

## **Abstract**

WOOD, ALEXA LEE. From the Kitchen Table to the Lecture Hall: Reaching an Understanding of the Lived Experiences of Home-School Students in Institutions of Higher Learning. (Under the direction of Alyssa Bryant.)

Current educational trends show that the population of home-schooled students is growing nationwide. As a result, the number of home-schooled students who apply to college is expected to increase. A small, yet growing body of research exists on the topic of home-schooled students' experiences in college. This study used a theoretical framework that viewed the students' experiences through a contextual lens. Individuals from home-school backgrounds and those who have an interest in working with this population of students can benefit from having a deeper understanding of the experiences of previously home-schooled students in college.

A basic interpretive approach was used to form an understanding of previously home-schooled students' experiences within a college environment. Six students from a large, public research institution in the Southeastern United States were interviewed. The participants were asked about their educational experiences both before and during their college years. The study's results demonstrated that the student participants' pre-college educations were heavily impacted by their families. Before entering college, all of the participants took steps to prepare for the increased workload at their university. While in college, the participants felt that they were adequately prepared for college, both academically and socially. All of the students had matriculated past their first semester, and

had a well-established peer network. Results suggest that home-schooled students are able to successfully integrate into the college environment.

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From the Kitchen Table to the Lecture Hall: Reaching an Understanding of the Lived  
Experiences of Home-School Students in Institutions of Higher Learning

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A thesis submitted to the Graduate Faculty of  
North Carolina State University  
in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the Degree of  
Master of Science

Higher Education Administration

Raleigh, North Carolina

2011

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## **Dedication**

To my parents and sister, who have been my most influential teachers

## **Biography**

Alexa Wood was raised in Florida, and received an Associate in Arts Degree from Edison State College in 2005. In 2009, she graduated from Florida State University with Bachelor of Science degrees in Meteorology and Environmental Studies. She will earn her Master of Science degree in Higher Education Administration from North Carolina State University.

## **Acknowledgements**

I would like to begin by thanking the members of the faculty who volunteered their time to help me grow as a researcher by serving on my thesis committee. Many thanks go to Dr. Alyssa Bryant, for inspiring my love for academic research and for her support throughout each semester of grad school. Additionally, I would like to thank Dr. Joy Gayles and Dr. Paul Umbach, for helping me to think outside of the box and for challenging me to thoroughly support my academic work.

Innumerable thanks are due to my parents, Alice and Terry Wood. Thank you for a lifetime of constant encouragement and support. Thank you, Tarra for being a wonderful sister and my best friend. Getting through grad school without friends like Kelly, Evie, Jo, and the White family would have been impossible. The friendships that I have with each of you are part of what makes life so wonderful. A thank you is also due to Chester and Deb, who have served as my supervisors throughout my time at NC State. Thank you for your encouragement.

I would also like to thank the students who dedicated their time and energy by sharing their stories with me. Without you, it would have been impossible to complete this study.

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## **Chapter 1: Introduction**

### **Introduction to the Topic**

In the United States, a growing number of families are seeking ways to educate their students outside of traditional means. According to data from the National Center for Education Statistics (2009), in 2007 there were over 1.5 million students enrolled in a home-school, constituting nearly three percent of all school age children. In 1999, the number of home-educated students was estimated to be approximately 850,000 (approximately 1.7 percent of school aged children), indicating a huge rate of growth in the intervening years between data collection. Choosing to establish a home-school is a viable option for some families who find that home-schooling their children is the best way to accomplish the educational goals that they have established for their children. According to Ray's (1997) study, 57 percent of home-schooled students pursued a college education immediately after graduating. These students arrive on college campuses having been academically equipped in a manner that is different from many of their collegiate peers. This study was meant to discuss the ways in which a number of students from home-school backgrounds have adjusted to the college experience, both academically and socially. Much of what is known about home-schooled students who attend college is anecdotal. There is an increasing body of research to support claims that students from home-school backgrounds succeed in the college environment. Lattibeaudiere (2000) and Bolle et al. (2007) conducted studies that examined the transitions of previously home-educated students into the college environment

that demonstrated that home-schooling was a viable option for college preparation. Analyses of standardized test scores and the grades that previously home-schooled students received have provided further evidence that this group of students can succeed in college level work (Sutton and Galloway 1995, Gray 1998, Holder 2001). Other studies have shown that previously home-educated students can successfully adjust to the social aspects of the college environment (Kraznow 2005, White et al. 2007). Additional research is needed to have a deeper understanding of how home-school students adjust to the college environment so that student affairs professionals and home-school students who aspire to attend college can better prepare for the challenges that these students face while they attend college.

### **Research Questions**

Due to the growing number of students from home-school backgrounds, student affairs professionals should have an understanding of the needs of these students as they become acclimated to the college environment. Additionally, students who look to transition from a home-school to an institution of higher learning would be well-advised to make themselves aware of the challenges that they may face as they adjust to a new learning environment. A relatively small number of quantitative studies have shown that students from home-school backgrounds succeed in the college environment (Gray 1998, Sutton and Galloway 2000, White et al. 2007). The number of qualitative studies on the adjustment patterns of home-school students is small in number as well, but show that students who were educated in a home-school can acclimate to college life (Lattibeaudiere 2000, Holder 2001, Kraznow 2005, Bolle et al. 2007). Little is known about how students from home-school

backgrounds reflect upon their educational experiences. There is a lack of research on college students from home-school backgrounds after the completion of the first year of college, especially in the context of a large public university. It is important for researchers and those who may work closely with students from home-school backgrounds to understand the development of these students. Results from the study will help inform individuals who desire to have a deeper understanding of the processes through which home-educated students adjust to the college environment. Home-educated students who aspire to attend college will have the opportunity to benefit from information regarding methods that their peers used to transition into a university setting. Those who work with students can discover ways in which to best integrate this population into the college community and educate themselves on the characteristics that home-educated students possess. The central questions of my study are listed below.

- What are the lived experiences of previously home-schooled students who currently attend college?
- What factor(s) contribute most to home-educated students' adjustment to a four-year university?

### **Methods**

A basic interpretive approach was used for this study. Six participants were recruited through emails sent to residential students at a large public research institution in the Southeastern United States. One interview, lasting no longer than fifty minutes was conducted with each student to gain an in-depth understanding of their experiences while

attending an institution of higher learning. Questions that asked students about their educational backgrounds helped me understand the history of the students before they matriculated into their current institution. In order to gain an understanding of the transitions of previously home-educated students as they progress through college, I asked a series of questions that helped to provide me with a well-defined picture of each student's experiences and perceptions of the college environment. Through the participants' storytelling, I found aspects of each participant's experience that highlighted their transition to college as home-schooled students who attended a university. Each transcript was analyzed to find common themes. The themes were used to identify the experiences that participants had throughout their time in college. Throughout the study, I maintained a journal to account for my perspectives throughout the process of the study.

### **Significance of the Study**

As mentioned previously, I had two goals for this study. The first goal was meant to help student affairs practitioners learn more about the students that they serve. This study can help inform individuals who work with students about the developmental needs of previously home-educated students as these students transition into and move through their college years. Having a deeper understanding of the needs of any given population of students can help student affairs practitioners develop methods to ease students' transitions into the college environment. Due to the ever changing set of student demographics, the creation and assessment of programs for transitioning students is a common task for all student affairs practitioners. It is important for practitioners to understand the efficacy and

relevance of initiatives that help students adjust to the college environment. Over time, adjustments to programs must reflect the changing needs of students in order to maximize the programs' effectiveness. Though it is understood that this study is limited in its scope, the findings may help inform student affairs practitioners of the adjustment patterns that some previously home-educated students undergo. Upon review of the findings, practitioners may find it necessary to alter some of their programs in order to help students navigate the transition between a home-school and college successfully.

Secondly, this study was meant to help students from home-educated backgrounds have a basic understanding of some of the situations that they may confront as they adjust to the college environment. It is important for incoming first-year college students to have a realistic perspective of what life in college entails. Students who come from home-school backgrounds may find the college environment to be a daunting challenge to navigate; it is my hope that students who have access to the results of this study will be able to find ways to adjust to life within a university. It is also important for incoming students to have an idea of how their educational backgrounds may be able to assist them in their adjustment to college. As a student affairs practitioner, I want students to feel empowered as they enter the college environment and help them to embrace the fact that they can have a successful college career. Additionally, this study will help bolster research in a topic area that lacks academically-based research since much of what is published about home-educated students is anecdotal. More research on the topic of home-education is needed to determine whether the anecdotal evidence can be supported.

## **Limitations**

A small number of students were interviewed for the study, and their experiences cannot be generalized to all home-educated students who now attend institutions of higher learning. Also, the small sample size reflected by the fact that all of the students attended the same university. Institutions respond to home-educated students in a manner that varies from one institution to the next. Home-educated students who had a more challenging application process may have a different perception of their current institution. Another limitation of the study is that there may be factors that contributed to the participants' adjustment that were unaccounted for in the interview protocol. For example, there were few questions about specific factors that directly relate to student development, such as experiences with people from different backgrounds. Additionally, external events may have occurred during the participants' transition into college that may have impacted their abilities to adjust to the university environment, but these types of events were not discussed in the interviews. The participants in the study consisted of students who were home-educated through their high school years, so only their perspectives will be discussed in the findings of the study. Interviewing individuals who encounter the research participants would have provided an additional layer of analysis, but the scope of this study was intended to focus upon the perceptions and experiences of home-educated students.

## **Researcher Perspective**

I was home-educated for nine years. Overall, I had a positive experience with my educational background. Throughout most of my high school years, I attended a two-year

public college in order to prepare for university-level work. I believe that having the opportunity to gain an understanding of the college environment before attending a large flagship institution helped me adjust more quickly to the university environment. A number of positive experiences throughout my undergraduate education led me to a career in student affairs. As a student affairs practitioner, I desire to have a deeper understanding of the ways in which all students adjust to the college environment, and have a specific interest in the adjustment patterns of students from non-traditional academic backgrounds. My educational background may result in unintentional bias, but I attempted to account for this through journaling my experiences and conducting member checks with the participants after writing the initial draft of the study. This study was not meant to be an endorsement or criticism of an individual's choice to participate in a home-school. Rather, the purpose of this study was to understand the educational experiences of students from home-school backgrounds.

### **Definition of Terms**

**Co-op:** A supplementary program that is often utilized by home-educators to create a well-rounded experience for students. Oftentimes, families will meet weekly to deepen their understanding of a given topic. The class-like environments are often facilitated by a member of the community who possesses an expertise in the subject.

**Dual Enroll:** A program in which non-college age students can concurrently earn college credit while completing high school requirements.

**Home-School:** A learning environment in which the parent of a student is the primary educator. The laws which govern the execution of a home-school vary from state to state.

Student Affairs Practitioner: A non-faculty employee of an institution of higher learning who is tasked with helping students become well-rounded adults in the context of the institution's goals (Nuss 2003).

Transition: The adjustment from one educational background to another.

## Chapter 2: Literature Review

### Theoretical Framework

A variety of elements impact a student's transition into the college environment. In order to have a well-developed understanding of the elements that impact student development, it is important to look at several factors that impact transitions. By using an ecological model of development, I plan to show how the interactive nature of a person's settings impact his/her life experiences in the years leading up to and through his/her college years. Bronfenbrenner's (1993) ecological model, asserts that a person's development is a product of the interaction of several elements which include "cognitive, affective, emotional, motivational, and social" psychological processes. In 2003, Renn and Arnold demonstrated that Bronfenbrenner's model could be applied to the study of college students; their study will also be used to help inform my approach to the study of previously home-schooled students in college.

Bronfenbrenner (1993) defined "development as an evolving process of organism-environment interaction," meaning that the context in which a person finds themselves impacts his/her life transitions (p. 4). The environment in which a person lives is composed of a network of levels of interaction which range from "face-to-face" conversations to his/her overarching culture (p. 10). An individual is not only affected by his/her environment, but they also help to create the environment in which he/she lives. Two axioms create the basis upon which Bronfenbrenner's theory is founded. The first axiom states "that development is

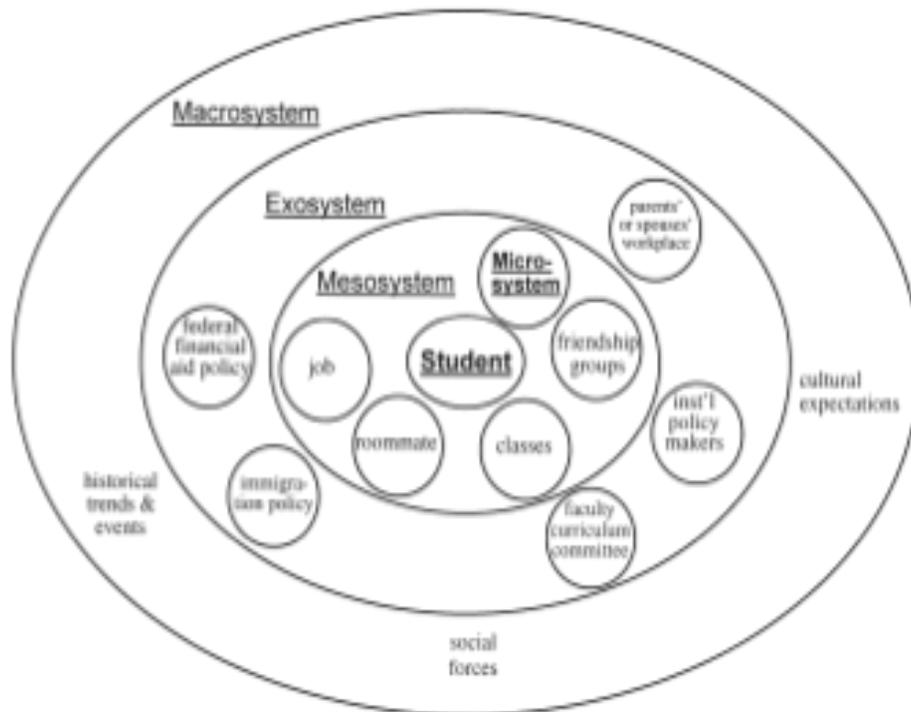
an evolving function of person-environment interaction” (p. 10). The second axiom clarifies that “this interaction must take place in the immediate, face-to-face setting in which the person exists” (p.10). Bronfenbrenner labels the set of elements that affect the way in which each person interacts with his/her environment as “developmentally investigative characteristics” (p. 11). In the following paragraph, the four varieties of developmentally investigative characteristics vary between individuals will be described.

Type one either stifles or encourages an environmental response. For example, the specific traits (temperament, appearance, personality, etcetera) that a person possesses elicits a certain response from other individuals. These traits, called “personal stimulus characteristics” have an impact on how others interact with a person (p. 11-12). The second type is “selective responsibility,” meaning that individuals choose to respond to his/her environments differently (p. 12). Some students are eager to become involved on campus, whereas others are content to spending time alone (Renn and Arnold 2003). Number three in the set of characteristics are “structuring proclivities,” which describes how an individual takes on more “complex activities” (Bronfenbrenner 1993, p. 12). Renn and Arnold (2003) provide an excellent description: “some students consciously seek out intellectual, social, and work-related activities that require increasing levels of critical thinking, leadership, and problem solving. (p. 269)” Finally, “directive beliefs” explain how an individual views his/her role in developing an understanding of his/her environment (Bronfenbrenner 1993, p. 13). The differences between the expression of these developmental characteristics helps to explain the process through which people adjust to the college environment. It is important

to note that these characteristics do not dictate a person's growth, but they do affect the trajectory of development. By using this framework, a reader can see how the environment and a person's traits interact and foster an individual's transitions.

Bronfenbrenner (1993) suggested that four levels of interaction between a person and the environment influence the development of the individual. These levels compose the contextual element of human development, and are referred to as the microsystem, the mesosystem, the exosystem and the macrosystem. Each level influences an individual differently, and can be used to explain the influences that range from face-to-face communication to cultural norms. Renn and Arnold (2003) created an illustration (Figure 1) to help readers understand the structure of Bronfenbrenner's theory when applied to higher education. The microsystem composes the "pattern of activities, roles, and interpersonal relations experienced by the developing persons in a given face-to-face setting with particular physical, social, and symbolic features that invite, permit, or inhibit engagement in sustained, progressively more complex interaction with, and activity in, the immediate environment" (Bronfenbrenner 1993, p. 15). A student's microsystems would include but not be limited to his/her classes, residence hall, campus organizations. Microsystems vary between students, since each individual relates to a microsystem in a different manner (Renn and Arnold 2003). In this context, a student's family (unless the student lived with his/her family) would not be included as part of his/her college-based microsystem, since "face-to-face" interaction is an integral part of the microsystem context. A mesosystem is a connection between two or more microsystems. Bronfenbrenner (1993) paid special

attention to the interaction that occurred between microsystems within the mesosystem. Renn and Arnold (2003) demonstrated that microsystems within a mesosystem can work together to help a student develop, or may work against each other, resulting in conflict and distraction. A given student's on-campus mesosystem would be composed of his/her varying microsystems. The synthesis of and potential interaction between residence hall, classroom, and peer group microsystems would be some of the factors that would constitute a student's on-campus mesosystem.



**Figure 2.1 - Ecological Model**

The exosystem contains both the microsystem and the mesosystem. It does not contain the individual, but exerts an influence over the student indirectly (Bronfenbrenner 1993). Academic policy-making bodies would be included in a student's exosystem, since

the decisions made have an influence on his/her ability to attend college (Renn and Arnold 2003). The macrosystem is the most distant sphere of influence, and reflects the culture that contains the individual's micro-, meso-, and exosystems. Renn and Arnold (2003, p. 272) provide an explanation of the macrosystem:

In the United States, macrosystem influences include meritocratic notions derived from democratic values and capitalist ideology. Cultural understandings of gender, race, and ethnicity also emit from the macrosystem to affect micro-, meso-, and exosystems. The macrosystem provides the structure and content of the inner systems and is specific to a given culture at a given moment in history. It is time and place dependent. Who attends what college and on what terms might seem to be an individual or at least family-based decision, but the conditions that govern college-choice making are located in the macrosystem and only made manifest locally.

The "process-person-context model" is a combination of all of the previously mentioned elements (p. 20). It accounts for the interaction between a person and his/her environment. A person's underlying perspectives are influenced by the macrosystem; in order to have a complete understanding of a given phenomenon, a researcher needs to understand the perspectives and underlying assumptions of the participants in the study (Bronfenbrenner 1993).

Home-schooled students, like all other students, are impacted by their immediate environments. However, in the absence of a formal classroom, home-schooled students are subject to environments that differ from their more traditionally educated peers. Upon arriving to college, the environment in which previously home-educated students changes drastically, as they are forced to find a new set of support systems and learn in a more formal

setting. This study explores the environmental elements that were important to a set of previously home-schooled students before and during their college experiences.

### **Review of the Literature**

At present, there is a small, yet growing body of research that is devoted to college students who had been educated in a home-school. A significant portion of the research focuses upon admissions trends and policies for home-schooled students. The performance of home-schooled students on college admissions and other standardized tests is another area of research. Other researchers have focused on the previously home-schooled students' performances in the classroom. The final area of focus directs its attention toward the social integration of adult home-schooled students.

### **Administrative Practices**

A significant portion of the literature on home-schooled students in college focuses upon admissions standards for this group of students. Although coming to an understanding of admissions processes was not part of the central focus of this study, the level of friendliness that colleges display toward home-educated students may have an impact on their college choices. The Home School Legal Defense Association strongly discourages institutions to require additional admissions documents from home-schooled students, stating that "requiring additional testing only of students educated in these settings could reasonably be seen as discriminatory (HSLDA 2010)."

### *Perceptions of Admissions Officers*

In Barneby's (1986) study, admissions officers were found to be supportive of home-educated students, and thought that they would be as successful as their more traditionally-educated peers. Prue's (1997) previous survey of admissions officers from a range of institutional types and was able to evaluate over 200 responses. Her results showed that many of the respondents had a "working knowledge" of home-schooled students, and many saw this group of students in a positive light. Jones and Gloeckner (2004) went into more detail about the attitudes of admissions officers toward students from home-school backgrounds. Many of the admissions officers thought that home-educated students possessed the ability to be as successful academically as their more traditionally educated peers. A majority of respondents reported that they would not instruct home-schooled students to attend a two-year college before attending a four-year institution, which seems to indicate that the officers felt that this group of students is adequately prepared for post-secondary education.

Furthermore, Mealy's (1998) study highlighted a set of concerns that admissions officers have when considering home-schooled applicants. Some of those concerns include a lack of standardization across transcripts and a lack of class rank can sometimes lead to distortions in the likelihood of a student's acceptance and financial aid. Over one-third of respondents in the Jones and Gloeckner (2004) study were concerned about home-schooled students' abilities to navigate the college social scene.

It is important to consider that many of the studies discussed in this section are over 10 years old, and the prevalence and awareness of home-schooling has shifted dramatically over the period of time. Jones' and Gloeckner's (2004) study was small in scope (55 respondents), and was restricted to the Western United States. Admissions officers' perceptions of home-schooled students' preparedness for college level work has a bearing on which students are admitted to an institution of higher learning. The attitude of admissions officers may also be indicative of their institutions' attitudes toward home-schooled students. As home-schooling becomes more prevalent in the United States, it will become increasingly important for institutions of higher learning to have an understanding of what home-schooled students can contribute to colleges and universities nationwide. An increased amount of information about the capabilities of home-schooled students will help college and university administrators form informed opinions about this population of students. This study will help administrators to create an informed opinion on the ability of home-schooled students to navigate the college landscape.

#### ***Admissions Policies for Home-Schooled Students***

In 1986, Barneby published the findings from her study that sought to analyze the admissions requirements for home-schooled students from over two hundred colleges and universities nationwide. After collecting the data, she compared the admissions requirements according to size, type of support, location, and Carnegie Classification. She found that admissions requirements are not affected by any of the factors she examined. Ashford (2005) found that public institutions were more likely to admit home-educated students, and were

more likely than private institutions to follow a set of admissions guidelines that have been put forth by the National Center for Home Education.

The survey of admissions officers conducted by Jones and Gloeckner (2004) found that nearly 75 percent of respondents reported that their institution had an established admissions policy for home-schooled students. Scores from admissions tests such as the SAT and ACT were considered to be highly important in admissions decisions, while criteria such as a GED or an essay were secondary in importance. A lack of formalized policies for the admission of home-schooled students continued into the late 1990's. Prue (1997) found that many of the institutions (64 percent of 200 respondents) in her study lacked formal policies to determine whether a home-schooled student was eligible for admission. According to Davis (2000), of the 15 public four year institutions in Virginia, only one institution, Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University, had a formalized admissions policy for home-schooled students, and nine institutions were at various stages in developing admissions policies for previously home-educated students. Out of the 15 public institutions in Virginia, 13 had admitted students.

On a related note, Callaway (2004) published a case study about how changes to laws governing Federal financial aid to home-schooled students impacted some students' abilities to complete their post-secondary educations. The policy changes were intended to make the receipt of federal financial aid less burdensome for students, but it has not been the case for all students. Under the legislation that was passed in 1998, states had the authority to determine what kind of certification home-educated students needed to verify that they were

not in violation of truancy laws. Due to these changes, colleges and universities were encouraged to make the admissions and financial aid process less burdensome for home-schooled students who were able to verify that their respective states recognized the completion of a secondary education. The new regulations made the transition into college easier for many, but increased the scrutiny to which previously home-educated students who attended institutions in New York were subjected. Callaway discussed the increased steps that some home-schooled students had to follow in order to verify that they had an appropriately rigorous secondary education. In the conclusion, Callaway used the examples from New York to stress to policy makers the need to reexamine policies that may affect previously home-schooled students' abilities to receive college degrees.

Policies that relate to college admissions and financial aid have an impact on access for home-schooled students. As discussed previously, increased information about home-schooled students can lead to well-informed opinions among administrators regarding the elements that students add to the college environment. The opinions of administrators have a bearing on what kinds of policies are developed and implemented regarding the admission of home-schooled students to institutions of higher learning. Without support from college administration, students from home-school backgrounds cannot attend institutions of higher learning. These studies highlight the need for alternative policies that allow academically qualified people from non-traditional academic backgrounds equal access into institutions of higher learning. My study will support the literature that highlights policies that allow students from home-schooled backgrounds to attend institutions of higher learning.

### ***Recruitment of Home-Schooled Students***

A small amount of research has been conducted that advocated for actively recruiting previously home-educated students. Mason (2004) discussed his experiences working with home-schooled students during his time as an admissions counselor at Ball State University. While Mason was at Ball State, he found that home-schooled students brought an additional layer of talent to the University. Though his article relied heavily on anecdotal evidence, much of what he discussed was based upon his observations and experiences in the field. Callahan and Callahan's (2004) article focused on recruiting home-schooled students for engineering programs. The article focused on academic performance through the K-12 years, and methods colleges and universities can employ to recruit home-schooled students to institutions of higher learning. However, the article did not delve into issues relating to retention of home-schooled students in engineering programs nor did it provide any data on the success rates of previously home-schooled students in engineering programs. Both articles highlighted the challenge in reaching out to home-schooled students, due to their relative isolation. Though these challenges may seem daunting to some, Mason wrote that the key to recruiting additional home-schooled students to institutions of higher education could be found through building relationships with students and their families in order to create a smaller and more manageable community at Mason's large state institution.

Since home-schooled students may not have the same level of access to events such as college fairs and other formalized recruitment events, it is important for colleges and universities to be aware of ways in which they may advertise their respective institutions to

students from non-traditional backgrounds. Although home-schooled students may be overlooked at times, they have the ability to be successful in college and be positive additions to institutions of higher education. Although this study does not highlight recruiting trends for home-schooled students, it highlights some of the types of activities in which home-schooled students engage. Hosting recruitment efforts at events such as home-school conventions or within local home-school communities could be beneficial for colleges and universities that desire to bolster enrollment numbers for home-schooled students.

### **Academic Performance**

The academic performance of previously home-educated students is an area of concern for many researchers. Due to the unaccredited nature of home-schools and the varying degree of legislation from state to state, the standards that dictate whether a home-schooled student has been adequately prepared for college level work vary. Through using quantitative measures, several researchers have measured factors that have been shown to contribute to success in college.

### ***Impact of the Home-School Background***

Each student comes to college with a different set of educational experiences that shape their transitions into college. Home-schooled students' experiences before entering college differ from their peers, due to their informal educational environment.

A dissertation penned by Goodman (2008) focused upon the "pre-college learning environments" and the intellectual progress of 16 previously home-educated students who attended a variety of Virginia colleges. Goodman (2008) found that the participants' home-

school backgrounds had an impact on the students in the study. The students' educational backgrounds were heavily impacted by their parents, and the gender of the participants had little influence over the ways in which the students developed their knowledge base. Duggan (2010) also explored the importance of home-schooled students' educational environments on their college experiences. Her findings showed that students from the public, private, and home-school backgrounds perceived their abilities and skills differently. "Home-schooled students were more likely to credit their current abilities, skills, and knowledge to their previous educational experiences than" their more traditionally educated peers. Additionally, the home-schooled participants "rated themselves as above average and in the top 10% of their peers on their general academic ability, mathematical ability, reading comprehension, and their drive to achieve than the other student groups (p. 25)."

Lisle (2006) also found that home-schooled students' backgrounds affected their world view development. Her study focused on how participants' home-school backgrounds affected their world views and how their perceptions of the world impacted their approach to the assignments in a composition class designed for first year students. After an analysis of copies of class assignments and interviews with the participants, Lisle found that the students were at times "dogmatic" in their thinking and had narrowly defined world views (p. 93). However, the results from Lisle's (2006) study showed that the students showed some ability to consider other perspectives. Lisle intended for the study to be longitudinal, and hoped to continue to follow the participants' academic development throughout their undergraduate

years. She also thought it was important for students from home-school backgrounds to learn how to better prepare themselves for academic discourse while maintaining their values.

The above studies show that the practice of home-schooling has an effect on students as they enter college, though there is little research on how a student's home-school background affects him/her as they progress through college. My study sought to explore home schooled students' perspectives on how their educational backgrounds affected their lives as college students. Goodman (2008) demonstrated that qualitative methods are appropriate for exploring how past home-schooling experiences affected college students. I found it necessary to explore the topic through directly asking the participants about whether their backgrounds as home-schooled students impacted their development as college students. Learning more about the students' perceptions of their home-school backgrounds from a contextual approach adds to the knowledge in this area.

### ***Standardized Test Scores***

Comparative scores from the SAT were the focus of Clemente's (2006) research. In the study, Clemente collected data from 7 private Christian institutions across the United States. After analyzing the SAT scores of nearly 3000 students from public, private, and home-school backgrounds, Clemente found that students from home-schooled backgrounds performed better than their peers on the admissions test. Jones and Gloeckner (2004) published an article that was based upon the results of Jones' dissertation (2002) in which he did a statistical comparison of home-schooled and traditionally educated students. He found that home-schooled students received higher ACT test scores than their peers, though the

results were not statistically significant. More recently, Cogan (2010) published findings about the academic performance of home-educated students at a medium sized doctoral institution in the Midwestern United States. After analyzing a small population of approximately 70 home-schooled students, Cogan found that previously home-schooled students outperformed their peers on the ACT. Clemente (2006) realized that her study was limited due to the use of a limited set of predictors of college success, but indicated that the differences in standardized test scores between the groups indicated that home-schooled students do not arrive on college campuses at a disadvantage.

Galloway and Sutton (1995) analyzed the composite ACT scores for 180 students was split equally among home-schooled, public-schooled, and private school backgrounds. While the composite ACT scores across the groups were equal, home-schooled students received higher scores on the English subtest. In Ashford's (2005) study of students at Florida community colleges, students' standardized test scores were analyzed. Results showed little difference in the mathematical scores of home-schooled and publicly educated students. Similar to Galloway and Sutton (2005), home-schooled students outperformed their peers on language-based portions of standardized tests.

Gray (1998) published findings that compared the SAT scores of students from both home-school and traditional school backgrounds and found that there was no difference between the two groups. Afterward, Holder (2001) found that the home-schooled earned similar ACT scores, when compared to their traditionally educated peers.

On a different note, Oliviera et al. (1994) measured the level of critical thinking skills among a group of college students from home-school, public school, and private school backgrounds using the California Critical Thinking Skills Test. The researchers found that all of the students performed at comparable levels, but none of the groups' averages reached the national mean score.

It was not one of my goals to explore the academic abilities of home-schooled students, but I felt it was important to discuss this topic. The above studies point out that on standardized tests, home-schooled students perform at levels that are equal or superior to more traditionally educated students. Research which demonstrates that home-schooled students enter college with these abilities shows that home-schooled have the basic tools to perform well academically. Though standardized tests predict a given set of academic abilities, it is important to consider home-schooled students' performances once they arrive on a college campus. It is also important to note that an overwhelming body of research shows that students from moderate to high socioeconomic statuses who receive parental support tend to perform better on tests than their less-advantaged peers. Since parental support is a necessary element of home-schooling, one should expect that home-schooled students score highly on standardized tests.

### ***Classroom Performance in College***

A measure of the effectiveness of home-schooling can be measured through student successes in the college environment. A small set of studies exist that focus upon previously home-schooled students as they enter and progress through college. Some of the research is

comparative in nature, whereas other studies focus solely upon home-schooled students' abilities to succeed in the college environment.

Barno's (2003) study focused on the transition experiences of 120 home-schooled students who attended four year institutions in Pennsylvania. The participants self-reported that they were academically successful, regardless of institutional type or their year in college. Though their studies were more heavily focused on the social aspects of home-schooled students' college experiences, Lattibeaudiere (2000) and White et al. (2007) found that that home-schooled students outperformed their peers in the classroom.

Jones and Gloeckner (2004) and Cogan (2010) studied multiple factors that contribute to student success. Cogan's (2010) study found that home-schooled students outperformed their peers' GPAs and graduation rates. When Cogan controlled for "demographic, pre-college, engagement, and first-term academic factors," he found that home-schooled students had similar graduation and retention rates to their peers, but had consistently higher GPAs than non-home-schooled students. Jones and Gloeckner's (2004) study also focused upon indicators of academic success: college credits earned, retention rates, and GPA. Based upon research that had been published before the study, Jones and Gloeckner hypothesized that there would not be a difference in the performance of home-and traditionally schooled students. After the performance indicators of 55 home-schooled and 53 traditionally educated students were compared, the results suggested that home-schooled students outperformed their more traditionally educated peers in the majority of the measures. However, the results showed that though there was a difference, it was not statistically

significant. This led Jones and Gloeckner (2004) to conclude that the home-educated students who arrive on college campuses are well-prepared to handle college level work. Jones and Gloeckner (2004) and Cogan's (2010) studies were fairly small in scope. Cogan's (2010) sample size consisted of approximately 70 home-schooled students at a medium sized doctoral institution in the Midwestern United States. Jones and Gloeckner's (2004) study was also fairly small in nature, and was restricted to students at 4-year institutions in Colorado. A study that focuses on a larger population of students at institutions nationwide could elicit more detailed results.

Gray (1998), Holder (2001), and Ashford (2005) showed that the home-schooled achieved similar GPAs as their traditionally educated peers at a variety of institutions. Furthermore, Gray's (2001) study did not find a difference in the English grades of students from both home-school and traditional school backgrounds. Similarly, Galloway and Sutton's (1995) study also assessed the students' grades on assignments and tests within a first-year composition course. The results showed that students from home-school backgrounds "demonstrate similar abilities in writing skills on the college level as conventionally educated students."

Similar to the research on home-schooled students' performances on standardized tests, studies show that this group of students perform at levels that are equal or superior to their more traditionally educated peers. According to the current research, students who enter college from home-school backgrounds are not at an academic disadvantage. The academic success of home-schooled students who attend college is reflected by the support

that they received throughout their K-12 years. Specialized attention from parents throughout childhood and adolescence can help home-schooled students develop stronger study skills that translate into success in the classroom. In addition, higher standardized test scores are correlated with classroom success. As previously discussed, home-schooled students' success on standardized tests is impacted by their parents' support throughout their K-12 years.

### **Social Integration**

The perceived isolation of home-schooled students is a cause for concern for some. Studies have been conducted that seek a deeper understanding of how previously home-educated students navigate the social aspects of college life. Due to the complex and heavily nuanced nature of social interaction in college, most of the studies below focus solely on the topic. However a few researchers have attempted to look at home-schooled students' academic performance and social adjustment in college.

Quantitative studies conducted by Lattibeaudiere (2000), Holder (2001), and White et al. (2007) showed that home-schooled students are able to adjust to the college environment and are socially well-adjusted. As part of her mixed-methods study, Lattibeaudiere (2000) used a survey to form an understanding of the transitions of 25 previously home-schooled students who attended both public and private institutions of higher education. Based upon the Student Adaptation to College Questionnaire's results, home-schooled students scored in the 76th percentile in social adjustment, and the 84th percentile in emotional adjustment, when compared to the national sample. A portion of Holder's (2001) study utilized the

Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale in order to determine if home-schooled students acclimated to the social aspects of the college environment as well as their traditionally-educated counterparts. The results showed that the home-schooled and traditionally educated students adjusted equally well to the college setting. White et al. (2007) compared students from home-school and traditional school backgrounds at a private university through using the College Adjustment Scale (CAS). The CAS is often used to assess a student's need for counseling assistance as they navigate the college environment. Out of the nine scales used in the test instrument, home-schooled students showed a lower level of anxiety than their peers, but were comparable in other scales, which include depression, substance abuse, and self-esteem problems. Additionally, the home-schooled students in the study reported lower levels of "emotional distress and social problems (p. 1)."

In addition to the questionnaire, Lattibeaudiere (2000) interviewed faculty and staff who were well acquainted with the students in order to ascertain their perspectives on the students' transitions into a college setting. The study's results showed that "students were very well prepared for college," and that the participants' skills translated very well into the college environment. Kraznow (2005) studied the transitional experiences of previously home-schooled students at two separate Christian universities. She interviewed 18 first and second year students to create a deeper understanding of what home-schooled students experience as they adjust to the college environment. Kraznow found that peer groups had a smaller impact on students who were home-educated, whereas faculty members had a larger impact on these students' transitions. In a study that was partially inspired by Lattibeaudiere

(2000), Bolle et al. (2007) conducted a study of six previously home-schooled students who attended a medium-sized public university in the Midwestern United States. All of the students in the study, which focused on the transitional issues of home-schooled students in college, were in their first year of college. The issues encountered by the students included “loneliness, meeting others with different values, and dealing with greater independence” (p. 637). The students in the study expressed that they felt well supported by their university, and the majority of the students were able to integrate into the university setting. Bolle et al.’s (2007) study was more focused on the transitional aspects of home-schooled students, and did not evaluate the students’ classroom performances. All of the students in the study matriculated into their second semester, which served as an indication that they achieved benchmarks for academic success. Bolle et al. (2007) found that home-schooled students contend with the same transitional issues that more traditionally educated students face. These qualitative studies demonstrate that home-schooled students can adjust to the social aspects of the college setting. Lattibeaudiere’s (2000) study focused upon the perspectives of students of sophomore status and above, but used a lens that focused on theories that are specific to college student development.

Gray (1998) and Lavoie (2006) surveyed students and parents to learn more about how previously home-schooled students navigated the college environment. The results from Gray’s (1998) survey suggested that students and parents thought that that home-schooling allowed for the development of social skills. In Lavoie’s (2006) study, both students and parents viewed the dual-enrollment experience favorably, as the dual-enrollment program

allowed home-schooled students adjust to college-level work. However, there were few support systems on the campus that were available to help younger students acclimate to the more social aspects of the college environment. These studies show that students and their families do not think that home-schooling puts students at a social disadvantage.

Critics of home-schooling frequently question whether home-schooled students are able to succeed socially in college. The attitudes of the participants, along with their parents, faculty, and staff demonstrate that home-schooled students are able to successfully navigate the collegiate milieu. In addition, quantitative assessments demonstrate that home-schooled students are socially well-adjusted and successfully adapt to the college environment. Students who were less able to integrate in to their colleges' social networks may have been less likely to participate in a study on home-schooled students and would not have been included in these studies. The potential overrepresentation of students who are able to successfully adjust to their colleges' social network could potentially be a limitation to these studies.

My study focused on the contextual elements of the students pre-college and college experiences, which previous studies had not addressed. Through asking open-ended questions and listening to their stories, I sought to find what elements of the participants' educational experiences had the greatest impact on their development as college students. Though my study bears several similarities to Lattibeaudiere's (2000), I thought it was important to explore the attitudes and adjustment of home-schooled students who attended college a decade after the completion of her study. In addition, unlike Kranzow's (2004)

study of home-schooled students who attend institutions of higher learning, I focused upon students at a large, public institution.

### **Home-Schooled Students as Adults**

An article penned by Knowles and Muchmore (1995) explored the long term impacts of home-schooling on a number of adults across a broad age range. Most of the adults in the study had received some sort of post secondary education, though few of the ten participants were home-educated past middle school. The majority of the participants viewed their home-school experiences positively, but a few felt as though they may have encountered some social challenges. Neven van Pelt (2009) conducted a follow-up study of a group of Canadian home-educated students who participated in a research project in 1994. The current lives of the students were the focus of a survey distributed to several hundred participants. Those who responded to the survey questionnaire were more likely to have a degree. Some of the cited benefits included “rich relationships, opportunity for enrichment, schedule flexibility, individualization of pace and programs, development of independence, and a superior education.” Some of the participants stated that they were negatively impacted by “social prejudice, [some] social challenges, some curricular limitations, [some] difficulty adapting to classroom settings, and [some] strains on family.”

Part of my study encouraged the participants to reflect upon their home-school experiences as current college students. I wanted to explore what previously home-educated students thought about their experiences in the years leading up to college, and to ask the participants to discuss how their home-school backgrounds related to them as college

students. The existing research suggests that adults from home-school backgrounds generally view their educational experiences favorably. However, it is difficult to find research on individuals who do not view their home-school experiences positively. Most of the existing research on previously home-schooled students highlights positive outcomes for those who have been educated at home. It would have been helpful to find research on people who were not successful after having been educated at home-in order to create a more balanced perspective. As the body of research expands, we can expect to find more critical studies in order to help facilitate constructive growth for the home-school movement.

### **Chapter 3: Methodology**

The purpose of this study is to discover the process through which students from a home-school background adjust to an institution of higher learning. The leap from a relatively isolated home-school to a large, public research university can be a daunting challenge for these students, and it may be difficult for student affairs professionals to understand their needs given that they represent a small number of college students. Members of the home-school community who understand the challenges and successes that home-school students face in college will help them become better prepared for the transition from a home-school to a university setting. Student affairs professionals who are equipped with the knowledge of the needs of home-school students are better prepared to help home-school students navigate the college landscape. In the following chapter, the methodology and the research paradigm will be delineated and discussed. In addition, the methods used for data collection and analysis will be described.

#### **Research Design**

This qualitative study was conducted through a basic interpretive approach. Merriam (2002) described this approach as one where “the researcher is interested in understanding how participants make meaning of a situation or phenomenon, this meaning is mediated through the researcher as instrument, the strategy is inductive, and the outcome is descriptive.” (p. 6). The meaning that the individual attaches to their experiences is a key component to qualitative research. Interviews were an essential part of forming an

understanding of the participants' experiences, and allowed me to create "a rich, descriptive account of the findings" (p. 7). Philosophically, this study adopted a social constructivist worldview, which surmises that people create a unique understanding of the social worlds to which they belong (Creswell, 2009). A method which granted me the opportunity to ask more open-ended questions seemed to correspond well to the goals of the study, which was to understand the transition and needs of students from home-school backgrounds. The uniqueness of each person's experience lent itself well to qualitative analysis. That said, the context of the environment is a key factor in this study, because the settings that these students have occupied – the college campus and their home-school – vary greatly from one another. I wanted to focus on how each participant's environment impacted their college experiences. Given the unique nature of the practice of home-based education, I thought that a more individualized approach to gathering data would best suit the goals of this study. Through individual interviews, I wanted to discover common themes that connected each student's experiences and draw conclusions based upon the commonalities that emerged during the data collection process. An understanding of the most common themes will help readers gain an understanding of the educational and social elements that are the most relevant factors in home-educated students' transitions into a four-year university.

As an educator, I believe that my primary goal is to help empower students and equip them with the ability to successfully navigate their college years and prepare them to become successful adults. Additionally, I have a duty to act as an advocate for students, and demonstrate that they are deserving of respect and that they matter to the University

community. Part of the embodiment of those duties is providing students with the chance to discuss experiences that are unique to their lives, and allow them to reflect upon the qualities that make them a valuable contributor to the community. Students with a home-school background possess a unique set of perspectives, but are sometimes reluctant to discuss their non-traditional experiences. It was my goal to encourage the participants to tell me their stories in order to help readers gain insight into the college experiences of previously home-educated students.

### **Sample**

Six students were interviewed for this study about their experiences as previously home-educated students who attend a large, public research institution. An email invitation was sent to students who resided in residence halls at a large, research intensive university in the Southeastern United States. Participants were selected based upon a pre-defined set of criteria. The first criterion was that the students had to at least be in their second year in college. Students who were in their first year were excluded from the study because I desired to have the perspectives of students who had some time to reflect upon the transitions that they underwent in their first year of college. This criterion was later amended to allow for the participation of a non-traditionally aged first-year student who spent one year abroad before embarking upon her collegiate studies. At the time of the interview, she had completed her first semester in college, and had spent a year participating in an internship overseas. She was home-schooled for most of her life, and I thought that her perspectives would add an additional layer of depth of the study. Another criterion was that participants

needed to have been educated in a home-school for at least seven years, including at least three of high school. Ensuring that there was not an extended period of time between the participants' home-school experiences and their college lives was an important part of understanding the transition from home-schools to the university. A total of eight students were interested in participating, five met the established criteria, and one exception was allowed. Participants who expressed interest were asked to complete a brief survey of demographic information and were provided with a consent form. After completing both forms, the interview was conducted. In order to protect their identities, the participants were allowed to select a pseudonym. Demographic data about each participant is shown in Table 3.1.

In the sample, male students were over represented. This initially came as a surprise to me, given that the nationwide balance between male and female home-educated students is proportionally balanced (National Center for Education Statistics, 2009). Additionally, in much of the previous research, female students were over represented in the sample populations. However, after further consideration, I attributed the population distribution to be reflective of the gender breakdown (56 percent male) at the university at which all of the students are enrolled. Additionally, all of the male participants were enrolled within engineering majors. I also attributed this to the focus of the institution. The institution at which the students were enrolled is known globally for its strength in the engineering disciplines. All of the participants self-identified as white or Caucasian, which did not benefit the goal of having a diverse set of ethnic backgrounds. However, this did not come as

a surprise, given that in 2007, over seventy percent of home-educated students nationwide identified as white (National Center for Education Statistics, 2009).

**TABLE 3.1 - Demographic Data**

| <b>Name</b> | <b>Gender</b> | <b>Year in College</b> | <b>Number of Years in a Home-School</b> | <b>Major</b>                    |
|-------------|---------------|------------------------|---|---------------------------------|
| Elizabeth   | Female        | Senior                 | 9                                       | Agriculture Extension Education |
| Alexander   | Male          | Sophomore              | 13                                      | Chemical Engineering            |
| Frank       | Male          | Senior                 | 12                                      | Electrical Engineering          |
| Gilbert     | Male          | Senior                 | 12                                      | Electrical Engineering          |
| Nigel       | Male          | Junior                 | 10                                      | Civil Engineering               |
| Katie       | Female        | First-Year             | 11.5                                    | Fashion and Textile Management  |

### **Interviews**

In accordance with the qualitative approach, interviews were the primary means of data collection. Each interview lasted no longer than fifty minutes, and covered a variety of topics ranging from the participants' educational backgrounds as home-school students to the experiences that they have had as college students. After receiving permission from the student, the in-depth interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed verbatim. All

recordings and transcripts were stored on a password protected computer to protect confidentiality. In order to create a well-rounded understanding of the dynamics of the interview process, I spent some time in reflection after the interview, and recorded my reactions in a research journal. The interviews took place in meeting rooms in a residence hall and study rooms located in the library of the university.

The interviews focused upon the participants' interpretation of how they transitioned into the university. Before each interview, I provided each participant with a brief overview of my background in order to explain why I had an interest in the topic. Not only was this done to help establish rapport with the participants, it helped to establish myself as one who could be trusted with personal information. From my experiences as a student who had been educated in a home-school, I can recall several of my peers regarding people from outside of the home-school network with suspicion. Some of the individuals in my home-school community oftentimes felt threatened by educators at a large public institution, and had concerns about the potentially negative influences of higher education upon their students. Since all of the participants in the study were students at a large, public research institution, I reasoned that they did not hold these assumptions or beliefs. Nevertheless, I felt as though it would be important to establish myself as one who had a sincere interest in learning more about the experiences of home-educated students for the sake of helping future students successfully transition into a four year college environment.

At the beginning of each interview, I asked questions about the participants' home-school experiences and the groups of people that were a part of their lives. As the interviews

progressed, the questions began to focus on the transition into college and the factors that affected the participants' abilities to adjust to a new educational environment. Toward the end of the interview, participants were asked to draw some conclusions based upon their experiences and were encouraged to think about the key elements that affected their transition from a home-school to a four-year university. This was to help provide me with a framework and offer an explanation of the perceptions and attitudes of college-bound home-schooled students as they entered the university. Past educational experiences are important for understanding current college experiences; thus, I was interested in how the participants' experiences as home-schooled students affected their impressions of the college environment. In addition, many of the interview questions focused upon the participants' experiences as college students. The questions were geared toward learning about the ways in which home-schooled students explore their campus environments. The interview was focused on understanding student voices so as to gain insight into their lived experiences in college.

### **Data Analysis**

Interview data were analyzed in several critical steps. Interviews were transcribed verbatim by a transcribing service (Verbal Ink). I then listened to the recordings before I finalized the transcripts. The transcripts were read several times in order to gain an understanding of themes expressed by the students and to create a list of codes. Each interview was coded using the list of open codes. Common themes and sub-themes were noted on each transcript, and the number of occurrences of each theme was noted so that I could discover the most common experiences each participant had as they transitioned into

the college environment. I focused on looking at the students' transitions through a contextual lens, as described by Bronfenbrenner (1993). The contextual lens helped me to look at the aspects of the students' experiences that combined and influenced the participants' development.

### **Researcher Role**

Within the study, my role as the researcher was to understand the lived experiences of home-school students as they transitioned into the college environment. However, since I have undergone this transition as well, I could not approach this topic from an outsider's perspective. I disclosed to students before beginning the interview that I was educated in a home-school from the time that I was nine until I graduated from high school. My background was somewhat different from the experiences of the participants, primarily because I attended a different undergraduate institution and was raised in a different state than the participants. Home-school laws differ between states, which leads to a different set of experiences among families (HSLDA 2011).

I approached the study assuming that the participants were fairly comfortable with discussing their home-school backgrounds, and that they valued an education from a public institution. Each student came from a different background, so no two educational experiences were alike. Additionally, given that the participants were enrolled in a large research extensive university, I assumed that these students were successful in their careers as home-school students, and that they came from families who supported their academic and career aspirations.

As an individual who was educated in a home-school, I have a range of perspectives that may have influenced my approach to the study as well as the findings. My home-school experience began when I was in fourth grade. My family's decision to home-school my sister and me was reached after a series of negative events in our local school district encouraged my parents to explore other educational options. Originally, the intention was to try home-schooling for one year, and to reevaluate the decision to do so at the conclusion of the school year. After some initial challenges in adjusting to a much smaller class size and method of instruction, I agreed to another year of home-schooling. I greatly enjoyed having the opportunity to meet a new group of friends, go on unique field trips, learn at my own pace, and take the time to explore my passions. When I was a child, I gained a deep interest in meteorology. As I progressed toward high school, I decided that I desired to become a hurricane researcher. However, finding a way to ensure that I was prepared for the high-level college mathematics required for a meteorology degree proved to be a challenge. I did not desire to attend a traditional school, and my mother's education did not expand into areas such as trigonometry and calculus, so we had to find a different option for the direction of my education.

After attending a seminar on accelerated college credit options for high school students, my parents decided to enroll me in two college-level courses during the spring semester of my ninth grade year. I remember being very nervous as I walked into my first college course. Clearly, I was the youngest person in class, and I tried to adopt a low profile in hopes that no one would notice. For the most part, I kept to myself but worked hard to

ensure that I performed to the best of my ability. Throughout that semester and into my second year at the community college, I gained additional confidence in my abilities, and began to get involved on campus by taking a job as a math tutor, and eventually organizing a club with the help of my sister. I received my Associate in Arts degree two weeks before my local home-school organization celebrated the high school graduation of its members. At the graduation ceremony, I was presented with an award that recognized my academic achievement and contributions to the college. Looking toward the next academic achievement excited me; I was confident that I fully understood the college landscape, and that I would excel at my next institution as I had at the community college.

The following fall, I enrolled at Florida State University. Initially, I had intended to spend two years working toward my meteorology degree, but was encouraged by faculty and older students that a three year plan would lead to lower stress and would give me the opportunity to fully enjoy college life. My first semester proved to be a difficult transition. Academically, I jumped into the core requirements of my major and had to adjust to the huge lecture hall that housed my Physics class. Outside of class, I got involved in my residence hall, but learning how to handle roommate conflict proved challenging. Many of the friends from my childhood lived several hours away, and I had to learn how to make new friends. Many of my fellow first-year students came to college with a network of high school friends in place. Given the distance from my home town and the fact that I only had one close friend who was also enrolled at Florida State made me feel as though I was an out-of-state student. I was thankful that I had some understanding of how to navigate college coursework, but it

was a challenge to motivate myself to become involved in new activities. Gradually, I got involved with an evangelical Christian student group which led to the formation of valuable friendships. Throughout that year, I did not want others to know that I had been home-schooled, because I was aware of some of the negative stereotypes (such as social awkwardness) to which it is attached. I was worried that I might say or do something that would continue to reinforce those stereotypes.

The following spring, I became a Resident Assistant. My role as an RA opened the door to new opportunities that helped me discover new interests which led me to pursue a career in Student Affairs. As I progressed through my time as an undergraduate, my identity as a home-schooled student became less salient; I was surprised how interested other students were when I revealed that I was home-schooled. I found that most people were intrigued by the non-traditional way in which I was educated. After completing my education at Florida State University, I discovered that while my home-education helped me to develop into the person I became, it did not need to define the core of my identity. Furthermore, I learned that I could not limit myself because of the non-traditional nature of my background. These concepts helped me to understand that a person's goals and identity should not be tied to a singular aspect of their personality or background. The individuality of my background helped me to develop an appreciation for the traits that makes each person unique.

Going into the study, I was not sure if the participants' backgrounds as home-schooled students would have a similar impact on their transitions into college. I thought that some students would find their past educational backgrounds to be a more salient factor into

their experiences as college students. When creating the interview protocol, I tried to word my questions in such a way as to avoid leading the participants' to overstate or understate the importance of their home-school backgrounds.

### **Trustworthiness**

Member checks were conducted following initial analysis of the interview data. The participants were sent a draft of the findings via email and were asked to confirm that they had been accurately represented in the study. I edited the results according to the wishes of the participants. In keeping with the purpose of the study, I felt that it was important that the students' voices were expressed in the findings. I did not want to assume that my initial interpretations would convey the most accurate representation of what each participant expressed. The stories of each participant constituted the basis for the study, and I thought it appropriate to show respect to the students by portraying them in a manner that they believed was accurate. Additionally, due to my personal ties to the research topic, I kept a journal throughout the study in order to account for and balance my own personal perspectives on what the students shared through their interviews.

### **Limitations**

Due to the qualitative nature of this study, the findings cannot be considered generalizable. Individuals reading this study need to remember that the findings are not meant to be representative of all home-school students; rather, the study illustrates some of the key experiences that a set of home-school students face as they transition into the college environment. Additionally, at the beginning of the study, I assumed that the participants

would be comfortable with discussing their educational experiences. Students who may have had extremely negative home-school experiences would be less likely to participate in the study. Thus, their perspectives are not represented in this study. Finally, as I progressed through my study it became apparent that it would be unlikely for home-educated students who were ill-prepared for the college environment to participate in the interviews due to their low persistence rates.

## **Chapter 4: Findings**

A set of recurring themes emerged throughout the data collection process of the study. In the following chapter, I will highlight the recurring topics that were discussed through the interview process. The themes will be grouped under two main categories: experiences before college and experiences during college. In this chapter, college will be defined as the 4-year institution in which the participants were enrolled. Though many of the participants took college-level coursework at local community colleges, such experiences will be related to dual enrollment, since the students were of high school age and living at home-during that period in their educational backgrounds.

### **Experiences Before College**

As I sought to gain an understanding of the participants' college transition, I found it necessary to learn more about the years that led up to their experiences in college. Learning about the participants' educational backgrounds helps to provide the context that impacted their transitions into college. In qualitative research, context is key to understanding the entirety of the research topic. Without insight into the background of previously home-educated students, it would be impossible to gain an accurate understanding of their experiences as college students. I found it necessary to highlight the participants' pre-college experiences to show how the home-schooled students' educational backgrounds affected their college transitions. In addition, having an understanding of each student's background can also help those within the home-school community understand what resources are available

to those who wish to prepare for a college education. Finding methods to adequately prepare home-educated students for college is seen as a daunting task for some. The results show that there are a variety of ways in which to prepare student from home-school backgrounds for college level academics.

### **Reasoning Behind Decision to Home-School**

Each participant discussed the dynamics that led to their family's decision to choose home-education as their method for instruction. Approximately half of the participants cited inadequate public schools as the motivating factor behind the decision to try home-education. Gilbert explained that his older siblings who were otherwise excellent students struggled to learn under teachers that had poor leadership and teaching skills. His parents made the decision to home-school during his later years of elementary school in order to avoid the negative experiences that his older siblings had faced. "So my mom thought about trying to homeschool me through that period of time and and I enjoyed it so much we continued on [until high school graduation]."

As an out of state student, Elizabeth had a slightly different experience. The local school system did not meet her family's educational needs.

But the reason that I was home-schooled was basically, because the school system that we were in was really bad. We were the bottom of the state and our state is one of the lowest in the whole country. So it was mostly for educational reasons. But then I was also raised in a Christian home, so there was those benefits too where we could have Bible time as well as school [...].

Elizabeth further explained that the schools in her district were was “so bad that kids would graduate without being able to read.” Elizabeth’s father had been educated in the same school district, “but he grew up with a lot fewer opportunities because he was stuck in the district we were initially in. So he really strove to make sure we had the opportunity as far as college and things like that were concerned.” Transferring to a neighboring school district that was of a much higher quality was out of the question, due to the political climate of the region.

Katie’s transition into home-schooling was heavily affected by her older sister’s educational needs. As a gifted student, Katie’s sister was not adequately challenged in the local public schools, and tried home-education as an alternative. Katie’s family members were flexible in their approach to home-schooling.

One thing my mom has always done is, if we wanted to go to school, we always had that option. So each one of us at different points have tried public school. So for me, it was seventh grade, and I went for about six months, I think, and then I decided to continue home-schooling.

Katie described her public school experience as “a disappointment.” Alexander’s explained that his family’s decision to home-school was for a variety of reasons.

My family was religious but that wasn’t why we home-schooled. We home-schooled because we traveled a lot in my early life and it was hard to find a school. And then where we moved to, they didn’t have a real great school system so we decided to—

my mom decided to home-school us through like kindergarten and the early grades. And then I was kind of like, "Oh, this isn't too bad." So I just kind of kept going. Many of the participants expressed that their public schools did not meet their specific academic needs, and that home-schooling seemed to be the best option for their families. Overall it seemed as though the decision to home-school the participants was heavily influenced by their parents. This would be expected though, given that within a home-school setting, parents are the primary educators. The participants seemed to enjoy their home-school experiences, and indicated that they took part in the decision to persist as home-schooled students.

### **Family**

All of the participants expressed their family units heavily impacted their education. All of the participants had siblings, and suggested that they had a close relationship with their families. Frank and Elizabeth talked about the impact that younger siblings had on their educational experiences. Both individuals were impacted very similarly by their brothers, and learned how to teach themselves as their mothers provided more assistance to their younger siblings. Elizabeth expressed this theme in the following paragraph.

For the most part what my mom would do is she would get me started on my school work and I was pretty much self-sufficient as far as school was concerned. She would be like, "You know you need to read this assignment today. Read these assignments by the end of the week and then you know you have a test. And you need to be ready for it." And because my brother was so much younger than me, he

needed a lot more attention as far as that was concerned. So by the time I got to like middle school she just kind of let me do my own thing. And then would check up you know make sure I was on target, but for the most part my brother needed a lot more attention than I did. So I just kind of did my own thing as far as school was concerned.

Participants with older siblings, such as Alexander and Gilbert, were thankful to have their older siblings' advice and support as they prepared for college. Both individuals had siblings who were several years older than they, and were able to gain an understanding of what to expect in the college environment. Gilbert felt that he "had a pretty good idea of what to expect because my brother and sister had gone before my and they just gave tips about what I could expect as far as the level of work and the type of work." Additionally, Gilbert's older brother helped tutor him in subjects such as "calculus and things of that nature." Each participant expressed gratitude for the role that their parents played in their respective upbringings. Everyone expressed the level of dedication that their parents had when designing their educational framework. In many cases, both parents were active participants in students' educations. A specific example was Nigel's "loving family" and the fact that his parents were still married as being a "really huge benefit" to his educational success. Additionally, Nigel credited his parents' college educations as being an instrumental part of his college preparation. His explanation follows: "with my mom being a physical therapist, she was able to help me whenever I had a question, [she] was great at math and those kinds of things too." Katie was heavily involved in Irish dancing, and started when she was 12.

So that was my other, I guess social outlet, you could call it. In my most competitive years, I had class 3 times a week, and it was – on Saturdays, it was all days, from morning until afternoon, and those classes were actually in [large city], so it's actually a 3-hour drive to [large city] from my house. So we'd drive 3 hours, class all day, and then drive back 3 hours. Which is – I have a very committed mother.

Each participant talked about their families with a great deal of warmth and fondness. It was clear that they deeply valued their families' influence upon their educational development. Siblings played a large role in helping to either support the participants as they progressed through their educations or had a role in allowing the participants to develop as independent learners. Parents, as primary educators, were central to the participants' educational development, and their impact was highlighted throughout the interviews. Though the role of the participants' parents was not discussed in great detail, their importance cannot be understated.

### **Home-School Community**

Each participant connected to a community of other home-schooled students differently. The respective families of Nigel, Frank, and Katie were involved in local home-school communities, which allowed for opportunities to engage in co-ops and sporting activities. Nigel connected with members of the home-school community through playing “soccer on Fridays, [as] a way to integrate ourselves into the home-school group. We had these co-op classes on Fridays where we would get together and talk about a variety of different things. Like classes on outdoor education or one on playing guitar [...]” Frank's

family was also involved in an educational co-op, but its focus was oriented more toward “liberal arts subjects such as history and literature.” His family did not participate for long, because “it felt like too much busy work.” Following that decision, Frank’s family would attend the annual state home-school convention as an outlet to connect with other families and learn more about educational trends. Katie and her family were involved in a home-school organization during her elementary school years. After three years of involvement, her family found other ways to connect to the home-school community because “they became a very religious group, and my family likes to read Harry Potter [...], so we weren’t really welcome anymore, so we left that group.” Co-op groups then became the primary way in which Katie’s family connected to other home-school families until high school when she was granted more autonomy over her own educational direction.

Elizabeth, Alexander, and Gilbert were less connected to a formally organized home-school association. Elizabeth was raised in a very rural region of her home state, and did not have the opportunity to interact with local home-educated students due to the low population density of her community. Her family became involved with a 4-H group that was specifically for home-educated students, but the gatherings were located two hours away, which made meeting regularly with the group problematic. Furthermore, Elizabeth and her brother felt out of place among a number of “weird home-school kids.” When asked for a definition of what a “weird home-school kid” was, she provided the following explanation:

I don't think it's necessarily a religious thing, because I've met some that have no preferences when it comes to religion, but I think that's kind of the stereotype that a

lot of people hold is that it's a religious thing. I think like socially they're very awkward, socially they just don't understand like norms and they don't understand like watching *Veggie Tales* is not okay for a 16 year old.

After a period of time, Elizabeth's family helped to organize and participate in a 4-H club that was closer to their home. Though Alexander was raised in a religious family, his mother felt like an outsider among other home-school families due to differences in their faith practices. As a result, Alexander spent more of his time with members of the secular home-school community. This has given Alexander the opportunity to educate others about some of the reasons why families choose to home-school their children, and that the decision to do so is not always religiously driven. Gilbert's family did not remain involved in a group that primarily consisted of other home-educated students, and preferred to connect to those outside of the home-school community. The level of formal interaction with other home-schooled students varied among the participants. Among the participants, a trend toward independence and finding a system that worked for their families became apparent.

### **Other Community**

Outside of the home-school community, all of the participants found ways to interact with others. 4-H was an interest held by both Elizabeth and Katie who had the opportunity to interact with other students in a variety of ways. Elizabeth showed livestock during her high school years, which gave her the opportunity to meet non-home-schooled students. Katie's interests focused more on leadership. The leadership program in which Katie was involved led to a foreign exchange opportunity where her family hosted Japanese students, and

allowed her to spend a month in Japan at the age of fifteen. In addition, Katie “was a district officer of 4H with the exchange program.”

I’m also 4H ambassador, and for that you have to take lots of classes and workshops, and then write reports on what you learned, and how that will affect what you do in the future. And I’ve taught tons of workshops, [and] worked at camps. [M]ostly, I’ve focused on the leadership aspect, and horticulture project areas, and also sewing and fashion.

Gilbert was heavily involved in his local Boy Scout troop throughout his entire childhood, and still continues his involvement with the organization. Though Gilbert did not feel as though he had been accepted by the troop until adolescence, he still viewed the experience very positively. Gilbert explained his experience as follows:

[T]hey were very close knit group of friends because all the boys that were in Boy Scouts happened to go to the same school. So it was kind of I was still an outsider even in the Boy Scout group. I wasn't even even they would joke around they didn't even accept me until I was probably 15. So I just kind of did my own thing. It was a good learning experience [...].

Taekwondo was Frank’s primary social outlet outside of the home-school community, and Nigel’s family was heavily involved in their church. Alexander had a less formal group of friends that primarily consisted of other children in his neighborhood. Social networks from outside of the home-school community developed in a variety of ways. Varying levels of

formality drove the creation of such networks, but none of the students expressed that they felt as though their social activity had been hindered by their home-schooling practices.

### **College Preparation**

Many of the individuals in the study were dual enrolled throughout their high school years. All of the participants who spent time as dual enrolled students spoke very highly of their experiences. Nigel was very positive about the time that he spent as a dual-enrolled student, and credited the experience as “the biggest benefit of home-schooling was dual-enrolling.” Over the course of four semesters, Nigel accumulated 50 college credits, which allowed him to enter his four year institution as a second semester sophomore. The time spent at the community college allowed Nigel to navigate some of the challenges that many new students face such as how to buy textbooks. During high school, Frank also dual enrolled in order to complete his “English, economics, and foreign language requirements for college,” which he described as “pretty nice.” Frank enjoyed the new environment, because he felt that “someone who had gone through the textbook and had already chosen all the specific things and would work through examples,” made navigating coursework an easier task because “you could ask questions when something wasn’t apparent.” Alexander was dual enrolled as well, and felt as though it helped him prepare for college level work. He credits his high level of performance to assistance from his siblings and parents, and explained that “it may have helped that I did the dual enrollment and pretty much got all A’s [...]. [Admissions officers] could see that I was devoted in other course work.” At the age of 16, Gilbert enrolled at his local community college, and received his Associate’s Degree two

years later. As a result, the admissions office viewed Gilbert “more as a transfer from a college than they did a home-schooled student.” While at the community college, Gilbert joined Phi Beta Kappa, which is an organization that celebrates academic achievement at two-year institutions.

Neither of the female participants in the study participated in a dual enrollment program before attending a four year institution. Elizabeth spent her senior year at her local high school because she felt that she “really needed to take AP classes in order to be competitive when it came to getting into schools. Originally I wanted to be a vet so taking Latin and like AP Biology and stuff like that was really essential” to be a more competitive admissions candidate. Upon reflection, Elizabeth did not think that the time spent at the local high school helped to prepare her for college. She felt as though the independent nature of her home-education was more beneficial to her college preparation “because [college is] very self-driven, you have to make sure you meet the deadline, the professor is not going come in or call you the day before the assignment is due.” Katie opted to take some time off from formal schooling and spent a year as a 4-H intern in Japan and worked with the exchange program in which she had previously participated. The personal growth that Katie had experienced helped to make her transition into college fairly easy.

I noticed a huge amount of personal growth from the beginning to when I finished. I think that, especially just the process of adjusting, because I was constantly moving, experiencing new things, and getting used to the culture. And that was just a huge transition, so I think that by comparison, the transition to college was so much less

than transitioning to living there. So when I came back, I was coming home, and I had only 5 days; I missed orientation and everything, 'cause I barely got home, and just had to go straight to college. I didn't really have time to think about it, so, I don't know, it was a pretty smooth transition, I guess, 'cause more like coming home than going somewhere else.

The participants also discussed the application process at their four year institution. Those who applied as students who had attended a home-school did not feel as though their current institution was overly stringent in its admissions policies. A transcript and test scores were required for admission. Creating a transcript proved to be challenging for some of the students, since their academic work was assessed in a non-traditional manner. Nigel and Frank sought help from older friends who had created transcripts for their college applications. Participants who did not apply to their institution as home-schooled students said that their home-school background was not an issue during the application process. All of the participants took steps to prepare for college-level work. The decision to attend an institution of higher learning was not made haphazardly, and each participant spent a large portion of their high school years preparing for college through dual-enrollment programs, advanced placement courses and overseas internships.

### **Experiences During College**

An understanding of the participants' experiences as college students is central to this study. Since all of the students lived on campus at the time of the interviews, the impact of their families was altered. Since becoming students at a large, public research institution,

their lifestyles have undergone change. Not only have they had to create new social networks, the participants have had to adjust to a new method of education. Though over half of the participants had spent some time at a community college before enrolling at their four year institution, it was expected that the new institution would lead to different kinds of experiences for all of the students. It is also important to understand that all of the students in the study are at different points in their educational careers and view their adjustment patterns individually. The findings will highlight some of the transitions that previously home-educated students face, and may help inform those who have an interest in students from home-school backgrounds about the nature of these transitions.

### **Expectations**

The participants entered college with a ranging set of expectations. Two of the participants, Gilbert and Elizabeth were not sure what to expect. Both individuals expected to see a lot of partying and similar activities in which they would not participate, due to their sets of values. Elizabeth summed her expectations as follows:

I guess I really didn't know what to expect. I was just coming into it with an open mind as far as like I knew this was going to be a public university and coming from a Christian background there were gonna be things that maybe I wasn't comfortable with or maybe I had never experienced before. So I kind of came into it with an open mind so I didn't have I don't want to say I had any certain [expectations].

Gilbert's expectations closely mirrored Elizabeth's. Additionally, Gilbert was prepared to accept more life responsibilities. Gilbert felt as though he needed to "start building my future, my career and was looking forward to it. I was just looking forward to taking the next step. I had no desire to get away from Mom and Dad it was just I knew I needed to."

Other participants' expectations about college were more focused on the academic workload. Katie, Frank, and Nigel thought that the coursework would be more difficult than the coursework that they had previously experienced. Frank was prepared to assume a higher level of academic responsibility.

I knew it'd be a place where I would have more challenging classes and I'd be responsible for myself and myself alone. Mom and Dad would always tell me about how the professors unlike them wouldn't really care about how I was doing in school and so I had to take it upon myself to stay motivated and get all of it done.

Katie's thoughts reflected a similar set of expectations regarding the additional autonomy that college afforded.

Well, I expected the classes to be difficult, but I knew that I was good at pushing myself, making myself do my homework. I feel like I'm good at time management. My first semester, I think actually I kind of surprised myself, because I thought it was actually easier than I expected. And I guess as a home-schooler, you want to validate yourself. You want to be like – I mean, I was really nervous at first, because I was thinking, what if I didn't work hard enough in high school? What if I didn't study enough, what if I'm totally unprepared, and I'm just gonna be terrible at this? So it's

kind of scary, because I think kids that go to school, they don't really have that. They think, "I went to school, my teachers taught me, so I should be prepared." But when you're teaching yourself, then it's a lot more personal, I think, and that was really scary. But it turned out – I mean, last semester went really well, and then I felt that I had done a pretty good job of preparing myself for college.

On the other end of the spectrum, Alexander thought that in comparison to his brother, he would have an easier time in college due to a difference in major.

I went as engineering so I figured I'd work hard but I wouldn't work as hard as my brother and so I'd have slightly more free time. [N]either my brother or my sister got involved in organizations, and I was much more interested in getting involved [...]. I was interested in getting involved in a lot more of the activities [and the] college experience [...].

He was also told that in college, "you're surprised by how many people are smarter than you and how many people are dumber than you," which he has found to be true.

The participants' expectations were heavily influenced by their families and by previous college-level study. Everyone expected that their level of independence would increase, and that the coursework would be more challenging than in years past. Some focused on the social aspects of college life, and knew that it would differ significantly from their home-school communities.

## Surprises

Though many of the participants felt as though their expectations had been met, they also experienced surprises. Nigel and Katie were surprised by the lack of diversity on campus and on their classes. Nigel's description of his surprise reflects his upbringing in a diverse community:

I think the biggest one that it was less diverse at [University] than the community college, [that] I attended [in another city]. [The city] is a melting pot of different people different all kinds of ideas and races, sexual orientations, religion, whatever. And so here it was a lot more of I guess the traditional kind of like Southern people that would attend a large university in the South. So it was less diverse, which was surprising to me.

Similar to Nigel, Katie expected to be among a more diverse student body.

I guess I expected there to be like a more pronounced difference between people, but when I – I'm probably being stereotypical or whatever, but within {my college}, when I look at the class of people, they're all so similar. All the people are so similar, and that, I guess that was kind of a surprise. And I found that the class where I actually fit in the best and I've made the most friends would be my Japanese class, and probably one of the reasons is 'cause it's my smallest class, so there's actually more time to talk with each other and interact.

The structure of his coursework came as a surprise to Nigel, who initially thought that he would be able to specialize sooner in his college career. Nigel did not expect to take as many

general courses before having the opportunity to delve more deeply into his main area of focus. Though Alexander knew that drugs and alcohol would be present in the lives of many of his peers, he was surprised by the number of friends who engaged in that kind of behavior. It took a period of adjustment before Frank could tune out what he viewed as some of the negative aspects of college culture.

I guess I could say that I—most everyone in my home-school organization, for the most part, were Christians and whatnot. So all of them fairly mild mannered and then coming here you can see all the penises drawn on all the walls and everyone swearing like a sailor. It's a little bit of a culture shock. But I got used to it pretty quickly.

Later in the interview, Frank expanded upon his thoughts about how his peers interact and the consequences that has on their relationships.

I guess I wasn't exposed to the whole petty gossip, backstabbing, drama thing that happens around—well, I guess it happens in all the movies and stuff. You see some of it around campus but I'm not in a group of friends that partakes in that stuff. So I don't have much experience with that but I've seen effects of it listening on the bus, the people's conversations. It just strikes me as interesting. I don't think I would exactly know how to deal with a situation where everyone's gossiping and backstabbing everyone. It's just kind of foreign to me.

Elizabeth expressed similar sentiments regarding some of the surprises she encountered in college:

There were things that I guess I figured would happen that didn't and that was the

level of accountability as far as students are concerned. I mean there was a high level of accountability in home-schooling, because Mom knew everything that I was doing. But as far as cheating or copying other students work that's so common place in a college environment and I guess that's something I didn't really realize. When I think about it now, I'm like well, duh. That kind of comes with the territory but that was something that I would say was one of the big things that just kind of surprised me [is] how prevalent [the lack of] general accountability [with] cheating

The students expressed surprise in two areas: diversity and the levels of cheating and gossiping that they had witnessed in the classroom and on campus. As the participants navigated the college landscape, they have adjusted to the factors that surprised them initially, and now view those elements as part of the backdrop of their institution.

### **Classroom Environment**

The classroom experience was not new to any of the participants, since everyone in the study had learned in a classroom setting prior coming to college. Many indicated an intuitive understanding of classroom learning, though each participant arrived at their conclusions differently. Nigel found that adjusting to a classroom “wasn’t a big deal because I had previous experiences.” He had “started some of the co-op stuff [...] in 6th or 7th grade, and because I had been in private school just a few years before, [classroom learning] wasn't a big deal-very natural.” Alexander said that college was “like [...] a movie where they sit in a classroom and you pretty much know what to do. You just walk down, sit down, take notes.” Frank explained that “learning in the classroom was I suppose easier because now

you had someone there that was an expert in the subject and that you could just ask questions [...] to,” but having to navigate each professors’ “quirks” was challenging. Additionally, Frank had to adjust to showing his work, because he preferred to solve problems in his head. Gilbert discussed the need to learn to adjust from the one-on-one instructional method used in his home-school to the thirty to one ratio at his community college, and furthermore to the three hundred to one ratio at his four year institution. He realized that each professor has a different instructional method, and that it is the student’s role to adjust to the professor, rather than demanding that the professor adjust to the student. In Gilbert’s opinion,

You're causing a problem if you start to draw a line between a home-schooled student and a public school student in the academic setting such as a university. [...] If you come in -- in my opinion the worst thing to happen is that you can just feel a little bit uncomfortable but you have to adjust. [...] If you say, “I’m not used to this classroom environment. I’m not used to this many people in the classroom.” It’s not really the professor’s fault. It’s not really the classmates fault. [...] So you need to adjust.

No one expressed that they felt as though the classroom environment was uncomfortable, but for some, and adjustment period was necessary. Previous classroom experiences and media images played a role in helping the participants adjust to a formal learning environment. Many participants expressed that their home-school backgrounds had helped them to develop a level of autonomy that lent itself well to learning in a college environment.

## *Faculty*

Many of the participants felt very comfortable with their professors, and readily approached their instructors. Alexander, Elizabeth, and Katie spoke about their comfort with members of the faculty. Though these participants approached developing relationships with professors differently, they expressed a commitment to getting to know faculty members. Due to the small size of her academic program and career field (Agriculture Extension Education), Elizabeth looks forward to the day when her professors become her colleagues as she works as a liaison between the University and area farmers. As a senior, Elizabeth has had the opportunity to get to know her professors and has taken an active role in maintaining relationships with faculty.

I love being able to connect with my professors sort of people that I won't literally be calling when I'm in the job of being an extension agent I'll be calling some of my professors being, "Hey I'm dealing with this program. How do I answer this person's question?" It's neat because not only are they a part of my environment here but they'll be a part of my professional environment in the future, because you're connected to the University's cooperative extension. So it's like a lifelong friendship almost, because I'll have more contact with them in the future.

As a home-educated student, Alexander was frequently in the company of adults, which helped to equip him with the ability to approach his professors more easily than many of his peers. Furthermore, he discussed the ways in which students are encouraged to build rapport with professors as being somewhat misleading. He described the student/professor

relationship as being more of an acquaintanceship rather than a friendship. Alexander's definition of the student/professor relationship as follows: "[...] you don't go out and have beers with them. It's kind of, I mean, maybe after you've had them for so long, you'll get more of that relationship but I guess as a [first-year student] you go talk to them in office hours." However, Alexander expressed that he strove to maintain connections to professors from his first year in college.

Yeah, so there's some professors that I still [visit] like my Chem 101 teacher, I'll go in and [say], "Hey, how's it going?" And he'll [say], "Hey Alexander, how's it going?" And we'll like talk about my studies a bit [...], see how I'm doing in all the classes and, you know, since I'm taking other Chem. classes he'll [say], "Oh, how's that teacher?" You know, and stuff like that.

Katie enjoyed getting to know her professors as well, but as a first-year student, had not yet had the opportunity to form long-standing connections with faculty. Similar to Alexander, she noticed a degree of trepidation from her peers when faced with having to approach a professor with a question. However, Katie embraced the opportunity to get to know her instructors.

One thing I noticed is that the other students tend in general to be more, I guess, afraid of the professors. They have that separation like, "I'm a student, you're a teacher," and when I've been talking to other people, if they have something, they need to go talk to someone, they're always a little bit hesitant. And maybe it's from home-schooling, or maybe it's from working with adults in 4-H, but I feel really

comfortable with adults, and I don't have a problem talking with my teachers. I went and talked with my Japanese professor for like 3 hours, just about random stuff, 'cause I feel really comfortable talking with adults. And I think, I guess that was – I guess it makes sense, because throughout school, it's always the students and then the teacher, there's that separation, and I think you have less of that when you're home-schooled.

Alexander, Elizabeth, and Katie strongly expressed their commitment to getting to know faculty. Each participant saw different reasons for getting to know faculty, but they all saw the importance of learning more about their instructors. The other participants did not discuss their relationships with their professors in detail.

### *Classmates*

Many of the participants described their experiences in working with their classmates. The students discussed their need to work with classmates in order to succeed in their studies. However, the participants expressed a range of opinions regarding their preferences for group work. Frank expressed dislike for group work, because he views his teammates to be “a little bit more unfocused or unsure as to what's going on, plus coordination is a nightmare.” To elaborate, Frank described a time in which a classmate did not adequately contribute to a group project due to his involvement in athletics. The classmate's lack of focus and dedication to the project led to a lower grade, which left Frank feeling frustrated. Frank expressed that he would rather work with friends, because he was aware of their capabilities. Nigel and Alexander's opinions on group work were more neutral. Nigel saw the utility in

working with others. “For a lot of the engineering classes it’s helpful to study in groups. There are times [...] where I can keep up with [assignments] by myself so I can crank those out for myself and understand it for myself. I think it definitely varies.” Alexander found studying in groups to be challenging at times, especially when there was a range of topics being discussed.

[I]f you’re all studying the same thing it’s not quite as bad but if you have some people in a different class that are studying something else and then you’re studying something completely different, they’re always talking and distracting, and then there are other people that are trying to focus.

Additionally, his social nature had a tendency to want to engage others in conversation, which contributed to the lack of focus and a frustrating set of distractions mentioned above. Over time, Alexander has found “friends that I have gotten really good at studying with. I know their quirks.”

Due to the small size of Elizabeth’s major, she and many of her classmates formed study groups. She indicated that she had a very positive experience in working with her classmates.

So we had a group project in a different class and we were in the other class we were planning like how we could get into a group together and stuff like that. We work as a team like even when we're in classes that have nothing to do with our major. We're very close knit. [Our classes] don't always fit together but when it comes time to study we'll get together in groups and we just we help each other out - “Hey I took

soil science last year let me help you with soil science this year. I can help you study and I know how this teacher what this teacher is looking for on their tests,” and just giving pointers as far as that's concerned. It's very much like a Big Brother/Big Sister type of a feel in my major.

The importance of working with classmates emerged as a theme, but there was a lack of agreement on whether or not the participants enjoyed it. Participating in group work was seen as a necessary part of college life, and the participants expressed that they preferred to work with friends.

### **Social Life**

All of the students in the study made it a priority to connect with others outside of their classes through a variety of avenues both on and away from campus. The participants in the study saw their social networks as an important portion of their lives at college. For many young adults, the college years are seen as a wonderful opportunity to get to know others, and the participants actively sought ways to create these connections. As an overall theme, the social lives of the participants was composed of many elements, I will highlight the sub-themes that appeared frequently throughout the interviews.

### ***Residence Life***

All of the participants lived in on-campus residence halls or apartments. Three of the participants discussed connections to their neighbors. As a first year student, Katie was still adjusting to life in college, but was thankful to have three roommates with whom she shared a positive connection. By coincidence, Katie already had connections with two of her

roommates before arriving on campus. The strong community that Katie built with her roommates provided her with a sense of comfort in her new surroundings.

Well, I like hanging out with my roommates, because they're really awesome. We all like board games, especially trivia games, so we play a lot of trivia. I don't know, we watch TV together. Sometimes we'll go like shopping together, bowling. I study a lot, that's probably how I spend the majority of my time.

Elizabeth was thankful to have a positive roommate experience, and has continued to live with her roommate throughout her entire time in college. Additionally, during her first two years on campus, Elizabeth lived in a residence hall community that focused on the personal, professional, and academic development of women who pursue careers in the fields of Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics.

I was in [the program] and it was absolutely amazing. I would say that is what helped my college transition more than anything else. I would recommend that to any incoming [first-year students] not just home-schooled kids, but it's such a big help to have that support group right off the bat. [In the program,] we got to move in early. We got to have the bridge program where you know you get to meet all the other incoming [first-year students] who are in [the program] you do monthly programs with your mentor. You have somebody checking on you constantly more than just an RA and [...] I think they're not advertised to incoming [first-year students] as much as they should.

Alexander discussed an appreciation for the academically “dedicated” students who lived in his residence hall. He enjoyed spending time getting to know his neighbors. Though the other 3 participants also lived on campus, their residence hall experiences did not emerge as a theme during the interviews.

### *Spirituality*

The beliefs of the students who strongly identified as Christian had an impact on their social lives. Gilbert’s decision to abstain from drugs and alcohol was influenced by his Christian faith, and clearly expressed that he did not attribute his lifestyle to his home-school background. He explained that “you could have someone at a public school who has those same beliefs and it's still gonna affect them in that regard.” Upon her arrival at college, Elizabeth became involved with a church group that met on campus, because she wanted “a network of friends who had similar religious views.” The church that Elizabeth attended provided her with support for a period of 3 years, after which she left due to personal reasons. Though Elizabeth enjoyed the close knit community of classmates, she did not join them when they went out to party. Doing so would not be consistent with her morals, but Elizabeth was thankful that it has not “inhibited any friendships,” because as college students, her classmates were more “mature” than her peers had been in high school. Frank and Nigel also sought ways to connect to others who shared their beliefs. Frank connected to a Bible study affiliated with a campus ministry, whereas Nigel was actively involved with his church, which occupied much of his free time. These participants expressed a commitment to continue to develop their belief systems. However, none of the participants expressed that

their home-school backgrounds were the driving factor behind the decision to continue to participate in spiritually affirming activities.

### ***Sports and Games***

On the weekends, Nigel enjoyed continuing the athletic pursuits he had enjoyed as a child. Nigel would often gather with friends and enjoyed “outdoor activities, [like] disc golf [and] long boarding.” Additionally, Nigel enjoyed “going to athletic events” with his friends, and had a particular interest in football and basketball. In his spare time, Gilbert also enjoyed participating in a “variety of hobbies,” which included Martial Arts and other low-cost activities. After classes, Frank “would go down [to the student union] after my work for the day for about two hours to grab dinner and to play some games. And little by little [...] friends each come on in and check it out and then the group just formed from there.” Finding informal groups that pursued games and athletic activities was important for some of the participants. These informal groups helped to establish friendship networks and provided a social outlet.

### ***Campus Organizations***

Many of the participants had taken steps to become involved with organized campus groups or participate in university sponsored activities. Katie and Alexander found ways to get involved with organizations that were academically and professionally based. In addition to teaching beginning level Irish dance at a studio that is located “down the road”, Katie formed connections with students in her Japanese class, because it is her “smallest class, so there’s actually more time to talk with each other and interact.” Though Katie “spend[s] the

majority of my time” studying, she became involved with the collegiate level of 4-H.

Alexander saw himself as a very social person, and made it a point to reach out to others. He has greatly enjoyed the opportunity to get to know others through classes and through his involvement in the campus chapter of Engineers Without Borders. Though many of his friends “like to just like sit at their computers,” Alexander felt as though he “[studied] enough on my computer,” and did not “enjoy sitting at my computer.”

Gilbert and Frank sought ways to become involved in more socially-based organizations. Earlier in his college career, Gilbert explored the option of joining a fraternity, but decided that involvement in Greek life was not the best option for him. Outside of the campus community, Gilbert continued his involvement with the Boy Scouts. Frank expressed that he and his friends enjoyed attending campus wide events sponsored by the Residence Hall Association and the Student Union. When those events did not occur, Frank and his friends “usually play[ed] some video games or play[ed] some board games.”

Organized campus activities also played an important role for the participants. Though some found campus involvement more appealing than others, most of the participants attempted to involve themselves in extracurricular activities.

### **Independence**

Some of the students discussed a need for independence in their lives. At the time of the interview, Gilbert was focused on his transition out of the University community. In the days and weeks leading up to the interview, Gilbert’s time had “been completely dominated by interviews and job hunting” in order to line up a job after graduation. During the

interview, Gilbert expressed excitement over the “seven job offers are waiting for” him. On top of the job search, Gilbert was also increasing his involvement in planning his upcoming wedding. Due to his home-school background, Alexander was thankful that he was able to attend college independently and did not have a predetermined set of friends, unlike many of the more traditionally educated students that he knew.

I have friends that come to school and it’s like they’re stuck with the same friends they had in high school, they can’t make any new friends. All those friends make friends and they become your friends and you’re pretty much you continue on the same social field as when you came off to college. I think I had the benefit of having coming here and deciding who my friends were [...].

Despite his strong desire to spend much of his time with friends, Alexander said that he felt comfortable with walking to class alone or eating by himself. He did not see himself as one who “felt the need to always be around people.” At the time of the interview, Elizabeth was granting more attention to her upcoming wedding, and attributed the narrowing of her friendship network to her and her fiancé's focus on their lives after graduation. Similar to Alexander and unlike many of her peers, Elizabeth did not feel the need to constantly socialize with others, and often found it necessary to find time “to just sit down and read a book or watch a movie” by herself. The participants expressed that they were content in a variety of settings. Those who were a bit older were more focused on life after college, whereas younger participants such as Alexander were thankful for his the opportunity to expand upon his social network.

### **Additional Reflections**

When the participants were asked about whether their home-school backgrounds were important to them as college students, all agreed that their educational backgrounds had shaped their college experiences. Both Nigel and Frank occasionally felt somewhat marginalized when their peers discussed more traditional schooling experiences, such as AP coursework or participating as a member of a varsity sports team. Despite these observations, both individuals were able to reflect upon the opportunities that they had due to their home-school backgrounds. Since becoming a college student, Nigel felt as though life had become a “level playing field,” meaning that previous experiences like “academic success [or] athletic success” had little bearing on one’s current role as a college student and “doesn't really matter anymore.” He explained that his background as a home-educated student “doesn't matter,” although he expressed that “dual enrolling was the biggest benefit, and that really helped prepare me for college.” Frank’s appreciation stemmed from his ability to study more independently and embrace the uniqueness of his educational background.

[...] I don’t feel like I was exactly limited by not having those opportunities because seeing the average person coming off of that I just feel like overall I’m better prepared for things than they are because I actually did do everything independently and through textbooks. And so I feel like that background gives me a huge advantage over other people when it comes to studying for tests and doing homework. So I guess I feel like my background as a home-schooler is important because it gives me

some advantages over some people in some ways but not in some others. But I guess it's also just different in a way because I know lots of people usually look for something that they have that's unique about them. And, you know, home-schooling isn't unique to me but it's exactly common enough that it's still kind of a big deal that you're a home-schooler.

The nontraditional backgrounds of these students sometimes led to feelings of slight marginalization, but the participants were able to put their feelings in an appropriate perspective and realize that home-schooling had a unique set of advantages.

Katie and Alexander also expressed that their home-school backgrounds helped them to love learning for its own sake. Both individuals were aware that their sincere devotion to learning did not align them with their peers, and expressed their excitement over new learning opportunities in college. Alexander thought that since he had the chance to learn about things he was "interested in," he "had more of a like for learning than I think a lot of my friends." Katie was surprised by some of the sentiments expressed by her peers.

And, I don't know, it's – I think home-schooling really makes you think about stuff more, and I think – I don't know. Other students in classes, I'll – when the class lets out I'll hear them, or before it starts, and they're just talking to each other, they'll be saying stuff like, "Ugh, this class is so boring, can't wait to get out of here, wish they'd let us out early," and it's almost like they're saying it, and sometimes maybe they don't even mean it, they just say it because that's what you say. And as a home-schooler, I think maybe I value it more. I go to class because I want to go to class. I

enjoy class, I pay attention, take notes, and I think it's actually fun a lot of the time. And my roommates think I'm weird, because I actually enjoy doing my homework. They think it's funny, and they're like, "Oh, that'll wear off by next year," and I'm like, "I dunno, maybe not." But I think you view school in a different way, a much different way.

Despite her classification as a first-year student, Katie felt a deeper connection to older students, since she was twenty-one at the time of the study. She looked forward to meeting different people throughout the rest of her college experience, as she greatly desired to be surrounded by people from different backgrounds.

Gilbert felt a strong need to represent home-schooling when faced with potential criticism.

Well, I guess I also feel responsibility to represent home-schooling in a positive light, because there's a lot of negative light on us in regards actually I had one gentleman who lived in the suite next to mine I was really good friends with all the men there he said, "Man, you're the coolest home-schooled student I ever met." And I don't consider myself to be popular guy or anything like that. "So what do you mean?" He explained how I'm the first home-schooled student he ever met that was that acted normal. But he said he hadn't met a lot. And he gave me that much. But some of them acted weird. So I just thought these weird stereotypes about home-schooling.

Elizabeth expressed that her home-school background helped her develop the independence that was previously mentioned. She said that due to a history of positive

home-school experiences, Elizabeth and her fiancé plan to home-school their children “at least until high school.” Furthermore, Elizabeth explained that she and her fiancé (who had also been home-schooled) appreciated the independence that home-schooling afforded:

[...] We grew up being our own [people] and not having that pressure of people who expect you to dress a certain way or be a certain way and so both of us feel very strongly that it helped us to be very independent people who have our own personalities that aren't dictated by our friends.

All of the participants expressed that their home-school backgrounds were significant to them, and felt as though the impacts were largely positive. The participants' backgrounds had a varying level of impact on their lives as college students, and the students expressed that home-schooling helped them prepare for college, especially within the academic realm.

The topics discussed throughout the interviews highlighted a number of recurring themes, which each participant discussed through a personal lens. In the following chapter, I will discuss how the findings relate to the previous research and theory and the potential implications of the data before highlighting some of the limitations of the study and ideas for future research.

## **Chapter 5: Conclusion**

This study sought to learn more about the lived experiences of previously home-educated students who attended a large, public, four-year university. A short survey and one round of interviews were used to gather information about students' experiences before and during their college years. In this chapter, I will provide a summary of key findings, discuss the theoretical and practical implications of the study, and provide some points to consider for future study. At the chapter's conclusion, I will provide my final thoughts on the topic of home-schooled students' experiences in the college environment.

### **Summary of Key Findings**

Several themes emerged throughout the interview process. Some themes, such as the students' families, social lives, or reflections on independence emerged as major themes, whereas others, like the participants' home-school communities or entering the classroom environment took a minor role. In the following section, I will highlight the major themes that emerged. It is important to note that all of the participants expressed a positive view of their home-school experiences. Everyone in the study seemed to have a desire to represent home-education in a positive light, and offered few, if any, criticisms of their educational backgrounds.

#### **Family**

Family networks were highly important to the participants throughout their childhood and adolescent years. Each participant attributed their ideas and perceptions of college to the

messages sent by parents and siblings. Participants with older siblings had a clearer set of expectations about college. Those with younger siblings expressed that the extra attention that their parents gave to their siblings helped them to become more independent learners. Parents of the students played a very important role as well, by helping to establish the tone of the participants' educations and providing moral guidance. Some of the participants expressed that the work assigned them by their parents was more challenging than some college-level work. The participants talked about their parents with a great deal of warmth, and were thankful for their parents' decision to home-school. Many of the participants discussed the moral framework that their parents established continued to impact them through their college years. Overall, the role that parents took was very important to the participants. This would make sense, given the nature of home-schooling. Parents must take an active role in their children as they develop into adults. As the primary caregivers and educators, parents who home-school their children must take on the additional role of a teacher in order to ensure their children's success.

Interestingly, none of the studies that I reviewed spent much time discussing the family relationships of home-schooled students who attend college. Some of the studies, such as Lattibeaudiere (2000), Kranzow (2004), and Neven Van Pelt (2009) asked about the occupation levels and occupations of the parents of previously home-schooled students. However, the researchers did not explore the relationship between these variables and the success of home-schooled students in depth. Lattibeaudiere (2000) briefly discussed the closeness that home-schooled students feel with their parents, but did not highlight sibling

relationships. The topic of having previously home-schooled students reflect upon and discuss their family relationships and their effects on them as adults seems to have been under-explored, and may be an interesting topic for future research.

### **Peer Groups**

Friends from both inside and outside of the students' home-school environments also contributed importantly to the participants' development prior to college. Groups of peers, whether inside or outside of the students' home-school communities, helped to make their home-school experiences richer. I combined the themes in this section to highlight the aggregate effects of peer groups on the home-schooled students in the study. Participants who moved during their childhoods had the opportunity to create additional networks among peers. Due to a variety of reasons, several of the participants did not interact with other home-schooled students formally. Many of the students expressed that their co-op experiences were beneficial in helping them to prepare for a classroom setting and provided an enjoyable learning environment that supplemented their studies. Friends outside of the home-school community were important to the participants, and the students became acquainted with traditionally-educated peers through several different forums. None of the students indicated that they had been socially hindered by their home-school experiences. If participants felt as though they had, it was not mentioned during the course of the interviews. As a formerly home-schooled student myself, I knew that asking a direct question about socialization would have been off-putting for the vast majority of this population of students, since it is a question that many home-educated students face. Although friends played a large

role in helping the participants develop into adults, families exerted a larger influence on the students.

The results from this study support Lattibeaudiere's (2000) findings, but highlight some new trends that may be emerging. Students in both studies were involved in several kinds of activities that took them outside of the home. However, church activities were less important for the students who were involved in this study when compared to the students in Lattibeaudiere's (2000) study. The vast majority (over 90 percent) of the participants in her study strongly identified with their Christian faith. Although most of the participants in my study identified as Christian, most did not cite church involvement as their primary socialization method during their childhood and adolescent years. I would attribute this difference to the drift away from home-schooling being seen as a primarily religious movement, and the increased influence of non-religious reasons for the practice of home-schooling. In addition, the students in my study did not criticize their home-school backgrounds or discuss any ways in which they may have been socially hindered throughout their childhood and adolescent years. A reason behind this could be an expansion of support networks and activities for students both inside and outside of the home-school community in the years that have passed since Lattibeaudiere's (2000) study.

### **College Preparation**

The ways in which the participants prepared for the college environment emerged as a major theme throughout the interviews. All of the participants expressed that they felt adequately prepared for the college environment. As alluded to previously, parents and

families of each participant were very involved in ensuring that each student was prepared for the college environment. Interestingly, all of the males in the study participated in a dual enrollment program at their local community colleges. Upon reflection, everyone who had participated in a dual enrollment program strongly emphasized that their community college experiences helped prepare them for the university environment. The reason for this may be attributed to the fact that these students still lived at home-and received much of their support from family and pre-existing peer groups. All four men would advise currently home-schooled students to participate in such programs. As one who was also dual enrolled, I strongly agree with their statements. The time that I spent at my community college and the leadership opportunities in which I engaged helped provide me with the confidence to succeed at my four year institution.

Those who did not participate in a dual enrollment program took steps to ensure that they were ready for the college environment. Though Katie's experiences in Japan helped her adjust to her coursework, Elizabeth felt that her experience at a local high school, did not prepare her for college as effectively as her home-school experience. Initially, I had not expected to meet participants who did not participate in a dual enrollment program, but was pleased to have had the opportunity to do so. Katie and Elizabeth's perspectives on their preparation for college broadened my views on the methods that others employ to prepare for the college environment. As a researcher with an insider perspective on the topic, it was helpful for me to hear viewpoints that differed from my own.

This study reflects prior research that suggests that home-schooled students take time to prepare for the college environment. Kranzow (2004) explored whether home-schooled students felt prepared to enter the college, but did not explore what steps the participants in her study took to ready themselves for the college environment. Lattibeaudiere (2000) found that several of the students in her sample participated in dual-enrollment programs before attending a four-year institution. The results from my study reflected what she found, and the students in both studies found dual-enrollment to be beneficial to their college preparation.

### **Expectations and Surprises**

The students in the study expressed that they had a ranging set of expectations as they entered the college environment. Some stated that they were not sure what to expect, and that they thought that they would encounter a large amount of partying and other behaviors that they found to be distasteful. Others expected that the coursework would be more challenging, and that they would have to take assume additional responsibilities to ensure their academic success. Those who had participated in dual-enrollment programs were confident in their abilities to succeed. One participant looked forward to the additional social opportunities that college provided.

Upon arriving on campus, many of the participants were surprised by what they encountered. Those who were raised in highly diverse communities expressed that they were initially taken aback by what they perceived as a highly homogenous campus community. Additionally, some of the participants indicated that they were surprised by the prevalence of negative behavior, such as cheating and other forms of dishonesty throughout campus. The

participants were vaguely aware that this kind of behavior occurred, but did not expect to encounter it in their daily lives. The elements that initially surprised the participants eventually faded into the backdrop of their institutions' culture, and for many, their expectations of college life were met.

Lattibeaudiere (2000) discussed a strong theme of the students' expectations of college emerged, and was influenced by the participants' exposure to formal school settings. In contrast, the students in my study expressed that they had expectations of college, but the themes in my study were less unified. I would attribute this to an increase in information about colleges, as students today have a wealth of information at their disposal, when compared with the time leading up to Lattibeaudiere's (2000) study. However, many of the participants in both studies received information about what to expect in college from family members.

### **Classroom Experiences**

The classroom environment was not new for any of the candidates. All of the participants had learned in a formal educational setting before entering their four-year university. The participants had either attended a public school or were dual-enrolled before entering the college environment. Although a period of adjustment was necessary, everyone found that acclimating to the classroom environment was a natural process. Some of the students discussed the role of their faculty in their lives, and their appreciation for the positive influence of faculty. Professors play a very important role in students' lives, but this impact can take on different forms. Some students seek to establish personal connections

with faculty, whereas others are merely thankful for classroom guidance. Most of the students were reluctant to reveal their educational backgrounds to their professors until they had the opportunity to demonstrate that they were academically successful and socially adept. No one wanted special treatment from the professors, which reflected their desire to be viewed in the same light as their peers. For many, group work was necessary to their academic success, but some expressed that they preferred to work alone. Those who enjoyed group work preferred to work with friends rather than people they did not know. Overall, the participants felt that they were able to successfully navigate the college learning environment. The academic autonomy that participants' home-school backgrounds had afforded them was seen as a benefit to their lives as college students.

None of the students indicated that they struggled academically, which is consistent with Galloway and Sutton (1995), Gray (1998), Lattibeaudiere (2000), Holder (2001), Barno, (2003), Jones and Gloeckner (2004), Ashford (2005), White et al. (2007), and Cogan (2010). The students in my study viewed their academic transition more positively than the participants in Lattibeaudiere (2000) and Kranzow's (2004) studies. This may be attributed to the kinds of students that attend the universities that were represented in the studies. Students who attend the university in my study are deeply engaged in their academics, and are held to a high admissions standard. The academics at the institution in my study are rigorous, and students who attend are very aware of the standards to which they are held. In addition, the students in my study were older than the students in Kranzow's (2004) study,

and the progression of time may have caused the students in my study to forget about the more negative aspects of their academic transitions.

### **Social Life**

Socially, the participants sought ways to connect to others on campus; everyone made sure that they remained connected to a group of friends. All of the participants were engaged with on-campus activities, although this was to a varying degree. Several of the participants discussed their experiences with living on campus and the social opportunities that accompanied living near other students. The role of spirituality also contributed to the participants' decisions regarding the kinds of activities that they pursued. A few of the students enjoyed getting to meeting peers through social events that focused on sports and games. On-campus organizations were important to some participants; clubs that allowed the students to explore their interests and passions provided them with the opportunity to meet others with similar interests. None of the participants felt as though they were isolated from the campus community, nor did they indicate that their home-school backgrounds had inhibited their social development in college.

Bolle et al. (2007) discussed several ways in which home-schooled students integrated into the college environment. The study was conducted at a mid-sized public university in the Midwestern United States, and built upon prior research conducted by Lattibeaudiere (2000). The participants in Bolle et al.'s (2007) study seemed to have a smoother transition into the college environment. My findings built upon Bolle et al.'s (2007), and suggested that all of the students in the study encountered few challenges as they

transitioned into the college environment. Again, this rosy picture could be attributed to the participants' aversion to dwelling upon negative events. Kranzow's (2004) study suggested that faculty influenced home-schooled students more than their peers. The findings of Kranzow's (2004) study were not reflected in my results, but may indicate a direction for future research.

### **Independence**

Though having a supportive peer network was essential to the students, many discussed their need for independence. Older participants were beginning to focus on life changes that were to occur after college, such as marriage and discovering career options. Other students expressed that they did not feel the need to constantly be in the presence of friends. Finding time to eat alone or read a book were opportunities that some of the students valued. One participant expressed that home-schooling had allowed her to develop into a unique person in the absence of peer pressure. Themes relating to independence also emerged when the students discussed their academic transitions, as they had already developed skills to learn outside of a teacher's presence.

Lattibeaudiere (2000) had discussed the academic independence of home-schooled students, but did not highlight the social independence of this group of students. In Bolle et al.'s (2007) study, the newfound independence that first-year students experienced was discussed, but the authors did not explore whether the participants' home-school backgrounds affected the development of their autonomy. Kranzow (2004) found that home-schooled students do not feel a strong need to adopt their peers' values and prefer to maintain the

values sets that they had acquired during their childhood and adolescent years. My results did not contradict these findings, and could support Kranzow's (2004) conclusions.

At the conclusion of Chapter 4, an assortment of student reflections was highlighted. Overall, the students in the study looked back upon their home-school experiences with appreciation. They were thankful for the unique experiences that they had throughout their childhoods, and focused upon the positive aspects of their educational backgrounds. The students' perspectives placed home-schooling in a favorable light; everyone in the study expressed a desire to highlight the aspects of home-schooling that were of benefit to them.

### **Theoretical Implications**

Bronfenbrenner's (1993) theories regarding human development was used as the theoretical framework for the study. A study conducted by Renn and Arnold (2003) also helped to inform my research, as their study applied Bronfenbrenner's (1993) theory to college students. In the following section, I will discuss how an ecological development model can be used to describe the experiences of previously home-schooled students who attend an institution of higher learning.

Context is key when using an ecological approach to understanding human development (Bronfenbrenner 1993). Though development occurs through in-person interactions, it is important to consider the impact of environment on the individual. A person's environment is composed of different levels of interaction between the self and others. In the following paragraphs, each level of interaction will be defined, along with how Bronfenbrenner's (1993) framework identifies the microsystem as the smallest unit of

interaction, and includes groups of people with whom and individual regularly interacts. The types of interaction either facilitate or discourage development in an individual. Before entering college, the participants' microsystems included their families, home-schooled students, other friends, community college classrooms. The students' families had a significant influence upon each student; within these units the participants developed their values sets and an understanding of the importance of education. Peers from both inside and outside of the participants' home-school communities provided students with a much needed social outlet. Students who participated in dual-enrollment programs benefited from learning how to approach and navigate college-level work.

Upon entering the college environment, the microsystems with which the students interact undergo a change. Classroom interactions (with classmates and professors), residence halls, religious groups, and on-campus organizations were the primary groups with which the participants interacted. Professors were important to some of the students; those who discussed their professors talked about the positive connections they had made in the classroom and during office hours. Though working with classmates was frustrating for some, the participants saw that group work was useful in learning how to work with people in teams. In some cases, the peer groups grew throughout the college years. Whereas in other cases, the peer groups shrank. In the latter case, the smaller size of the participants' peer groups was reflective of their narrowed focus as they prepared to leave their university. These groups had a positive impact on the participants and contributed to a sense of belonging by making the campus environment smaller and providing the participants with a

group of friends. After entering college, family was seen to play a smaller role in students' lives, as all of the participants lived on campus and did not have the same kind of support from their families that they had as children and adolescents. The role of the family should not be discounted throughout the college years, but its role in students' day to day lives changed, and was not discussed during the interviews.

Mesosystems are composed of multiple microsystems. Within the mesosystem, microsystems interact with each other to facilitate the development of an individual (Bronfenbrenner 1993). I identified two separate mesosystems in this study: the home-school mesosystem and the college mesosystem. The home-school mesosystem is composed of the family, peer group, and community college microsystems. Within these units, the participants developed the skills that enabled them to successfully navigate the college environment. These microsystems worked together within the mesosystem to help the participants learn how to interact with others and understand the dynamics of a group learning environment. Additionally, since the microsystems within the home-school mesosystem are relatively independent of each other, the students within the study were able to develop a level of autonomy that they felt their peers lacked.

The mesosystem of the college environment was primarily composed of social and classroom (which are composed of professors and classmates) microsystems. The combined effects of these microsystems within the mesosystem created a sense of belonging for the students. It is also important to consider the context of the university that the participants attended. As alluded to in Chapter 3, the sample closely mirrored the overall student

population. The University has a majority male population and possesses very strong engineering and agricultural programs. Its conservative student culture at the University distinguishes it from its peers in the area. An alignment between the University's values and culture with that of the participants could have had a positive effect on the participants' transitions into their institution. Though the combined effects of the students' microsystems within the context of the University was not explored in depth, the findings highlight some developmental outcomes that may prove interesting for future research, especially at campuses where the students' values may not align with their institutions.

The exo- and macrosystems did not have an immediate impact on the students, but may have exerted an influence on the participants, though this relationship was not studied in-depth. The exosystem is composed of the conditions and policies that allow a mesosystem to exist (Bronfenbrenner 1993). An admissions policy that was friendly toward home-schooled students was essential to this study. If the institution in the study was not open to admitting home-schooled students, the research design and implementation would have taken a decidedly different course. The macrosystem lies beyond the exosystem, and influences the micro-, meso-, and exosystems from a cultural standpoint. The unspoken cultural norm that places merit on a college education is an example of a value that emanates from the macrosystem.

It is important to look at how a variety of groups and situations impact an individual's development. This study highlighted the elements that were important to previously home-schooled students as they approached and navigated the college environment. Previous

research focused on the college experiences of home-schooled student from a college student development lens. I thought it was important to use a framework that allowed me to analyze the participants' development before and during college. The ecological lens allowed me to find what elements are important to home-schooled students as they progress through college and to analyze their summative effects on the student.

### **Practical Implications**

Finding ways to meet the developmental needs of students is a central concern for student affairs administrators. The students in the study indicated that they did not need additional support from college staff. Each student found ways to make the college environment smaller, and appreciated the social opportunities that their institution provided through residence hall and other on-campus events. As a general principle, individuals who work with students should continue to find ways to help make the college environment smaller for students. After reviewing the results, I would not recommend that student affairs practitioners create interventions specific to the success of home-schooled students. A significant portion of the students in the study wanted to be treated in a manner that was consistent with their peers; specifically singling out home-schooled students for any reason could lead to marginalization of the population.

Relatedly, it is important for individuals who work with students to be mindful of their language, and avoid making comments that may make students who had been home-schooled uncomfortable with discussing their educational backgrounds. Some of the study's participants were reluctant to reveal that they had been home-schooled because of perceived

stigmas. Putting students in a position where they are required to defend and justify the efficacy of their educational backgrounds is not beneficial to their development. Continuing to develop environments that are openly inclusive of individuals from non-traditional backgrounds would add to the comfort levels of home-schooled students.

Individuals from home-school backgrounds who desire to attend a four-year institution need to understand that preparing for a college education is a process that occurs over the course of a few years. The students in the study spent a large portion of their high school years in preparation for the college environment. Dual-enrollment was seen as a highly effective method for college preparation, but in the absence of a nearby community college, other viable options exist. This study and other research indicates that home-schooling can adequately prepare students for the college environment, provided that parents and students form an understanding of the elements that contribute to success in college.

### **Limitations**

Those who read this study must keep in mind that the opinions reflected are those of the six individuals who participated in the study. Everyone in the study presented a very positive view of their transitions into college, and no one discussed having to overcome any significant challenges. This could be attributed to a tendency to want to view the past in a positive light, rather than to dwell on the negatives. It would have been helpful to speak to students who may have faced challenges during their adjustment period. However, students who may have had a positive home-school experience, but may have had a challenging college transition, may have not wanted to represent their educational backgrounds in a

negative light. Similarly, I found it interesting that all who participated had a very positive view of their upbringing and the educational path which they followed. Students who expressed a negative experience with home-education were not represented within the sample. The findings and discussion would have most likely had a different tone if there had been a participant who resented their educational backgrounds. The participation criteria may have impacted this; students who did not benefit from being home-schooled may not have been educated in a home-school for a long period of time. Therefore, if the criteria for the study had allowed for the participation of students who spent a short amount of time in a home-school, a wider range of opinions may have been represented.

In addition, previously home-educated students who were educationally underprepared may not have participated because they were not able to matriculate to college or remain in college. Every college institution is faced with the prospect of student attrition each year. It would be difficult for me to assume that the retention rate of previously home-educated students is one-hundred percent. Distrust of the unknown may have been a factor in a lack of participation. Having to discuss one's educational experiences with a complete stranger may have been intimidating for some, and would have caused discomfort in some students. Students who may not have been able to represent themselves well to a researcher may have avoided participating in the study.

Throughout the course of the study, I considered other limitations. All of the participants were undergraduates at the same institution, so each of the students experienced similar admissions standards and campus culture. The culture at the institution is considered

by many (including me) to be fairly conservative. Also, the participants in the study were enrolled in programs that are considered to be among the strongest in the university, and as a result, these students may have received additional support from well-developed academic units. In addition, my status as an insider could be another limitation. I understood the meanings behind much of what the participants said, and did not need to ask questions to further comprehend what the students communicated to me as the researcher. If I had not been home-schooled, I may have asked additional follow-up questions to gain a deeper understanding of the students' backgrounds. It would have been helpful to have asked for additional demographic data in the survey. Additional information about the educational backgrounds of the students' parents or whether the participants were raised in an urban or rural environment would have added more depth to the study.

### **Future Research**

The scope of many of the questions was fairly broad, and none of them directly focused on the participants' relationships with their professors. As mentioned previously, the students in the study reported a positive home-school experience, and a positive transition into college. I believe that it would be helpful to learn more about the experiences and perspectives of previously home-educated students who have faced challenges in adjusting to the college environment, as well as those who chose to withdraw. A deeper understanding of the challenges that some students from home-schools face would be a help student affairs practitioners better assist students who had a greater difficulty in their transition. Allowing disadvantaged students to have a voice is a vital part of creating change within an

environment. Relatedly, conducting a study that focused on college students who were home-schooled for a short time could illuminate some issues. Exploring the long-term impacts of a student's short-term involvement in a home-school could highlight some interesting trends.

Studies that focus upon the lived experiences of home-schooled students during their childhood and adolescent years would also add to the depth of the literature. The pre-college years of the participants greatly affected the students' college experiences. A deeper understanding of home-schooled students' K-12 years would benefit others learn more about the context of the home-school environment. It would also be interesting to further explore the contextual elements of the development of home-schooled students in college. This study provided an overview of the most salient aspects of the students' educational experiences; a study that focused on developing a deeper understanding of these experiences would provide additional insight into the elements that impact home-schooled students' transitions into college.

### **Concluding Reflections**

An increasing body of literature suggests that home-schooled students can achieve success in the college environment. This study adds to the research that has shown that home-schooled students adjust well to college-level work. A number of factors that contributed to the students' success was highlighted and could prove interesting for further research. More research is needed to learn more about how these elements work in the students' lives for a variety of reasons. First, equipping home-schooled students with the

knowledge of what they can do to succeed in college is essential for favorable outcomes. Relatedly, students who are less successful can find ways to better equip themselves for college-level studies. Student affairs personnel can also benefit from knowing how to better support students from home-school backgrounds.

In conclusion, this study and other research shows that when implemented properly, home-schooling can help students prepare for college-level work. A lack of standardization within home-schooling leads to ambiguity regarding the preparedness of students as they enter college. However, it is important to consider that a non-traditional approach to one's education should not suggest that a person is unprepared or incapable of college-level work. Instead, welcoming students from home-school backgrounds enhances the diversity of the university by valuing the unique skills and perspectives that they possess.

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## Appendix

## Appendix A: Interview Protocol

*Note:* The following questions are **examples** of the content that will be discussed in the interview. In the interest of creating conversational space, questions may evolve in and between interviews.

*Note:* Prior to beginning interview 1, participants will be thanked for their involvement, told about the study and the nature of the interviews, informed of their rights as a research participant, asked to read and sign the consent form, and asked for their permission to record the interview. Any questions that participants have will be answered at the beginning of the interview. Throughout the interview, participants will be encouraged to elaborate on their stories and provide a detailed picture of their experiences.

Tell me about the home-school community in which you were raised.

What were some of your perceptions of your home-school?

How did you prepare for college level work?

Tell me about how you felt NCSU's admissions process treated you as a home-schooled student.

What were your expectations of college?

What surprised you about the college environment?

What was it like to enter and learn in a classroom?

How do you like to spend your time outside of class?

Is your background as a home-schooled student an important part of who you are as a student today? Why/why not?

Describe your study methods, and how you have developed them throughout your education.

How has being home-schooled affected your academic progress in college?

How has being home-schooled affected your social development in college?

What advice would you give to home-schooled students who aspire to attend college?

What do you wish that faculty and staff would understand about you and other home-schooled students?

Is there anything else that you would like to share?

## Appendix B: Demographic Survey

Please provide the following information to help us ensure that participants in this study reflect diverse perspectives.

1. Gender:
2. Race/Ethnicity:
3. Year in College:
  - a. Number of years spent in a home-school
  - b. Elementary School
  - c. Middle School
  - d. High School
5. Academic Major:
6. How did you hear about this study?
7. Please provide us with a pseudonym (i.e., a fictitious name) so that this survey will not be associated with your actual name:

## Appendix C: Informed Consent

### North Carolina State University INFORMED CONSENT FORM for RESEARCH

Title of Study: From the Kitchen Table to the Lecture Hall: Reaching an Understanding of the Lived Experiences of Home-School Students to Institutions of Higher Learning

Principal Investigator:

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M.S. Candidate  
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**What are some general things you should know about research studies?**

You are being asked to take part in a research study. Your participation in this study is voluntary. You have the right to be a part of this study, to choose not to participate, or to stop participating at any time without penalty. The purpose of research studies is to gain a better understanding of a certain topic or issue. You are not guaranteed any personal benefits from being in a study. Research studies also may pose risks to those that participate. In this consent form you will find specific details about the research in which you are being asked to participate. If you do not understand something in this form it is your right to ask the researcher for clarification or more information. A copy of this consent form will be provided to you. If at any time you have questions about your participation, do not hesitate to contact the researcher(s) named above.

**What is the purpose of this study?**

The purpose of this study is to explore the ways in which students who were educated in a home-school transition into college. The population of home-educated students is expanding, and as home-schooled students reach adulthood, many of these students seek a college education. The goal is to understand the transitions that formerly home-schooled students experience, in order to help student affairs professionals understand the needs of home-schooled students and provide home-schooled students who plan to attend college with an understanding of what to expect throughout transition into college.

**What will happen if you take part in the study?**

If you agree to participate in this study, you will be asked to participate in an interview with the researcher, who has a similar background to yours. The interview will take place during the Fall 2010 semester at a site chosen by you and the researcher, will last 1-2 hours, and will involve discussing your educational background and your transition into college. After all interviews have taken place and the researcher has written a draft of the results, an additional interview will serve as a "member check" in which you will have an opportunity to respond to the researcher's written description of the stories shared and the exchange. With your permission, the interviews will be audio-recorded and transcribed so that the researcher can accurately capture the stories shared and the nature of the exchange. The findings of the study will be included in a master's thesis that focuses upon the transitions of home-schooled students.

### Risks

This project involves discussion of your educational background, which includes your experiences with their family, peers, and the surrounding community. These topics are personal and may cause some individuals to feel uneasy. Thus, every effort will be made to explain the nature of the project to you before you agree to be involved. The recruitment materials and informed consent form describe the nature of the project to prospective undergraduate participants. If you feel uneasy discussing any of the questions asked in interviews, or if the topic is too emotionally challenging, you may opt to not answer the question(s) and still remain a participant in the study. You are also free to withdraw from the study at any time.

### Benefits

You may benefit from an opportunity to reflect on their educational experiences with someone who has come from a similar background. The reflective aspect of the study may contribute to your personal development. Additionally, the knowledge gained from the study may be used in the future to help other students from a home-school background understand how to navigate the college transition.

### Confidentiality

Here are some important details to keep in mind with regard to your confidentiality as a participant in this study:

- a. Transcripts will be generated from the digital recordings collected during interviews. Pseudonyms will replace any names captured in the recordings. Recordings will be destroyed one year after the end of the project.
- b. The information in the study records will be kept confidential. Data (e.g., transcripts, field notes) will be stored securely on the researcher's password-protected computer.
- c. The researcher will discuss the interviews in the study, but in these discussions the researcher who interviewed you will protect your confidentiality by using a pseudonym.
- d. No reference will be made in oral or written reports which could link you to the study. A pseudonym will be used to protect your confidentiality.

### **Compensation**

There is no compensation for participating in this study.

### **What if you are a NCSU student?**

Participation in this study is not a course requirement and your participation or lack thereof, will not affect your class standing or grades at NC State.

### What if you have questions about this study?

If you have questions at any time about the study or the procedures, you may contact the researcher, Alexa Wood, at Wolf Village Apartments, North Carolina State University, 110A Wolf Village G, Box 7315, Raleigh, NC 27695-7315 or 919-513-7483. Additionally, you may contact the researcher's faculty supervisor, Alyssa N. Bryant, at the Department of Leadership, Policy, and Adult and Higher Education, North Carolina State University, 300N Poe Hall, Box 7801, Raleigh, NC 27695-7801 or 919-515-6294.

### **What if you have questions about your rights as a research participant?**

If you feel you have not been treated according to the descriptions in this form, or your rights as a participant in research have been violated during the course of this project, you may contact Deb Paxton, Regulatory Compliance Administrator, Box 7514, NCSU Campus (919/515-4514).

Consent To Participate

“I have read and understand the above information. I have received a copy of this form. I agree to participate in this study with the understanding that I may choose not to participate or to stop participating at any time without penalty or loss of benefits to which I am otherwise entitled.”

**Subject's signature** \_\_\_\_\_ **Date** \_\_\_\_\_

**Investigator's signature** \_\_\_\_\_ **Date** \_\_\_\_\_

## Appendix D: Recruitment Email

Dear Student,

Were you home-schooled during your childhood and adolescent years? If so, I invite you to participate in an exciting new research study designed to explore the ways in which people who come from home-school backgrounds adjust to the college environment. As the population of home-schooled students expands, it is increasingly important that staff at colleges and universities understand the needs of home-schooled students as they become acclimated to college life.

To be a participant in this study you must be at least a second-year college student and be willing to engage in conversations with the researcher about your educational background. The interview will take place this semester and will involve discussing your educational background as a home schooled student and your experience at a large university.

I am interested in hearing from a broad spectrum of the student body, including students of both non-religious and religious backgrounds. Also, I am seeking a diverse sample of participants in terms of gender, race/ethnicity, sexual orientation, and college major. If you agree to participate, the information you share will be kept confidential, and your name and other personally identifying information will not be associated with your comments or perceptions. Also, please be assured that participation in this study is completely voluntary.

If you would like to participate, please complete the brief survey attached to this email and send it to Alexa Wood ([alwood4@ncsu.edu](mailto:alwood4@ncsu.edu)). I look forward to hearing from you!

Sincerely,

Alexa Wood  
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Department of Leadership, Policy, and Adult and Higher Education  
(919) 513.7483  
[alwood4@ncsu.edu](mailto:alwood4@ncsu.edu)