, thus creating the need for subthemes. Each theme is explored in this chapter, along with direct quotes from the participants' interviews to support each theme. The translation of college preparation experience into the first year at college or university is explored. These themes, along with detailed accounts of those who shared their experiences at college or university, will lay the groundwork for understanding college readiness from the students' perspectives.

### **Purpose of the Study**

Early college high schools were designed to provide small, supportive environments for typically underrepresented students to receive a secondary-level education using research-based methods for instruction to ensure college, career, and life readiness. Most early college high school students were provided exposure to a college campus setting and all had access to introductory college-level dual enrollment courses for which they received both high school and college credit. Many students completed enough courses to earn two year degrees from the partnering postsecondary institutions involved in each region's early college high school. Early college graduates who chose to enroll in other postsecondary institutions after high school had several options for continuing their education. Some matriculated at two year institutions, while others transferred their earned credits to a bachelor's degree granting college or university.

This IPA was used to investigate the lived experiences of those students during their first

year at a college or university as a means of exploring how each translated their college readiness. The researcher chose the IPA to fully explore each student's experience with the phenomenon. The phenomenon was the translation of one's college readiness preparation as an early college high school graduate into the lived experience as a first-year college or university student. Early college high school students were unique in that they were most often members of a traditionally underrepresented group in secondary and postsecondary education, typically first-generation, low-income, and minority students. Additionally, they entered their first postsecondary year with a significant amount of college credit.

### **Interviewing and Recording Process**

The researcher invited RCEC alumni from the classes of 2016 and 2017 who had completed at least one year of postsecondary education after high school graduation to take part in this study. Nine of the 38 potential participants expressed willingness to participate. Four of the nine participants completed face-to-face interviews that were recorded using the Zoom communication application. The other five participants selected online interviews for reasons including transportation, location, and schedule availability. The online interviews were facilitated using Zoom and recorded using the application as well. The first interview covered all of the predetermined interview questions for six participants (interview one). Three participants spent more time describing their first-year experiences than others. The researcher limited interviews to 90 minutes; and in three cases, a second session was needed (interview one, part two). One participant required two full 90-minute interviews for interview one (interview one, part one and interview one, part two) and a third interview for interview two. The second interviews (interview two) included additional researcher-created evaluative and comparative questions as well as member checking. Interviews were transcribed, and careful reading and

rereading of the transcripts occurred until all emergent themes were evident. The researcher met with a peer reviewer who repeated the process. The reviewer offered the perspective of a higher education background. Adjustments made included reconsidering theme organization and determining appropriate word selection to accurately reflect the subthemes and effectively communicate what the participants shared in their interviews. As participants' interviews were reported to support the themes, responses have been edited, in some cases, to reflect correct grammar, spelling, and punctuation.

### **Participant Group**

Participants in the study graduated from a small, rural early college in western North Carolina. All participants attended a four year college or university during the year immediately following their graduation from the early college high school. The county in which the early college high school and its community college partner operated was very small. The combined populations of both schools on the one campus were significantly less than the traditional public high school in the county. Participants remarked that everyone knew almost everyone else on campus. Thomas remarked, "I came from an early college knowing everyone and everyone knowing me and being, you know, really interconnected on campus." Additionally, Silvia recalled, "I always felt kinda like it was a family with *nearly* everybody"; and Matthew agreed by noting, "the early college is known as being a family."

The study parameters required participants to be graduates of the class of 2016 or class of 2017 so as to provide the most recent and relevant insights into the translation of their college readiness experiences at the early college high school into their first postsecondary year. The graduating class sizes of the classes of 2016 and 2017 were 41 and 58 respectively. Fifteen of the 41 graduates from the class of 2016 attended postsecondary education during the year

immediately after their high school graduation, and 25 of the 58 graduates from the class of 2017 did as well. Postsecondary education reduced the possible participants to 40 early college high school graduates. Two of the 40 graduates completed the program in three years, therefore lacking the full college readiness seminar curriculum delivered. The final number of potential participants was reduced to 38.

As previously noted, nine of the 38 graduates offered to participate in the study. Four participants identified as being female, and five of them identified as male. All students except one were from low-income families in which their parents had not completed college. Two of the nine students were Hispanic/Latina. Three participants completed early college high school in four years, and six of them completed it in five years. Some of the participants lived with both parents, while some split time between divorced parents' homes. Other participants lived with a single parent with limited or no access to the other parent because of employment or because a parent was deceased.

**Brenden.** Brenden is a 21-year-old male with a larger-than-life personality. During high school, he was far more introverted and withdrawn but always personable. Brenden graduated from RCEC after five years with a high school diploma and an Associate of Science degree in college transfer. Brenden's parents are divorced, and he splits his time between his parents' homes and has one sister at his father's house. One of Brenden's parents went to college but withdrew. Brenden was a member of the National Honor Society at RCEC with an excellent academic record during early college. Brenden was a junior at university at the time of the interview; however, he started at a different university closer to his hometown and then transferred to his current location. His experience at his original college was reportedly difficult. During his time at that college, Brenden became very physically ill, eventually forcing him to

withdraw from spring courses. With renewed health, Brenden transferred to his current location the next semester (summer) and began working toward his degree. Brenden has an interest in biology and plants. Brenden is currently studying freshwater and terrestrial conservation.

**Leah.** Leah is a 19-year-old female with a mild demeanor layered upon a core of tenacity and will to survive. In high school, Leah often utilized her maximum number of absences allowances in classes and often made up time on the weekends. Leah is a reader and a writer and was lauded by an English teacher as one of the best student writers ever encountered in that community. Leah was also a member of the National Honor Society at RCEC. As a child, Leah lived in a variety of places determined by her father's spiritual calling. Her father died when she was 10 years old. Leah lived with her mother during early college; and as a result of a variety of circumstances, she spent a great deal of time caring for herself and often for her mother. Her older brother is a college graduate, but her mother is not. Leah's brother lived in another town with his family. Leah's father had attended a Bible college. As part of her family's beliefs, Leah attended secular educational institutions until early college in ninth grade. She graduated from the early college in four years with a high school diploma and an Associate of Arts degree in college transfer. At the time of the interview, Leah had completed three semesters of college at the same location working towards a degree in psychology. Leah left college at the end of her third semester due to lack of funds to support her education and declining academics as a result of an increasing number of work hours needed to support herself. At the time of the interview, Leah intended to reenroll during the next semester.

**Roxy.** Roxy is an extremely introverted female aged 20 at the time of the interview. She had an excellent academic record in early college and was a member of RCEC's National Honor Society and a member of the student government for the partnering community college.

Roxy is creative and kind. She struggled with depression during high school. She also came from a very low-income family and neither of her parents attended college. Roxy does not always have a stable relationship with her family; and she chose a terminal degree from the partnering institution while in early college, so she would have a means to support herself after high school. Roxy graduated from the early college after five years with a high school diploma and an Associate of Arts degree in graphic design. Roxy attends an academically rigorous four year university on a full scholarship due to her first-generation status and studies communications. Her interests are in media, arts, and anything else that helped her express her creative side.

**Seymour.** Seymour is a 21-year-old male who is a senior at university. Seymour was rather introverted in high school and is slightly less so in college. He graduated from RCEC after five years with a high school diploma and an Associate of Science degree in college transfer. Seymour maintained an exceptional academic record at RCEC and was a member of the National Honor Society. His parents are divorced, and he splits time between homes. Seymour has positive relationships with his family. He was interested in gaming in high school and developed an interest in geology in college. Seymour completed two years of university and is working toward a degree in quantitative geology with a minor in mathematics. He attended the same university for two years while living off campus.

**Silvia.** Silvia is a 20-year-old Hispanic female who is very soft spoken but a bundle of energy on the inside. Silvia strongly identifies with her Mexican culture and travels to her home country yearly. Silvia was an exceptional student at the top of her class in early college and she graduated after four years with a high school diploma and an Associate of Science degree in college transfer. She had a lifelong dream to be a vet and a knack for photography and



organization. Silvia was a member of her yearbook staff in early college as well as the International Club and National Honor Society. Silvia lives with her parents and younger sister in a home where Spanish is the primary language. Neither of her parents completed college. Silvia completed one year at an academically rigorous university and is a junior there working toward a degree in journalism.

**Luana.** Luana is a 20-year-old Hispanic female who is also very soft spoken. Luana is a soccer player, and she lived with her mother. Her parents were married, and she had an older brother. Her father lived with her brother in another town for work, and Luana stayed at home with her mother. Neither of Luana's parents attend college. She identifies strongly with her Mexican heritage and also returns home to visit family and friends on school vacations. Luana was an excellent student at early college and was a member of the Interact club, International club, and the National Honor Society while she maintained a rigorous sports schedule. She graduated from the early college after four years with a high school diploma and an Associate of Arts degree in college transfer. Luana attends a private four year university. Her major is global development studies.

**Matthew.** Matthew is a 20-year-old male who is extroverted and helpful. He attended the early college for five years and graduated at the top of his class with a high school diploma and an associate degree in college transfer. Matthew lives with both of his parents and his younger sister. Both of his parents graduated from college, and Matthew's mother earned her master's degree while he was in elementary school. Matthew participates faithfully at his church and was a member of Key Club, National Honor Society, and the school yearbook while in early college. He attends a private university out of state, where he intended to study zoology. He is a junior there pursuing a degree in pastoral leadership. Matthew's positive personality is

contagious, and his strong sense of faith was evident throughout the interview as it was in high school. At the time of the interview, Matthew had attended one year of university.

**Ben.** Ben is a 20-year-old student who had attended one year of university at the time of the interview. Ben is a shy, polite student who has learned to be more outspoken in college. He was an introverted student who performed very well in high school. Ben was a member of the National Honor Society at RCEC. Ben lives with his mother and brother, along with his brother's wife and two elementary school aged children. Ben worked a part-time job in high school to help pay bills at his home. Ben's mother attended a two year college to complete a certificate program. He was part of a large friend group in high school. Ben attended early college for five years and graduated with a high school diploma and an associate of science in college transfer. He is currently a business major.

**Thomas.** Thomas is a 21-year-old student who had completed 1 year of college at the time of the interview. He was an extremely outgoing individual in early college who belonged to Key Club, National Honor Society, Eagle Scouts, and more. At the early college, Thomas was the life of the party and a positive force on campus, socially. He served his church and worked part time at a local store. Thomas lives with his grandparents, but he sees his parents daily. Neither Thomas' grandparents nor parents had completed college or university. His family was proactively involved in his education at the early college and he maintained an excellent academic record and graduated near the top of his class. Thomas is a junior in the honors program at his college and is studying to become an elementary school teacher.

### **Researcher Bias and Relationship to the Study**

The researcher is a former educator and mentor at RCEC. Each of the participants were former students of the researcher. During the interviews, with a rapport previously developed

over several years of exposure and interaction, the researcher worked to authentically reflect on personal ideas, goals, and opinions about the early college high school and each participant's college readiness. The researcher identified a personal bias in the desire to determine that the organization had effectively prepared students for college. As a result, the researcher worked to avoid leading questions and used several prompts to elicit more participant-generated detail. Additionally, the researcher realized that past relationships with participants presented situations that might be uncomfortable for them. To ensure participant comfort and willingness to offer truthful and reflective responses, the researcher addressed those issues with each student.

### **Introduction of Emergent Themes**

Examination of the scripted qualitative data collected from interviews revealed four major themes of college readiness: exploring identity, academics, student mindset, and networking. Participants' exploration of their identity allowed them to explore their status as early college graduates, as first-generation students, as children with familial influences, and as individuals in their new environment. Through the exploration of academics, the researcher determined an overall state of shock reported by participants regarding how much first-year students were required to know already and the quantity and quality of reading and writing in college. Additional academic considerations arose as a result of descriptive and comparative accounts by the participants regarding their college academic experiences, both in early college and university. Student mindsets were explored through topics of self-management, dealing with self-doubt, finding balance, and ultimately, successful adaptation to the environment. Last, networking was discussed as a tool in college readiness: Organization and interest-based networking both presented as popular methods for building relationships during identity exploration, along with the connections sought through personal networking in the new

environment. Table 3 reports the number of participants who contributed lived experiences that fell into the superordinate themes.

Table 3

*Participant Data Supporting Superordinate Themes*

<u>Exploring identity</u>	<u>Navigating academics</u>	<u>Student mindset</u>	<u>Networking</u>
9/9 participants	9/9 participants	9/9 participants	7/9 participants

Superordinate themes exploring identity, navigating academics, and student mindset were most supported by participants' data as displayed in Table 3.

### **Exploring Identity**

“As colleges seek to foster students' intercultural awareness and skills, they must acknowledge the complex relationship between an array of factors such as students' personality, gender, race, ethnicity, and social relationships” (Peifer & Yangchen, 2017, p. 1). Dropped into a new environment, early college graduates struggled to translate their small, collaborative high school educational experience into a sense of belonging in a new place. Brenden (personal communication, August 10, 2018) recalled, “It was like I was in this weird little bubble and then I got dropped off at college and it got popped. I was like OMG! It was the intensity of the newness.” This transition from high school was daunting for all of the participants. Participants worked to rediscover themselves in this new environment. The researcher noted participants' strong connections to specific cultures as students explored their identity during the first year at college, specifically early college status, first-generation status, minority status, income, faith, and sexual identity.

**Early college.** Although most participants were unaware of their first-generation status and how it related to their acceptance at the early college high school, they had a strong

connection with the school. Brenden explained how the connection translated to his new college environment. Brenden (personal communication, August 10, 2018) stated,

You get the idea that early college is a family and it can really mess with you in the sense because you come from a place where you have a lot of people to latch onto. And then you go away it feels like a breakup in addition to leaving your family.

***Freshman or junior?*** “On paper I might be a junior but in reality, I’m a freshman,” remarked Thomas (personal communication, August 17, 2018) when asked about the credit transfer experience. The early college graduates in this study, like many of their early college peers, entered university with two years of transferable general education credits. By definition, these students demonstrated college readiness by completing these courses in high school. When early college students graduated, they applied to college as freshmen with transfer credits instead of as transfer students. At college or university, class status was determined by number of credits. Applying as freshmen assisted with housing availability, financial aid, and scholarships, but class status changed for some when classes began. Luana (personal communication, August 19, 2018) clarified her freshman/junior status,

I was technically a junior, but I applied as a freshman to get more financial aid and it allowed me to be in a dorm with people my age. It was kind of hard being in classes with people two years older than you. There was a girl who would always answer all the questions and she’s like “yeah, I learned this in so-and-so’s class.”

With nearly all general education requirements completed through credit transfer, participants started their first year in courses specifically for their major. Silvia (personal communication, August 16, 2018) recounted her experience with the confusing class level of an early college graduate:

It was kind of sucky because I was a freshman in junior classes so everyone that was in the classes already knew someone there. They chose their classes based on their friends going to classes with them. And since they were in the same major they all knew the same people who started out with them.

Leah (personal communication, August 14, 2018) noted the age difference when asked about being in core classes for her major in her first year at college: “I was 17 when I started college. I was in classes, in my core classes with students who were anywhere between 21 and 24 years old.”

***Linking up on campus with other early college students.*** Participants’ strong connection to the early college high school created avenues of comfort and identity away from home when they connected with other alumni. Roxxy (personal communication, August 14, 2018) found her connection restorative in a difficult rooming situation, stating, “Luckily, there were two other alumni from my early college who were also out there so I kind of lived with them and then I had a much better experience not being in my room depressed.” Others reported a sense of surprise at how their new academic environment compared. Thomas (personal communication, August 17, 2018) talked about this topic when asked about his biggest surprise, remarking,

The biggest surprise for me was a change in personal status because I came from an early college knowing everyone and everyone knowing me and being very interconnected on campus. Then going to a four-year university, you are literally dropped into a campus in an area you don’t know well, and no one knows you. I was really lucky and blessed in my situation because I had five or six people that came with me from the early college. Ben (personal communication, August 16, 2018) decided to extend his connection to

early college by making a specific housing request:

I signed up for the early college floor in my dorm which is the whole floor just early college students. I'm not sure if it was a good thing or not. It was only my first year, so I guess we will see this year.

**First-generation.** With 80% of the student population at RCEC as first-generation students, it was notable that participants lacked understanding of the terminology and how that status impacted their educational paths. Roxxy (personal communication, August 16, 2018) pointed out, "I didn't realize I was a first-generation student until I applied for the scholarship for college for it." Luana recalled that her first-generation status was linked to her acceptance into the RCEC but did not learn about how it related to her education. "I remember being asked about my parents' education on my early college application and my college application, but I never thought about what it meant to be a first-generation student" (Luana, personal communication, August 20, 2018).

***Sense of community.*** Exploring her status as a first-generation student, Roxxy hoped to find people from similar environments who were also representing their entire families as the first to go to college. Her experiences included first-generation student housing, a first-generation campus group, and a peer mentor through a first-generation scholarship. Each offered very different communities for her. Roxxy (personal communication, August 16, 2018) explained,

It was the first-generation dorm. But the people in my suite were all pretty affluent and didn't really have the same background like coming from a very small and very poor hometown and household. So, I didn't connect with them. Which was completely the opposite of what I was expecting.

When asked about positive campus groups or events, the first-generation community seemed a better fit for Roxxy.

One of the groups I joined was a first-generation group at the university. Well, we come together to try to think of events to try to bring first-generation students together more on campus. A lot of people don't really know there is a community for it. (Roxxy, personal communication, August 16, 2018)

The peer mentor ultimately assisted Roxxy in translating her college readiness experience into college and finding a sense of community.

My peer mentor was in class with me through my first-generation scholarship I have, and I really connected with her. She graduated this year but she's still in the area and we have the same major so it's a really cool to see someone who's been through it. We still meet for coffee and I can ask her questions about my major. (Roxxy, personal communication, August 10, 2018)

***Disconnect from community.*** Not every first-generation student gets a scholarship however; and for one participant, it changed her ability to create a community at college.

If you are a first-generation college student coming from a low-income family, that changes things. I think at one point I had three jobs and most of the time I had two jobs. I did this to pay tuition, fees, books, supplies, parking and gas for my car. (Leah, personal communication, August 14, 2018)

With no scholarship, Leah, also a first-generation student, started school hoping to make enough money at extra jobs to pay the balance of the tuition bill so she could stay in school. She recalled that study groups and campus activities were not an option when you are working full time.



**Familial influences.** As first-generation students, participants noted the extra weight they carried since they were the first and so many people were looking to them to succeed.

**Expectations.** Silvia's family, while not college educated, imparted the value of education to her. Silvia (personal communication, August 16, 2018) explained,

When I failed something, I was worried that I was letting people down. My parents, all they've wanted and worked for was for me to go to college. My mom says if I'm not going to be better off than my dad can provide then there's no point in leaving the home.

This pressure was something Silvia recalled having to work through alone during her first year at university. On the other hand, one participant noted that her parent showed no interest or disappointment when she failed. She was reminded frequently that she could simply pack up and come home and there would always be a place waiting. "That didn't comfort me. I needed someone to say it was hard but to stick to it and that I could do it" (Silvia, personal communication, August 16, 2018).

**Education.** Alternatively, Matthew, the only non-first-generation student, offered a compelling report of his mother's graduate school experience as part of his mindset about his own educational path. Matthew (personal communication, August 17, 2018) noted,

From the time I've been in school, you know from kindergarten and first grade, my parents have been very driven for me to work my hardest and score my highest that I can on tests and in classes. So, they were the major force behind me understanding what colleges was about. My mom got her masters while I was in middle school so seeing that level of work you know you're going to have to sacrifice the late nights till one or two in the morning. So, I knew that going into college.

**Finances.** Many first-generation students work jobs outside of high school, and Leah

was an example of a student who continued to need that employment even in college. “I worked 30 to 40 hours a week on top of being a full-time college student in order to be able to try to stay here and live here” (Leah, personal communication, August 14, 2018). Ben recalled how the employment in high school impacted his college readiness by shifting his focus to more daily familial needs than his specific educational path or future. The change in pressures allowed him to shift focus back to his studies.

My last year at early college was the most relaxed I had academically, but outside of school I worked as the manager at Little Caesars. At home it’s pretty hard because I was working almost full-time, but I was like helping Mom pay her bills and stuff. Here I just go to school and that’s my one goal that’s it. (Ben, personal communication, August 16, 2018)

**Belief systems.** Leah recalled one of her greatest struggles with college readiness to be the education she received prior to getting accepted into RCEC.

I think that because I went to a non-accredited Christian day school before going to the early college in ninth grade, that I was worse off in an educational sense. The focus there was more on our religious lifestyle than anything academic. Now, I find that I can’t grasp basics and it’s finally keeping me from moving forward. (Leah, personal communication, August 14, 2018)

**Identity and personal growth.** First-year college and university students were faced with new environments, new people, and elevated expectations for both academic and personal growth. Residential advisers and staff often welcome new students with a hearty “Welcome to your new home!” Participants unanimously agreed that nothing at RCEC could have prepared them for that. Roxxy (personal communication, August 14, 2018) closed her eyes and recounted

moving in day,

My mom was going to the beach with family and my dad had to work the next day, so I was kind of left with piles of my stuff surrounding me and I didn't know what to do. I was kind of panicking and I didn't really have anything else to do that day besides move in, so I was like, where do I go from here?

***It's more than just cohabitation.*** Leah's living arrangement drastically reduced her access to college living or campus-centered experiences because she got her last choice for available housing. Leah (personal communication, August 14, 2018) submitted her housing application just before the deadline because she did not have the money earlier. Leah explained,

My first semester, instead of living in a hall style dorm, I lived in an apartment style. I don't recommend that because it didn't allow me to meet very many people. My [three] roommates were all on the basketball team together ... [that] left me a little out of the loop because they trained together, they had classes together and they had lived there together and become friends before I got there. I didn't have a roommate or suitemates. I didn't have a hall at all and there were no connections between apartments. If you have a roommate, you are at least forced to talk to that person at least some and if they have friends then you meet them, and it builds.

Seymour (personal communication, August 14, 2018) described his new environment, stating,

It was a bigger campus. My first few times on campus, if you're walking around during class change there were times where big groups of people were just flooding down and you were like "oh, crap! I'd better move over here and just let everyone go by." That was just like my first few weeks and then I got used to it.

Roxy (personal communication, August 14, 2018) reiterated her perception of her new home environment: “It’s mostly high stress, I mean, like I said, it’s a work hard, play hard kind of deal.”

Matthew’s roommate emailed him before moving day and asked to bring his motorcycle to store in their dorm room. “I emailed him and said ‘I don’t think that’s going to work. I don’t know if you’ve been to campus, but the rooms aren’t that big’” (Matthew, personal communication, August 17, 2018). When asked about how the experience was resolved, Matthew (personal communication, August 10, 2018) remarked, “No, he didn’t even bring it to campus.” When asked about how his living experience impacted his first year, Matthew recounted different social norms in the shared living space but ultimately highlighted more qualities about his roommate he related to than the ones he perceived were different.

I was trying to be as nice as I could be. So, the rooming was fine; he was a little bit messy, um, he wouldn’t shower very often, didn’t change clothes much ... but he didn’t stink! That was the crazy part. But other than that, I mean, it was fine. I mean he was a Christian, too, so there wasn’t anything awkward about that. He would go to church. He would do well in his classes. If he didn’t make all As, he would make all As and high Bs. I mean he was a very good student. I mean that aspect was fine it was just sometimes the personality was a little strange to get used to. (Matthew, personal communication, August 17, 2018)

Thomas lived with two different friends during his first year, one first semester and another during second semester. He shared his reflection of the housing environment and its reflection on his first-year experience.

My roommate was my best friend from home and he was depressed and didn’t care and

would stay inside so it's kind of like you adapt to that ... my roommate transferred, and a different friend moved in second semester. You go from a person who doesn't care about anything to a person who has input into everything. (Thomas, personal communication, August 17, 2018)

Matthew (personal communication, August 17, 2018) echoed Thomas's sentiment about adjusting to a roommate's needs, explaining,

He was as introverted as they come. He made me look like an extrovert. It took me probably until fall break or Thanksgiving to get him out on the hall and be friendly and stuff. Before that, well, you know how I am, I did not feel comfortable leaving him alone because you know I felt bad for him, so I didn't go out on the hall until Thanksgiving either.

Thomas (personal communication, August 17, 2018) summed it up well: "You tend to adapt to your roommate's style and that can affect you."

***Diversity and microaggressions.*** Participants reported differing levels of diversity on their college or university campuses when answering the researcher's queries regarding campus atmosphere and their preparation for it. For some, the diversity was a welcomed change. Both Brenden and Roxxy communicated that the diversity on their current campuses was a welcome change from the small, rural, conservative county they left behind. Sadly, both early college graduates were the recipients of microaggressions and/or feared them early on in their new environments causing them to make changes to their own environments.

Brenden compared his first semester college environment to his early college experience and noted that his fears created social-emotional barriers to new experiences.

The atmosphere was much like home, maybe a little more exaggerated than at home.

There's hardly anything to do and it's really small and you had basically the same demographic so it's not very diverse. Given my being gay, going there, I guess I didn't have room to grow so I stuck to script like here. My first college, all the guys on my floor were all bro dudes. When you're a flamboyant male, when you're shoved into this world of bro dudes, you're like "can I shower and not have you mess with me" or even just that there might be bullying in there. But none of this was new from early college. I heard comments from people hired to work at school and interact with kids and were supposed to get kids ready for the world that communicated the mindset that we were lower because we loved differently than they did. So originally, I didn't want to talk to professors because if they heard how I sounded I might start failing classes. I didn't sign up for clubs I might identify with because I thought I would be a target. So, I stayed in my dorm and tried to pass classes. (Brenden, personal communication, August 10, 2018)

Brenden shared that he left the first university and transferred to another university after the fall semester but recognized that he had also become very physically ill as well as being worried about his environment and considered that the combination of circumstances and choices indicated it was time for change. He reported that his new college environment was significantly different. "At [the new university], it wasn't like that. It was easier to look at someone and say 'Hey, do you get this?' That let me focus on what I needed to focus on" (Brenden, personal communication, August 10, 2018).

Roxy indicated through her discussion of the environment that multiple opportunities existed for students to explore diverse interests and diverse ideas. On the other hand, she noted that the inherent racism at her university was a significant problem and a big issue on campus. Overall, however, she clarified that she had the "opportunity to interact with more diverse groups

of people at [college]; I would say more than our county” (Roxxy, personal communication, August 14, 2018). In a different arena of college life, Roxxy experienced firsthand how differences in beliefs can impact the living environment. She (Roxxy, personal communication, August 14, 2018) recalled, “my roommate, she was very conservative and homophobic. My suite mates, we didn’t really connect, and we were very different people. We didn’t mesh very well. So, I was kinda having trouble finding people.” Roxxy (personal communication, August 14, 2018) shared her desire to just live and let live, but her roommate “was always saying something to me about everything I did or had.” The interactions tested Roxxy’s personal identity, her beliefs, and finally her patience.

Every other interaction was like that, just mean or rude about how I live my life and how different I am. That was hurtful especially because both she and her parents directed comments at me about things I had, especially my rainbow flag and Planned Parenthood poster. (Roxxy, personal communication, August 14, 2018).

To rectify this, she linked up with friends and spent time at their apartment. Roxxy indicated that the new situation alleviated her stress during her first-year experience. “Actually, in the spring semester, [my friends’ roommate] studied abroad, so I pretty much lived there because the dorm situation was not something that was working out and was convenient because it was at the end of a line” (Roxxy, personal communication, August 14, 2018).

Despite these overt experiences with her roommate, Roxxy (personal communication, August 14, 2018) reported positively about the college’s overall open platform for exercising one’s beliefs, explaining, “It’s really nice to be in a liberal place where my ideas are actually heard, and I don’t feel like I have to hide the fact that I don’t agree with something for fear of my safety of ostracism.”

***Cultural identity.*** Each participant discussed on some level how they identified with their environment and those in it with them. All participants reported a widening of diversity in their surroundings in some aspect that required a new frame of reference to consider. Silvia and Luana, both Mexican females were raised in families who spoke only Spanish at home. Both students fondly recalled friends and family members at home who fulfilled some aspect of their cultural needs. Language, humor, and even food were offered by both young women as examples of the Mexican culture to which they were accustomed in early college and in their hometown. Each sought out ways to feed their cultural identity or use it as a way to make connections with others. Luana found this experience in a random roommate reassignment situation. Luana (personal communication, August 19, 2018) started the year with no roommate:

I think I identified with her more because she was Spanish, she was Mexican like me.

So, we got along pretty well. She moved in because her room was being fixed and when it was time to go back she said, “do you think I could stay here” and I said “yeah.” We weren’t friends, but we were enough to get along as roommates. As the year went along we got closer and became pretty good friends because even though we had our own friend groups when we came back to the room we could talk in Spanish about our days.

Both Silvia and Luana joined Hispanic/Latino communities at their respective colleges. When asked for an example of something positive during her first-year experience at college, Silvia (personal communication, August 16, 2018) immediately identified the Latino club, stating,

I joined the Latin American club, sort of a Hispanic association. It’s really nice just to find more people like me. And there are a lot of events that are centered around the Hispanic community and just things we are going through as a whole. At home I speak only Spanish with



my family and all I get is that Mexican-ness from them. So, it wasn't that big of a deal if I didn't have it at the early college because I could get it at home. But in college I couldn't get that anywhere and I had to go find it somewhere.

### **Navigating Academics**

College readiness is often thought of as academic preparedness. While some aspects of that rang true in the accounts of the participants, it was evident in the superordinate themes that additional factors presented themselves as students experienced their first year. "I was lost in every class trying to figure out what was happening," Roxxy (personal communication, August 14, 2018) fervently described to the researcher, when asked about the biggest change encountered during the first year. "The workload was insane" (Roxxy, personal communication, August 14, 2018).

Silvia reflected similar challenges during her interview as she described her academic disconnect. "My college classes were definitely more challenging than I had expected. I couldn't connect anything from what I had learned at the early college. I felt like I had no background" (Silvia, personal communication, August 16, 2018). Leah (personal communication, August 14, 2018) echoed the sentiment, "I knew at the time that it would be more challenging at college but everything at university turned out to be way harder than I anticipated."

Some participants expressed difficulty translating the academic alternatives they were offered at the early college into their new environment. Their high school academic opportunities, while initially promising, presented unforeseen effects on some participants' academic paths. Brenden expressed a fallacy in his understanding of the way his early college academic opportunities would affect his GPA.

[The early college] sells you this idea that you have your first two years down and it's going to be cheaper and you'll get ahead. That's false advertising because when you get there, little did you realize, your Gen Ed courses would have helped cushion your GPA and give you time to devote to your more fundamental core classes. (Brenden, personal communication, August 10, 2018)

Seymour (personal communication, August 14, 2018) had considered the issues of completed general education courses from a different perspective and also deemed it a significant concern for an early college graduate:

The main problem with it [early college dual enrollment], is that your GPA doesn't transfer from early college to [university] so you start with a 0. You only start with the credits you transferred and none of the good grades you earned in those courses.

**College-level expectations.** Participants noted the most awe in the differences in expectations at their new educational institution. While not all participants focused on the same aspect of expectation, they unanimously recalled the major adjustment to at least one of the following areas of their academic life: content, reading, and writing.

**Content knowledge.** Roxxy's first major surprise about college was the quantity of prerequisite knowledge needed for her university's courses. "I think I was surprised most by how much I was expected to know" (Roxxy, personal communication, August 16, 2018). Seymour (personal communication, August 14, 2018) agreed that he wished he had known more but also clarified, "my college classes required more critical thinking and required more time to do things. I guess because they're just harder to understand." Despite the shock of it all, Luana (personal communication, August 19, 2018) summarized her answer to the researcher's question about feeling academically prepared by saying, "for the most part, it's either you know it, or you

don't, so you just have to study more and study harder to figure it out." One participant, Leah, who had attended an unaccredited, Christian private school for first through eighth grade, became overwhelmed with the gaps she carried from her elementary education in addition to those she felt developed later.

That's when I would go to my adviser and say, "I don't know how to be in this class because it all just seems too much" and I didn't know what I didn't know. I think it was all just daunting. (Leah, personal communication, August 14, 2018)

**Reading.** RCEC's mission of college readiness encouraged reading, writing, thinking, and talking in every early college high school level class, every day for every student. The researcher's unique position in relation to the study location and participants justified another examination of researcher bias. As a former teacher at RCEC, the researcher possessed privileged information gleaned from work experience as a teacher at the site. To avoid the inclusion of both bias and privileged information that could distort the participants' observations, the researcher chose to report only student narrative for this subordinate theme.

Roxy, Ben, and Matthew attended three different universities. They offered reflections on their attempts at translating their college preparation in reading during early college to their new courses at university. Ben described his reading practices during his first year at university and then related them to his college preparation courses in early college.

I read pretty much every textbook I had last year, chapter by chapter. If I didn't, I would get very far behind or wouldn't have any idea what the professor was talking about the next class so, you have to read it. I never used a textbook at the early college except the math book that had problems in it and a few times in English to read a few short stories out of the book. (Ben, personal communication, August 16, 2018)

Roxy further clarified that the quantity of the reading was not her only concern. She, too, compared her college requirements with those in her early college courses.

We had to read texts over 100 pages long twice a week and take a quiz online on the new material. It was not only the quantity, but the quality. The level was definitely higher, and I had to learn to process some of the things I was reading or how to relate them back. At the early college I didn't really read ... we had to read little sections but never a whole novel. The classes at college were text heavy and I didn't really know how to read textbooks. (Roxy, personal communication, August 14, 2018)

Matthew echoed Ben and Roxy's sentiments about the volume of reading and how it connected to their learning. "I was surprised by the amount of reading I had to do in college. I had to read four to five books per semester and be able to write about the material and be tested on it" (Matthew, personal communication, August 17, 2018).

**Writing.** The researcher bias discussed in the previous subordinate theme continued though this subordinate theme. To review, RCEC's mission of college readiness encouraged reading, writing, thinking, and talking in every early college high school level class, every day for every student. The researcher's unique position in relation to the study location and participants justified another examination of researcher bias. As a former teacher at RCEC, the researcher possessed privileged information gleaned from work experience as a teacher at the site. To avoid the inclusion of both bias and privileged information that could distort the participants' observations, the researcher chose to report only student narrative for this subordinate theme.

Roxy (personal communication, August 14, 2018) reflected on writing during her first year and she identified a gap in her college readiness, explaining, "We had to write all of these

journal entries about once or twice a week and I still don't know how to write academically versus creatively.”

Matthew and Luana discussed their experiences with professors' writing requirements during their first year, specifically in Spanish. First, Matthew compared tasks from early college Spanish and university-level Spanish.

Spanish class, oh my word. I was retaking it even though I had the credit from the Ecuador trip I took in early college. We had to do some workbooks and little bit of speaking now and then but it was kind of simple stuff. You never had to read or analyze anything. In college we had to write a research paper in Spanish which I was not ready for. (Matthew, personal communication, August 17, 2018)

Then, Luana discussed her unique strengths in Spanish while reflecting on her preparation for the writing aspect of the course.

Spanish class was my biggest struggle and I am a native Spanish speaker. We had to do one presentation each semester in high school, but in college we have presentations in Spanish like every other week in class and we can only speak Spanish. We also wrote some five-page essays, and even some seven to ten-page papers in college. In high school, every class' papers were two-page papers. At the early college, we should have wrote more. We did our quizzes but never wrote a paragraph or anything like that in Spanish. (Luana, personal communication, August 19, 2018)

**Additional academic considerations.** Participant responses to the researcher's questions about academic preparation were varied. Brenden (personal communication, August 10, 2018) recollected, “I was not prepared, not at all.” Roxxy (personal communication, August 14, 2018) offered her perception of the magnitude of missing prerequisite knowledge: “I was

surprised most about how much I was supposed to know.” As the researcher read and reread transcriptions of participant interviews regarding academic experiences, three subordinate themes emerged from the student accounts: AP courses (specifically participants’ perceptions of them), the academic culture, and study skills.

***Perceptions of AP courses.*** Four participants related their own academic readiness for the first-year courses to that of their friends and college classmates and to high school camp participants. Silvia (personal communication, August 16, 2018) explained, “When I talk to my friends that had their AP courses, they seemed to know more than me and how to study.” When Roxxy (personal communication, August 14, 2018) was recalling a sense of feeling lost in her first-year courses she remarked, “a lot of people who seemed to know what was going on had had AP classes.” Luana shared the same observations about her college classmates at a different university.

What I also found is that my friend did AP classes. Maybe she’s more focused or something than me, but I feel like a lot of it came from her school and those classes and that helped her out, even though her AP classes didn’t count for transfer credits. But, I feel like she is more prepared than me. (Luana, personal communication, August 19, 2018)

Matthew, a non-first-generation student, noticed the differences in student preparation through an opportunity offered by one of his teachers.

At early college, a faculty member sought me out to apply for a summer study program. I did that program between my junior and senior year where I spent a whole month away from home studying ... and doing research projects. At the summer program I was surrounded by the best and the brightest in the state with students who were taking high honors

courses and AP courses. It was eye opening to see. I mean, I knew that our county's schools were easy but when I went there I was like "wow, I'm even farther down than I thought I was." I have the early college to thank for that opportunity. I would not have been prepared for college otherwise. (Matthew, personal communication, August 17, 2018)

***Academic culture.*** Participants reported experiencing various cultures in their first year at college or university. Thomas was accepted into the honors college at his university. He admitted, "I have a huge pressure to succeed. I'm in the honors college and I have to maintain a 3.5 so definitely there's pressure to maintain my grades" (Thomas, personal communication, August 17, 2018). Brenden and Silvia experienced new academic cultures. Brenden (personal communication, August 10, 2018) admitted, "the concept of the flipped classroom was totally new to me." Silvia also realized she was being exposed to a new academic culture in which the responsibility for learning shifted toward the learner, and final exams were comprehensive. Through her description of the new academic culture, Silvia compared her first-year experiences back to her early college experiences as she examined her own readiness for college while answering the researcher's prompts regarding learning experiences.

There's a lot more material and you have to get used to a flipped classroom where you teach yourself a lot of the material and then practice it in class. Also, finals didn't carry much weight in early college and weren't comprehensive. They were just the same as the other tests but a little bit longer. Now you have to be able to remember things from the first week of class, committing those to long term. (Silvia, personal communication, August 16, 2018)

Leah framed her first-year academic experiences with an examination of the academic environments from her early college experience and first year university courses.

At the college level the professors are more intense and there is no forgiveness about whether you do something on-time or not. You are paying for it! And the college professors will let you struggle. In early college there were a lot more extra credit opportunities and there was often a learning curve on tests and that's just not a thing in college. You get the grade you earn. (Leah, personal communication, August 14, 2018)

***Study skills.*** After the first round of interviews, the researcher noted that several participants described having to learn large quantities of material in less time than they are accustomed to and at a much higher level. To further explore the concept of being ready to handle those academic experiences, the researcher asked participants about their experiences with study skills.

Luana (personal communication, August 19, 2018) offered the following understanding of her study skills: "No one taught me how to use study skills at the early college, but I just tried things and figured out what was the fastest and best way for me." Roxxy assessed the need for study skills and the desire to learn them but admitted she would have had little use for them in her early college courses.

I really didn't have to study at all until college and then I had to figure out how to study during my first year because everything had always come naturally to me before in my education. I had a lot of trouble figuring out how to study. I knew of things from Seminar, but I wish we had learned in seminar how to *use* the study methods. (Roxxy, personal communication, August 14, 2018)

Silvia also recalled no need for study skills in early college but wished she had learned them once she was in university.

I really needed to learn how to learn the things I didn't know the first time around. I



didn't know how to learn hard stuff on my own. But we were never really taught [at the early college] how to study and I didn't need it at the time. (Silvia, personal communication, August 16, 2018)

### **Student Mindset**

For all participants, attending a four year college or university involved relocation to new living arrangements in new places, often located in towns or cities hours from home. Early college high school graduates encountered a variety of first-year experiences at the myriad institutions they attended, and it would be impossible to explore preparation for each and every one. However, through the interpretative analysis of participants' interview data, the researcher discovered that students' self-reported mindsets in new situations were also indicative of their readiness to handle college-level experiences.

**Self-management.** Participants recalled having to learn how to cope with new environments. Seymour found a coping tool that allowed him to improve his experience on campus. "My social anxiety goes way up being around large crowds. But I discovered I like to wear ear buds and walk around like that a lot of people do it, now it doesn't bother me anymore" (Seymour, personal communication, August 14, 2018). Roxxy encountered a learning curve in living on her own away from home. "There's not a lot of emphasis on self-care there so that was something I really had to learn for me that I really hadn't learned before ... I just didn't know how to take care of myself" (Roxxy, personal communication, August 14, 2018).

**Seeking assistance.** Participants reported varying levels of willingness to seek help, from Seymour's repeated visits to the same professor's office hours to Silvia (personal communication, August 16, 2018) who got lost in the crowd:

I never really interacted with any of them just because in all the classes where I should

have; I guess I felt like just a number because there were so many students in class and it wasn't their only class.

Luana expressed both comfort and frequency in her interactions with professors to seek assistance. "About every other week, or when something is coming up that I'm worried about then I'm going to ask them about it or something like that" (Luana, personal communication, August 19, 2018). Leah (personal communication, August 14, 2018) focused more on timing of requests for assistance, explaining,

The only member of faculty I was close to during my first year was my adviser and that's because she was the only member of faculty that I sought out for help; mostly when I was at the end of my rope because I had not tried to talk to my professors. The disadvantage was, I went to her after I had already failed.

***Frame of reference.*** Two participants reported the uncomfortable process of adjusting one's frame of reference in a new setting. Leah recalled how the adjustment forced her to examine her own frames of reference for experiences.

I was exposed to a lot more in college than I had ever been before, and I think I realized how sheltered I been in my life before because you don't know when you're under it. I think seeing all the different lifestyles and realizing all the different options I have for my life surprised to me the most. I think it was so overwhelming when I first got here but I didn't know what to think of it. Having gone through it all I think what surprised me now is how lonely I was in the midst of all that. I was really lonely. (Leah, personal communication, August 14, 2018)

Thomas's frame of reference adjustment came about through his experiences with roommates.

When you're surrounded by it you will eventually do it too. [My first roommate] didn't want to go anywhere and eventually I didn't want to go anywhere, and I would just prefer to stay in and watch a movie with him. My roommate transferred, and a different friend moved in second semester. You go from a person who doesn't care about anything to a person who has input on everything. The biggest change was going from a roommate who would leave trash and clothes in the floor to someone who is very tidy who was raised in a household where there is no trash you make your bed as soon as you get up out of. So again, I had to adapt. I want to be a teacher so I'm going to need to learn to get used to different perspectives and in that way, it was helpful for me. (Thomas, personal communication, August 17, 2018)

***Failure is part of the process.*** One participant, Brenden (personal communication, August 10, 2018), shared what he learned about failing something: "I had a professor in college tell me it's okay to fail. He said people fail; you're going to fail at something." Brenden recalled that as being strangely motivating to prevent failing.

***Self-doubt.*** The researcher recognized self-doubt as an acceptable feeling and noticed that half of the participants directly addressed their self-doubt as stemming from feelings of intimidation and value.

***Intimidation.*** Simply adjusting to the size of a campus generated feelings of intimidation. Academically, participants admitted that some of their encounters left them feeling less intelligent and caused them to compare themselves to what they were seeing in others. Leah (personal communication, August 14, 2018) elaborated on why she dreaded communication with professors: "Frankly, I didn't know what to ask in some classes. And I didn't want to be like 'Hey, I don't understand the basics of what you're saying.'" Roxxy (personal communication,

August 14, 2018) expressed that she found some student behaviors to be very intimidating, even in public places meant for everyone's improvement:

The libraries are very intimidating, especially the undergraduate library. I've found different ones to go to because there are people in there that know they're going to be a doctor and they're taking all the science classes and they are just like, study, study, study. They don't want you to mess with them or make any noise. If you make a noise they look at you like "I'm going to be mad you," which is why I go to different libraries, usually the art library is really nice. There are like eight libraries on campus though so there are definitely choices. Some of them you just avoid because you know the hard-core people are always in there grinding away.

*Maybe this isn't for me.* Roxxy (personal communication, August 14, 2018) recalled asking herself during the first month of the first year of college, "Should I be here? Am I ready to be here?" All participants expressed some form of nonacademic growth during their first year. Some learned from experiences and created new paths, while others were faced with abandoning their preconceived notions about college and trying to start over; however, some participants recalled that they began to question their purpose and location during the first year. The researcher did not see this questioning as harmful to the participants. Matthew and Silvia had fairly detailed plans about their college experience and after some self-questioning brought on by an organic chemistry course, each discovered a new academic path that suited their interests, strengths, and talents. Silvia recounted her thought process as she encountered difficulty with her academics.

The first year I took physics and statistics, which were both prerequisites for veterinary school. I didn't do all that great, but I figured maybe it's my first semester and I'm still

getting used to everything, so I'll keep doing it. Until the next semester, I took organic chemistry which was another prerequisite, and then I did terrible in that and I was like "okay, this isn't for me" because I found I didn't even like any of the prerequisites.

(Silvia, personal communication, August 16, 2018)

**Social and academic balance.** Thomas recalled that his decision to get out and meet people in his dorm and hang out with old friends solved one problem during his first year at university but created another. Thomas (personal communication, August 17, 2018) described the impact of his choices:

Improving my social life affected my grades because I went from my first semester, where I'm on top of it with my grades because I was inside all the time to where we have big family get-togethers and big group things instead of buckling down. Once you get out of your shell more, some things have got to give. And for me, it was my school work. It came down while my whole social confidence went up.

Seymour (personal communication, August 14, 2018) described the social temptations:

At [college] there are a lot of parties and there are tons of bars, more than I can think of or count. That's way different from my hometown or anything in my county. When you make friends, a lot of times they want to go out and have a drink, and it may not even be Friday. Occasionally I've done that, but I'm mostly focused on my major. And I know that there's really not a lot of time, so I spend most of my time on campus now.

**Adaptation.** Participants described specific adjustments they made to their practices or perspectives during the first year. Brenden (personal communication, August 10, 2018) described one of the social adjustments with which he struggled: "In reality, you have to work on your life and others have to work on their lives and it's tough to comprehend this change."

***Deciding to learn how to learn.*** All participants recalled a course in a lecture hall. Some found them intimidating; others found them less interesting. Ben (personal communication, August 16, 2018) shared his learning preferences and how he adapted to the lecture setting:

I really like to keep to myself and along with that I also try to sit closer to the front. I had some lecture classes, which were 80 students; they're like big classes and I sat in the front row so that way it made the classroom seems smaller and I felt like I have more personal connection with the teacher.

***Find someone who knows.*** Luana and Brenden adopted the “it takes a village” approach. Each found ways to work with peers to improve their own learning. Luana (personal communication, August 19, 2018) reached out to an upperclassman:

I found this senior in my class, so she's been there, and it was like one of her last classes. So, I stuck with her. She actually did a study group and I learned a lot from her so that was kind of good I was in those classes with those people.

Brenden (personal communication, August 10, 2018) explained his logic in working with classmates:

For me, I learned quickly that even though it's my education, you can't really learn by yourself. It makes it not only easier but more helpful when you are able to have a group so if one person is slacking another can pick up in the sense that if I'm not understanding this, but you do then you can help explain it to me and vice versa.

***Just do something!*** Participants unanimously agreed that students must be willing to make a move. Leah (personal communication, August 14, 2018) reminded the researcher, “you can be involved, but you must independently seek it.” Suggestions included go somewhere, join something based on interest, and know that help is available.

***Go somewhere.*** Just leaving the dorm room was a catalyst for Matthew and his roommate.

I got tired of seeing my roommate sit in my room and play video games and I was done with all of my work and I didn't want to sit and watch Netflix every night, so I decided to go out into the hall. (Matthew, personal communication, August 17, 2018)

Luana (personal communication, August 19, 2018) accepted the invitation to enjoy a campus mixer event and explained,

The first night they had this block party and it seemed like it would be really lame but there was free food. There were mostly freshmen, and nobody was really dancing or anything but there was good music and food trucks, and so I just started talking to the other people there. There were some older students there, maybe 20 of them walking around and talking to everyone and I picked up on that started doing it too. I met about six of my good college friends that I have now on that night.

***Join something based on interest.*** Roxxy located spaces on her campus that interested her artistic nature.

There are definitely opportunities, like there is a 3D makerspace with a 3D printer there. There are like four different spaces you can go to: they have woodworking, metal shops, vinyl cutting and sewing machines and you can learn any of it if you go to an orientation. It's awesome and you can register online which is even better because you don't necessarily have to talk to anyone to sign up. (Roxxy, personal communication, August 14, 2018)

Seymour, (personal communication, August 14, 2018) when asked about campus events or organizations, remembered, "I was definitely trying to find something I was passionate about

to join. So, I joined the gaming club and the geology club.”

***Help is available.*** Considering his college readiness preparation, Brenden (personal communication, August 10, 2018) explained how requesting help differs on college and university campus: “If you want to get help at college, you can get it. It’s just that that they’re not just going to give it out to you ... the reality is you have to seek the help.” Additionally, Brenden elaborated on the action of seeking help from a professor. “Seminar teachers taught me how to interact with professors but at college I still had to make myself get up and go do it” (Brenden, personal communication, August 10, 2018).

Seymour (personal communication, August 16, 2018) revealed that getting to office hours is not a problem he encounters at college:

Faculty have lots of office hours and you can go in about anything. You can sit down and ask questions and go over something you missed or just anything you need. And it was the same way at the early college, but I never really used the office hours because I felt on top of things then, but when I got to college I was in there a lot! I mean all of the time. So much so that I was like “hey, I’m back again.”

## **Networking**

Participants referred to networking and building relationships with peers at college or university. Many participants identified a networking experience as one of their most positive.

***Organization based.*** Brenden (personal communication, August 10, 2018) shared, “at college, when I went to talk to a professor about an interest she gave me lots of contact information and told me to come back to her to follow up on it.” This interaction helped develop a positive working relationship with a faculty member.

***Scholarships, groups, and programs.*** Thomas (personal communication, August 17,



2018) recounted his introduction to a local community service organization:

A friend of mine from the early college, actually from Key club when we were in high school, we found a program of honors Board of Directors. So, we got involved in that and we actually became committee heads so now we're co-chairs of the community service committee and we plan community service events throughout the year.

Luana's (personal communication, August 19, 2018) interest in one of her school's programs provided motivation to address another aspect of her academic life:

Now I'm trying to apply to study abroad and to do that my GPA needs to be higher. It's one below what it needs to be, so I have to work hard this semester to make sure it goes up. I would take any class in order to go anywhere they are willing to send me.

***Courses.*** Leah (personal communication, August 14, 2018) described one of her more positive experiences during her first year at university:

I went to this thing for my class and anyone on campus could go to it. Although I had to do it for class, it was my interest and I wanted to meet those people and everyone else who went because they were also interested in it. I was able to talk to other people about something that interested me, and I wanted to hear their perspectives and they wanted to hear mine.

Thomas (personal communication, August 17, 2018) explained how he became involved in his personal community service experience:

When I changed majors from elementary education to inclusive education, I started volunteering with the UP program. It was a course requirement and we had to have ten hours logged. My professor thought I did really well, so she invited me to be a paid support member which now offers me employment on campus. I go back, though, because I get to work with all

of these amazing people and that's what keeps me going. I could make more money at a job off campus.

**Interest based.** Some participants chose clubs based on previously developed interests.

***Clubs and events.*** Silvia retraced her journey to her current college newspaper staff position for the researcher.

In early college, a teacher recommended me for a position at the local newspaper doing public relations assignments for the school and other local schools in general. When I got my assignment printed on the front page of the local newspaper, I couldn't have been happier. So, during orientation at [university] I saw the stand for the Herald and I asked my orientation leader, "how do I join that?" That year, I was involved enough with the newspaper to know that it's what I wanted to do. At the end of the year my assistant editor convinced me to apply for an editorial position. I felt like I was just skipping a step though, I was like "I should probably do the assistant editor job first." And she was like, "If you want to go for it, go for the editor job, it's not unheard-of for a sophomore to go straight to an editorial job." So, I applied, and I got it. I'm a photography editor in charge of all the photographers and every picture that goes in the paper and online

and all of our video work as well! (Silvia, personal communication, August 16, 2018)

***Projects.*** College-level class projects were noted by participants as a means through which students could network with their peers and the community. Roxxy (personal communication, August 14, 2018) explained her first-year highlight to the researcher:

I made a movie on campus with campus cinema and that was an awesome experience. It was also incredibly stressful because we only had week to do it all. I'm happy with it. That

whole week was terrible and wonderful all at the same time.

Thomas, an honors college student, had independent projects to imagine, present, and complete for honors credit. He explained,

Because I am in an honors college I have to obtain three honors credits each semester, and the only way you can do that is to enroll in an honors course, which is most of the time a liberal arts course, which I have already done all of them at the early college. So, you must contact your professor and meet one-on-one to discuss how you will make another one of your courses an honors level course. There's a lot more interaction because I had to meet with them outside of class to come up with a complete plan to make the course credit worthy for the honors college. (Thomas, personal communication, August 17, 2018)

***Activism and service.*** Two participants specifically noted the opportunities they had to actively support or protest and contribute to the community. Roxxy (personal communication, August 14, 2018) explained, “coming from [my hometown], it's really nice to be in a liberal place.” Roxxy exercised her interests in political activism organizations and feminist student groups. Luana happened upon an organization that was similar to her primary service organization at the early college.

So, it was nice, and I liked it because it was like Interact. It wasn't the same thing, but we would donate funds, or help raise funds to donate to organizations; and it was nice to be able to help out. (Luana, personal communication, August 19, 2018)

***People like me.*** While diversity was discussed by many participants throughout descriptions of their campus experiences, the researcher noted that students also sought comfort in seeking out others like themselves.

***Ethnicity/culture/interests.*** Silvia and Luana, attending different universities, both

shared with the researcher their involvement in Latin American student organizations. Luana (personal communication, August 19, 2018) shared, “I’m in LASO. It’s a Latin American student organization. I’m Hispanic so it was nice to have like other people who are like me.” Silvia (personal communication, August 16, 2018) also described a sense of relief in finding an organization about a culture with which you identify: “When I joined the Latin American club on campus it was just nice to find people like me.”

Thomas, an Eagle Scout, participated in hundreds of hours of community service in high school and found others to join him in the continuation of that culture of serving.

A friend of mine from the early college, actually from Key club ... in high school, we found a program called Honors Board of Directors. So, we got involved in that and we actually became committee heads so now we’re co-chairs of the community service committee and we plan community service events throughout the year. (Thomas, personal communication, August 17, 2018)

***Early college.*** Ben, who felt lost as an early college graduate when he first arrived at university, got together with others in the same situation and found ways to learn from it.

I joined the early college student association and I’m an executive member on it this year. It’s given us a lot more connections for early college resources because when we came here there was a lot of confusion about what early college students do, what they are considered academically and what’s the difference between them and freshman and transfer students. That club got me in contact with people that kinda understood and kinda helped us figure out or at least feel better about not knowing what we need to do sometimes. We did internship and resumé workshops and then went to an internship fair and talked to local businesses. That was probably the most positive thing that I’ve done

since I've been here. (Ben, personal communication, August 16, 2018)

### **Summary**

Careful, thorough analysis of the qualitative data collected through interviews yielded four main themes. These themes communicated that participants called upon their college readiness preparation at different times and in different ways. Students were primarily aware of their readiness during times of identity exploration and while they attempted to navigate academics. Two additional themes provided examples of mental and social exercises in which students called upon their college readiness: the development of their mindset and their networking experiences.

## Chapter 5: Discussion

### Overview

The purpose of the study was to elucidate the ways in which early college high school graduates transferred the college readiness skills acquired during their tenure at early college to new environments encountered during the first year of their postsecondary education. The researcher selected the IPA method to study the phenomenon of early college graduates transferring learned skills, techniques, and content to different institutions during their first postsecondary year.

Early college high schools provide an educational path for traditionally underrepresented student populations in the United States, including first-generation students, many of whom come from low-income households and often represent minority populations. Students accepted into early college high schools receive their high school education in smaller schools, most likely located on the campus of a local postsecondary institution. The Early College High School Initiative in North Carolina offered its students smaller class sizes, exposure to a college campus environment, and college preparatory instruction using research-based methods. Students received transferable college credits for the classes taken at the partnering institution.

D. Conley's (2012) four facets of college readiness became the foundation for the researcher's exploration of college readiness in the literature. Despite the plethora of literature on the topic, very little suggested elements outside of D. Conley's (2012) four facets (content knowledge, academic skills, cognitive behaviors, and college knowledge), other than national standardized scores such as the ACT. Castro (2013) posited two impediments to the current college readiness movement: a national definition of the metrics used to assess the facets of college readiness and inequitable educational practices stemming from socio-structural

inequities. Castro (2013) argued that the inequitable educational practices, most likely to affect low-income and minority students, must be addressed before an informed national conversation can take place regarding reasonable metrics that test the multiple facets of college readiness.

D. Conley's (2007b) definition of college readiness suggested that students were deemed college ready if they could successfully complete entry level general education courses for college freshmen. Early college students begin completing general education courses and acquiring the credits during their first years in high school. Using D. Conley's (2007b) definition, early college high school graduates are considered college ready years before enrolling in their first year of college. Still, like young adults all over the U.S., some early college graduates do not experience success at their chosen colleges and universities. Researchers agreed; the problem of college readiness is multifaceted.

Early college high schools in North Carolina, serving traditionally underserved populations, utilized the common instructional framework to facilitate college preparation courses (Jobs for the Future, 2014). Additionally, most programs provided college readiness seminars that focused on many of the nonacademic components of D. Conley's (2007a) framework. In summary, early college high school graduates received research-based instructional practices in smaller, higher education-focused environments along with targeted college readiness preparation.

This study sought to answer the following overarching research question: How do students from an early college high school translate their college preparation into their first-year postsecondary college or university lived experiences? The researcher chose to employ an IPA to explore how each participant lived out their college readiness during their first postsecondary year. Firsthand accounts were collected through individual interviews. The participant pool was

a targeted population of graduates from 2016 and 2017 at RCEC totaling 38 individuals. Nine graduates volunteered their time for multiple interviews, and data were collected and stored on the researcher's computer.

Interview data were transcribed and then read and reread by the researcher. Analysis included initial noting by the researcher. Exploratory comments were developed along the right margin of the transcript. Continued immersive reading facilitated the researcher's reduction of exploratory comments into significant emergent themes. This process was repeated by a colleague with qualitative research experience and without inherent bias regarding the location or population. The researcher and the colleague discussed emergent themes and explored the data supporting each. Changes were made to the original themes as the researcher and colleague organized data into subthemes. The researcher met one last time with participants for member checking of the data selected from their interviews.

The researcher discovered through interpretative analysis that early college graduates transferred their college readiness from high school to college or university in four capacities during their first year. Students drew from their current states of college readiness while exploring their identity, navigating academics, developing their mindset, and networking.

In Chapter 5, the researcher offers an interpretation of the themes. The interpretation of themes includes a relation to the four facets of D. Conley's (2012) college readiness framework and examination for specific populations to address any of the inequitable educational practices presented in Castro's (2013) research. The implications of the researcher's findings are presented, followed by a description of the limitations and delimitations of the study. Last, the researcher advances suggestions for practice in early college high schools and future research.



### **Interpretation of Themes in Relation to Conley's Framework**

D. Conley's (2007b) framework provided four facets of college readiness: key content knowledge (content knowledge), key cognitive strategies (cognitive strategies), key learning skills and techniques (academic behaviors), and key transition skills and awareness (contextual skills/awareness). Table 4 delineates the alignment of the emergent superordinate themes and their subordinate themes where applicable. Each facet is presented with the associated themes gleaned from data analysis and the direct correlation to D. Conley's (2007b) readiness facet. Many of the themes aligned with D. Conley's (2007b) suggestions for improving college readiness for all students.

Table 4

*Alignment of Themes with Conley's Four Facets of College Readiness*

Facet of Conley's framework	Themes (superordinate: subordinate)	Presentation of the theme in the data	Alignment of theme to Conley's framework recommendations
Content knowledge	Navigating academics: College level expectations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Quantity and quality of work presented to and expected from students in college level courses</li> <li>Prerequisite skills for second languages and sciences</li> <li>Equivalency of content for transferable courses</li> </ul>	<p>"Have an intellectually coherent program of study that is systematically designed to focus on . . . the 'big ideas' of each subject are taught" (D. Conley, 2007b, p. 25).</p> <p>"Students often enter their senior year of high school believing they are ready for college because they have completed required courses" (D. Conley, 2007b, p. 25).</p>
	Navigating academics: Additional academic considerations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Adjustment to quantity of reading required</li> <li>Adjustment to level of content in first year reading</li> <li>Prerequisite skills for college level academic writing</li> <li>Early college courses did not create authentic requirement to acquire study skills</li> </ul>	<p>Knowing how to slow down to understand key points, when to re-read a passage, and how to underline key terms and concepts strategically so that only the most important points are highlighted are examples of strategies that aid comprehension and retention of key content. (D. Conley, 2007b, p. 14)</p> <p>"College writing requires students to present arguments clearly, substantiate each point, and utilize the basics of a style manual when constructing a paper. College-level writing is largely free of grammatical, spelling, and usage errors" (D. Conley, 2007b, p. 14).</p> <p>If the content of the program of study is carefully organized around the kinds of key organizing and supporting concepts and [big ideas that present exposure to enduring understandings], it is then possible to use this structure of challenging and appropriate content as a framework for developing key thinking and reasoning skills and other supporting cognitive habits that will affect success in college. (D. Conley, 2007b, p. 25)</p>

(continued)

Facet of Conley's framework	Themes (superordinate: subordinate)	Presentation of the theme in the data	Alignment of theme to Conley's framework recommendations
Academic behaviors	Student mindset: Self-management	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Development of coping skills to address diversity in academic environments</li> <li>Willingness to engage with professors or graduate assistants in a timely manner</li> <li>Assessing one's needs followed by intentional changes to address needs</li> </ul>	Recommended academic behaviors included: "persistence, self-awareness, motivation, help seeking, progress monitoring, self-efficacy" (David Conley, 2014, p. 14)
	Student mindset: Self doubt	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Feeling academically intimidated by professors/other students</li> <li>Questioning one's academic readiness</li> </ul>	
	Student mindset: Adaptation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Self-reflection of one's own learning followed by intentional behavior to improve one's learning</li> </ul>	
	Student mindset: Just do something?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Help seeking</li> </ul>	"An additional set of study skills is the ability to participate successfully in a study group and recognize the critical importance of study groups to success in specific subjects" (D. Conley, 2007b, p. 17)
Cognitive strategies	Navigating academics: College level expectations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Need for instruction in reading higher level texts for understanding</li> </ul>	Knowing how to slow down to understand key points, when to re-read a passage, and how to underline key terms and concepts strategically so that only the most important points are highlighted are examples of strategies that aid comprehension and retention of key content. (D. Conley, 2007b, p. 14)
		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Generating written work that extends in length to support more complex content</li> </ul>	"Students need to know how to pre-write, how to edit, and how to re-write a piece before it is submitted and, often, after it has been submitted once and feedback has been provided" (D. Conley, 2007b, p. 14).

(continued)

Facet of Conley's framework	Themes (superordinate: subordinate)	Presentation of the theme in the data	Alignment of theme to Conley's framework recommendations
Contextual skills and awareness	Navigating academics: Academic culture	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Assessing the expectations of the new academic environment while relating it to previous norms/cultures</li> </ul>	"The intellectual climate of the school is a central element in college readiness" (D. Conley, 2007b, p. 25).
	Networking: Organization based	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Developing academic relationships at the college level</li> <li>Involvement for the purpose of developing skills</li> </ul>	"Success in college is enhanced for students who possess interpersonal and social skills that enable them to interact with a diverse cross-section of academicians and peers" (D. Conley, 2007b, p. 17).
	Exploring Identity: Identity and personal growth	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Home and school are no longer separate for residential students</li> <li>Diversity: acceptance and rejection</li> </ul>	

Table 4 provided the complete alignment of all relevant emergent superordinate themes and the applicable subordinate themes to D. Conley's (2007c) widely accepted, comprehensive concept of college readiness and its four major facets: The researcher summarized each theme's relation to one or more college readiness facets and provided research-based support from the framework design's author supporting the alignment choices. Additionally, the table provided a visual assessment of the dispersion of themes across the four facets.

The researcher noted the content knowledge facet encompassed one superordinate and two subordinate themes: navigating academics, college-level expectations, and additional academic considerations respectively. Within content knowledge, participants noted a misalignment between expectations at early college and those expressed by professors during their first year. Of specific concern for the early college graduates was the lack of content equivalency between college credit bearing courses taken at early college and their general education courses being replaced at the college or university level. Participants aligned with the

framework in remarking on the increased quantity and quality of content in their first-year postsecondary courses as well as noting the differences in college-level writing. Finally, participants described the need for authentic application of study skills in early college courses rather than making use of skills optional.

The academic behaviors facet aligned with one superordinate and four subordinate themes: student mindset, self-management, self-doubt, adaptation, and just do something. In college- and university-level courses, participants encountered scenarios requiring a significant grasp on self-management. During the course of their first-year academics, students demonstrated the need for self-assessment, self-management of what they assessed, and the interpersonal and intrapersonal skills needed to work with a diverse set of peers.

Cognitive strategies included one superordinate and one subordinate theme: navigating academics and college-level expectations respectively. Within this facet, students merely reiterated the need for skills related to reading and comprehending more text at higher levels. Concurrently, participants noted that writing needs were essentially the same: writing more and writing at the level expected of them.

The last facet, that which represented the contextual skills of college, contained three superordinate and three subordinate themes. The superordinate themes with their subordinate themes are presented in groups here, demonstrating the breadth of use of contextual skills and awareness: navigating academics and academic culture, networking that is organization based, and exploring identity through personal growth. The number of superordinate themes represented in the contextual skills and awareness alignment suggested that participants reflected on, recalled, or used at least one of the skills or lessons about college knowledge in a variety of ways throughout their first postsecondary year at their new college or university. Participants

recalled the need to adjust to the new academic culture and all that it entailed at their college or university. Additionally, students shared the need for interpersonal and intrapersonal skills to navigate the myriad social and academic encounters occurring simultaneously within the same environment during the first year.

### **Interpretation of Themes Lacking Framework Alignment**

In addition to the themes aligned to D. Conley's framework, the researcher noted two subordinate themes within the superordinate theme exploring identity that were not stated in the framework facets: early college graduate identity and first-generation identity. These subordinate themes focused primarily on the participants' identities as graduates of an early college high school as opposed to a traditional high school program and their status as first-generation students. These specific identities encompass a variety of factors that could impact a student's college readiness. Early college status impacts the content knowledge and academic behaviors needed in the college courses available to them upon matriculation. Subsequently, courses in which early college graduates have enrolled impact their need for different cognitive strategies and contextual skills than their first-year peers based on their academic environment. The first-generation status often involves other factors inherent to the situation: financial concerns, diversity issues, language, and identity. All of these directly impacted the participants' ability to navigate the four facets of college readiness.

**First-year experiences impacted by early college background.** Early college students received certain college readiness advantages upon acceptance into the program. The program was designed to target specific populations of students and provide dual enrollment opportunities along with matriculation in a smaller, innovative setting focused on research-based methods of college readiness and classroom instruction for these populations. When the program facilitates

these opportunities for students and these opportunities are utilized, it simultaneously alters the postsecondary paths students encounter in their first-year postsecondary experiences, creating another identity to which they must adapt on their own. More than half of the participants recounted struggle and adaptation for which they were not prepared regarding their status as a freshman, sophomore, or junior when they arrived at their new educational institutions. In many cases, students maintained multiple grade-level statuses, depending upon which aspect of their college life they were considering. Participants' class status at college impacted their access to courses, housing, and socioemotional climate in classes available to them.

**Factors affecting first-generation students.** First-generation students experienced a gamut of identity issues upon matriculation at their postsecondary institution after high school graduation. Darling and Smith (2007) reported the following issues faced by this population:

Family values, race and ethnicity, socioeconomic status, learning skills, the ability to navigate the culture, and finding connections within that culture are issues that bring daily challenges to first-generation students. Each of these issues influence how these students approach life in the institution and in their academic programs and have a direct relationship to their persistence and graduation rates. (p. 204)

Early college high schools, like RCEC, were designed to create environments for first-generation students in which their status afforded them opportunities to enroll in these small, nontraditional schools to prepare for postsecondary enrollment after graduation.

The researcher noted that only one of the eight first-generation students were cognizant of their first-generation status when asked about it during the interview process. Additionally, they were unaware of its impact on their acceptance at RCEC. The researcher noted that the first-generation status was not a one-size-fits-all role or identity for participants. In some cases,

being first-generation provided opportunities outside of their acceptance into early college. One participant, Roxxy, had access to a postsecondary scholarship with an accompanying first-generation mentor and a housing community with other first-generation students. One other participant, Ben, lived with other first-generation students in a designated section of his dorm. These two students found social acceptance and purpose by joining first-generation student groups during their first year designed to provide awareness and assistance to the underserved community. While these participants recalled opportunity or belonging as a byproduct of their first-generation status, others recounted countless hours of work at part-time jobs that diverted their focus from their studies. Many first-generation students were also from low-income families, and one participant noted that the combination of her parent's education and income did not equate to enough financial assistance to make college a feasible reality for her.

### **Implications of Findings**

D. Conley (2011) presented a visual model with his introduction of a more comprehensive definition of college readiness. Figure 7 presents his model.



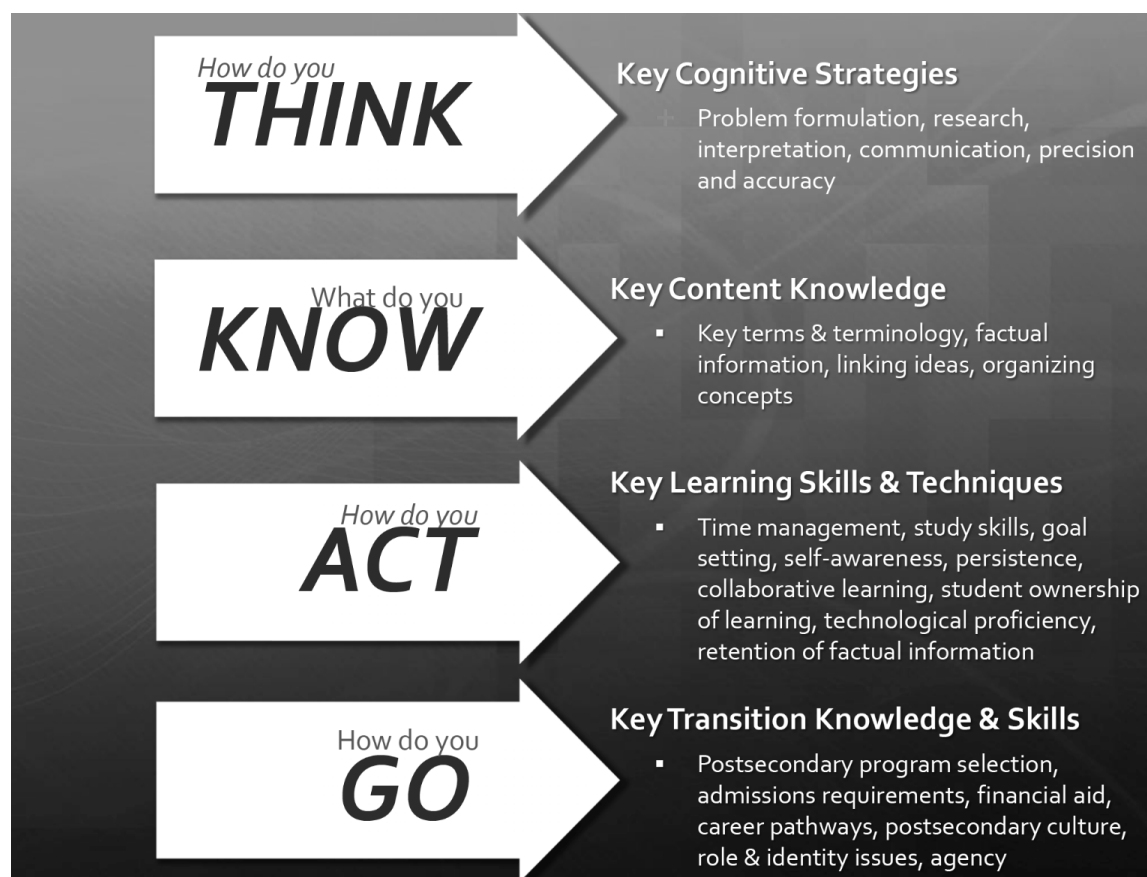


Figure 7. Graphic of Four Facets of College Readiness. From *The Four Keys to College and Career Readiness*, (p. 24), by D. Conley, 2011, Bellevue, WA: Counsel of State Governments. Copyright 2011 by Counsel of State Governments. Reprinted with permission.

Themes generated through data analysis supported the four facets of college readiness as essential components in addressing the first-year postsecondary experiences of early college graduates. The themes lacking framework alignment were related to participants' identity as part of the first-year postsecondary experience. While an additional facet of readiness is not needed to address the postsecondary needs of early college students, a purposeful means through which educators can view the framework for these traditionally underserved populations could prompt conversations regarding the differentiation of the framework for specific populations.

The researcher proposes a frame of reference component be added to D. Conley's (2007c) current framework. The frame of reference would encompass the four interconnected

facets of college readiness, and it would contain a directive to consider the population when utilizing the framework for college readiness. Observing the framework within the frame of reference for a specific population provides the reader with a means of considering each facet along with the inherent identity, diversity, and financial concerns of a specific population of students. Figure 8 showcases D. Conley's (2011) college readiness framework with the researcher's addition of the population-focused frame of reference.

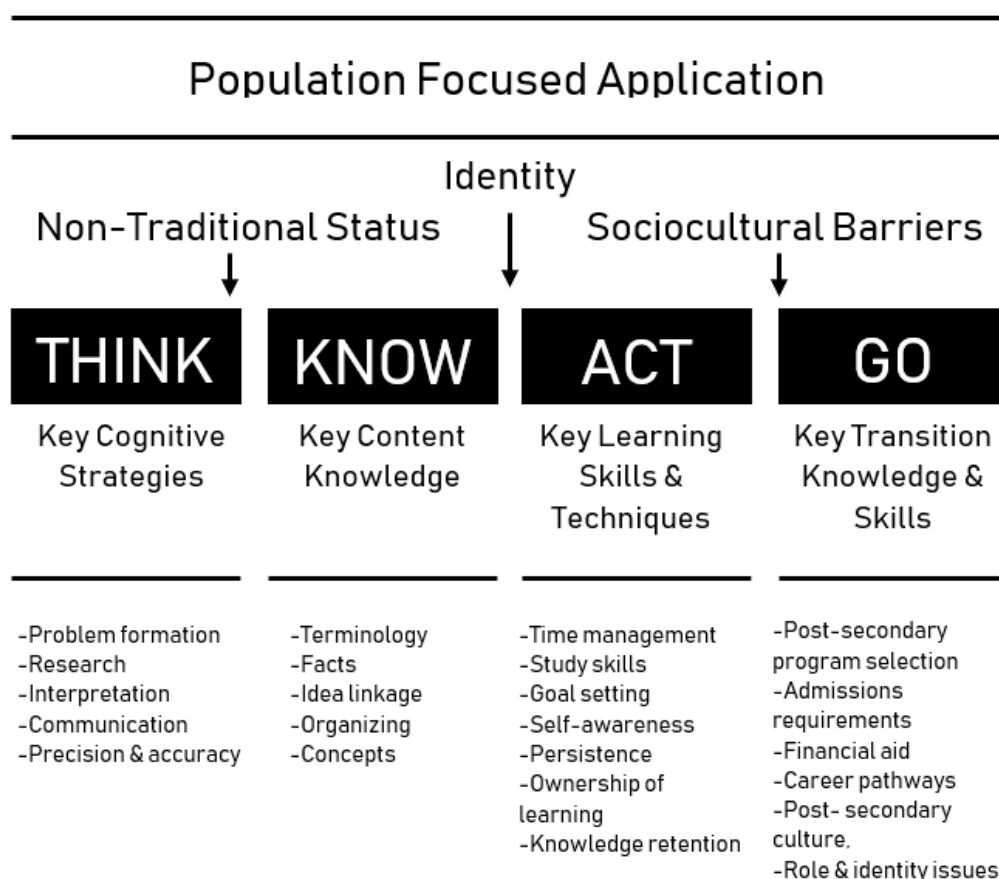


Figure 8. Population Focused Graphic of Four Facets of College Readiness. Adapted from *The Four Keys to College and Career Readiness*, (p. 24), by D. Conley, 2011, Bellevue, WA: Counsel of State Governments. Copyright 2011 by Counsel of State Governments. Reprinted with permission.

Figure 8 directs educators to consider the school's population and the factors affecting

each student's current and future paths of college readiness. Three specific demographics are presented for consideration in an attempt to encompass all populations for improved college readiness. These categories included any student with a nontraditional educational status (early college, home schooled, first-generation, secular schooled); identity (cultural, gender, sexual); and sociocultural barriers (low-income, minority status).

### **Suggestions for Early College Practice**

The researcher considered the interpretation of themes, the implications of the findings, and the resultant model of college readiness for all students to provide suggestions for future early college practice. Suggestions were supported with data and research and were organizational, sociocultural, and curricular in nature. D. Conley (2007b) reminded educators, "if schools and students understand college readiness in a more expansive and comprehensive way, they can do more to develop the full range of capabilities and skills needed to succeed in college" (p. 25).

**Recommendation 1: Regain and maintain organizational control of academic culture.** Early college high schools were designed to serve traditionally underrepresented students and prepare them to be college ready freshmen. Early college graduates, however, were freshmen possessing enough transfer credits to impact their first-year postsecondary course loads and their class levels in college. As a result, participants reported reduced access to general education courses, those designed to introduce large quantities of higher-level content and college-level expectations to freshman-level college students, due to transfer credits earned as part of their early college program. Therefore, early college programs are tasked with considering what content and skills were necessary for early college graduates to possess. Rigorous content and cognitive skills are required for early college graduates' success in the

higher-level college or university classes of their first-year experience.

The first recommendation addressing the uniqueness of the early college graduate involved organizational goal setting to increase early college high school's control over their academic culture. Participants at RCEC unanimously communicated a lack of rigor and relevance in their academic preparation. Additionally, descriptions of the environment and cognitive expectations of their courses supported the need for increased control of the academic culture. In order for early college graduates to be college ready in prerequisite courses for their major, core-level courses (one required for one's major but not a prerequisite) or to continue in common academic sequences in sciences, languages, and mathematics, they need to be "interacting with appropriately important and challenging academic content" (D. Conley, 2007b, p. 25) in the early college setting.

This researcher's recommendation involves purposeful and continuous control of the academic climate of the school. D. Conley (2007b) purported,

The reason the intellectual climate of the school is a central element in college readiness is because the school can control this variable directly and relatively completely if its teachers and administrators choose to do so. Furthermore, this is an area that teachers and administrators often fail to address consciously, instead allowing students to dictate the intellectual tone and tenor of the school. (p. 25)

**Recommendation 2: Reorient from college eligible to college ready.** Additionally, a longer-term consideration of each student's educational pathway is recommended (through the end of their first postsecondary year, at least) when making organizational choices that impact student academics. The researcher recommends fact-based communication with students about the significant academic challenge of their future college courses coupled with an "academic

program ... structured to cause students to demonstrate progressively more control and responsibility for their learning” (D. Conley, 2007b, p. 25). The researcher suggests a curricular plan that is vertically and horizontally aligned throughout all grade levels and includes the cognitive requirements of AP-level courses in place of the community college courses typically taken as dual enrollment for required high school courses.

It is also important to examine the quantity and quality of reading and writing across content and incorporate the intentional exploration and use of study skills throughout the plan. The school’s curriculum should be considered the standard of rigor in both content and skill development for all teachers and students at the early college high school. The curriculum should prepare students to be successful in their college courses and not simply successful in high school in order to gain college acceptance.

When available, use dual enrollment classes to support this rigorous curriculum. In some instances, dual enrollment courses may not offer a suitably rigorous equivalent to the early college high school’s curricular plan course description. In these cases, early college faculty should determine the learning gaps and either address them through other means or choose not to offer students that specific dual enrollment option and offer a rigorous high school replacement that matches the curricular plan. Aspects of the partnering institution that are counterproductive to the early college mission of college readiness for all students should be replaced, if possible, with a controllable environment. The focus should be maintained on college readiness for the years after early college and not two year degree requirements while enrolled in the early college.

**Recommendation 3: Address student mindsets.** An additional recommendation to increase control over the academic culture would be to directly address student mindsets in all

aspects of the academic day. Participant data generated a variety of themes which communicated that many of their first-year experiences required a consideration of or adjustment to their mindset regarding the scenario. The incorporation of intentional encounters designed to introduce students to mindsets and how different mindsets impact their successful interaction with academic experiences could contribute to the mindful maintenance of the academic culture and assist students in the development of college ready behaviors such as self-efficacy, self-management, and adaptation to utilize in the face of academic changes.

**Recommendation 4: Examine all sociocultural considerations when using a college readiness framework.** As previously noted in the researcher's implications of the findings, D. Conley's (2007a) college readiness framework was supported in this study through the overall connection of the themes to elements within each of the four facets. Themes that did not align with the current framework were primarily related to the participants' identity.

For the early college, the themes communicated a need to intentionally address the nontraditional status of students and align their college readiness efforts, classroom instruction, and organizational decision-making with the sociocultural barriers in mind for both students and their families.

### **Suggestions for Future Research**

The researcher recommends a continuation of the exploration of student voices in first-year postsecondary experiences. Many other states in the United States offer early college high school programs, and an examination of how their students translate the college readiness received in those programs could be used to further support the four facets and shed light on the specific populations that interpret their college readiness differently based on their identity.

Additionally, gathering data in larger numbers would allow for better generalizability

outside of the study's region. Just as with all educational institutions, early colleges within the same state differ in their offerings and some even have magnet programs as well. An examination of the graduates' translation of college readiness at other early colleges within the state could assist in creating more rigorous and effective programs that prepare the graduates for the most frequently attended universities within North Carolina.

Alternatively, to examine the college readiness translation of all traditionally underrepresented populations in American education, data could be collected from students who did not enroll or were not accepted into an early college program as a means of understanding the college readiness needs in a variety of educational settings and making comparisons between traditional high school and early college high school college preparation programs.

Last, to assist RCEC in their program development, a study allowing all graduates of a particular early college to share their student voice on college experiences could reveal positive and negative trends. The collection of these perceptions would provide additional data to allow RCEC to evaluate their program.

### **Limitation and Delimitations**

**Limitations.** The limitations of the study were outside of the researcher's control and originated with the choices made in research design. The researcher's use of interviews to collect qualitative data relied on participants' truthful and accurate responses to the researcher's questions. The size of the participant group was based on the number of responses received with informed consent and could impact the generalizability of the results to all early college students. The participant group totaled nine early college alumni.

**Delimitations.** The researcher's choices created the study's delimitations. The researcher selected only students who had completed the full four or five year term of the early

college. Additionally, the participants were to have attended two semesters (or a full year) of postsecondary education. This limited the total available participants to 38 early college alumni. The interview location was the same for all in-person interviews, but location choice could have impacted the data received from participants. The interview method for all virtual interviews was the same; however, the video communication platform may have impacted the data offerings from participants. Last, the researcher selected only one early college from which to select participants. Extrapolation of results could be limited based on the school's demographics, community, and more.

### **Summary**

The researcher completed an IPA of qualitative data collected from early college graduates regarding their first-year experiences at college or university in order to discover how students translated their college readiness into real-life practices. Additionally, the researcher aligned the analysis to the current college readiness framework used nationally, D. Conley's (2007b) four facet of college readiness. The researcher determined that these facets accurately portrayed that which participants were experiencing during their first-year with one major exception: Specific identities require modifications to the four facets in order to prepare students equitably for their first postsecondary year. Differentiation of college readiness can be achieved through careful consideration of the population of students and how their status as first-generation, low-income, minority, or even early college student will impact what is needed during the first postsecondary year.



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## Appendix B

### Email Communication to Participants

Dear RCEC graduate,

You are invited to participate in a research study on the college readiness you received while enrolled at Rural County Early College in Smallville, N.C. The study is titled:

Ready or Not: An Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis of Early College Graduates' First Year Experiences

The purpose of the study is to explore how early college high school graduates experience their own college readiness during the first year of postsecondary education?

If you choose to participate in the study, you will be asked to engage in at least one individual interview regarding your college readiness. Interviews can be either in person or virtual and can last between 45-90 minutes. If it is determined more information is needed after the first interview you may be asked to engage in a follow up interview to explore topics further.

Participation in this study is voluntary. You have the right to withdraw from the research study at any time without penalty. You also have the right to refuse to answer any question(s) for any reason without penalty. If you choose to withdraw, you may request that any of your data which has been collected be destroyed; unless it is in a de-identified state.

If you decided to participate in the study, your participation will be completely anonymous. The information that you give in the study will be handled confidentially. Your data will be anonymous which means that your name will not be collected or linked to the data. Because of the nature of the data, it may be possible to deduce your identity; however, there will be no attempt to do so, and your data will be reported in a way that will not identify you.

If you wish to participate in the study, please complete the attached informed consent and the researcher will be in touch to arrange an interview time and location.



## Appendix C

### Semi-Structured Interview Questions

## Interview question prompts:

### Descriptive:

Describe your college experience as a first-year student.

- Describe your living experience. classroom experience.
- Describe your involvement in campus events, activities, or courses that positively impacted your first-year experience. Were there any experiences that were impactful in a negative way?
- Describe your relationships with faculty during your first year.

### Structural:

- How was your credit transfer experience from the early college to your college or university?
- Are you on track to get a bachelor's degree?

### Evaluative:

- What has surprised you most about your first-year college experience?
- How do you feel about the atmosphere of your campus?
- How academically prepared did you feel in your first-year courses? Were there any courses that were a particular struggle for you? What courses did you enjoy the most? Why?

### Comparative:

- How was your first year of college or university different than your last year at the early college?
- How was your living experience different than that which you were used to before enrolling in college or university?

Appendix D  
Interview Agenda

## Interview Schedule

Thank you for joining me today for this interview. If you choose to continue participation in this study your confidentiality will be preserved throughout the process with pseudonyms. If at any time today you wish to discontinue your participation in this interview, you have the right to do so. Please feel free to stop me at any time to ask for clarification or if you choose to discontinue answering questions. If there are certain questions you are not comfortable answering, you have the right to decline to answer anything. It is my goal that this interview last between 60 and 90 minutes but your comfort is essential so please communicate if anything about the time frame or setting are not conducive to your needs.

Your selection for this interview indicates that you have completed a four or five year early college high school program and graduated with a high school diploma and college credits. Also, your participation implies that you have attended at least one year of postsecondary education. Do you agree with these statements and are there any clarifications you would like me to make?

I will begin by asking basic demographic questions as the study considers these factors essential in understanding college readiness.

### Demographics

1. Gender
2. Race
3. First-generation status
4. SES status (using the Free and Reduced Lunch status from high school)

Experiential question (Interviews will begin with an experiential question to place the participant back in the experience and allow the information and direction to be determined based on the participant's response.)

First question:

What has surprised you most about your first-year college experience?

Based on response from first question the researcher will select the next appropriate question from the list in Appendix B.