

## **ABSTRACT**

OUTLAW, STACY EDWARDS. Early College High School Participants' Transition to a Research University. (Under the direction of Dr. Alyssa Rockenbach and Dr. Paul Umbach).

The purpose of this study was to garner an understanding of the transition experiences of students who attended an Early College High School on a community college campus and who are now attending a doctoral-granting large public research university (with very high research activity) in the southeastern United States. Transition Theory was the theoretical framework for this study in an effort to provide insight as to how these students adapted to the transition to college. This study addresses the following questions: 1) What are Early College High School participants' perceptions of their transition to a research university? 2) What factors enhance or hinder the success of Early College High School participants at a research university? Participants who earned an associate's degree alongside their high school diploma from an Early College High School located on a community college campus were eligible to participate in this study. In addition, two academic advisors were interviewed in order to provide perspectives on their advising experiences with Early College students at the research institution. The researcher interviewed students and academic advisors using semi-structured interviews. Qualitative analysis of the interview transcripts provided data to answer the research questions.

Five primary themes emerged from the participants' experiences in relation to the first research question. The first theme was that Early College participants felt as though they received repetitive and irrelevant information upon matriculating into RU. The second theme involved the struggle to cultivate meaningful advisor relationships. The third theme illustrated the need for Early College participants to understand the implications of entering college with an associate's degree. While having an associate's degree as a first-year student

at RU was advantageous in terms of course registration there were also adverse effects of having an associate's degree, which included lacking courses to take, having to take multiple science classes within any given semester, and encountering the tuition surcharge policy. A fourth theme that emerged in regards to Early College participants' perception of their transition to RU was that these students had to learn how to acclimate to a rigorous curriculum. Subthemes included noting distinctive curricular and pedagogical differences between Early College and RU, recognizing differences between Early College and RU faculty, learning to study effectively, and experiencing academic difficulty as a result of rigor. The fifth and final theme in regard to the first research question was that Early College students were able to find community on campus. The vast majority of students reported that they had acclimated socially to RU, had established peer networks, and were involved in extracurricular activities outside of the classroom.

The second research question identified the factors found to enhance or hinder the success of Early College participants at a research university. Factors that enhanced success were: 1) feeling prepared for college, 2) connecting with faculty and staff at RU, and 3) maintaining cultural connections. Factors that hindered success for Early College students included 1) encountering racism/racial microaggressions and, 2) feeling unprepared for college

From these findings, the following conclusions were reached: 1) the academic transition for Early College students is not always smooth, 2) academic advising was viewed as hit or miss by Early College students, 3) Early College did not affect the social transition to RU, and 4) STEM majors experienced academic difficulty. The study concludes with

implications for theory, policy and practice, and suggestions for future research regarding the Early College student population.

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Early College High School Participants' Transition to a Research University

by  
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## DEDICATION

First, this dissertation is dedicated to God—thank you for providing me with the grace, wisdom, strength, and favor to embark upon such an educational journey.

To my parents, Benjamin and Phyllis Edwards. Your sacrifices made it possible for me to be where I am today. I love you both.

To my husband, Cecil Outlaw, who is my rock and my best friend. I'm not sure this degree would have been possible without you. I love you with all of my heart.

Finally, I dedicate this dissertation to all of the mothers who are pursuing a degree. It is certainly not an easy journey by any means and there will be numerous days when you feel like quitting. However as a mother, you have a tremendous amount of strength and power within you that you may not even realize exists. This same strength and power will sustain you through the most difficult moments in life and allow you to persevere. Keep the faith and know that you CAN and you WILL do it!

## **BIOGRAPHY**

Stacy Edwards Outlaw is the daughter of Benjamin and Phyllis Edwards of Sanford, North Carolina. Stacy grew up as a military brat as she was born in Heidelberg, Germany and has also lived in South Carolina, Georgia, Tennessee, Hawaii, and North Carolina. Stacy earned her bachelor's degree in Communication Studies with a concentration in Speech and Hearing Sciences from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, but through her campus activities discovered that her real passion was student development at the collegiate level. She then went on to earn her master's degree in College Student Development from Appalachian State University. Upon graduating from her master's program, Stacy returned to her alma mater and worked as an academic advisor in the Academic Advising Program within the College of Arts and Sciences at UNC-Chapel Hill for seven years. During her time at UNC, Stacy decided to pursue a Doctor of Education degree in Higher Education Administration at North Carolina State University. She currently works at Elon University in the Martha and Spencer Love School of Business as the Director of Undergraduate Programs. She was recently named the Commission Chair-Elect for the Advising Business Majors commission within NACADA (National Academic Advising Association) for 2017-2019. Stacy has been married to her wonderful husband Cecil since November 7, 2009 and they have one son, Nicholas Bryce, who is absolutely the greatest and the cutest child on earth!

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## CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

States and organizations have created a variety of initiatives to increase high school students' readiness for college as well as their access to college-level courses while they are still in high school (Edmunds, 2012). Historically, the practice of permitting students to enroll in college courses while they were still in high school was strictly reserved for students exhibiting high levels of academic achievement (Berger, Adelman, & Cole, 2010; Howley et al., 2013). Today, however, that is no longer the case. College preparatory initiatives such as Advanced Placement (AP) and International Baccalaureate (IB) programs, which potentially allows students to earn college credit while they are in high school, have also been widely criticized for their lack of accessibility, particularly for students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds and students of color (DeVance Taliaferro & DeCuir-Gunby, 2008; Hertberg-Davis & Callahan, 2008). Educators and policy makers have now come to see college preparatory initiatives as a possible strategy for supporting the academic engagement and higher levels of academic performance for a wider range of students, including low-income students, first-generation students, and students of color (Brewer, Stern, & Ahn, 2007).

National programs such as the Early College High School Initiative are directed at increasing college access among traditionally underrepresented high school students (i.e. racial/ethnic minorities, students from low socioeconomic status families, and first-generation students) as well as preparing students for college (Jobs for the Future, 2015). Early College High Schools (ECHS) are based on the principle that academic rigor,

combined with the opportunity to save time and money, is a powerful motivator for students to work hard and meet intellectual challenges (Early College Designs, 2015). This is accomplished by blending high school and college in a rigorous program and compressing the time it takes to complete a high school diploma and the first two years of college (Early College Designs, 2015). These high schools have produced great success in increasing high school graduation rates as well as providing students with the opportunity to earn college credits or an associate's degree (Jobs for the Future, 2015). President Obama has set a national goal that by 2020, America will regain its status of having the highest proportion of college graduates in the world (Whitehouse, 2015). Early College High Schools are helping to pave the pathway toward achieving this goal.

### **What are Early College High Schools?**

Early College High Schools (ECHS) are the most recent form of college preparatory programs in the United States that help bridge the gap between high school and college. These schools aim to increase the number of students who graduate from high school and enroll and succeed in postsecondary education (Edmunds, 2012). In 2002, generous funding from the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, along with other private sponsors such as the Carnegie Corporation of New York, the Ford Foundation, the W.K. Kellogg Foundation, and the Lumina Foundation for Education, supported the development of a model known as the "Early College Initiative" (Bragg, 2006; Early College Designs, 2015; Edmunds, 2012). ECHS combine high school and the first two years of college into a coherent and supportive educational program (Kisker, 2006). Students have the opportunity to graduate from an



ECCHS with both a high school diploma and an associate's degree or ample college credits that can be applied toward a baccalaureate degree, all of which is earned tuition free (Early College Designs, 2015).

ECCHS have the potential to improve high school graduation rates and better prepare students for high-skill careers by engaging them in a rigorous, college preparatory curriculum and reducing the time it takes to earn a college degree (Kisker, 2006). According to the latest ECCHS statistics, 90% of students graduate from ECCHS as opposed to the national overall high school graduation rate of 78% (Jobs for the Future, 2015). Decreasing the cost of college is particularly important in a time where tuition and fees have skyrocketed over the past decade, making it more difficult for American families to invest in higher education opportunities for the future (Whitehouse, 2015). The average Early College student earns at least 38 college credits which may yield a total savings of 30% toward the cost to obtain a baccalaureate degree (Jobs for the Future, 2015). While many Americans may feel that a college degree is necessary in order to advance economically, they may also feel that in today's economy, it is financially impossible to obtain a higher education (Ebersole, 2010). However, the fact remains that most Americans will need more than a high school diploma in order to prosper economically; therefore, the completion of a bachelor's degree is essential to the determination of both occupational status and income (Early College Designs, 2015; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991; 2005). During an individual's working life, college graduates typically earn over 60% more than typical high school graduates and those with advanced degrees earn two to three times as much as high school graduates (Baum & Ma, 2007; Day &

Newburger, 2002; Weisbrod, Ballou, & Asch, 2008). Society cannot continue to achieve prosperity without having an educated population and it starts with encouraging high school students to continue their education beyond the secondary level. ECHS were created to help pave these pathways to postsecondary opportunities.

ECHS have increased tremendously in number since they were founded in 2002. In the 2002-2003 academic year, there were only three ECHS existed in the United States (Early College Designs, 2015). Today, there are more than 280 ECHS across the country. Currently, more than 81,000 students in 31 states and the District of Columbia attend an ECHS (Jobs for the Future, 2015). ECHS are located on the campuses of community colleges and four-year institutions, although over 74% of ECHS are located on community college campuses, as these institutions have the most experience with dual enrollment initiatives and are committed to serving low-income, minority, and at-risk students (Kisker, 2006). In fact, the community college system has often been referred to as the gateway to education, as it provides low-cost tuition, an open admissions policy, and local access to anyone in the community (Kerr, King, & Grites, 2004). The ECHS Initiative specifically targets students for whom the transition into postsecondary education may be challenging financially, as well as for students who might be at risk of losing interest in schooling (Howley et al., 2013). Its priority is also to serve students who come from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, students who may be first-generation college goers, non-native English speakers, or students of color, all of whom are statistically underrepresented in higher education and for whom society often

has low aspirations for academic achievement (Early College Designs, 2015; Edmunds, 2012).

The majority of ECHS participants are unique in that they have an opportunity to have the full “community college experience” in terms of being physically located on the community college, taking classes alongside community college students, being taught by community college faculty, along with experiencing the rigor of college-level courses. ECHS offer a plethora of educational benefits such as smaller class sizes, personalized instruction, and support to assist in the transition from secondary to postsecondary education (Edmunds et al., 2013; Roberts, 2007). Evidence also suggests that the creation of the ECHS model has increased postsecondary educational access for high school graduates. Seventy-one percent of ECHS graduates went on to pursue some form of postsecondary education after early college high school graduation compared to the national college enrollment rate of 68% (Jobs for the Future, 2015). Thirty percent of graduates at ECHS that have been opened for four years or more have earned an associate’s or college certificate along with their high school diploma (Jobs for the Future, 2015).

### **Problem Statement**

ECHS are the most recent form of college preparatory programs in the United States and are increasing at rapid rates. While it is apparent that ECHS are beneficial with graduating students from high school and helping them to continue their education beyond the secondary level, very little is known about these student’s experiences once they continue their postsecondary education at a four-year institution (Howley et al., 2013; Miller, Fleming,

& Reed, 2013). This may raise questions as to whether these students are academically successful once they transition to a four-year institution after they graduate from an ECHS (Howley et al., 2013). Furthermore, four-year institutions vary by type in terms of their size, level of research activity, selectivity of applicants, residential/commuter status, and a variety of other factors that constitutes a campus's culture. Therefore, a need exists for extensive research not only regarding ECHS students' transition into a postsecondary institution but also research that examines how student experiences vary by institution type so that colleges and universities can develop the appropriate support mechanisms to assist these students in their transition to and during college.

Early College participants who attend a four-year college or university after graduation may find their new postsecondary institutional environment to be considerably different from what they are accustomed to, especially if they attended an ECHS on a community college campus. This may particularly be the case for the Early College student who decides to attend a research university as research universities and community colleges often have distinctive differences in regards to size, location, difficulty of the curriculum, and competition among students (Laanan, 1996). In addition, inconsistencies and differences between the community college curriculum and the four-year college curriculum may not always prepare students for the academic rigor that research institutions impose among their students. While research universities offer students a rich and dynamic environment that promotes academic rigor and intellectual growth, these institutions have also been criticized for their emphasis on research over teaching and for not committing enough resources to

undergraduates (Astin & Chang, 1995; Braxton, 1993; Kuh & Hu, 2001; Merkel, 2003; Townsend, 2006). While students may know that a research institution offers a variety of campus resources, students may not know where to find them or who to turn to for support, which may cause additional challenges (McLoughlin, 2012).

Due to a lack of research that examines the postsecondary experiences of Early College students once they enroll at four-year institutions, community college transfer students were considered to be the parallel population to Early College students for the purposes of this study. Both groups of students have similar demographics in that they comprise a larger percentage of students that may come from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, may be first-generation college goers, or students of color. Also, Early College participants have taken the same classes alongside students on these community college campuses. Similar to community college transfer students, these students have an entirely new collegiate experience once they enter a four-year institution and may encounter similar challenges as well.

There are misconceptions that exist about community college transfer students and the Early College student may not necessarily be exempt from these misconceptions. A common belief exists that students who attend highly selective institutions learn more and develop intellectual skills more fully than their peers at less selective institutions (Braxton, 1993). As a result, faculty at four-year institutions may negatively perceive the capabilities of community college transfer students (Kerr, King, & Grites, 2004). Faculty members and administrators at four-year institutions may also view students transferring from community

colleges as academically suspect (Cejda, 1997). Townsend (1995) noted that university faculty members perpetuated a Darwinian attitude of “survival of the fittest” toward community college students. While most ECHS are located on community college campuses, those ECHS that were connected to four-year institutions struggled to establish credibility because college faculty members were skeptical that these students were not adequately prepared for college (Bragg, 2006). Thus, students who graduated from an ECHS may find the academic transition to be somewhat of a challenge once enrolled at a research university not only due to a rigorous academic load but also having to battle the misconceptions that may exist about their educational capabilities.

The success of Early College students attending research universities demands particular attention because of the vast differences that exist between their prior experience at a community college and their new academic environment. Furthermore, given the fact that the majority of Early College students are first-generation college students, students of color, or low-income students, the stakes for retention and graduation of this particular student population become much higher. Of the 3.4 million high-achieving low-income students in the United States, fewer than 19% attend the most selective colleges in the United States (McLoughlin, 2012). These students are also less likely to graduate from high selective colleges than their high income peers (McLoughlin, 2012). First-generation students also tend to have lower graduation rates than non-first-generation students (Stebbleton & Soria, 2012). Furthermore, according to Engle and Tinto (2008), low-income and first-generation students are less likely to be engaged in the academic and social experiences that foster

success in college such as studying in groups, interacting with faculty and other students, participating in extracurricular activities, and using support services. Therefore it becomes imperative that research institutions devote special attention to these students to make sure they are receiving adequate support services to be successful in college and graduate.

Admitting a student into an institution carries a certain level of commitment on the part of the institution to support the success of the student (Krumrei-Mancuso et al., 2013).

### **Purpose of the Study and Research Questions**

Minimal research exists regarding postsecondary outcomes of students who participated in an ECHS. While research exists regarding the transition from high school to college (Bowles et al., 2011; Briggs, Clark, & Hall, 2012; Venezia & Jaeger, 2013) and from a community college to a four-year institution (Cedja et al., 1998; Flaga, 2006; Gard, Paton, & Gosselin, 2012; Laanan, 1996; Townsend, 2006; Townsend, 2008), there is minimal information that specifically emphasizes the Early College participants' transition into a four-year university and a lack of information exists regarding their transition specifically at a research institution. As the number of ECHS in the United States continues to increase, it is imperative that administrators and educators understand the needs and characteristics of this particular population of students to ensure that they are receive adequate support services to be successful in college and graduate. The purpose of this study was to garner an understanding of the transition experiences of students who attended an ECHS on a community college campus who are now attending a doctoral-granting large public research

university (with very high research activity) in the southeastern United States. The two research questions that guided this study were:

1. What were Early College High School participants' perceptions of their transition to a research university?
2. What factors enhanced or hindered the success of Early College High School participants at a research university?

For the purpose of this study, the term "success" was defined as students making progress toward their academic goals and experiencing satisfaction with university life (Krumrei-Mancuso et al., 2013).

### **Theoretical Framework**

This study utilized Schlossberg, Waters, and Goodman's (1995) Transition Theory as the theoretical framework to serve as the foundation of this study. Transition Theory provides insight as to how individuals adapt to transition and identifies four factors that influence the quality of any transition: situation, self, support and strategies. These four areas are referred to as the "4 S's" (Schlossberg et al., 1995). While a transition may be the result of a single event or nonevent, dealing with a transition is a process that extends over time (Schlossberg et al., 1995). The time needed to achieve successful integration will vary with the person and the transition (Schlossberg et al., 1995). The researchers also coined the phrases "moving in," "moving through," and "moving out," which is appropriate as it relates to this study in that Early College participants are transitioning from a community college campus into a new collegiate environment; they are "moving through" by navigating the



research institution and discovering factors that enhanced or hindered their success; they are “moving out” by having the ultimate goal of graduating from the university.

### **Significance of the Study**

Since there are limited studies that explore the transition experiences of Early College participants once they enter a research university, this study has several implications for the field of higher education. First, the findings from this study will help higher education practitioners garner a basic understanding of the populations of students served by ECHS, along with the purpose of these secondary institutions. There are countless faculty and staff who have never heard of ECHS and as a result, have no working knowledge about this particular population of students. Consequently, there is a need to provide knowledge and background to those who work with ECHS students (both directly and indirectly) at four-year institutions, as it is likely that they will encounter and interact with these students in some form or fashion whether it be in the classroom, the advising office, or the residence hall. Secondly, institutions may also use these findings to determine how their academic policies influence Early College participants. Questions such as, “Should a student be allowed to take their core major courses within their first year of college?;” “What are the best practices for advising students who attended an ECHS?;” or “Should there be a limit on how much coursework we will accept from another institution?” will facilitate a beneficial discussion among higher education administrators and assist them in determining the best strategies for promoting success among students who attended an ECHS. Lastly, this study will contribute to the Early College literature base by providing rich, qualitative data to extend an

understanding of this particular student population and their transition process and success within the research university context. In sum, this study is significant because it has the potential to inform higher education administrators at both the secondary and postsecondary levels in their efforts to address the needs of the Early College student population. The future of ECHS will depend upon research and empirical data that attest to the effectiveness and limitations of these programs and explore students' transition from the ECHS to a four-year institution in pursuit of the baccalaureate degree.

### **Definition of Terms**

The following section provides definitions of several frequently used terms that may be unfamiliar to the reader but may often be related terms used to describe the Early College participants' transition to and success within a research institution. It is important to note that while ECHS may be located on the campus of a two-year or four-year institution, for the purposes of this study, the transition process will be examined from the perspective of students who attended an ECHS on a community college campus.

*Early college high schools (ECHS)* are secondary educational institutions that are designed so that students can earn both a high school diploma and an associate's degree or up to two years of credit toward a bachelor's degree. ECHS schools have the potential to improve high school graduation rates and better prepare these students through rigorous, college coursework and reducing the number of years to obtain a college degree (Early College Designs, 2015). The term *Early College* will be used interchangeably throughout this dissertation.

*Research institutions or universities*, also known as doctoral granting research universities, are institutions that award at least 20 research doctoral degrees (with the exception of professional degrees) and are classified as having a high level of research activity or a very high level of research activity (Carnegie Foundation, 2013).

The term “*transfer student*” refers to a student who seeks admission to a college or university after previously attending another institution, most often a community college, with the goal of eventually obtaining a baccalaureate degree from a four-year institution (Cedja, 1997).

### **Overview and Organization of Dissertation**

This dissertation is divided into five chapters. Chapter one presented an overview of the problem, purpose, and rationale for this study. It explained the importance of the study, introduced the research questions, and provided definitions of key terms. Chapter two explores the literature related to Early College High Schools. It includes a discussion of two popular college preparatory initiatives, Advanced Placement (AP) and International Baccalaureate (IB) and the criticisms associated with these programs, the rationale for integrating high school and college, along with the need for Early College High Schools. Chapter two also addresses Transition Theory by utilizing community college transfer students as a parallel population to Early College students. Chapter three discusses the methodology selected for the study, including data collection, data analysis, trustworthiness, as well as my personal biases and assumptions and the limitations of the research study. Chapter four presents the findings for this study and chapter five presents key conclusions

drawn from the study's findings along with a discussion of implications theory, practice and policy, and for future research.

## CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

Increased attention is being devoted by educators and administrators to adequately prepare students for college (Berger et al., 2009; Brewer, Stern, & Ahn, 2007). In order for the United States to fulfill President Obama's national goal that by 2020, America will regain its status of having the highest proportion of college graduates in the world (Whitehouse, 2015), it is essential that pathways are created that allow students to successfully pursue a higher education. There are multiple reasons as to why students in the United States are unprepared for postsecondary coursework. These reasons range from differences that exist between high school curricula to the large socioeconomic disparities that exist between high schools (Venezia & Jaeger, 2013). While college preparatory initiatives such as Advanced Placement (AP) and International Baccalaureate (IB) potentially allow students to earn college credit, these initiatives have been also been widely criticized for their lack of accessibility, particularly for students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds and students of color (DeVance Taliaferro & DeCuir-Gunby, 2008; Hertberg-Davis & Callahan, 2008).

Early College High Schools (ECHS) were created to serve students for whom the entrance to college has historically been more challenging, including students who are low-income, first-generation college goers, and students of color that are underrepresented in college (Edmunds, 2012). ECHS combine high school and the first two years of college into a supportive and coherent educational program (Kisker, 2006). Because ECHS are a fairly recent initiative among the college preparatory efforts in the United States, limited research regarding postsecondary outcomes for Early College students exists (Edmunds et al., 2013;

Howley et al., 2013; Miller, Fleming, & Reed, 2013; Oliver et al., 2010), and only one dissertation to date specifically explored Early College students' transition to a research university (McCorry-Andalis, 2013).

State budgets are providing far less per-pupil funding for kindergarten through 12th grade than they did six years ago (Leachman & Mai, 2014). Even schools that have received increased funding have found that it is not enough to make up for budget cuts in past years (Leachman & Mai, 2014). With decreased levels of funding for public schools, ECHS will need to provide evidence that validates their existence as a viable college preparatory initiative. Not only is it important to show evidence of student success while students are enrolled in high school, ECHS will also need to provide evidence that an ECHS education was advantageous to achieving postsecondary success (Miller, Fleming, & Reed, 2013). Thus, there is a need for research that explores the experiences of Early College students once they reach the postsecondary level. At a time when states and the nation are trying to produce workers with the skills to master new technologies and adapt to the complexities of a global economy, the decline in state educational investment is cause for concern (Leachman & Mai, 2014). Research pertaining to ECHS is a necessity in order to ensure their continued existence at a time when funding for K-12 education is steadily declining.

This chapter begins with an overview of two common college preparatory initiatives in the United States (AP and IB) and the criticisms associated with these programs. Afterwards, the rationale for integrating high school and college will be addressed which will lead into a discussion regarding the need for ECHS as well as its characteristics, benefits, and

challenges. Next, the literature regarding postsecondary outcomes will be examined. The chapter concludes with a discussion of Schlossberg, Waters, and Goodman's (1995) Transition Theory which served as the theoretical framework and foundation for this study as well as a discussion of community college transfer students who served as a parallel student population to Early College students.

### **Advanced Placement (AP) Program**

College preparatory programs have existed since the middle of the twentieth century (The College Board, 2003). The Advanced Placement Program, or "AP" as it is more commonly known, is the longest running college preparatory program in the United States. The AP program began in the 1950s with two projects financed by the Fund for the Advancement of Education of the Ford Foundation (Santoli, 2002). The first project's goal was to address the issue of academically talented students having to repeat introductory courses in college despite the fact that they had taken these same courses while they were in high school (Rothschild, 1999). A committee of college and high school teachers recommended that achievement examinations be set up in major subjects to enable students to obtain college credit while they are in high school and to enter college with advanced standing (The College Board, 2003; Rothschild, 1999). The second project, the Kenyon Plan, brought together high school teachers, university professors, and representatives from the Educational Testing Service, who developed high school course outlines, syllabi, and tests based on the outlines (Santoli, 2002). Leaders from every discipline in higher education worked to develop high school course descriptions and assessments that colleges

would find rigorous enough to use as a basis for granting credit (The College Board, 2003). In 1952, a pilot program was unveiled that introduced advanced courses in eleven subjects (The College Board, 2003). By the 1955-56 school year, the College Board was invited to step in and take over administration of the program and it became known as the College Board Advanced Placement (AP) Program (The College Board, 2003).

Since its creation, the AP program has expanded significantly. In 1955-1956, 1,229 students participated in AP courses; the latest data reveal that the graduating class of 2013 had 1,033,430 AP examinees (The 10<sup>th</sup> Annual AP Report, 2014). Today, the AP programs offer rigorous college-level curricula and assessments to students in high school in 34 courses (College Board, 2015). Students who take AP courses typically earn higher GPAs in college, have higher college graduation rates, and are more likely to graduate college within five years (10<sup>th</sup> Annual AP Report, 2014; Santioli, 2002).

### **International Baccalaureate (IB) Program**

Although not quite as popular as the AP program, another fairly common college preparatory initiative is the International Baccalaureate or IB program. Whereas the AP program prepares students for college curricula in the United States, the IB program prepares students for college coursework at both domestic and international universities (Kyburg, Hertberg-Davis, & Callahan, 2007; Poelzer & Feldhusen, 1997). The idea behind the IB program was to create a secondary program to meet the educational needs of a highly mobile society throughout Europe (Poelzer & Feldhusen, 1997). There were three types of students in mind: those living abroad, those returning from abroad, and those who were likely to go



abroad (Renauld, 1974). Up until that time, there had been no single curriculum acceptable to all of the European nations and this created confusion among the schools (Poelzer & Feldhusen, 1997). In the early 1950's, the United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organization founded the International Schools' Association (ISA) in an effort to study practical ways to unify the curriculum for the development of international understanding (Renaud, 1974). In 1963, ISA received a grant from the Twentieth Century Fund to develop a common curriculum and examination program that would meet the admissions requirements of any university that a student chose to attend (Poelzer & Feldhusen, 1997). As a result, the IB initiative was founded in 1968 and was implemented in countries that desired to internationalize their curriculum and provide a rigorous and holistic educational option for their students (IB Annual Review, 2013).

The IB program is a pre-university program of study in which students take courses in both the humanities and the sciences (Kyburg, Hertberg-Davis, & Callahan, 2007). The AP program differs from the IB initiative in that the AP program allows students to take AP courses of their choice; students in the IB program must take all of the necessary courses required in order to earn the IB diploma or Diploma Programme (DP) (Poelzer & Feldhusen, 1997). Students take three subjects at the Higher Level and three at the Standard Level or a maximum of four at the Higher Level and two at the Standard Level (Poelzer & Feldhusen, 1997). This allows the students to have depth in some subjects and breadth in others (Poelzer & Feldhusen, 1997). Students take a written exam at the end of the DP and if the student achieves a satisfactory score, the student will earn college credit (International Baccalaureate

Organization, 2015) To ensure program integrity, a school must be approved through a formal application process and must be able to offer all of the courses in the program that lead to the DP (Kyburg, Hertberg-Davis, & Callahan, 2007). The IB program is modeled after the European secondary schools where high school spans an additional year and is typically followed by just three years of undergraduate study at the college level (Kyburg, Hertberg-Davis, & Callahan, 2007).

In 1970, there were only 20 schools that had adopted the IB curriculum (Poelzer & Feldhusen, 1997). Today, 4,972 IB programs are offered worldwide across 3,968 schools (International Baccalaureate Organization, 2015). Between December 2009 and December 2014, the number of IB programs offered globally grew by 46.35% (International Baccalaureate Organization, 2015).

AP and IB programs have become increasingly endorsed by federal and state education policymakers and are often highly recommended by state officials and school leaders (Hertberg-Davis & Callahan, 2008; Kyburg, Hertberg-Davis, & Callahan, 2007). Both AP and IB programs allow students to earn college credit upon satisfactory scores on a final examination.

One of the potential benefits of completing AP courses and the IB program is the opportunity to complete the bachelor's degree in shorter time and save money on college tuition (Kyburg, Hertberg-Davis, & Callahan, 2007; Santioli, 2002). The College Board (2015) and the International Baccalaureate Organization (2015) both assert that students who

receive credit for introductory courses based on AP and IB exams are more successful in college than those who have not taken these exams.

### **Criticisms of AP and IB Initiatives**

Although the AP and the IB programs may prove to be beneficial for high school students, these college preparatory initiatives have certainly not come without criticism. DeVance Taliaferro and DeCuir-Gunby (2008) assert that an opportunity gap in AP courses exists. AP and IB courses are comprised primarily of middle-class, Caucasian, high-achieving students and may exclude numerous groups of gifted students, including minority students, students from low-SES backgrounds, gifted underachievers, and second-language learners (Hertberg-Davis & Callahan, 2008). Furthermore, African-American and Hispanic high school students do not enroll in Advanced Placement (AP) courses anywhere near the rate of white students (Klopfenstein, 2004). According to the latest data produced in the 10<sup>th</sup> Annual AP Annual Report to the Nation (2014), African-American students in the graduating class of 2013 were the most underrepresented group in AP classrooms and in the population of successful AP exam takers. Whereas 55.9% of white students took AP exams and 61.3% scored a three or higher on their AP exams, only 18.8% of Hispanic students took AP exams with 16.9% scoring three or higher (The 10<sup>th</sup> Annual AP Report, 2014). The statistics were even lower for African-American students with 9.2% of these students actually taking AP exams and only 4.6% of these students scoring a three or higher (The 10<sup>th</sup> Annual AP Report, 2014). One possible reason for the low number of African-American students enrolling in AP courses is that they are less likely to be nominated by their teachers to take these courses

than their Caucasian counterparts (DeVance Taliaferro & DeCuir-Gunby, 2008; Saunders & Maloney, 2005). In addition, African-American students who are enrolled in AP courses are more likely to experience feelings of alienation because they are not adequately represented in the curriculum and are often one of the few, if not the only, African-American students in the classroom (Ford 1996; Yonezawa, Wells, & Serna, 2002).

Access to AP programs is particularly problematic in small schools, rural schools, and predominately African-American and Latino schools (Solorzano & Ornelas, 2002). These schools may lack the resources to offer AP courses and have a limited number of teachers who are actually certified to teach AP courses (DeVance Taliaferro & DeCuir-Gunby, 2008). DeVance Taliaferro and DeCuir-Gunby (2008) conducted a study to examine the perspectives of educators on the advanced placement opportunity gap for African American students. Their study revealed discrepancies between diverse students' needs and the curriculum and instruction offered in these programs, indicating a need for a broader range of services for students on the secondary level in urban environments (DeVance Taliaferro & DeCuir-Gunby, 2008). Additionally, because the curriculum and instruction in AP and IB courses tended to offer the biggest mismatch for students of color and students from impoverished backgrounds, the heavy reliance upon AP and IB programs without appropriate attention to the learning needs of the students often excluded these learners from participation in advanced high school courses and threatens equity (Kyburg, Hertberg-Davis, & Callahan, 2007).

Another issue that threatens the equity of AP and IB courses are the fees charged to take the exams in order to earn college credit. The AP exam fee is \$91 per exam (College Board, 2015). IB exams cost considerably more. The current student registration fee is \$160; the candidate subject fee is \$110 per exam; and core fees for the DP are \$85 for the extended essay; \$43 for the theory of knowledge, and \$10 for creativity action and services (International Baccalaureate Organization, 2015). These fees may prove to be problematic for students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds or those students whose families simply cannot afford to for their children to take these exams.

While the College Board (2015) is actively working to increase the number of underrepresented students who enroll in AP courses and take the exams, they also readily acknowledge that their most immediate, pressing issue is that they continue working alongside policymakers and educators to address the vast number of highly qualified students who are not taking AP courses. Simply getting minority students into advanced level classes is not enough to enable them to thrive (Lichten, 2007 as cited in Kyburg, Hertberg-Davis, & Callahan, 2007). The curriculum and instructional strategies of AP and IB must be flexible in order to accommodate different readiness levels, learning styles, and aptitudes of all talented students preparing for college work (Kyburg, Hertberg-Davis, & Callahan, 2007). As students, teachers, and policymakers increasingly accept AP and IB courses as indicators of school and student quality, programming options for talented high school students has often become synonymous with the offerings of the College Board (Kyburg, Hertberg-Davis, & Callahan, 2007). This has resulted in a reduction in the number of alternative options for

meeting the academic needs of talented students at the secondary level (Kyburg, Hertberg-Davis, & Callahan, 2007). The ECHS model offers a new approach to college preparation. While AP and IB programs are certainly aiming to increase their accessibility and lessen the educational gap that exist between Caucasian students and students of color, the ECHS initiative fills this gap in that it specifically targets underrepresented high school students and offers a rigorous curriculum that allows a student to earn a high school diploma as well as an associate's degree or abundant college credits (Kaniuka & Vickers, 2010). The next section will explore the rationale for integrating high school and college curricula, and subsequent sections will illuminate the current research on ECHS.

### **The Rationale for Integrating High School and College**

The premise of integrating secondary and postsecondary education is not a novel concept (Kisker, 2006). Two originators of junior colleges, President William Rainey Harper and Dean Alexis F. Lange, believed that the two years that comprised a junior college education would be organized directly with high schools (Eby, 1928). The government at that time also supported the link between high school and college coursework. In a 1921 address delivered to the Texas State Teachers' Association, George Zook from the U.S. Bureau of Education, emphasized that four-year colleges and universities spent an unnecessary amount of time assimilating freshmen and sophomores who were essentially doing work found in secondary education; Zook offered the junior college as a solution (Kisker, 2006). The junior college movement began in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century when secondary schools and districts across the country began to experiment with postgraduate and college

courses (Kisker, 2006). Most two-year colleges were established as extensions of secondary schools and in many states operated as departments within high schools until 1960 (Pederson, 2000).

In the 1930s and 1940s, a scholar at the University of Minnesota and the University of Chicago by the name of Leonard Koos promoted a 6-4-4 plan of public education in the Pasadena and Compton school districts as well as districts in Kansas, Missouri, Oklahoma, and Mississippi (Kisker, 2006). Koos (1946) asserted that the first two years of college were more connected to secondary education than to higher education. Koos (1946) found that the curriculum in high school and the freshman/sophomore college curriculum were essentially repetitive. Koos (1946) argued that educators should reorganize the education system in a manner that linked secondary and postsecondary education courses. Over the next twenty years, Koos (1946) advocated for a nationwide realignment of public education to a 6-4-4 model in which grades 1-6 would consist of elementary school; grades 7-10 would consist of high school; and grades 11-14 would comprise junior college. This model would also allow a student the opportunity to earn a college degree in a shorter amount of time and provide the student with more time to enroll in additional courses to enrich the educational experience (Wechsler, 2001). Koos (1946) also pointed out that combining grades 11 through 14 would permit savings in capital construction, housing, maintenance, and operation. Integrating grades 11-14 would also eliminate curriculum gaps and allow for a natural transition from general coursework to more specialized coursework (Koos, 1946).

While there were several proponents of Koos' 6-4-4 plan, there were also many adversaries of this model. Walter Eells advocated for maintaining a separate high school and junior college model in which junior colleges would be administered and funded separately from high schools (Kisker, 2006). In particular, Eells favored a 6-3-3-2 arrangement of public education (Kisker, 2006). Eells (1931) noted that the 6-4-4 plan went against the psychology of the American public. He continued to assert that it would be difficult for people to fathom "college" as a model of half high school and half college and as a result, would not provide students with a "true" collegiate experience. Kisker (2006) contended that this argument may be one reason why the 6-4-4 plan was not widely implemented as Koos (1946) and other advocates had envisioned it. In addition, Eells (1931) noted that despite the 1947 President's Commission on Higher Education endorsing the 6-4-4 plan, the proposal did not recommend restructuring grades 11-14 and, as a result, the states chose not to disturb the organization of local high schools. Advocates of the traditional junior high model opposed the 6-4-4 plan and were successful in convincing members of educational associations, including the North Central Association, which had previously supported Koos' 6-4-4 plan, that preserving middle school was more important than saving two years in the student's program (Kisker, 2006).

Koos' (1946) four-year junior college model had very few advocates at the local level (Pederson, 2000). By 1941, only ten public school systems were operating under a 6-4-4 model (Stoel, 1988). By 1955, Pasadena Junior College, which was originally the prototype of Koos' (1946) 6-4-4 model, had relinquished grades 11 and 12 to back to Pasadena High



School. The concept of integrating high school and community college ended up disappearing for the next thirty years and reemerged with the establishment of Middle College High Schools in the early 1970s (Kisker, 2006).

### **The Creation of Middle College High Schools**

In 1971, the City University of New York's acting chancellor, Timothy Healy, asked Janet Lieberman at LaGuardia Community College to design a program that would increase the college's enrollment and help curb the large numbers of students dropping out of New York City high schools (Kisker, 2006). Lieberman proposed that LaGuardia create a program that targeted students ages 16 to 20 who were identified by their middle schools as potential dropouts (Carter, 2004). The main components of the middle college high school (MCHS) model included a flexible curriculum that would allow students to move at their own pace; an opportunity for students to enroll in college courses after they demonstrated mastery of a subject; a cooperative educational program that included field trips, internships, and apprenticeships; and a counseling structure that would encourage student-faculty relationships, cooperative learning, student visibility, and individuality (Wechsler, 2001). Unfortunately, the MCHS model struggled to fully integrate high school and college. According to Wechsler (2001),

LaGuardia's Middle College High School became neither a grades 10-14 school for at risk students nor a high school-level department preparing at-risk students exclusively for one community college. Novelty was limited when the state compelled high school attendance but left postsecondary education volitional, when the need for

revenue tempered collaboration, and when the age gap between community college and high school students widened. (p. 167)

Significant collaboration between MCHS and LaGuardia Community College was initially inhibited by the conflicts between the New York Board of Education and the New York Board of Higher Education (Kisker, 2006). Another factor that may have hindered the complete integration of the high school and college experience at LaGuardia was that New York high school teachers and college faculty often faced different credentialing requirements and had separate union representation (Kisker, 2006).

The MCHS model, despite its challenges, did accomplish the intended goal of educating and graduating at-risk students (Kisker, 2006). Lieberman received several Ford Foundation grants to create seven new middle colleges across the nation (Kisker, 2006). To date, the Middle College National Consortium (Middle College National Consortium, 2015) provided support to 25 middle colleges in 9 states during the 2014-2015 school year (Middle College National Consortium, 2015). The MCHS model led to the creation of what are now known as ECHS, which have been proven thus far to successfully integrate high school and postsecondary education. Middle colleges are high schools designed for underrepresented students populations to earn college credit and are located on college campuses (Early College Designs, 2015). ECHS take the model a step further by providing a coordinated course of study in which students can earn up to 60 college credits while in high school (Early College Designs, 2015). The main difference is the amount of college course work

expected as well as the degree of secondary-postsecondary integration (Early College Designs, 2015).

While Koos' (1946) 6-4-4 did not persevere, it did lay a solid foundation for ECHS. Scholars and educators now agree that integrating high school and the community college bridges the gap between the high school and college curriculum, allows students to take advanced coursework and keeps students in one institution throughout their adolescence (Kisker, 2006). Integrating high school and community college may also create cost savings for states and institutions, reduce attrition, and remove barriers to postsecondary education for underprivileged students (Kisker, 2006).

### **The Need for Early College High Schools**

Postsecondary educators have expressed concerns for many years about how prepared high school students are for college (Edmunds, 2012). Declining high school graduation rates and evidence of students unprepared for postsecondary education have garnered the attention of the federal government, educators, and the general community (Greene & Forrester, 2003; Krueger, 2006; Lachat, 2001) and generated a need for reformation of high schools (Green & Forrester, 2003; Kirst & Venezia, 2001; Kisker, 2006). Kisker (2006) argues that America's schools have many outstanding features but they are failing to provide all students with a challenging and engaging high school curriculum that adequately prepares them for success in higher education.

Allowing students to enroll in college early was previously reserved for high-achieving students or for those who had mastered the secondary curriculum (Howley et al.,

2013). Throughout the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, early entry to college was made possible through various measures such as grade-skipping, AP courses and exams, and special programs such as the Center for Talented Youth at Johns Hopkins University (Howley et al., 2013). Today, however, the nature of college preparatory initiatives has shifted from academic excellence to academic equity (Howley et al., 2013). School reformers now see early college attendance, through dual enrollment or early entry to college, as a possible strategy for supporting the academic engagement and higher levels of academic performance of a wider range of students (Brewer, Stern, & Ahn, 2007). Some policymakers now cite its benefits for increasing educational rigor and improving human capital development among academically average students (Berger et al., 2010).

ECHS are the most ambitious attempt to date that integrates high school and community college (Kisker, 2006). In 2002, generous funding from the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, along with other private sponsors such as the Carnegie Corporation of New York, the Ford Foundation, the W.K. Kellogg Foundation, and the Lumina Foundation for Education supported the development of a model known as the “Early College Initiative” (Bragg, 2006; Early College Designs, 2015; Edmunds, 2012). ECHS are designed for underrepresented student populations who have not had access to the academic preparation needed to succeed in college (Kisker, 2006; Vargas & Miller, 2011).

ECHS are located on the campuses of two and four-year colleges and aim to ensure that all students graduate with a high school diploma and two years of college credit or an associates’ degree (Bernstein et al., 2010; Edmunds et al., 2013). In order for students to be

able to accomplish the goal of obtaining a high school diploma and an associate's degree or ample college credits by the time that they graduate from high school, the ECHS and their higher education partner, must collaboratively develop a seamless curriculum that avoids unnecessary duplication and/or omission of critical content (Bernstein et al., 2010). ECHS serve an average of 400 students when fully enrolled and eliminate the physical transition between high school and college (Kisker, 2006). ECHS also provide students with a personalized learning environment where mastery of subject matter, rather than matriculation through grade levels, is rewarded (Jobs for the Future, 2015). The following section will discuss the characteristics of ECHS and the factors that distinguish these schools from traditional high schools.

### **Characteristics of Early College High Schools**

ECHS are autonomous schools managed by the local school district in partnership with a community college or a university. ECHS offer personalized and caring learning environments that provide students with care, support, and high expectations (Thompson & Ongaga, 2011). From as early as ninth grade, ECHS help students gain the inside knowledge about college as well as the self-management skills necessary to create and follow a postsecondary plan, even when they face obstacles (Morrow & Torrez, 2012). The ECHS Initiative is built upon a framework of rigor, relevance, and relationships, commonly known in the Early College community as the 3 R's (Thompson & Ongaga, 2011). This framework is characterized by personalization, respect, responsibility, high expectations, performance based decision making, use of technology, common focus, and time to collaborate (Berger et

al., 2014; Webb & Gerwin, 2014). These characteristics make up the foundation for ECHS and allow them to be welcoming places where students and adults know each other well and pursue a common mission based on high academic achievement for all students (Berger et al., 2014; Webb & Gerwin, 2014). In addition, ECHS create a professional community among its educators that is collaborative and student focused (Berger et al., 2014; Webb & Gerwin, 2014).

Students undergo a rigorous interview and application process to ensure an appropriate fit between the student's learning needs and the program goals (Born, 2006; Edmunds; 2012). ECHS do not provide opportunities for extracurricular activities such as athletics, band, and clubs (Miller, Fleming, & Reed, 2013; Smith et al., 2012). Students are required to participate in extensive service learning projects of their choice until graduation (Edmunds 2012; Thompson & Ongaga, 2011). ECHS students elect to forego these extracurricular activities in an effort to gain the benefits of a small personalized environment (Miller, Fleming, & Reed, 2013; Edmunds, 2012). The ECHS curriculum also does not offer electives and students only take their core course requirements (Thompson & Ongaga, 2011).

While in ECHS, students participate in an accelerated high school education program that offers courses to prepare them for the rigor of college (Oliver et al., 2010). In the first two years of the program, students typically complete their required high school courses (Edmunds, 2012). Although many schools provide college classes in the ninth grade in which only high school students are enrolled, by the time the students are in the tenth grade, they are enrolled in college classes with other college students (Edmunds, 2012). ECHS

professionals closely monitor each student's academic progress while providing support and guidance throughout the start of college course work. Program curriculum and pedagogical strategies are specially designed to function as an academic and social bridge for successful college integration through an acceleration process (Edmunds, 2012). Students are acclimated to the rigor of college level work through preparatory courses completed under the supervision of high school teachers and then are transitioned to college courses taught by professors (Edmunds, 2012).

By junior year, students typically take 12-15 credit hours and attend class with regularly enrolled college students (Thompson & Ongaga, 2011). Each cohort in college courses is assigned an ECHS faculty member who maintains regular contact with students to monitor and support their progress as well as provide assistance in areas such as time management and navigating the new college environment (Thompson & Ongaga, 2011).

The ECHS Initiative is founded on partnerships between high schools and colleges or universities (Oliver et al., 2010). Advising personnel at both institutions have a vested interest in determining the programs that work for Early College students (Oliver et al., 2010). The partnering institutions also share a role in monitoring students' motivational beliefs and need for support. Early College personnel typically provide guidance activities at the high school, which serves as a secure base from which students can venture and return from the university environment (Oliver et al., 2010). At the university, advising, counseling, and transition centers are available for students throughout their academic careers

so that they can seek out needed services such as personal counseling and tutoring (Kramer & Spencer, 1989).

ECHS are significantly smaller than traditional high schools (Kaniuka & Vickers, 2010). The maximum size for ECHS is 400 students total and they serve students in grades nine through twelve. Some ECHS offer a fifth year or grade thirteen (Edmunds, 2012; Edmunds et al. 2013). Smaller schools are founded on a close, supportive, and respectful school environment and have a strong relationship to student success (Thompson & Ongaga, 2011). Due to their smaller size, ECHS are able to create rigorous academic programs for every student in relation to their specific interests and potential career choices (Shear et al., 2008). Furthermore, ECHS foster positive relationships that can inspire students both academically and personally which is important for a couple of reasons (Shear et al., 2008). First, students' sense of belonging increases the chances that they will accept the school's rules and policy (Knesting, 2008). Second, as students become important and valued members of their school's network of peers and adults, they will become more invested in school (Knesting, 2008). Finally, students are more likely to take educational risks when they feel safe in their school environment (Knesting, 2008).

All of the ECHS' components are intended to be implemented together; schools cannot select to only follow one element of their own choosing (Edmunds et al., 2013). This is based on the belief that these different aspects of schooling work together to create an environment that helps students remain in school and prepare them for college (Edmunds et al., 2013). Each of ECHS' facets comprises the true nature of an ECHS and provides a



secondary school experience so that even those considered “at-risk” can be motivated at an early age to see themselves not only attending college but being successful in college as well (Berger, Adelman, & Cole, 2010). The next two sections discuss the benefits for students attending an ECHS as well the challenges of ECHS.

### **Benefits of Early College High Schools**

The goal of the ECHS Initiative is to raise high school graduation rates as well as increase the postsecondary success of underserved student populations (Jobs for the Future, 2015). ECHS aim to remove the financial, academic, and psychological barriers that prevent students from entering and succeeding in college (Jobs for the Future, 2015). Furthermore, ECHS provide an opportunity for students from diverse racial, socioeconomic, and educational backgrounds to earn credit for college level courses (Early College Designs, 2015).

ECHS can yield significant savings for students and their families by including up to two years of college during the high school years at a fraction of the normal college cost (Early College Designs, 2015). By changing the structure of high school and reducing the time to earn a bachelor’s degree, ECHS have the potential to improve graduation rates and better prepare students for entry into high-skill careers (Hoffman & Vargas, 2005).

ECHS offer introductory college-level courses as well as demanding seminar classes that incorporate classical works by Plato or Charles Darwin (Marcy, 2006). The rigorous curriculum transmits a message of high expectation for student engagement and students usually respond by putting learning at the center of their college experience (Marcy, 2006).

Furthermore, ECHS are active learning communities which are important for building social and academic networks which in turn, help students integrate what they learn across multiple disciplines (Early College Designs, 2015; March 2006).

The most important predictor of college success is the rigor of courses that are taken in high school (Adelman, 2006). Students who take college classes while in high school are more likely to earn a high school degree, enroll in a four-year college as a full-time student, and persist in college (Berger, Adelman, & Cole, 2010). Kaniuka and Vickers (2010) conducted a mixed method case study on an ECHS to determine how the academic performance of students attending an ECHS compared with the performance of similar students attending traditional high schools. The researchers found that students attending an ECHS performed significantly better overall and had greater passing rates compared to students attending traditional high schools (Kaniuka & Vickers, 2010). They also found that non-Asian minority students performed as well if not better than their White peers at the ECHS. In some cases, these students performed better than White students attending a traditional high school (Kaniuka & Vickers, 2010).

Edmunds et al., (2012) found that ECHS have increased the proportion of students progressing in a college preparatory course of study and have resulted in more students staying in school. ECHS students also have higher attendance rates, lower behavioral misconduct issues, and lower suspension rates than traditional high school students (Edmunds et al., 2013; Roberts, 2007).

Students at ECHS demonstrated higher levels of motivational, cognitive, and behavioral engagement than traditional high school students (Edmunds et al., 2013; Roberts, 2007). Possible reasons for this higher level of engagement include the opportunity to have smaller classes as well as the personalized and caring relationships between staff and students (Edmunds et al., 2013; Roberts, 2007). Additionally, higher parental involvement, the presence of an honors-level curriculum, mastery goal orientation, and teacher collaboration also contribute to a higher level of student engagement at their ECHS (Bernstein et al., 2010; Early College Designs, 2015; Jordan et al., 2006; Kaniuka & Vickers, 2010; Roberts, 2007). The success of ECHS is due to the fact that these schools essentially require students to be engaged with their educational experiences in a variety of ways and the students “can’t hide” (Edmunds et al., 2013, p. 3). Increased engagement with school has been related to a variety of positive school related outcomes including increased academic performance and increased graduation rates (Appleton et al., 2008; Fredericks, Blumenfeld, & Paris, 2004).

Student performance at ECHS provides a clear picture of what can occur when students are provide with a rigorous and challenging curriculum (Kaniuka & Vickers, 2010). High schools seeking to challenge their students should note that compressing four years of traditional high school into two that incorporate a college experience can yield significantly improved results (Kaniuka & Vickers, 2010). Students saw a meaningful benefit in attending ECHS and were motivated to succeed (Kaniuka & Vickers, 2010). Their success is not one uniquely attributable to the curriculum and the work that they do; it is due to the type

of dynamic environment that results when they feel secure, valued, and part of something (Kaniuka & Vickers, 2010).

### **Challenges Faced by Early College High Schools**

While ECHS bridge the gap between high school and college, they also face challenges that threaten their success (Born, 2006). Middle College High Schools and Early College High Schools may work with students who may not be intrinsically motivated to perform academically or with students who come from homes where they are the first to graduate from high school, let alone college (Born, 2006). Many of these schools are located in communities where urban problems of violence, drug abuse, and teen pregnancy, and high school dropout rates are the rule rather than the exception (Born, 2006). To that end, Middle College High Schools and Early College High Schools must carefully build a support system that counters some of the negative habits and influences students bring to the learning experience (Born, 2006).

Another challenge faced by ECHS is the lack of academic preparedness of its students (Thompson & Ongaga, 2011). Because some students may not have the necessary skills to start or complete the rigorous curriculum, there are some ECHS that have imposed minimum entrance requirements which goes against the grain of what the ECHS model entails (National High School Center, 2007). Although some enrolled ECHS students were able to meet college entrance and placement requirements, schools also found that some students were unable to pass these exams (National High School Center, 2007; Thompson & Ongaga, 2011). While the solution to this problem would be to enroll students in

developmental or remedial courses in order to provide the students with additional academic preparation, many times these courses do not offer college credit (National High School Center, 2007). If students are not able to earn multiple college credits, as per one of the goals of the ECHS Initiative, then taking college courses becomes counterintuitive. As such, it becomes important to consider what structures may be added to the ECHS model to support students, who, even with significant support and mentoring, may not meet either high school graduation or university academic requirements (Thompson & Ongaga, 2011).

In addition, there are criticisms that that accelerated learning, within a compressed time frame, does not provide the depth and breadth needed for reflective thinking and conceptual development (Tatum, 2010; Wlodkowski, 2003). Some educators fear that superficial or short-term acquisition of knowledge will occur with little to no internalization of concepts and skills (McDonald & Farrell, 2012). The rigor and work at an ECHS, in regards to the high level of critical thinking and the volume of individual and group work, may be overwhelming for high school students (Thompson & Ongaga, 2011).

ECHS students may find the transition from a high school to a college culture to be quite challenging. Born (2006) reported that while students enrolled in ECHS to lessen the burden of college tuition and accelerate and complete their college attendance early, it was not an easy decision or a challenge that they were prepared to meet. ECHS students sometimes felt alienated by their college instructors (Born, 2006). ECHS students were accustomed to their teachers being flexible if they happened to miss an assignment or needed time for revision; some of these student found that college course instructors were not so

lenient (Born, 2006). Students admitted that college presented challenges for which they were not prepared and that they experienced shock when first attending class (Born, 2006). Community college instructors tend to be student-centered, thus not simply teaching students but helping students to actually learn (Williams & Southers, 2010). As a result, faculty members may feel a disconnect with students who are not prepared to be self-directed and some ECHS students may not be ready for this type of learning (Williams & Southers, 2010).

In sum, ECHS are not for everyone (Smith et al., 2012). While ECHS do provide a small and personal learning environment and fewer rules than a traditional school, they also involve more student responsibility (Smith et al., 2012). Lecture formats, larger class size and limited personalization found in many traditional college classes may not coincide with the student-centered experiences that ECHS students are accustomed to (Born, 2006). Furthermore, compressing the core high school curriculum from four years to two years may create an intense academic experience for a high school student (Smith et al., 2012; Thompson & Ongaga, 2011). While ECHS provide a lot of support for students, there are increased expectations regarding students' academic, social, and psychological maturity and readiness to take college courses at age sixteen (Lee et al., 2010; Muratori et al., 2003; Smith et al., 2012; Vialle et al., 2001). Therefore while these high schools provide a plethora of benefits, each family should carefully weigh the benefits and the costs and, ultimately, pursue the educational opportunity that will allow the student to thrive in high school and be successful.

### **What Happens to ECHS Students after Graduation?**

ECHS make higher education more accessible, attractive, and affordable by bridging the gap between high school and college (Jobs for the Future, 2015). While the research is plentiful regarding ECHS' characteristics and its benefits and outcomes, it is also critical to explore what happens to these students after they graduate from an ECHS considering that the ultimate goal of ECHS is for students to earn a postsecondary degree or credential that prepares them for successful entry into the workforce (Berger et al., 2014). This section will explore the most recent research that exists regarding postsecondary outcomes.

#### **Postsecondary Outcomes for ECHS Graduates**

A non-profit organization, Jobs for the Future, has overseen the ECHS Initiative from its inception and produces data regarding the effectiveness of this college preparatory initiative (Jobs for the Future, 2015). In their latest report regarding postsecondary outcomes, they state that Early College students are far more likely to enroll in college immediately after high school and assert that 71% of ECHS graduates enroll in two-year and four-year colleges versus the national average of 68% (Webb & Gerwin, 2014). Furthermore, the percentage of Early College students that enroll in college after high school is also higher than the national average for both Latino and African-American students, which is 67% (Webb & Gerwin, 2014). The percentage of Early College students that enroll in college after high school is also higher than the national average for low-income students which is 54%. In addition, the postsecondary enrollment of Early College students exceeded middle-income students in that only 66% of this group enrolled in college in the school year

following high school graduation (Webb & Gerwin, 2014). High-income students still enrolled in college at a higher rate of 82% (Webb & Gerwin, 2014).

Forty-seven percent of Early College students specifically enrolled at a four-year college or university the fall after high school graduation compared to the national average of 42% (Webb & Gerwin, 2014). ECHS graduates are also more likely than non-ECHS students to persist for a second year once they are in college (Webb & Gerwin, 2014). Eighty-six percent of Early College graduates who enroll in college persist for a second year versus 72% of college students nationally (Webb & Gerwin, 2014). Considering that ECHS student persist to their second year of college in greater numbers than their peers nationwide is an important early indicator of their likelihood of college completion (Webb & Gerwin, 2014).

The American Institutes for Research was selected by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation to conduct independent third-party evaluations every year for the ECHS Initiative (Jobs for the Future, 2015). Berger et al., (2014) examined 10 ECHS that participated in a lottery admission process and graduated students between 2005 and 2011. Comparison students included those who had participated in the lottery but were not offered admission to an ECHS. This report revealed that ECHS impacted college enrollment more so during high school rather than impacting college enrollment after high school. This is due to the fact that ECHS provide students with an edge of taking college courses while in high school and this edge persisted after high school (Berger et al., 2014). ECHS and comparison students enrolled in two-year colleges at comparable rates after Year 4 (when most high schools



students graduate) with 35.7% for ECHS students and 37.2% for comparison students. Both groups of students also attended four-year colleges at comparable rates after Year 4 with 52.4% for ECHS students and 48.8% for comparison students (Berger et al., 2014). This study also found that although the majority of ECHS are located on two-year college campuses, Early College students did not appear to enroll in two-year colleges at the expense of four-year college enrollment (Berger et al., 2014). Similar to the Webb and Gerwin's (2014) findings, the effect of an ECHS on college degree attainment was stronger for minority and low-income students (Berger et al., 2014).

McCorry-Andalis (2013) conducted a mixed methods study for her dissertation to examine the academic and social adjustment of Latino who had attended an ECHS and matriculated to a four-year public research institution after high school graduation. These students entered the university with 60 academic credits hours and were classified as juniors by the institution (McCorry-Andalis, 2013). Her study found that students who attended an ECHS, despite their age, had very few issues with academic and social adjustment during their first semester at the university (McCorry-Andalis, 2013). These students adjusted socially at a similar level as students who did not attend an ECHS (McCorry-Andalis, 2013). The data also indicated that ECHS respondents desired to get involved in campus activities but were unsure as to how to get involved but for some students, their age did impact their level of involvement. While this particular study was limited in its scope in that it examined one student demographic at one institution in Texas, it appeared that these students may have assimilated well into the collegiate environment both academically and socially.

### **Summary of ECHS Research**

The value of the high school diploma has now been superseded with a baccalaureate degree and is being promoted as essential for everyone by political and educational leaders (Kirwan, 2009). As a result, states and organizations have launched initiatives designed to increase high school students' readiness for college, including increased access to college level courses (Edmunds, 2012). There is increasing evidence that simply pushing a larger number of students through a pipeline that only works for a portion of students will not solve the problem (Cohen, 2001). Thus, ECHS were created to make higher education more accessible, attractive, and affordable by bridging the gap between high school and college for underrepresented student populations (Jobs for the Future, 2015). ECHS facilitate high school and college course enrollment through established course sequences (Berger et al., 2014). ECHS partner with two-year and four-year colleges and universities to offers students the opportunity to earn a high school diploma and an associate's degree or ample college credit at no cost to the student (Berger et al., 2014; Webb & Gerwin, 2014). The underlying assumption is that enrolling underrepresented students in a rigorous high school curriculum in which they can earn college credits will motivate these students and increase their access to postsecondary education (Berger et al., 2014).

ECHS offer numerous benefits from their small size to their comprehensive support system that helps students develop the skills necessary for college (Jobs for the Future, 2015). However, these schools may also pose challenges such as getting acclimated to taking a rigorous curriculum at a young age and being held to higher expectations in the

classroom. Thus, students and their families will need to determine the best educational “fit” for the student that will produce student success.

Research on ECHS is limited because ECHS are still relatively new (Edmunds et al., 2013; Howley et al., 2013; Miller, Fleming, & Reed, 2013; Oliver et al., 2010). While questions regarding ECHS remain, the research that has been conducted suggests that Early College had a positive impact on postsecondary enrollment. However, the missing component of the data is the actual Early College student experience after they graduate and enroll in four-year institutions. More research is needed that illustrates Early College students’ transition into a four-year college or university and fully captures the students’ voices as to how they experience the transition into college. While McCorry-Andalis (2010)’s study examined the academic and social adjustment of Latinos attending a public research institution that had attended ECHS, this study did not examine exactly how these students navigated the college environment nor did it specify how attending a research institution impacted the Early College student experience. This particular research study contributes to the literature by not only exploring Early College participants’ perceptions of their transition to a research university but also the factors that they felt enhanced or hindered their success at a research university. This study utilized Schlossberg, Waters, and Goodman’s (1995) Transition Theory as its foundation and served as a lens through which to view the Early College student transition in relation to the research university environment. The following section discusses the theoretical framework that was used for this study.

## **Transition Theory**

Transition Theory was originally presented by Nancy Schlossberg in 1981. A well-known author in the field of psychology and counseling, Schlossberg (1981) described her model as a vehicle for “analyzing human adaptation to transition” (p.2). She asserted that adaptation was affected by the interaction of three variables: the individual’s perception of the transition, characteristics of the pre-transition and post-transition environments, and characteristics of the individual experiencing the transition (Schlossberg, 1981). Perceptions, environmental characteristics, and personal characteristics could be considered assets, liabilities, or a mixture of both, in regard to the ability to cope with transition (Schlossberg, 1981). Her model viewed adaptation to transition as a dynamic process or movement through the various stages of transition (Berner, 2012).

In 1984, Schlossberg incorporated feedback she received and revised her model to include how an individual responds to transition since adaptation may not always be achieved (Evans, Forney & DiBrito, 1998). Schlossberg (1984) identified the concept of variability as a primary goal of her development theory. She felt there was a need for a framework that would help garner an understanding of adults in transition and lead them to the help they needed to cope with life (Schlossberg, 1984). Fassinger and Schlossberg (1992) described four categories of adult development theory that are useful to understanding the context of adult development theory. The contextual perspective highlights the influence of the social environment on individual lives; the developmental perspective emphasizes the sequential nature of change during the adult years and consists of three subtypes (age-related,

domain-specific, and stage); the life span perspective includes the individuality of continuity and change; and the traditional perspective emphasizes cultural components and individual life events that involved change (Fassinger & Schlossberg, 1991). These perspectives of adult development theory were based on the works of several theorists and served as the preliminary to the revised version of Transition Theory that exists today (Schlossberg et al., 1995).

Schlossberg, Waters, and Goodman (1995) define a transition as “any event or non-event that results in changed relationships, routines, assumptions and roles” (p. 27). In order to understand the meaning that a transition has for an individual, one has to consider the type, context, and impact of the transition. There are three types of transition. Anticipated transitions are the ones that occur predictably; unanticipated transitions are unpredictable; and nonevents are transitions that are expected but do not occur (Schlossberg et al., 1995). The context of the transition refers to an individual’s relationship to the transition (whether it is one’s own or someone else’s) as well as the setting in which the transition takes place (Schlossberg et al., 1995). The impact of the transition is determined by the degree to which a transition changes an individual’s life (Schlossberg et al., 1995). Both positive and negative transitions as perceived by the individual can produce stress and the impact of that stress depends on the individual’s assets and liabilities at the time (Schlossberg et al., 1995).

Transition is a process that extends over time (Schlossberg et al., 1995). Schlossberg et al. (1995) describe the transition process as “moving in,” “moving through,” and “moving out.” Four factors or the “4 S’s” affect a person’s ability to cope with a transition: situation,

self, support, and strategies. The 4 S's provide a framework for a person's appraisal process (Schlossberg et al., 1995). The first 'S,' situation, considers various factors such as the trigger, timing, control, role change, duration, previous experience with a similar transition, concurrent stress and assessment (Schlossberg et al., 1995). "Self," as it relates to one's transition, includes personal and demographic characteristics as well as psychological resources (i.e. ego development, optimism, self-efficacy, commitment and values) (Schlossberg et al., 1995). "Support" includes one's social support system and "strategies" entails one's coping responses to the transition (Schlossberg et al., 1995). The 4S's are interrelated and may influence one another. Figure 1 illustrates the relationship of the 4S's as it relates to coping with a transition.

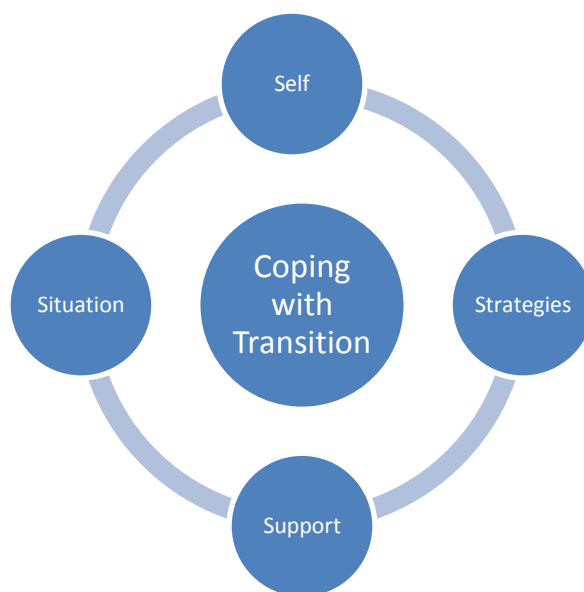


Figure 2. Schlossberg et al.'s (1995) 4S framework

Schlossberg et al.'s (1995) Transition Theory is applicable to this research study in that Early College students have experienced the transition of moving from a small high school located on a community college campus to a large public research university. The individual and personalized attention these students once received while they were at the ECHS may not be exhibited in the same manner once they arrive at a large institution. A mismatch may exist between how ECHS students perceived their new campus environment prior to arriving on campus and the reality of their first year at the university (Smith & Hopkins, 2005). When students begin their first year at a university, they are required to reorganize the way they think about themselves as learners and as social beings (Huon & Sankey, 2002 as cited by Briggs, Clark, & Hall, 2012). Whether the transition to a university is perceived as positive or negative by the Early College student, the time needed to achieve successful integration will vary with the person and with the transition (Schlossberg et al., 1995).

Due to the lack of research that examines the postsecondary experiences of Early College students once they enroll at a college or university after high school graduation, community college students were considered to be the parallel population to Early College students. Similar to the student populations that ECHS target, students who enroll in community colleges are more likely to be low-income, ethnic minorities, non-traditional aged students or first generation college students than their four-year counterparts (Cohen & Brawer, 2008; Laanan, 1996). In addition, both student populations may find themselves entering a new collegiate environment that is vastly different from the environment in which

they are accustomed to. As a result, the transition from one educational setting may involve substantial social and psychological relearning in order to deal with various new demands in the new academic environment (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). While Schlossberg et al.'s (1995) Transition Theory has been applied in higher education in examining student populations such as student veterans (Wheeler, 2012; Rumann & Hamrick, 2010) and students on academic probation (Tovar & Simon, 2006), unfortunately, there is not research studies (other than dissertations) that specifically applied Schlossberg et al.'s (1995)'s Transition Theory to community college transfer students. Transition Theory was appropriate for this particular research study because when applied, it purposefully sought to understand Early College participants' transitions into and within collegiate environments and accounted for the large role that a students' personal characteristics play in coping with the transition.

Considering that the transition from a community college to a four-year institution has been extensively studied, the next section will discuss the literature pertaining to community college transfer students and how these students experience the transition to their new academic environment. Following the literature on community college transfer students, Transition Theory will be applied to this particular parallel student population.

### **Community College Transfer Students as a Parallel Population**

Attending a new college is a big life transition which can impact nearly everything about a student's life (Berner, 2012). When students enter a new academic environment, they may not feel like they fit in psychologically, academically, or socially (Young & Litzler,



2013). The four-year institution may be quite different than the two-year institution in terms of academic standards, social environment, and institutional culture and as a result, students may have to learn a new system with different rules and norms (Berner, 2012). Some researchers have even described the transition of moving from one educational environment to another as a form of culture shock (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991).

Community college GPA has been shown to be a strong predictor of community college transfer students' academic performance at four-year institutions (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Wang, 2012). According to Montondon and Eikener (1997), the type and quality of community college experiences, such as a student's GPA while they are in community college are key factors that lead to academic success at four-year institutions. One of the most noted challenges that some transfer students experience is a notion called "transfer shock" in which transfer students experience a first semester dip in grade point average as they transition to a new academic and social environment (Diaz, 1992; Hills, 1965). Cedja, Kaylor, and Rewey (1998) researched community college transfer students' academic behavior prior to transfer and its relations to academic persistence once they reached the university. While community college transfer students who had previously completed an associate's degree with a GPA of 3.0 or higher were shown to have persistence rates at an equal level with non-transfer students, the researchers also found that within the STEM disciplines, math and science majors' GPAs declined significantly in the first semester at their new institution (Cedja, Kaylor, & Rewey, 1998). Cedja, Kaylor, and Rewey (1998) also found that the GPAs of students in the fine arts, humanities, and social sciences

increased upon transfer. Laanan (2004) suggests that while this research may explain the cognitive outcome of transfer student adjustment (as measured by GPA), it fails to explain the other potential factors that are involved once a student moves from one institution to another (Laanan, 2004). As such, the phenomenon of transfer shock cannot be viewed as independent of other variables (Owens, 2010).

The size of an institution is another factor that can influence a community college transfer student's transition into a four-year university. Townsend and Wilson (2006) examined the academic and social integration of community college transfer students who transferred to a large research-extensive public university. The data from this study revealed that because of the difference in size between the university and the community college, community college transfer students felt anonymous once they arrived at the four-year university (Townsend & Wilson, 2006). Students familiar with small institutions and small classes found that moving to a large university with large lecture courses caused difficulty in social and academic integration with other students and faculty (Townsend & Wilson, 2006). Some of the community college transfer students were frustrated by the anonymity in large lecture classes and the unwillingness of the students to form study groups which was a vast difference in the environment from which they were accustomed to (Townsend & Wilson, 2006).

Research has been conducted in regards to the differences between faculty at two-year and four-year institutions and the effect that this may have on a community college student's transition into a university. Typically, the majority of faculty at two-year

community colleges possess a master's degree, while university faculty typically have a Ph.D. and may be responsible for conducting research (Berner, 2012). According to Cohen and Brawer (2008), community college instructors tend not to conduct scholarly inquiry or belong to disciplinary associations and focus mostly on teaching in areas of student interest that may cross disciplinary fields. Research has also suggested that tenure and tenure-track faculty at research universities may place greater emphasis upon their research publications and obtaining grants more so than teaching (Astin & Chang, 1995; Braxton, 1993; Kuh & Hu, 2001; Merkel, 2003; Townsend & Wilson, 2006). While community college transfer students may feel that university faculty members are more interested in research than in teaching, oftentimes, these students do not understand the mission of a research institution and that research occupies a large amount of a faculty member's time and is necessary in order to gain tenure (Astin & Chang, 1995; Townsend & Wilson, 2006). A few studies have proposed that students considered community college faculty more caring, helpful, and interested in their students than university faculty (Arzy, Davie, & Harbour, 2006; Townsend & Wilson, 2006). Research has also suggested that community college transfer students have felt that having a large student-faculty ratio at the four-year institution limited their direct interaction with faculty (Astin & Chang, 1995; Kim & Sax, 2009). Having been accustomed to small institutions and small class sizes, students may have difficulty adjusting to a large university with large lecture courses and, as a result, may experience difficulty integrating into their new environment both academically and socially (Laanan, 1996; Townsend & Wilson, 2006). The next section will apply Schlossberg et al.'s (1995) Transition Theory to

the community college transfer student populations and describe how the 4's influence their transition to the four-year university.

### **Community College Transfer Students and Transition Theory**

Having to adjust to a new institutional culture and factors such as increased academic demands, large lecture classes, and relocation to a new environment are a few of the obstacles that students experience once they reach the four-year institution. Moving from one institution to another represents a big transition for students and impacts all of these areas significantly (Berner, 2012). Schlossberg et al. (1995) endorse the concept of the transition process as a series of phrases that they call “moving in,” “moving through,” and “moving out.” These phrases are applicable in describing community college transfer students’ transition to a four-year institution. “Moving in” represents community college transfer students entering their new collegiate environment at a four-year institution. “Moving out” represents exiting the four-year institution, hopefully by graduating from the institution. “Moving through” represents everything in between from the beginning of the transition process to the end of the undergraduate experience at the four-year institution. During the “moving through” phase, community college transfer students may begin to notice differences between their current and former institution in terms of the size, location, difficulty of the curriculum, and competition among students (Laanan, 1996). The “moving through” phase may also be where students may encounter challenges in their new collegiate environment. Four major sets of factors influence a person’s ability to cope with a transition: situation, self, support, and strategies, known as the “4 S’s” (Schlossberg et al., 1995). The

transfer student's effectiveness in coping with transition depends on the student's assets and liabilities at the time (Schlossberg et al., 1995). The ratio of assets to liabilities helps explain "why individuals react differently to the same type of transition and why the same person reacts differently at different times" (Schlossberg et al., 1995, p. 49). In the following section, the 4 S's will be applied to the community college transfer student population.

#### **4 S's and the Community College Transfer Student Population**

**Situation.** Situation focuses on the type of transition the individual is experiencing. Situation also considers factors such as the trigger, timing, control, role change, duration, previous experience with a similar transition, concurrent stress and assessment (Schlossberg et al., 1995). For community college transfer students, the situation is the actual transfer to the four-year institution. The perception of the situation will vary from transfer student to transfer student in terms of what precipitated the transition (trigger). In other words, did the community college transfer student apply to the four-year institution for the first time or was this the result of not being admitted previously? Is the particular four-year institution that the student is transferring to his or her first college choice?

**Self.** According to Schlossberg et al. (1995), personal and demographic factors such as socioeconomic status, gender, ethnicity, and age play a role in an individual's ability to cope with a transition. These particular characteristics will vary from student to student. Psychological resources such as one's ego development, optimism, self-efficacy, commitment and values can also influence aspects of one's "self" (Schlossberg et al., 1995). This component of "self" can essentially affect the other "S's"—support and strategies, in

terms of how the student navigates the transition. Students who are performing well academically and who have high self-concept in their intellectual ability will likely experience less difficulty adjusting compared to their counterparts (Laanan, 2007). What students do after they arrive at the four-year institution will positively or negatively affect their academic adjustment process (Laanan, 2007). Students who are not doing well academically (as measured by their GPA) and students who indicate that they have low self-concept in their intellectual ability will have difficulty in adjusting academically (Laanan, 2007). Both of these go hand in hand. If students think that they are inferior academically, it will determine the way that they think and the way that they approach course learning (Laanan, 2007).

In the same way that a student's perception of "self" affects how they approach academics, it will also influence their interactions and perceptions of faculty as well. If community college transfer students perceive that faculty are easier to approach they will experience a smoother academic adjustment to college (Laanan, 2007). Students who perceive the faculty as easy to approach will more likely take advantage of office hours and seek assistance on class assignments and projects (Laanan, 2007) which is a critical component of student success. The more information students have about the expectations of the faculty for a particular class, the greater the likelihood that students will successfully meet those expectations (Laanan, 2007).

**Support.** Support refers to social support and includes intimate relationships, family units, networks of friends, and institutions and communities (Schlossberg et al., 1995).

Based on a study of community college transfer students at eight public universities within the University of Texas System, Ellis (2013) concluded that successful transfer students find champions on every community college and university campus which includes faculty, advisors, professional staff members, and administrators. Ellis (2013) found that successful community transfer students were those who sought out their champions, were actively engaged in their new academic environment, and utilized academic and student services. Laanan et al., (2010) coined the term “transfer student capital,” the process by which community college students acquire the knowledge and skills necessary to navigate the transfer process. The more transfer capital a student has acquired, the easier the transition the four-year institution will be (Laanan et al., 2010). Because these community transfer students possessed a certain level of transfer capital, it assisted in the transition into the university and students readily accepted that the rigor of the curriculum at the university is the natural next step or natural progression into upper level coursework (Ellis, 2013).

**Strategies.** Strategy describes how the individual copes with the transition. The academic environment at the senior institution is one that students must learn to navigate. Some students take longer than others to figure out the system and feel comfortable utilizing all the available support services (Laanan, 2007). Interactions with community college personnel, such as faculty members, academic advisors, financial aid officers, and student support personnel, promote the development of capital and give students an advantage as they move into an university environment (Moser, 2013). For transfer students, possessing the coping mechanisms to deal with the stress, and the extent to which they have the skills to

fit in and become involved, will impact their successful cross-cultural relocation from the community college to the university (Laanan, 2007).

### **Summary of Community College Transfer Students and Transition Theory**

Similar to community college transfer students, Early College participants will need to adapt similar strategies to ensure a smooth transition into the research institution. When Early College students are considered first-year students by the four-year institution, they actually have a significant advantage over transfer students. According to Townsend and Wilson (2006), “Four-year college efforts to facilitate the fit of community college transfer students into the receiving institution have been minor in comparison to the efforts to assist first-year students. First-year students typically receive the bulk of an institution’s retention efforts such as first year seminars and living-learning communities while transfer students have been largely ignored” (p. 454). Therefore, unlike transfer students, Early College students may have access to the resources to ease the transition into the research university environment to help guide them along the pathway to success since they viewed by the institution as first-year students. However, it is up to the individual as to whether they will take advantage of these resources. Transition Theory was useful to examine how community college transfer students experienced transfer into a four-year university and thus was used as the theoretical lens for this research study to examine how Early College participants perceive their transition into a research university and the factors that enhance or hinder their success in relation to the “4 S’s” which may influence a student’s transition into a new



academic environment. The next chapter will guide the reader on the methodology that this research study utilized to answer the research questions.

### **CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY**

The transition from one institution to another is often a critical time for students. Early College students are unique in that they have the opportunity to graduate from high school with both a high school diploma and an associate's degree or ample college credits that can be applied toward a baccalaureate degree, all of which may be earned tuition free (Jobs for the Future, 2015). While there is research regarding Early College student performance and the transition to taking college courses while these students are in high school, there is still a critical need to explore the transition experiences for these students after they graduate from an ECHS and enter a university, specifically, a research institution. The major research questions that guided this study were:

1. What were Early College High School (ECHS) participants' perceptions of their transition at a research university?
2. What factors enhanced or hindered the success of Early College High School participants at a research university?

This chapter begins with a discussion of the study's research design followed by a description of the setting and the participant selection process for the study. Afterwards, the data collection methods and the data analysis procedures used for this study will be addressed. Following that discussion, I will address any issues concerning trustworthiness of the study as well as clarifying the researcher's biases and assumptions. The chapter will conclude with addressing the limitations of the research study.

### **Design of the Study**

This study utilized a qualitative research approach. Qualitative methods are ideal for phenomena about which there is little knowledge in order to gain a clearer understanding of a particular experience (Creswell, 2007; Krathwohl, 1998). Conducting a qualitative study for this topic was appropriate since there was a lack of research that examined the transition experiences of Early College students after they graduated high school and enrolled at four-year institutions. While it is certainly helpful to have numerical data on Early College students once they enter a research institution, describing a student's transition into a collegiate environment, especially if they are entering a collegiate environment as a traditional-age college student with an associate's degree, cannot be solely relied on by quantitative data. Thus, qualitative research goes behind the statistics to understand the issue (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2011). Each student's transition into college is different and is a unique experience specific to each individual student. Therefore in order to capture the authentic and multifaceted nature of Early College students' transition into a research university, utilizing a qualitative approach for this study helped to look at the process or meaning that these students attributed to their given social situation (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2011).

Qualitative research involves an interpretive and naturalistic approach to the world (Mertens, 2005). Qualitative research does not necessarily try to predict what will happen in the future (Patton, 2002). Rather, qualitative research aims to understand the nature of participants' lives, what the world looks like in a particular setting, and the ways in which

individuals attribute meaning to experiences (Patton, 2002). As a researcher, I accept the constructivist approach in that people construct their own reality from their experiences and their interactions with the world; thus, an interpretive approach is helpful in understanding their perspective (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2011).

Specifically, this study employed what Merriam (2002; 2009) described as a basic interpretive qualitative research approach. In conducting a basic qualitative study, the researcher seeks to discover and understand a phenomenon, a process, the perspectives and worldviews of the people involved (Merriam, 2002). One characteristic of qualitative research is that the researcher is the primary instrument (Merriam, 2009). Since understanding is the goal of qualitative research, the researcher is the instrument and must be immediately responsive and adaptive to collecting and analyzing the data (Merriam, 2009).

Qualitative research is an inductive process. Often, researchers pursue a qualitative study because there is a lack of theory or an existing theory fails to sufficiently explain a phenomenon (Merriam, 2009). Qualitative research is interested in how participants make meaning of a situation or phenomenon thus, the strategy is inductive with the outcome being deductive as it pertains to basic interpretive qualitative research (Merriam, 2002). Hence, researchers gather data to build concepts, hypotheses, or theories rather than deductively testing hypotheses (Merriam, 2009).

In addition, basic interpretive qualitative research recognizes the importance of language and discourse as well as issues of power, authority, and domination in all aspects of qualitative inquiry (Creswell, 2007). Within qualitative research, data is analyzed to identify

the recurring patterns and themes in order to provide a rich, descriptive account of the phenomenon being studied (Merriam, 2002). Words rather than numbers are used to convey what the researcher has learned about a phenomenon (Merriam, 2009). Using a basic interpretive qualitative approach for this study provided insight into the transition experiences of Early College participants at a research university by providing a rich, descriptive account of how these students attributed meaning to their collegiate experiences. In addition, a qualitative approach sought to provide insight into the factors that enhanced or hindered Early College students' success at the research institution.

### **Setting of the Study**

Research University (RU) is located in the southeastern United States with an enrollment of over 30,000 undergraduate and graduate students. As mentioned previously, the particular institution chosen for this study is classified as a doctoral-granting research institution. Doctoral-granting research universities include institutions that awarded at least 20 research doctoral degrees during the update year with the exception of professional degrees such as the Juris Doctor or Doctor of Medicine (Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching (2013). These institutions are also classified as having a high level of research activity or a very high level of research activity. This particular research university is also classified as a selective institution. A selective institution can be defined as an institution that places great emphasis on merit through high American College Testing (ACT) or Scholastic Aptitude tests (SAT) scores, high grades, strong high school ranking as well as using other admission practices for review such as college essays, extracurricular

activities, and individual interviews (Bial & Rodriguez, 2007; Kurlaender & Grodsky, 2013). The average SAT score of entering undergraduate students at RU was 1836 and the average GPA was a 4.4 with 51% of first-year students ranking in the top 10% of their graduating high school class. Almost 20% of students at RU identify as African-American, Asian, Hispanic, Native American, Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander, or two or more races.

Although Early College students may have earned an associate's degree or ample transfer credits alongside a high school diploma, Early College applicants are considered first-year students for admission purposes and not as transfer students. RU has 10 colleges that offer more than 300 undergraduate and graduate programs through 65 departments. RU also offers a First Year College for students who are undecided about their major. Students apply to their college of choice and have an opportunity to list their first two preferences. Applicants who are admitted into the College of Engineering or the College of Life Sciences must take a common set of courses and meet certain admissions criteria once they complete the program before they can be officially admitted. Students who wish to change colleges or apply to go through a change of degree program (CODA) before they can be officially admitted into that program.

### **Participants for the Study**

Patton (2002) asserts that purposeful sampling is a technique widely used in qualitative research for the identification and selection of information-rich cases for the most effective use of limited resources. Purposeful sampling is intentional and involves seeking individuals or situations that will provide a greater understanding of a concept of interest and

inform an understanding of the research problem (Krathwohl, 1998; Creswell, 2007). Since this research study focused on the transition experiences of Early College participants at a research university, students who graduated from an ECHS were purposefully selected. It is also not uncommon within qualitative research to use one or more sampling strategies in a qualitative study (Creswell, 2007). This study used criterion sampling in addition to purposeful sampling. Criterion sampling works well when all of the participants being studied represent people who have experienced the phenomenon (Creswell, 2007). The subjects in this research study met the following criteria:

1. Attended an ECHS on a community college campus (in the state that RU is located in).
2. Earned an associate's degree from the community college affiliated with their ECHS alongside a high school diploma.

While this study focused on the perspectives of Early College students, two academic advisors were also interviewed in order to garner perspectives of their advising experiences with Early College students. Considering the fact that RU students are required to meet with an academic advisor before they register for classes every semester, the academic advisor perspective regarding Early College students shed light on the institutional factors that enhanced or hindered these students' success from an advising standpoint. Academic advisors provided an additional lens about the experiences of Early College students considering that these are the professional faculty and staff members on campus that students have the most regular interaction with during their first-year at RU through graduation.

Academic advisors were selected if they expressed an interest in volunteering for this research study and they had advised students at RU for at least one academic year.

## **Data Collection**

### **Sample Selection**

Before beginning my research, it was necessary to obtain permission from the IRB office at my institution of study. Once I obtained permission from the IRB office, I was able to obtain a list of all RU students who graduated from an ECHS along with their RU email addresses from the Enrollment Management department per the recommendation of one of my committee members.

After I obtained the list of ECHS, I sent a blind copied email (Appendix A) to these students outlining the purpose and importance of the study. Upon completion of the research study, a \$25 e-gift card to Target was provided to Early College students who participated in the study. In regards to the academic advisors, I was able to obtain a list of I will also obtain a list of the academic advisors' email addresses from RU's academic advising website. I also sent a blind copied email to academic advisors (Appendix B) outlining the purpose and importance of the study. While I sought out a large number of academic advisors, only two academic advisors volunteered to participate in the study as they stated that they were familiar with advising Early College students. No monetary compensation was provided to the academic advisors. I requested that students and academic advisors contact me via email if they were interested in participating in the study so that we could set up a day and time to meet.



## **Interviews**

All interviews took place on RU's campus. My goal was to interview anywhere between two and three academic advisors and only two academic advisors who volunteered to participate in this study. For the student interviews, I interviewed eleven participants as this was the point when saturation occurred. Lincoln and Guba (1985) recommend sampling until a point of saturation or until redundancy is reached. Saturation is the point where the researcher no longer finds new information in the setting (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2011).

Upon meeting with the student and academic advisor participants, I gave each participant two copies of the informed consent form (Appendices C and D). Before the interviews were conducted, I verbally read the consent form to each participant and asked if they had any questions and/or would still like to continue with the study. Once the participants agreed to participate in the study, I had them sign both copies of the consent form—the participant kept one informed consent form for their records and I kept the other form for my records. Student participants were also asked to complete a demographic questionnaire (Appendix E) before the interview began which contained general demographic and educational background information questions about their secondary and postsecondary background to date. Students and academic advisors were free to ask questions during the interview, skip questions if they choose not to answer, or contribute any information that they feel is pertinent in describing the transition to a research university. The interviews were recorded using two digital recorders and I took field notes as well. The interviews lasted no longer than an hour.

Semi-structured, individual interviews with each participant were the primary data source. In a semi-structured interview, each informant is asked a set of similar questions based on an interview guide that contains a list of questions and topics to be covered (Bernard & Ryan, 2010). The interview protocol is a substantive frame or range of specific topics or issues that the researcher is interested in exploring. The interview protocol also serves as a checklist for the researcher at the end of the interview as a way of making sure all of the topics under investigation have been addressed even if it was not in the sequences suggested by the guide (Hesse-Biber & Levy, 2011). Semi-structured interviews allowed each respondent some flexibility and freedom to talk about what is of interest or importance to them, which in turn allows the conversation to flow more naturally and makes room for the conversation to go in unexpected directions (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2011). The student interview protocol (Appendix F) included questions about their experiences at the ECHS that they attended, their transition into RU, as well as their academic and co-curricular experiences at RU. These questions were situated within the 4 S's (situation, self, support, and strategies) of Schlossberg, Waters, and Goodman's (1995) Transition Theory which provided insight as to how a person responds to transition based on the characteristics of the pre-transition and post-transition environments as well as the characteristics of the individual experiencing the transition (Schlossberg, 1981). Strengths or weaknesses in any of the "4 S's" can either facilitate or hinder a successful transition (Schlossberg et al., 1995).

The academic advisor interview protocol (Appendix G) included questions in an effort to shed a lens on Early College students from an advising perspective in terms of

advisors' perspectives of the Early College students' transition to RU, the challenges of advising these students, and any institutional policies that they felt enhanced or hindered these student's success. Pseudonyms were used for each student and advisor participant in order to protect the identity of the participants. The majority of the interviews were transcribed by a transcriptionist although I transcribed both advisor interviews and two student interviews. Upon transcription of each interview, each participant was contacted via email with a copy of their interview transcript to review it for accuracy and to confirm that it captures the student's true perspective about the transition to a research university as an Early College student. I did not receive any responses from students or academic advisors who wished to change or delete anything from their interview transcript.

### **Data Analysis**

Qualitative researchers strive for a depth of understanding as they conduct data analysis (Patton, 2002). Data analysis in qualitative research consists of preparing and organizing the data for analysis, reducing the data into themes through a process of coding, condensing the codes, and representing the data in figures, tables, or a discussion (Creswell, 2007). In this study, data elicited from student interviews were used to help garner an understanding of the transition experiences of Early College participants experience at RU. Data from the academic advisor interviews were used to add another perspective of the transition to RU and to validate the student's experiences. Data from the all of the interviews conducted for this study were digitally recorded and transcribed verbatim.

Data analysis began with identifying segments in the data set that were responsive to the research questions (Merriam, 2009). This was accomplished by thoroughly reading through the interview transcripts and making notes, comments, questions, and observations about anything striking, interesting or relevant to the research study by assigning codes (Merriam, 2009). This process is known as open coding. At the open coding stage, I was open to any and all possibilities (Merriam, 2009) and this time was spent getting familiar with the individual participants' experiences both at their ECHS and at RU.

The interview transcripts were reviewed again and at that point, I grouped comments and notes that went together (Merriam, 2009). Corbin and Strauss (2007) call this process axial coding which is the coding that comes from interpretation and reflection on meaning (Richards, 2005). Axial coding is when the data are reviewed to specifically provide insight into specific coding categories that relate or explain the central phenomenon (Creswell, 2007), which for this study will be comprised of the transition of Early College participants attending a research university as well as the factors may have enhanced or hindered their success.

Open and axial coding was used for every transcript acquired. I compared each transcript to the preceding and subsequent transcripts to see if the notes and codes from these transcripts were also present. Glaser and Strauss (1967) call this the constant comparative method because the researcher is constantly comparing one set of data to the other sets of data that are being used in the study. Specifically, as more data are collected and analyzed, it allows the researcher to check whether categories derived from earlier data "hold up" as

subsequent data are analyzed (Merriam, 2009). While the constant comparative method is known for being used in grounded theory, it is also used in qualitative research (Merriam, 2009). The individual list of codes was merged into one master list of concepts derived from all sets of data. The master list was an outline that reflected the recurrences and patterns in the study which then lent itself to the creation of themes that covered many individual examples of the category.

Once the preliminary set of themes was derived from the data, they became more refined as I searched through the data for more relevant information. The themes underwent several revisions throughout the data analysis process. Once a tentative scheme of themes was created, I sorted through the data again and provided text from the Early College participants and academic advisors that validated these themes. I did not use any type of qualitative software program as all coding was done manually by hand. While the themes described the data, to some extent, they also interpreted the data (Merriam, 2009).

### **Trustworthiness**

Several perspectives exist regarding the importance of validation in qualitative research, including its definition, terms used to describe it, and procedures for establishing it (LeCompte & Goetz, 1982; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Wolcott, 1994). While quantitative studies must convince the reader that procedures have been followed faithfully, qualitative research must provide the reader with a depiction in enough detail to show that the author's conclusions make sense (Firestone, 1987). Regardless of the terms used, validation in qualitative research must attempt to assess the accuracy of the findings as best described by

the researcher and the participants (Creswell, 2007). Creswell (2007) argues that validation is a distinct strength of qualitative research in that the extensive time spent in the field, the detailed, thick description, and the closeness of the researcher to the participants in the study all adds value or accuracy to the study. Creswell (2007) suggests 8 strategies for establishing validity: a) prolonged engagement in the field and checking information introduced by the researcher and informants, b) using triangulation, defined as using two or more methods to address the same research question in order to look for convergence in the research findings (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2011), c) peer review or debriefing, d) refining working hypotheses in light of negative or disconfirming evidence, e) clarifying researcher bias, f) member checking, g) providing rich, thick description regarding transferability, and h) external audits.

Creswell (2007) recommends utilizing at least two validation strategies in one's research. This research study utilized member checks, provided rich, thick description, and clarified researcher bias in order to establish credibility of the study. In member checking, the participants provide their views of the creditability of the findings and interpretations of the data (Creswell, 2007). Member checking is a means of ensuring that the analysis accurately represents the participants' experiences (Morrow, 2005), and is extremely important because the goal of the study is to depict the students' perceptions of their personal academic transition coming from an ECHS to a research institution. Furthermore, for ethical reasons, it gives the students a chance to delete any quotes or information with which they might feel uncomfortable. Member checking assists in validating the authenticity of the data obtained (Creswell, 2007). Each participant was given a copy of their interview transcript

upon completion of the interview. I did not receive any feedback from any of the participants in the study and all participants were satisfied with their account of their experiences at RU.

In addition to member checking, transferability was established by providing a rich description of the time, place, context and culture of the environment using as many details as possible to illustrate the Early College participant transition to a research university (Merriam, 2009). In qualitative research, transferability is determined by the individual reader to determine the degree of similarity between the research study and the receiving context (Mertens, 2005). Providing a detailed description allows the readers to transfer information to other settings and determine whether the findings can be transferred due to shared characteristics (Creswell, 2007).

In the following section, I clarify my bias from the onset of the research study in order for the reader to understand my position and I explain any biases or assumptions that may have affected the study (Creswell, 2007). The limitations of this research study are addressed at the conclusion of this chapter.

### **Researcher Bias and Assumptions**

One characteristic of qualitative research is that the researcher is the primary instrument for data collection and analysis (Merriam, 2009). However, researchers may also have biases and perspectives that impact the study (Merriam, 2009). In order to establish trustworthiness of my study, it was important that I clarified how my past experiences,

biases, prejudices, and orientations may shape the interpretation and approach to the study (Creswell, 2007).

I worked for seven years as an academic advisor at a large research university in the southeastern United States. During my tenure in academic advising, every year there were increasing numbers of incoming first-year students entering the university that had attended an Early College High School. At the same time, the incoming first-year classes continuously grew larger, and as a result, course availability, particularly for upper-level general education requirements and major courses, were limited by the time these students registered for classes. Early College students are a unique student population. They oftentimes enter a university with ample transfer credits or an associate's degree and are familiar with being on a college campus. However, the institution where I worked still classified them as first-year students and in my opinion, many of those students were still very much on a developmental level of a first-year student. Early College students are extremely bright and oftentimes these students felt "prepared" to take upper-level coursework since they had already completed most, if not all of their general education requirements while they were still in high school. However, in my professional experiences with this student population, a good portion of Early College students were not academically prepared to take upper-level course work because of the vast differences that existed between the curriculum and instruction at a community college versus a research institution. I have worked with many Early College students over the years and have seen a several of them be successful. Conversely, I have also worked with Early College students who struggled



academically in their college coursework and some students even became academic ineligible and were dismissed by the university.

Furthermore, since these Early College students were entering college with a plethora of college credits, many of them also aspired to graduate in two years, which unfortunately, was not the reality for the majority of these students due to lack of course availability. My colleagues and I often found it difficult to advise these students and to help them to understand the value of the liberal arts curriculum along with assisting them in choosing courses that would still allow them to make academic progression toward a degree. Admittedly, I came into this study with certain biases because I expected that a good number of students would have experienced some degree of academic difficulty during their time at the research university based upon my previous professional experiences with working with Early College students. I was aware before conducting this study that my biases and assumptions could affect this study, its findings, and how the data is interpreted. However, the fact that I have never worked at RU allowed me to enter this research study with an open perspective. I also discovered that many of the institutional policies at RU were different from those at my previous place of employment, such as the fact that Early College students register for classes based upon the number of credit hours that they have accumulated and is not based upon class standing. This allowed me to completely to develop a new perspective of Early College students and as a result, I did my best to really keep an open mind as I realized that I had to learn about an entirely new campus culture from what I was accustomed to. The only way to do that was really listen to the students and through my conversations

with the participants, I was able to gain tremendous insight regarding their transition at a research university in terms of the differences between RU and the community college campus they had attended. I communicated to the participants beforehand that the information they shared during their interviews was completely confidential and would not be shared with anyone at the RU. In addition, pseudonyms were used so that there was no identifiable information that would be able to be traced back to the participants. Finally, quotes from each transcript were used to illustrate and support each theme. Individual ideas or experiences that did not necessarily fit under the final themes were included as subthemes. This helped validate the experiences of all of the Early College participants who each had a unique story to tell about their transition to RU.

### **Limitations of the Study**

As with any research study, this investigation has its limitations. This study purposefully sought Early College students who attended an Early College High School on a community college campus because the majority of Early College High Schools are located on a community college campus. Therefore, this study did not include any student who attended an Early College High School on the campus at a four-year institution or a free-standing Early College High School. Thus, the findings of this study are not generalizable to all populations of Early College students, particularly those who choose to attend a different type of institution. Patton (2002) argued that generalization is not the ultimate goal in qualitative inquiry. Instead, Patton (2002) suggested that the purpose of qualitative research is to provide perspective in a way so that the findings may be generalized back to a particular

framework or conceptual model. Although this study may not be generalizable to all Early College students, it provides deeper insight into the experiences of this particular student population considering that there is not a lot of research that examine what happens when Early College students enroll at a four-year institution.

Another limitation of this study is that it examined the perspectives of Early College students attending only one institution. Based on the responses of the participants in this study, institutional factors such as the campus culture and policies can certainly influence a student's perception of their transition to a research university and the factors that they feel enhance or hinder their success at the research university. If additional Early College students were interviewed who attended another research university (either private or public), these students may have experienced a different transition to college depending on the type, size, and location of the institution and the college's commitment to the Early College student population.

Finally, I readily acknowledge that I am a novice researcher. Prior to this dissertation, I had never conducted a research study. In retrospect, there are areas where I should have probed the participant more in order to gain greater clarity or gain greater substance. Throughout the data collection and analysis process, I determined which questions to ask, themes to code, and findings to present. These decisions were based on my previous advising experiences with Early College students, familiarity with the relevant literature, and understanding of qualitative research strategies. While there were certainly

“lessons learned” along the way while conducting this research study, it has prepared me to become a better researcher moving forward in the future.

### **Chapter Summary**

This chapter described the research methodology which involved utilizing a basic interpretive qualitative research approach. The procedures for participant selection, data collection, and data analysis were presented. This chapter also outlined the various steps that were taken throughout the study in order to ensure trustworthiness including member checks, providing rich, thick description, and clarifying the researcher bias in order to establish credibility of the study. My biases and assumptions as the researcher were also addressed as I entered this study with pre-conceived notions regarding the Early College student populations. The chapter concludes with a discussion regarding the limitations of this research study. The following chapter presents the findings that emerged from this research study.

## CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS

The goal of this dissertation was to garner an understanding of the transition experiences of students who attended an Early College High School on a community college campus and are now attending a doctoral-granting large public research university (with very high research activity) in the southeastern United States. The two research questions that guided this study were:

1. What were Early College High School participants' perceptions of their transition to a research university?
2. What factors enhanced or hindered the success of Early College High School participants at a research university?

This study included semi-structured interviews from eleven students who attended an Early College High School on a community college campus. Qualitative analysis of the interview transcripts provided data to answer the research questions. Five themes emerged from the first research question regarding Early College participants' perceptions of their transition to a research university. The first theme was that Early College participants felt as though they received repetitive/irrelevant information upon matriculating into RU. The second theme involved the struggle to cultivate meaningful advisor relationships. Another theme illustrated the need for Early College participants to understand the implications of entering college with an associate's degree. While having an associate's degree as a first-year student at RU was advantageous in terms of course registration, there were also adverse effects of having an associate's degree which included lacking courses to take, having to take

multiple science classes within any given semester, and encountering the tuition surcharge policy. An additional theme that emerged in regards to Early College participants' perception of their transition to RU was that these students had to learn how to acclimate to a rigorous curriculum. Subthemes included noting distinctive curricular and pedagogical differences, noting differences between Early College and RU faculty, learning to study effectively, and experiencing academic difficulty as a result of rigor. The final theme in regards to the first research question was that Early College students were able to find community on campus. The majority of students reported that they had acclimated socially to RU and were involved in activities outside of the classroom.

The second research question sought to identify the factors that enhanced or hindered the success of Early College participants at a research university. Factors that enhanced Early College student success included feeling prepared for college and connecting with faculty and staff at RU. Maintaining cultural connections was a critical component of success for students of color. Feeling unprepared for college and encountering racism/racial microaggressions were found to be factors that hindered the success of Early College students at a research university. Table 1 provides a summary of the findings that emerged from this study.

At the beginning of the study, students were asked to choose a pseudonym in order to protect their identity so that any information communicated by participants would not be able to be traced back to the students. Specific identifiers such as the name of the institution, the

name of the ECHS that the student attended, or the names of faculty or staff members at RU were changed or omitted from the findings.

Two academic advisors at RU, Tiffany and April, were also interviewed in order to shed an additional light on the transition experiences of Early College participants from an advising perspective. Academic advisors often have the most regular interactions with students from the time of matriculation through graduation (students at RU are required to meet with an academic advisor prior to registering for the next semester's classes). Considering that the perspectives of only two academic advisors are reflected within the findings, their perceptions simply provide context as it pertains to advising Early College students and is not reflective of the advising experiences of all academic advisors at RU. Tiffany is an academic advisor in the Life Sciences College which includes the following majors: biochemistry, biological sciences, genetics, microbiology, nutrition science, plant biology, and zoology. She has been in academic advising on and off for the past sixteen years. April is an academic advisor in the First Year College which is responsible for advising undecided first-year students (or until students have declared a major), as well as those who are switching to a major in another College. She has been an academic advisor at RU for three years. Both Tiffany and April have noticed an increase in the number of Early College students over the years and both advisors commented that the transition to RU is not always smooth for Early College students, particularly for those interested in the sciences. Advisor perspectives are incorporated throughout the chapter to substantiate the relevant themes that students addressed in their interviews.

Table 1

*Summary of Findings*

## Research Question One: Early College Students' Perceptions of the Transition to a Research

Theme	Subtheme
Receiving repetitive/irrelevant information upon matriculating into RU	
Struggling to cultivate meaningful advisor relationships	
Understanding the academic implications of entering RU with an associate's degree	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. Having an advantage to course registration</li> <li>b. Lacking courses to take</li> <li>c. Taking multiple sciences classes in a semester</li> <li>d. Encountering the tuition surcharge policy</li> </ul>
Acclimating to a rigorous curriculum	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. Noting curricular and pedagogical differences</li> <li>b. Noting differences between Early College and RU faculty</li> <li>c. Learning to study effectively</li> <li>d. Experiencing academic difficulty as a result of rigor</li> </ul>
Finding community on campus	



Table 1 (continued)

*Summary of Findings*

## Research Question Two: Factors that Enhanced the Success of Early College Students

Theme	Subtheme
Feeling prepared for college	Being accustomed to a rigorous curriculum
Connecting with faculty and staff	
Maintaining cultural connections	

## Factors that Hindered the Success of Early College Students

Theme	Subtheme
Experiencing racism/racial microaggressions	
Feeling unprepared for	

**Participant Profiles**

The following section gives a brief introduction of each participant that was interviewed for this study. Table 2 provides a summary of the demographic characteristics of the sample. Five females and six males participated in this study. The students ranged in age from 18 to 24 years old. Five students identified as Black or African-American, one student identified as Egyptian, and the other five students identified as White or Caucasian. All eleven students entered RU with an associate's degree from a community college in the state in which RU is located. Six students identified as first-generation college students, meaning that neither parent obtained a bachelor's degree. While two of the students did not identify

as a first-generation college student, they did acknowledge that their parent(s) attended college outside of the United States and as a result, they felt like a first-generation college student in that they had to learn to navigate the college application process and the college experience on their own. Self-reported GPAs ranged from 2.6 to a 3.95. Jack, the only first-year student in the study, did not report a GPA since this was his first semester enrolled at RU.

Table 2

*Demographic Characteristics of the Sample*

<b>Name</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Gender Identity</b>	<b>Race/Ethnicity</b>	<b>Major</b>	<b>GPA</b>	<b>First-Generation</b>
Austin	23	Male	Black/African-American	Industrial Engineering	3.0	Yes
Jasmine	20	Female	Black/African-American	Nutrition	2.8	No
Sam	24	Male	Black/African-American	Technology, Engineering & Design Education	2.9	Yes
Ashley	22	Female	Black/African-American	Psychology	2.8	No
Stephanie	21	Female	White/Caucasian	Agricultural Business	2.6	No
Christina	21	Female	Egyptian	Psychology & English	3.95	No
Andrea	21	Female	Black/African-American	Electrical & Chemical Engineering	3.79	Yes
Brian	22	Male	White/Caucasian	Philosophy	3.45	Yes
Jack	18	Male	White/Caucasian	Accounting	Not reported	No
Max	21	Male	White/Caucasian	Computer Science	2.7	Yes
Paul	21	Male	White/Caucasian	Physics; Computer & Electrical Engineering	2.9	Yes

***Austin***

Austin is a 23-year old Black/African-American male who is a junior at RU with a self-reported GPA of 3.0. He is majoring in Industrial Engineering. Austin is also a first-generation college student and reports that his mother did not complete high school and that the highest level of education completed by his father was a high school diploma or GED. Austin's high school transitioned to an Early College High School while he was in the 10<sup>th</sup> grade and so in order to earn both the high school diploma and the associate's degree, he opted to stay an extra year and complete high school in five years instead of four years. Austin had a positive Early College High School experience. After he graduated from high school, he decided to take a gap year and live and work with his brother in Seattle. While in Seattle, his job involved engineering related duties which sparked his interest in the field. Austin knew that living and working in Seattle was a short-term plan and that he wanted to continue his education at a four-year institution and earn a bachelor's degree. RU was the only school that he applied to and he reported that he has had a wonderful collegiate experience so far.

***Jasmine***

Jasmine is a 20-year old Black/African-American female who is a junior at RU with a self-reported GPA of 2.8. She is majoring in Nutrition and hopes to become a dentist one day. Jasmine is not a first-generation college student and reports that the highest level of education completed by her mother is a master's degree and the highest level of education completed by her father is a bachelor's degree. Jasmine stated that the only reason that she

attended an Early College High School was because her mother felt that it would be a good college preparatory option for her and essentially, Jasmine did not have a voice in the matter in terms of making the decision to change high schools. Jasmine reports that her ECHS was tough academically and that it was also hard for her socially as she had to leave all of her friends behind and did not necessarily always connect with the students at her Early College High School. Jasmine has experienced academic difficulty at RU but she knows that her degree will be worth it in the end.

### *Sam*

Sam is a 24-year old Black/African-American male who is a senior at RU with a self-reported GPA of 2.9. He is majoring in Technology, Engineering, and Design Education. He is currently in his last semester at RU and is completing his student teaching internship at a local high school. Upon graduation, he wants to go into the manufacturing or computer engineering business and eventually teach; although, at the time of the interview, he had not yet secured full-time employment. Sam is a first-generation college student and reported that the highest level of education completed by his mother was a high school diploma or GED. His father has never been a part of his life so he reported his father's educational level as unknown. Sam had an extremely positive ECHS experience and credits his high school with sparking his interest in attending college and preparing him for college. While Sam has enjoyed his time at RU, he has experienced both academic and financial difficulties. He started off as an engineering major but found himself landing on academic probation after experiencing academic difficulty in his core engineering classes. One of Sam's ECHS

teachers who also served as a mentor to him and attended RU herself, encouraged him to explore other majors/interests which could essentially allow him to do similar work. He then discovered that the College of Education had a Technology, Engineering, and Design Education major. Since changing his major, Sam states that he has worked hard to raise his GPA and return to good academic standing and hopes to graduate with a solid 3.0.

### *Ashley*

Ashley is a 22-year old Black/African-American female who is a senior at RU with a self-reported GPA of 2.85. She is majoring in psychology. Ashley has secured a year-long internship upon graduation and afterwards, she plans to apply to graduate school. Ashley is not a first-generation college student. She reported that while the highest level of education completed by her mother is a high school diploma or GED; her father has completed a master's degree, although he completed his education outside of the United States. Ashley is originally from Nigeria and moved to the United States when she was ten years old. In her opinion, the transition to a new country was extremely tough in terms of adjusting to a new culture and she found that the transition to RU was nowhere near on the same level as it was to adjusting to the culture of the south. Overall, Ashley had a positive experience at her Early College High School and felt that it prepared her well for academics at RU.

### *Stephanie*

Stephanie is a 21-year old White/Caucasian female who is a senior at RU with a self-reported GPA of 2.6. She is majoring in agricultural business. She is unsure as to her post-graduation plans. Stephanie is not a first-generation college student as she reported that her

mother attended some college and her father has completed a bachelor's degree. Stephanie had a positive experience at her Early College High School. She has wanted to go to RU since she was in the seventh grade and had always wanted to be a veterinarian. Since Stephanie has been at RU, she has experienced academic difficulty. Stephanie was originally majoring in Animal Science however, after having to retake a couple of science courses at RU, she re-evaluated her career goals and decided to change her major to Agricultural business because some of the courses that she previously took would apply to this new degree and would not extend her time at RU. Stephanie reported that while she has experienced academic difficulty at RU, she does not regret her decision to attend college there.

### *Christina*

Christina is a 21-year old Egyptian female who is a senior at RU with a self-reported GPA of 3.95. She is majoring in Psychology and English. She is currently applying for Ph.D. programs in psychology. Although Christina is not a first-generation college student (both parents have earned a bachelor's degree), she expressed that it feels like she is because both of her parents attended college in Egypt and therefore had no knowledge or background of the educational system in the United States. Christina credits her Early College High School with helping her to navigate the college application process. Christina had a positive high school experience and she has had an overall positive experience at RU as well.

***Andrea***

Andrea is a 21-year old Black/African-American female who is a junior at RU with a self-reported GPA of a 3.79. She is majoring in electrical and chemical engineering. Andrea is a first-generation college student and reported that her mother did not complete high school and that her father only completed some college. Andrea had a positive ECHS experience although she reported it was rigorous. During her first two years at RU, she did not see much variation in the level of rigor between her early college high school courses and her courses at RU however now that she is a junior, she is experiencing major difficulties in one of her engineering classes and is fearful that it will bring down her GPA to the point where she could lose her summer internship opportunity. Aside from the academic difficulty that she is currently experiencing, she reported an overall positive experience at RU and does not regret her decision to attend college here.

***Brian***

Brian is a 22-year old White/Caucasian male who is a senior at RU with a self-reported GPA of 3.45. Brian is majoring in philosophy. He is unsure of his post-graduation plans but does plan to take some time off and travel. Brian reported that he is a first-generation college student and that the highest level of education completed by both parents was a high school diploma or GED. Brian was not originally planning to attend college after high school. He worked at a power plant while he was in high school and was planning to continue working there after graduation however his boss encouraged him to look into pursuing a bachelor's degree, specifically at RU. Brian started off as an engineering major

but almost flunked out of college after his first-year at RU due to the academic rigor of his engineering classes. After doing some self-evaluation, he decided to take a variety of courses in the humanities which sparked his interest in philosophy. Brian does not feel that his Early College High School prepared him for academics at RU. However, he has had an overall positive experience at RU.

***Jack***

Jack is an 18-year old White/Caucasian male who is a first-year student at RU. Since he was in his first semester at the time of his interview, he had not yet obtained a GPA at RU. Jack plans to major in Accounting and would really like to graduate RU in two years considering that he entered with an associate's degree. Jack is not a first-generation college student and reported that the highest level of education completed by both parents is a master's degree. Jack has found the transition to RU to be somewhat challenging both academically and socially. While he feels that on some level, his Early College High School prepared him for college, he has also noticed distinct differences in the level of rigor of courses at RU. Jack has had a difficult time being away from his girlfriend and his family and stated that he was not prepared for the level of homesickness that he has experienced since he's been at RU.

***Max***

Max is a 21-year old White/Caucasian male who is a senior at RU with a self-reported GPA of 2.7. He is majoring in Computer Science. Max is a first-generation college student and neither parent attended college. Max has to take an additional semester to



complete his degree since one of the classes that he has left to take is only offered in a particular semester. After graduation, he would like to stay in the area and look for jobs in the gaming industry. Max recently got engaged to his long-time girlfriend. He has experienced a great level of academic difficulty since he's been at RU and does not feel that his Early College High School prepared him for academics at RU. In addition to the academic challenges that he's experienced at RU, he has also had some personal challenges early on during his time at RU with his now fiancée which affected his overall experience at RU. Now that he's a senior, he feels that although his courses are still difficult, they are more manageable as he now has a better handle on his academics. Max reports that if he had to do it all over again, he still would have chosen to attend RU.

***Paul***

Paul is a 21-year old White/Caucasian male who is a senior at RU with a self-reported GPA of 2.9. He is a triple major—Physics, Computer Engineering, and Electrical Engineering. Paul is a first-generation college student and stated that neither parent attended college. He is still undecided as to what exactly he would like to do after he graduates. He had a positive high school experience but does not necessarily feel that his Early College prepared him for academics at RU. He has experienced academic difficulties since he has been at RU but has found strategies to help overcome these difficulties such as utilizing study groups or going to office hours. Paul's motivation to stay in college is that it's a “means to and end” and that graduating from college will pay off in the long-run.

### **Early College Students' Perceptions of their Transition to a Research University**

For many college students, the transition to a four-year college or university is unlike any other transition in life that they had ever encountered prior to attending college. The Early College participants in this study were no exception. Students were away from their parents for the first time in their lives and had to not only learn how to be self-sufficient but they also had to learn how to navigate a new collegiate environment. Based upon the stories that Early College participants shared about their transition to RU, at times, the transition proved to be more complex for this student population. Not only was this new collegiate environment unlike any collegiate environment that they had previously experienced, but in addition, their unique high school background situation posed challenges academically. Early College participants' overall perceptions of their transition to a research university were that 1) they received repetitive/irrelevant information upon matriculating into RU, 2) they struggled to cultivate meaningful advisor relationships, 3) they lacked understanding in regards to the academic implications of entering RU with an associate's degree, 4) they had to acclimate to a rigorous curriculum at RU and, 5) they found community on campus. Each theme along with any relevant subthemes will be discussed subsequently.

#### **Receiving Repetitive/Irrelevant Information Upon Matriculating into RU**

Although the Early College students in this study entered RU with an associate's degree, they were still classified as first-year students upon matriculation into the university. And because they were classified as first-year students by RU, Early College students were grouped together amongst the other 4,200 incoming first-year students during new student

orientation without regard for the fact that they were technically college students before entering RU (one of the qualities that made this student population so unique). Not only were their high schools located on a community college campus but these students took college courses alongside other college students and were taught by community college faculty. In other words, although they were transitioning into an entirely new collegiate environment, they were not transitioning into college for the first time. It became apparent while interviewing these students that they had experiences (i.e., familiarity with a college environment, college success strategies), that was not typical of the average incoming first-year student. As such, several of the participants in this study reported that the information they received at their new student orientation was repetitive or irrelevant as this was not novel material for Early College students as it was for other incoming first-year students. Sam noted his familiarity with the information conveyed to first-year students during new student orientation. He was taken aback that other incoming first-year students were unaware of college success strategies as he assumed that this was information that other students already knew.

Some of the things they were telling us were like where to sit in class and different note taking strategies...It [new student orientation] felt very repetitive because that was all that I did in high school and I was kind of surprised that people needed that coming into college because I felt very prepared on that aspect. There were some things that I did benefit from them teaching us the way that RU does their own certain things as far as logging into the system and all that. That was very beneficial.

However, the college preparedness courses and the lectures about being mature and all that stuff; I kind of felt I didn't really need it.

Similarly, Austin also felt that the information conveyed to him upon entering RU was repetitive as his Early College High School had previously addressed these concepts and he felt as if it gave him a "head start" to collegiate life at RU.

I actually felt like I had a head start on a lot of the things they were saying. I mean there were some things that I didn't know like specific procedures and traditions that RU does but you know, no one knows that coming in. Like whenever they started talking about classes and how you had to be way more responsible for yourself, like this was stuff that I had been doing for the past several years in high school.

Community college is very similar to where you are now in a lot of ways with class schedules. You are on your own pretty much. The way that professors act. How you interact with them and stuff like that.

Jasmine and Christina commented on the irrelevancy of the information that was communicated to first-year students during new student orientation and felt that the information was not directed to early college students specifically. Jasmine stated:

Even though I went to a community college, I still understood how schedules work. It's not a typical high school schedule. You still have to get up and go to class. It is kind of different from a regular high school.

Christina did not feel that orientation was relevant to Early College students and that it did not address whether they could graduate in two years versus four years.

I think orientation was irrelevant and was really geared toward people who come from a high school that's not an Early College. I know for a lot of Early College students, we didn't know if we could graduate in two years or four years. If there was a portion for Early College students, it would probably be really helpful.

Jack also discussed the notion of irrelevancy as it pertained to the information communicated to incoming and stated that the "the material they offer is completely contradictory to what I know to be my reality." He illustrated this point by discussing how advising at orientation worked for him.

Like when they teach students how to undergo advising, it's completely different than my advising process. In orientation, when they were teaching students how to register for classes, they had to pull me aside and actually do mine by hand because it's so different. It's just doesn't work for us [Early College students] but that's because we're the overwhelming minority.

Based on her experiences with advising Early College students, April, a First Year College academic advisor, suggested that the university and the New Student Programs office misses the mark with this particular student population.

I think a lot of the university policies in the sense of orientation and new student programs a lot of times miss the mark. They'll say things like "you're taking your first college classes." Not really. These students [Early College] have been taking college classes. I guess that's a programmatic thing; we understand the majority of

students fit into this group. However, how do make sure that the information you're sharing is useful for everyone?

**Summary: Receiving repetitive/irrelevant information upon matriculating into RU.** While the Early College students in this study were technically considered as first-year students by RU, it became apparent that they have experiences (i.e., familiarity with a college environment, college success strategies) that are atypical of the average incoming first-year student. Students reported that upon entry to RU, the information conveyed during their new student orientation was either repetitive or irrelevant because they were already familiar with this information and needed to hear information that would be specific to their situation as an Early College student. The next theme addresses the participants' struggle to cultivate meaningful advisor relationships.

### **Struggling to Cultivate Meaningful Advisor Relationships**

It is important to note that academic advising at RU is decentralized, meaning that there is not one central location on campus where academic advising takes place. Each of the nine individual colleges along with the First Year College for undecided majors are responsible for providing academic advising to the respective students in their college. Academic advising at RU can be provided by a professional staff member or a faculty member within each individual college. April, First Year College academic advisor, acknowledges that because of this decentralized advising structure, students sometime get lost in the shuffle.

We have seen students lost in the shuffle and we've done a lot of advocating within our office to improve the application process and to improve intra-campus transfer requirements and to improve relationships with majors on campus that students can be successful in.

April also pointed out that although there are universal institutional policies, such as retaking a course or late drops, each college determines the process for how they go about handling these institutional policies.

It's very unique to the colleges so when you talk to someone who works in a different college, they have a different process for how they do things. There's a lot of trust from the university level. Late drops, other things like that, withdrawing from a course, all of that is usually just handled at a college or departmental level so it isn't necessarily universal; it's still really managed by the individual programs and entities.

As such, several of the participants expressed, to some extent, dissatisfaction with the academic advising process. Andrea and Sam both felt as though they were simply "another number" when it came to meeting their academic advisors. Max even described his initial advising experiences as "superficial" as his advisors did not even know who he was. Students expressed the need to have not only have more interaction with the advisors but the need to have "quality" interactions with their academic advisors as opposed to having them simply check off the box. Andrea explained that her interaction with advisors is always brief so she does not feel like advising has been much help to her and that she has to rely on friends for academic advice. She went on to state, "my interaction with advisors isn't really

as useful as I would like it to be.” Similarly, Sam desired to have more quality interactions with his advisors. In fact, he often felt like the advisors were pressed for time due to their large advising caseloads and that if his proposed class schedule sounded good, he received advisor approval. Yet, there was no substance to the advising conversation. In his opinion, having a more substantive advising relationship may have helped him to stick with the engineering major. Sam explained,

While I was an engineering major, I only met with my advisor maybe 30 minutes every semester. That was it. She just basically gave me the ok if they [classes] sounded right. She was like, “do you think you can take these classes?” I’m like, “yes.” She was like “Ok, you are approved. Next.” Sometimes I kind of hate that I didn’t have this [advising] time where I could talk. Maybe I could have stayed in engineering and not had to switch my major. They could have geared it more towards being practical for me and what I wanted to do in college.

Brian made several attempts to build a relationship with his advisor but his advisor was inaccessible which made cultivating an advising relationship impossible.

I did not have any correspondence with academic advisors until maybe a year or two ago. I remember going to just a general College of Education advisor because it was the only advisor I could find who would talk to me to switch my degree over to philosophy because I couldn’t get a hold of who I was directed to in the philosophy department. Only about a year ago did I actually start talking to my advisor to make sure I was going to actually graduate. Before that for three semesters my advisor



assigned to me in the department I never met. I emailed him and phoned him and went to his office hours which he never was at. He's a professor here and over at another university so he's only here two days a week and there's just no getting up with the guy.

Max expressed his dissatisfaction with academic advising since he's been at RU. Since matriculating into the university, he stated that he always feels like the "elephant in the room" as it pertained to academic advising. He expressed that although academic advisors knew that his academic situation was unique, they were not prepared to meet his advising needs.

There was a moment where they [academic advisors] were kind of confused on what I picked for classes. I think I explained that I was Early College and they were kind of like, "ok." I feel like there has always been this elephant in the room so anytime I meet with an advisor, it's like, "oh he's a special case." I feel like I always have to explain what Early College is. At first, they don't understand. I always have to explain.

Furthermore, Max expected to develop a relationship with his advisor once he matriculated into his major as he felt that the role of an academic advisor was to serve as a resource for students where students feel comfortable approaching advisors with questions. However, since being accepted into the computer science program, Max reported that he has experienced hostility from his advisor and that he tries to avoid seeing his particular advisor because of his previous interactions with her.

She's just been very discouraging. She basically is very intimidating. She doesn't really give you a chance to speak. There have been times where I've been to her office and she immediately started yelling at me because she wasn't happy about something that I wrote down and didn't give me a chance to explain. She doesn't handle...she has her way, her own way of how things need to be done. And if something is not done that way, she gets very upset and starts reprimanding you. It would be simple as someone forgot their degree audit. She immediately starts yelling so that kind of intimidates me and makes me feel like I can't go and see her or talk to her. I just don't want to get yelled at. I always dread advising and I always try to avoid her. And that is the person that you would think, that's the first person that you'd want to go to whenever you have questions about your classes or graduation and what you should do, in terms of if you should drop a class, stuff like that.

Although there were several participants that noted dissatisfaction with their academic advisors, there were also a few students who had developed positive and nourishing relationships with their academic advisors. Students who encountered advisors who were familiar with the Early College model and had that had experience advising this particular student population reported experiencing a higher level of satisfaction with academic advising. For instance, Jack was initially worried that the academic advisors in the School of Business would not have been able to adequately advise an Early College student due to their unique academic situation. Instead, however, he discovered that advisors were very helpful and knowledgeable.

They're [academic advisors] excellent, really helpful. I think my biggest concern was that I would have this sort of one in a million situation that they wouldn't know how to deal with and it was all going to be really weird. But then the Early College program isn't big by any means but it's certainly bigger than it was so they'd seen people do it before so they knew exactly how to get me where I needed to be.

Whereas Jack interacted with academic advisors who were familiar with Early College, Paul had a positive experience with academic advising because he was assigned to a transfer advisor who was familiar with working with students entering RU with a plethora of transfer credit and thus, was also knowledgeable about his situation as an Early College student.

Since I was Early College, they gave me a transfer advisor which was actually really helpful because she was in the engineering department and she knew what was going on. She understood that we were from an Early College and was able to get us exactly what we needed when we needed it. And I say that specifically because some of the advisors are just teachers. They go to their training sessions and advise people which is good but they don't know the ends and outs of the system like what we needed transferring in and stuff like that. It was definitely positive interactions.

Ashley reported a positive experience with her academic advisor. She felt as though her advisor went beyond the call of duty and not only assisted her in her educational journey at RU but was also instrumental in helping her determine which path to take in order to pursue her ultimate goal of becoming a psychologist.

My advisor helped me out a lot in terms of trying to figure out grad school and whether to get a master's or a doctorate. She said if you know that you want to get a doctorate you should not do a master's because really a lot of schools prefer for all of your training to come from them. That was really helpful to me because that will help me to know something about the costs. I feel like she could relate to me a little bit because she was trying to come from a student perspective because you'll save a lot of money by not doing the master's. So that was very helpful advice. It's complicated trying to figure out grad school; you have to know exactly what you're doing.

While Sam reported that he did not have a positive advising experience while he was enrolled in the College of Engineering, his advising experiences since enrolling in the College of Education have been completely different. One reason for his dissatisfaction with academic advising in Engineering was that he felt like due to the size of the engineering program, advisors were pressed for time and as a result, he was not able to form a relationship. Since changing majors, he noted that he has been able to cultivate a meaningful relationship with his academic advisor.

Here in tech ed, I sit down with my advisor and talk to my advisor. We explore various possibilities. We look at my end goal and figure out when I'm going to graduate. What type of jobs are out there. Internships. We just kind of...it is more of a relationship.

**Summary: Struggling to cultivate meaningful advisor relationships.** Several participants expressed some level of dissatisfaction with the advising process and desired to

cultivate meaningful relationships with their academic advisors. These participants felt as though they were simply another number, their advisors were pressed for time, were inaccessible, or were demeaning and hostile. On the other hand, there were also Early College students who had positive experiences with academic advising. Being familiar with the Early College model and knowing how to adequately advise students with an associate's degree was credited with having a positive academic advising experience. In addition, advising students beyond their degree requirements and helping students to look and think "outside of the box" in regards to their career pursuits was another factor that was associated with a positive academic experience. Finally, advisors who simply carved out time for their students in an effort to get to know their students in a genuine way also led to a higher level of satisfaction with academic advising. While the advisors in this study expressed the challenges associated with advising Early College students due to the decentralized structure and the fact that institutional policies and procedures are handled by each individual college, there were still certain qualities that Early College students felt as though advisors should possess in order to ensure a positive academic advising experience. The next theme addresses understanding the academic implications of entering RU with an associate's degree.

### **Understanding the Academic Implications of Having an Associate's Degree**

As a result of entering RU with an associate's degree, the participants in this study had fulfilled the majority of their general education requirements. However, certain majors at RU require admission into the major, the successful completion of certain prerequisites, or

retaking certain college courses that they took previously at their Early College High School. Depending on a student's intended major, it can get complicated when determining what courses an Early College student is qualified to take within their first semester or if they will be able to graduate in two years as a result of earning an associate's degree. Tiffany, Life Sciences academic advisor, explained that graduating in two years is often not the case at RU, depending on a student's program and what the student would like to do after graduation. For instance, when Sam entered RU as an engineering major, he was under the impression from his Early College High School that he would graduate from RU in two years since he had his associate's degree. Upon entering RU, he was extremely disappointed to learn otherwise.

They [Early College High School] made us believe that if we went to Early College all we had to do was two years at a four-year university and we were done. No one told me about the articulation agreement and that certain classes don't go to certain majors. So when I came here [RU] I was very surprised when I found out that I was going to end up being here for four to five years. Very surprised.

Although Early College High Schools may communicate to students that they have the opportunity to graduate from a four-year college or university because of their associate's degree, depending on a student's educational goals, it may not be in the best interests of students to graduate in two years. Christina, a psychology major, explained that she desired to understand the implications of an associate's degree and how that would impact her future graduate school plans.

Although you may come in with an associates' degree and you may only have two years, you should can three or four years if you'd like to and kind of gauge out what you want to do after college. A lot of times that's the determining factor because if someone wants to get a Ph.D., it would probably help to stay another year just for that research experience but if someone wants to go to the work force, just finishing in two years would be better probably. So advisors should gauge out what they want to do in the future and help them decide that.

In addition, while having an associate's degree offered some positive aspects that aided in their transition, such as having an advantage in course registration, it also produced some other unwarranted issues such as lacking courses to take, taking multiple science courses within any given semester, and encountering the tuition surcharge policy. All of these issues emerged as subthemes. Due to all of these moving pieces, it proved at times to be difficult to understand the academic implications of what it meant, at RU specifically, to have an associate's degree and how that would impact a student's educational pursuits.

**Having an advantage in course registration.** Many students found that entering RU with an associate's degree worked to their advantage in terms of registering for classes. At RU, course registration is based upon the number of credit hours a student has accumulated, including transfer credits. Because the Early College students in this study entered RU with an associate's degree, they automatically registered for classes alongside upperclassmen although they were classified as first-year students upon entering the university. Having an associate's degree was an advantage to course registration because it

allowed Early College students to get into the classes that they actually needed to fulfill their degree requirements as opposed to simply taking courses that would not count toward their degree and possibly delay graduation. From the time he was a first-year student, Austin reported that he never experienced issues registering for the courses that he needed or registering for the time slots that he desired. He described his registration experience at RU as smooth and stress-free.

Registration has been like a hot knife through butter. Would not change it. Loved it. A lot of people won't say that. They'll be like it was stressful and frustrating to have a class filled up and now you've to take the 8:30 that you didn't want to do. Like whenever I made my schedule I knew that was going to be my schedule, so the ease of mind and the security that goes along with that was great. I did not have to worry about it. One thing that I absolutely am just grateful for having this degree [associate's] is that whenever you register for classes, you register based on your standings. So seniors go first, then juniors, then sophomores and then freshmen. And since I was technically a freshman my first year of college but I had enough credits to be a junior, I was able to register really early. And so I always got the classes I needed.

Similar to Austin, when it came to course registration, Jasmine has had a smooth registration process as well.

I haven't had a problem especially because, I don't know why, I think it is the number of credits that I had coming in. I usually have pretty early dates. And so once 3:00



hits. Today is the day. Boom. Submit. Usually I have already put the classes in the blocks that I want. I put them in there but then you have to submit. Like after you've put them in there in your cart you have to submit them and see if they actually go through. Usually I just press the submit. Sometimes I have to do a couple moving around like if I didn't finish a class the way I expected to and I have to take it again. But other than that, not too much of a problem.

Sam has also had a smooth registration process as well. Before he was officially admitted into his new major, the only issue that he encountered was not being able to take a class because he had not yet been admitted into the College of Education. He stated that entering RU with an associate's degree was definitely a perk of going to an Early College High School:

I definitely have gotten every class that I needed. I always have priority classes because I had so many credits coming in. I never had a problem with getting the classes until I started to switch my major. It was kind of like you are in this college so you can't take certain classes. But I mean once I switched my major officially then it wasn't a problem. I've always had good priority scheduling. Love it! One of the best perks to going to Early College.

**Lacking courses to take.** While some participants mentioned that having an associate's degree was found to be advantageous in terms of course registration, other participants found it to be burdensome as it pertained to course registration. April, First Year College advisor, asserted that finding courses that an Early College student can take can

produce a great deal of stress both for the student and the advisor. According to April, “oftentimes we have to be really intentional about the courses they can select and they don’t feel they have the amount of options that other students have.”

Max explained as a result of entering RU with an associate’s degree and having fulfilled a plethora of his degree requirements, it has been difficult finding classes to take every semester. If a course had a prerequisite, he was not able to take those two courses concurrently and as a result, was left short in regards to taking relevant courses during any given semester. There have been times where Max has had to resort to taking electives in order to maintain full-time standing at RU.

I completed all of my general education requirements [because of the associate’s degree] so with my major classes, if a class is a prereq for another class, I can’t take both of those classes. And that’s been a lot of the problem. So I just kind of run out of classes that I need to take. And there have been times where I just took a class that I didn’t need, it didn’t count toward anything, just to stay above full time. That was definitely been a struggle in terms of making a schedule. Getting into the classes I want. It’s been hard for me to fit the classes I need because of that. That’s why I have to come back in the fall for just one class. Those have been my struggles with classes.

While Max felt as though as a result of having an associate’s degree, it limited his course options within any given semester, Andrea reported that the Early College model also

puts students at a disadvantage because Early College students do not always have the opportunity to take the “cool classes” that RU offers.

That was a disadvantage really to the Early College system. I already came in with all the general requirements so every semester I couldn't take cool classes. Another aspect is that RU has so many cool introduction studies and general education classes that I would have liked to take but I had all those requirements satisfied so taking it would be like taking it for nothing. That would be a waste.

Upon admission into RU, Jasmine was accepted into the psychology major and not into the nutrition program, which was her major of choice. She found that this to be incredibly annoying because not only was she not able to get into the classes that she needed—her timeline to graduate in two years was jeopardized. According to Jasmine, “I got accepted into a program that didn't even require science classes so I couldn't get into any classes that I actually needed. All the classes had pre-reqs that everybody had to take and I had already done them. So it wasn't like I could fill that semester with just—I needed my classes. That was annoying and nobody could really help me with that.” Tiffany, Life Sciences academic advisor, explained that this is very common for Early College students. She explained that there is a process at RU called “CODA” which stands for change of degree application. Basically, students have to complete a certain number of requirements and/or earn a certain GPA before they will be admitted into that major. According to Tiffany:

It will say that you have to have at least a C in those classes and a 2.0 to be considered. [However] very few departments really look at that. They really want you to make A's and B's in the biology classes, the chemistry classes, and the math classes because those are the entry ones and they just get harder so they want to see you have some kind of strong foundation. In terms of GPA, what we saw a lot last spring where the departments were really looking above a 3.0. There are some students that were denied into some departments with a 2.9 or 2.8 and it was because the 2.8 or 2.9 was based on a C in a chemistry or a biology course. And again, they will look at what students have in terms of transfer credit but they really want to see how students do [academically] at RU before they get into the major here.

**Taking multiple science classes in a semester.** As mentioned earlier, when Early College students enter RU with an associate's degree, it fulfills the majority of their general education requirements. As a result, for STEM majors, this meant taking multiple sciences courses within a given semester which could be an extremely strenuous course load for students. Tiffany, Life Sciences academic advisor, explained:

With your lab science, you not only go to lecture three days a week, but you have an additional problem session that you're required to go to plus the lab. So if you're taking chemistry, you may be doing chemistry five days a week here. With one of them being a two hour lab. And then I know they take them at community college but I don't know if it's as intensive. Combined with other courses that a student is taking with a semester, taking more than two lab sciences for any student can prove to

be problematic because of the extensive time commitment the lab sciences classes alone take.

Paul, a Physics, Computer Engineering, and Electrical Engineering triple major, experienced first-hand how strenuous it was to take multiple science courses within one semester when entering RU with an associate's degree. While he appreciated being able to take major courses and the opportunity to by-pass taking electives, he acknowledged that as a STEM major, it still proved to be a difficult course load.

Due to the articulation agreement and since I have an associates' degree, I have all my general education requirements, diversity classes, all that kind of extra stuff done so you can jump straight into core curricula which is good and bad. It's good because you're doing exactly what you're there to do but it's kind of rough because for me it was all science and math and for me I can only take so much science and math at one time. Three physics classes and two engineering classes, anyway you try to divide that up it's a lot of class work so that made life hard.

Sam, a former Engineering major, discovered early on during his time at RU that although he got into the courses he needed, he wished that he would have understood that having an associate's degree meant that he would have to take several engineering courses at once.

I got the courses that I needed but I wasn't really aware of how I needed to lay my schedule out so that in the long run it wouldn't backfire on me or kind of pile up. My first semester I took classes that would be okay for a freshman that would kind of

gear me towards engineering. But had I known that the next semester I was going to have like full-out engineering courses, I kind of would have tried to re-arrange or went and sought more time to figure out what was really going on and how I could make it work with my unique situation.

**Encountering the tuition surcharge policy.** The notion of a “tuition surcharge” was mentioned by several students as negative implication of entering RU with an associate’s degree. The tuition surcharge is statewide policy that is implemented at all of the four-year public institutions in the state in which RU is located. According the tuition surcharge policy, degree-seeking students who exceed credit hour limits towards their degree may be subject to a 50 percent tuition surcharge if students complete more than 140 degree credit hours toward the bachelor’s degree (Tuition Surcharge, 2016). This includes transfer courses. Interestingly enough, AP, IB, and CLEP (College Level Examination Program) courses are not included in the tuition surcharge policy. Furthermore, RU does not have a limit in terms of the number of AP, IB, and CLEP credits that a student can bring in. So essentially, a student can bring the same number of AP, IB, and CLEP credits as a first-year student with an associate’s degree and yet they are not penalized in the same way as an Early College student who possesses an associate’s degree. Fortunately, the three students in this study who encountered the tuition surcharge were able to eventually get this issue resolved and did not have to repay money to the university. However, those participants noted that the process to resolve the tuition surcharge was a hassle. Sam discussed the financial

implications that the tuition surcharge caused for him and how it affected his grants and his refund check:

My financial aid situation was a little weird because I had all these transfer credits. And so it didn't really hit me until I think about my junior or senior year here at RU when I had made my transition to transfer to another major they said you have so many credits. I had already come in with like 64 or so credits for my associate's degree. They were like, "we're going to have to start surplusing you and charging you extra to take credits here." I was like, "I was told that that didn't matter." They had taken money out of one of my refund checks which was from my scholarship, well not necessarily my scholarship but one of my grants. They took it and surplused me on my refund check and held it for like months. I actually had to schedule a face-to-face meeting with financial aid. I emailed and I actually had to sit face-to-face and have someone review it in order to get my money back from the surplus. It was like a really drawn out process and it was really hard for me to get to someone who understood what I was talking about.

Like Sam, Austin had the tuition surcharge automatically taken from his account and had to petition in order to receive a refund. He stated that he was unsure as to whether he will encounter the tuition surcharge policy in the future and he felt that Early College students should be exempt from this tuition surcharge policy.

It happened for me this semester. What they had me do was contact someone and sit down and fill out paperwork and then turn around and have to write a short essay on

what my situation/circumstance was and this was already after I had been charged. So I was trying to get a refund. It took maybe a week and a half to get it submitted and reviewed and another week to get my money back. I looked into and I knew it was going to happen but I wasn't aware of how rigorous and difficult it would be to be like "hey you guys admitted me, you know I went to Early College. You know I'm going to go over the hours." I feel like there should be a certain clause just across the nation, "if you went to an Early College, I understand so we'll wipe that off." But that was something that was stressful. I'm good now but I'm not sure if I have to do it next semester. I don't know if this is a recurring thing. I guess I'll just find out next semester. Tuition surcharge is not fun. It was a lot of money.

Christina was told that she exceeded her credits and as a result, would not be able to receive any additional financial aid. She had to petition the Financial Aid office and explain that she had attended an Early College High School.

It happened last summer and they said I had gone overboard with my credit hours and so they said they wouldn't be able to keep giving me financial aid but it was because I went to an Early College and I'm doing 4 years at RU so I had to go through this process of filling out a form and explaining why. So that's pretty annoying and it was a really annoying process because they aren't used to Early College students.

**Summary: Understanding the academic implications of having an associate's degree.** Early College participants lacked an understanding of what it meant to have an associate's degree at RU. While having an associate's degree proved to be advantageous in



regards to course registration, it would have been helpful if participants understood early in their collegiate careers how possessing an associate's degree would affect their academic goals at RU. The associate's degree produced burdensome issues such as lacking courses to take, having to take multiple sciences classes within any given semester, and encountering the tuition surcharge policy. While the students in this study, they were able to get this issue resolved but they found it to be inconvenient and a hassle to resolve. The next theme, acclimating to a rigorous curriculum, will be the final theme to be addressed in regards to Early College participants' transition to a research university.

### **Acclimating to a Rigorous Curriculum**

RU is one of the nation's top research universities with renowned science, technology and liberal arts programs and a highly selective admissions review process. As such, the student population at RU are the top-notch students from their high schools with an average incoming GPA of 4.53 and over 50% of students in the top 10% of their graduating class. Nonetheless, the majority of participants in this study acknowledged that academics at RU is much more rigorous than the community college classes that they took as a part of their Early College High School curriculum. Participants acknowledged that they expected before arriving at RU that the curriculum would be more rigorous than what they were accustomed to; however, they were astonished as to how much more demanding these courses would actually be. April, First Year College academic advisor stated, "sometimes students feel like even though they are prepared for the amount of work they're going to have, they're concerned that they're not prepared for the rigor." Interestingly, Sam felt as if one reason for

the differences in the level of rigor is that community college are geared toward a diverse group of learners (i.e., students from all levels of educational backgrounds). As a result, community college faculty have to take their student population into consideration when they're teaching a group of students that may contain a traditional age student who plans to transfer to a university in two years as well as an adult learner who is returning to school after a twenty year hiatus. At RU, most of the students are coming from similar educational backgrounds so faculty may expect more from their students. In Paul's opinion, this contributes to the rigor of classes at RU:

It's a lot expected out of you. My class that came in was in the top 10% of their class and I think they put all of us like that together and all the expectations go up and so we go faster, we go more in depth, just do more stuff with the material. If I had to guess I'd say that's why it's more rigorous. They expect more out of us because, I hate to say it but we performed better in high school.

In Sam's opinion, classes were much more demanding at RU to the point where he did not feel like the smartest kid in the school as he did in high school.

RU is ten times harder. I'm not trying to talk bad on the community college system but even my hardest community college class was nothing compared to my hardest class here at RU. In high school, you are the smartest kid in their school and now you are not the smartest kid in their school. It was definitely more of a like sink or float type situation. Whereas in community college I felt like it was tough but I could still keep up.

The rigor of courses at RU, particularly what he referred to as “weed out classes” also caused Paul to question his intellectual ability.

Those weed out classes will really mess with your head. The idea that half the class is not going to pass messes with you. Physics in general is also sometimes a hard thing to swallow in the sense that it’s a lot of math and a lot of people have trouble with it and so you’re constantly asking yourself as you go through it “is this something I can do?” “Am I smart enough?” There are all those kind of questions.

Tiffany, Life Sciences academic advisor, mentioned that her and her colleagues have found that while an Early College student may have made A’s in their lower-level sciences courses while in high school, they had a rude awakening once they were in their upper-level courses due to “the volume of information, what was expected, how huge the classes were, and how they were tested.” Jasmine described her science courses are much more rigorous than her other courses at RU due to the mass volume of information that is presented in these classes. As a result, she has even had to retake one of her science classes.

Completely different. So different. I would only say different in the science. I expected that. But definitely physics was the first science class I took here. Physics was doable. Anatomy was a lot. I never took anatomy in high school which I wish I had. It wasn’t the difficulty of like understanding the information. It was just a massive amount of information. That was crazy. That was the class that I ended up having to change to pass/fail this semester and then have to take it again for credit.

Even the second time I was still like I don't want to do this. I am in organic chemistry now. It's going ok. I wish it was going better. They are hard classes.

Participants discussed various aspects of the level of rigor according to what they've experienced at RU. The subthemes that emerged from this theme included a) noting curricular and pedagogical differences, b) noting differences between Early College and RU faculty, c) learning to study effectively and, d) experiencing academic difficulty as a result of rigor.

**Noting curricular and pedagogical differences.** Since being at RU, students noticed several differences between the curricula in their community college classes and the curricula at RU. Brian pointed out the material is much broader than it was in high school.

More difficult, broader range of material that you're responsible for in any given semester. You are required to know a larger range of material to a higher specificity. You need to be well versed and reasoned in everything that you're engaging with here. The university courses are much more challenging but also more fun, more rewarding when you learn the material.

Similarly, Jasmine also mentioned the mass volume of information for her classes.

It was just a massive amount of information. Like a bucket of water. Catch. That was crazy.

Austin pointed out the concepts learned from a student's major courses at RU build upon one another as opposed to community college courses that are general in nature and do not necessarily assume that a student has an extensive background in that particular area.

It's not as general as community college can afford to be. You have to get more specific and know stuff and then also if you are in a 400 level class that means that 400 level class is building on what you've learned two years ago. So classes just add up on top of each other. I mean it is just logical for them to get harder the further you go.

While Paul previously discussed the concept of "weed-out" courses, he divulged further into this particular concept by discussing how each professor grades according to their own discretion and oftentimes used a bell curve to determine who will pass and who will fail.

It was a new concept to me to have a weed out class, quote unquote, where basically half the class is more than likely going to fail. I'm thinking of physics, the intro course here. The bell curve on all the scores is much lower so to get what they need, they shift it up and cut somewhere down the middle. I think there's some discretion in that the professor decides that this one is a pass and this one's a fail.

Sam and Jasmine commented that another distinctive pedagogical difference that they've noticed at RU is that the course material is taught at a much faster pace. Because of the pace of the lectures, it makes it difficult to ask questions in class. Sam felt the peer pressure not to ask questions during lectures at RU as opposed to his Early College High School where students were encouraged to ask questions during class.

In Early College when I struggled I would just raise my hand and say, "hey I don't get it. Can you go back over it?" They were like, "Yeah we can take the time. Does

anybody else have that question?” But here at RU in a class of 300, you have to be very bold to raise your hand during the lecture when the professor is talking.

Especially when it is a three-hour class or you know or if it is a 50 minute class and he [professor] is trying to fit in a strict pace to keep everybody on task. You raise your hand and throw him off which means that his next lecture is going to be even shorter. I mean it is just more peer pressure not to ask a question here.

As opposed to the Early College environment, where students were encouraged to raise their hands and ask questions in class, Jasmine asserted that since being at RU, she has experienced a form of peer pressure in regards to not asking questions during class at RU.

My organic chemistry class has over 200 people in it. And so it is very fast paced. Not a lot of questions during class. Like as in raising your hand and asking questions. It is just very fast paced like moving, moving, moving. You have to learn how to absorb it as it comes. You can tell the way they are teaching that they are on a time schedule. We have to get through this chunk of information today. I felt like if I needed to stop the class for help, I would feel bad. I feel like students would look at me and be like, I wanted to get out early today. Be quiet. The environment is different. The learning environment is different.

**Noting differences between Early College and RU faculty.** Students discussed their experiences with the faculty at RU compared to their Early College faculty and noted how they were different. Max stated that faculty at his ECHS “babied and pampered”

students and that the Early College faculty should have done a better job of letting students do stuff for themselves.

I'm used to the teacher holding your hand in a way. When I got here to RU, they [faculty] had higher expectations. Teachers are more strict, much, much less forgiving on mistakes or late assignments or being late for class.

Similar to Max, Austin also noticed that the Early College faculty coddled students a lot although that may have been attributed to the fact that they were still young. However, Austin reported that the faculty and staff at RU have higher expectations of students more than at RU:

Expectations here at RU are a lot higher than they were in community college.

Professors at our community college were aware that we were Early College students and they were aware we were the test bunnies and they knew we were also younger. I wouldn't say they babied us but they probably paid a little more attention to us so kind of cradled us a little bit. But here at RU, that just doesn't happen. I'd say that the academic faculty & staff here have higher expectations, they've been doing this sometimes for years so they get in, they do what they need to do and they're out.

While Early College faculty may have been perceived as more nurturing by some of the participants in this study due to the fact that that faculty still viewed them as "kids," Sam reported that the faculty at RU viewed and treated all students as adults and as such, expected students to act like adults and do things for themselves.

I would say the faculty were more caring in high school. More nurturing. Not necessarily caring but definitely nurturing. They kind of realized that you are still young and you're a kid. They help you more whereas in college, like they help you as much as they can but they can't baby you because they've got more kids to help. They are looking at you and you are an adult now. You are on your own. You should know how to take the extra steps to help yourself. It's just way different at RU.

Brian felt that RU faculty have higher expectations of students and while they are willing to help students, they will not provide any sort of remedial help like the Early College faculty provided in high school. According to Brian, as a student at RU, it was definitely the student's responsibility to ensure that they have a good foundation on the basic material.

Seems like high school teachers have no expectations or really low expectations and don't sort of make you do anything but college professors have rather high expectations and they're not going to have to help you learn the basic course material. They are there to help you go further but there is no remedial help. When you go to a professor struggling I've noticed and some of my friends have professors that are like 'learn it or leave; you have to learn it first. Read your stuff and get a tutor if you really need that'. Where at the high school level they're remedial but not very expansive. Professors at RU will take all the time in the world to help you get further but if you're not getting the basic stuff, they sort of don't care.



While some participants reported that the faculty at RU were not as lenient as the faculty were in high school, there were several participants who reported having positive experiences with RU faculty. For instance, although Paul noted that the faculty at RU are focused on their research given that RU is a research institution, he felt as though the RU faculty were still very receptive to meet with students outside of class as opposed to the community college faculty.

With regards to a research institution some professors are much more focused on their research than they are on teaching and so that would definitely mean that they're there to teach the class while they're there and afterwards not so much. But in general, quite honestly, most of them are quite receptive to coming by anytime they're not busy with a project or something. Just to pop in during their office hours or whatever. Community college they hold specific office hours and if you don't catch them during that time sometimes it's hard to get help. It's a very different environment.

Christina found the faculty at RU to be much more flexible and relaxed than the Early College faculty. RU faculty possess academic freedom as opposed to high school faculty who have to abide by a rigid set of expectations in order to meet the teaching statutes of the state in which they are teaching in.

I think professors in college are apt to have more flexibility in terms of understanding than high school teachers because high school teachers have this expectation that college isn't going to be like this and I need to prepare you for college. But a lot of

times, college is just like relaxed and in a lot of classes a lot of professors are really laid back. I feel like in that sense it's been different and also in terms of what they value is different. I feel like high school teachers have more rigid expectations and college professors value more creativity and thinking outside the box and having your own originality.

Whereas Christina acknowledged that the faculty at RU were more laid back than the faculty at RU and encouraged students to “think outside of the box,” Brian noticed that RU faculty were much more willing to engage outside of the classroom as opposed to the community college faculty. Given that the faculty at RU have a certain level of expertise, he felt as if they willing to connect with students as they shared a common interest.

The professors are much more willing to engage with you outside of class and not just during their office hours. If you're actually interested in learning something or doing some independent research on your own you can go and have lunch with your professors. They're very eager to have someone talk to them. Community college it was a little less. For the most part the community college professors were a little more preoccupied. They're doing stuff with their lives in addition to just teaching. It seems the professors here [at RU], teaching is the thing that they do.

**Learning to study effectively.** Several of the participants were introduced to the concept of studying once they entered RU as they never really had to study in high school. Tiffany, Life Sciences academic advisor, explained that based on her advising experiences,

many students at RU did not have to study in college and had a rude awakening once they got to RU.

A lot of them will come from high school and they didn't have to study much in high school and they made A's. And then, they come to RU and they go to convocation and at convocation, they [senior administration] tell them that they are the smartest class that has walked on campus, you have this SAT, this GPA, so they think they don't have to study. But it's not until the first test or two when they've already started to dig a hole that they realize they weren't doing what they needed to do.

Jack mentioned that he was failing his economics class due to the fact that he did not know how to study effectively. In Early College, he was accustomed to simply memorizing the concepts. Since he's been at RU, he has had to adapt his definition of what it means to study in terms of actually applying what you learn and not simply memorizing a concept.

Oh God yes, I have to study. Absolutely. It completely changes the entire idea of studying and how to do well in a class. It totally redefines what it means to do well in a class. I was failing Economics for the longest time. That was the first time since I've been in kindergarten that I've not done well in a class. I really didn't know what to study. There was just this huge volume of information and no study guide or anything. The tests are more so applying the concepts as opposed to memorizing. It is much more about applying a concept versus the actual concept. When you learn supply and demand, it's not necessary that you have to understand how it works on a

societal scale but you'll have to do the math for a certain price point. It's something you adapt to for sure.

Similar to Brian, Sam also had to learn to apply the concepts as opposed to memorization. As a result, Sam reported that he has had to explore different study methods in order to determine what works effectively for him due to the fast-paced speed of the lectures.

I've had to study since I've been at RU. Non-stop. All day. Every day. I've also had to change my study habits since I've been here 100%. Writing notes on the side or I forgot the name of the notes that we learned how to take. There is a certain style of notes that I did in Early College that did not work here. The speed at which the professor lectures, I had to figure out a way to write down only what was important which was something they taught us in Early College but you didn't get to actually do that in the community college. Just because here, it's 300 kids. You [faculty] only have 50 minutes to teach them [students] three chapters of a book. It's like the light is on go and they just go. I just literally just write verbatim. I learned to take pictures of their lecture slides or ask to go to office hours and ask if they could print me copies of the PowerPoints or whatever the case may be. I definitely learned to go and get more and find alternatives. I've tried it all. High school is more memorization and college is more applying what you know.

Similar to Sam, Jasmine mentioned that because of the fast-paced nature of the lectures, she had to absorb as much information as she can while she's in class as it is hard to take notes during the lecture. For her, she has learned to effectively study by taking the time

outside of class to reteach the course information to herself and do so in a way so that she can understand what was discussed.

Now I've learned that I just have to absorb as much as I can in class and take the time after class, immediately if I can. But if I can't, I still have to take the time to reteach myself. Before I wouldn't have to reteach myself. I could just start studying. Now I can't start studying until I've taken my own version of the notes and have a well-rounded understanding. I can't even do the homework without doing that. That was a step that I didn't have to take before. I'm actually just now learning that I have to do that. I never had to take notes after I already took notes in class. Now I have to take two notes. Because I know for ergonomics, I can't take notes in class. Like detailed notes the way I would want to. It's so fast paced. I have to print out the notes. Take a little side stuff and fill that out but then afterwards I have to teach myself the concepts again. With the side notes that I already took.

**Experiencing academic difficulty as a result of rigor.** As a result of acclimating to the rigorous curriculum at RU, there were several participants who expressed that they have experienced some type of academic difficulty since they've been at RU. As reported earlier, participants felt as though the courses at RU were taught at a much faster pace and contained a greater volume of information. It is noteworthy that the participants that reported substantial academic difficulty were all STEM majors. Sam entered RU as an engineering major but after landing on probation and having his GPA drop to a 1.9, he knew that he had to change his major in order to remain at RU.

Having a bad semester in engineering and having been on academic probation.

Having to transition and work my way up from that. It's just been a lot of work. I had to definitely try and continue to work hard to strive to graduate from college. It was not as easy at all. I did what I could and took classes that I could to maintain and get my GPA up. When I switched my major [Technology, Engineering and Design Education], that really helped. My GPA now is knocking on a 3.0. It's a 2.97. My goal is to have over a 3.0 to graduate. Because at one point I had a 1.9 and I was on academic probation.

Stephanie also changed her major since she's been at RU. Since she was a child, she always wanted to be a veterinarian and always wanted to go to RU because of their exceptional veterinarian program. In her opinion, the courses are rigorous because students not only have to learn how to teach themselves but there are also very few, if any, homework assignments that allow students to keep up with the material in a non-self-paced manner. Due to the difficulty that she experienced in her science courses, she switched her major to agricultural business.

Courses at RU are hard and I've had professors that don't teach how I learn and I haven't had an incentive to teach myself. My organic chemistry class was huge and I did not do well both times that I took it. The first time I took my organic chemistry class, we didn't have homework. I think we had 1 homework assignment the entire semester. The subject matter the first time I took it, I just didn't know what was

going on. Should have dropped the class and didn't know I could. The second time I was doing really well until the final and just tanked.

Paul and Max, also STEM majors, have experienced academic difficulty in their major courses since enrolling at RU. However, both of these students have managed to persevere and while they stated that the curriculum at RU is rigorous, it became more manageable over time. Although these students reported experiencing academic difficulty, they have been proactive in utilizing campus resources and as a result, have not had to change their majors. Paul stated:

I have definitely experienced academic difficulty. Study groups, that was the first step. Going to the teacher quite a lot. When I say quite a lot, for example my E&M class, electricity and magnetism physics class, if I wasn't in her office two times a week, then it was a rarity. It was normally more than that. Going to the teacher actually helps more than I would think it would. Of course they know what you need to know and are normally very helpful. For example with chemistry, I could just go to the professor. In some of my engineering classes, all I need is a study group. I never see them during office hours. But in physics I have to do both. Everything all the time, as much help as you can get.

While Max utilized tutoring as a resource to assist him academically, he found that communicating with his instructors regularly works best for him.

Yeah, I've experienced plenty of academic difficulties. My first year here I started struggling. I went to tutoring, that was probably the big thing. Communicate with the

professor about what I can do. It's not something I do commonly but only if it's looking pretty grim. Other classes, especially my sophomore and junior year, I kind of slacked off so I didn't use that many. I think I was really busy and really dealing with a lot of emotional stuff so I didn't feel like seeking that stuff out. But this year, I haven't really had too many difficulties but I think that's mainly because I've communicated with the professors and the TA's more in pretty much all of my classes.

According to Andrea, who is an Electrical and Chemical Engineering double major, RU courses did not get rigorous until her junior year. Prior to her junior year, she felt as though her courses were a continuation of courses from her Early College High School. Now that she is a junior, she is now confronted with the reality of a rigorous curriculum and is experiencing academic difficulty to the extent to where her grades could possibly jeopardize her upcoming summer internship.

I have experienced some but not as much as like this past week. There is a class and the test we had it is literally the hardest. It is just something that has been weighing on me and like weighs on the grade I have. It could impact like a lot. Like its impact could pull down not only my GPA but like my summer internship is also in jeopardy if my GPA falls. So I'm just like waiting to get back the grade and then I have an appointment with an advisor to find out what are my options.

**Summary: Acclimating to a rigorous curriculum.** The majority of the participants in this study acknowledged that the curriculum at RU was much more rigorous than their



early college high school curriculum. Students noticed distinctive differences in terms of greater volume of information, higher faculty expectations, along with faster-paced courses. Students also noted the differences between the faculty in their Early College High Schools and the faculty at RU. Some students felt that the faculty in Early College pampered them to a greater degree than the faculty at RU. Other students felt that the faculty at RU were much more willing to engage with students outside of the classroom setting. Due to the rigor of the curriculum, students also had to learn how to change their study habits once they got to RU as the concept of “applying what you’ve learned as opposed to simply memorizing” was critical to their success in their classes. Several students also experienced academic difficulty at some point during their time at RU but found ways to persevere whether that was through changing their majors or utilizing campus resources. The next section of this chapter will discuss the final theme in regards to the first research question of this study which examined the perceptions that Early College participants held in regards to their social transition to RU.

### **Finding Community on Campus**

While Early College students discovered that the academic transition was at times difficult, all eleven participants in this study did not report issues regarding their social adjustment to the university specifically as a result of attending an Early College High School. While Jack and Max expressed that their social adjustment was affected because they were away from their longtime girlfriends, this was not due as a result of attending an ECHS. The majority of students found their belonging at RU in terms of making friends and getting involved in extracurricular activities outside of the classroom. This could be due to

the fact that Early College students, similar to other incoming first-year students at RU, started the university from day one in which all students are in the same boat in regards to having to make an effort to get involved on campus and establish a new group of friends.

Even before arriving at RU, Sam knew that he wanted to join a fraternity. He reported that he always felt welcomed by his brothers since he was a first-year student and that being a member of a fraternity has been his most positive and beneficial student experience at RU.

My fraternity has been my most positive experience at RU. Being able to join a fraternity was one of the greatest gifts of college. Coming in I already had an idea that I wanted to join a fraternity. I didn't know which one. The brothers of my fraternity were very welcoming. When I was a freshman they helped me out and gave me advice. They were in my major already and gave me resources to stay one step ahead and not necessarily sink but to be able to come in my freshman year and do the best I could.

Although Andrea is not in a Greek organization, she found her sense of belonging at RU in a scholars program that she's a member of which promotes building community outside of the classroom setting by having weekly activities, sharing Sunday dinners, and taking trips.

When we got inducted, we had like a class together every Thursday and then we have Sunday dinners like one Sunday every month. We have retreats and other things during the week. We go like on a lot of trips, like we went last spring break to

Hawaii. Then we went to like Boston. Like other places. So just going on those trips with them, it's a great...just like getting to know what they are going through or what their day has been like.

While Stephanie experienced several academic difficulties at RU, she reported that she never experienced any difficulties regarding her social adjustment to RU. She stated that her dad often likes to joke and say that she has "adjusted very well socially and not so well academically." Stephanie discussed a break-up with her boyfriend that occurred recently and that they broke up because they had different goals in life. When asked what helped her cope with the break-up, she replied:

My friends. I have a very solid core group of friends. Without them, I don't know how I would have gotten through this.

Paul has formed his core group of friends from his major courses. As a result of forming study groups during their first introductory science course, they formed a friendship outside of the classroom.

So that first weed out class forced us to form study groups and that group of friends definitely became a core group of friends for me. We go do different activities together, go get lunch or dinner, work on homework, those kinds of things. We have game nights and different things like that. That's been very positive.

While Early College High Schools do not provide opportunities for extracurricular activities such as athletics, band, and clubs (Smith et al., 2012), several of the Early College students were actively involved in activities outside of the classroom. In addition to being a

member of a fraternity, Sam's Early College High School emphasized service learning so he knew that he wanted to continue service-learning once he got to RU.

I like to give my time and do service learning. That was one of the requirements of Early College, always do service learning. It was drilled in me. I love doing service learning volunteering. I'm a very social person so I meet other people who are connected to campus.

Austin explained that he is also a social person and in addition to being involved in various extracurricular activities on campus, he also makes a conscious effort to see what activities are occurring on campus every week.

I am not the type to sit in my room and not know friends. I need to know people. I'm just a very social person. I like to be involved in things. I'm involved with NSBE which is the national society of black engineers. I'm also involved in IE, which is the Institute of Industrial Engineers and SME, the society of manufacturing engineers. I'm also a RA and I'm involved in my residence hall council. And I also try to just see what events the university is putting on. Like this week is African week and that's a lot of cool stuff.

While Jack and Max reported that they had a hard time adjusting socially because it has been hard to be away from their longtime girlfriends, those were not issues that arose as a result of attending an ECHS. Although Jack has gotten involved on campus as he serves as a mentor for a rehabilitation program for Latino students that have a history of a poor academic or behavioral performance, he reported that it is extremely hard being away from his

longtime girlfriend who attends another college three hours away as well as his other family members.

There've been times when I've broken down from it. It's the adjustment of being away from family and your girlfriend and everything. Oftentimes it seems insurmountable but I think you could talk to any college freshman and get similar results.

Similar to Jack's situation, Max also experienced the difficulty of being away from his girlfriend (now fiancée) and as a result of this stress, it affected his social transition into RU.

We've had our fair share of not so good times. When I first got here [RU], it was definitely really stressful because she was still in high school at the time. She still had another year of high school. So I didn't want to be at RU as much, I wanted to be at home. When she started college, it was the same deal because she goes to college almost two hours away. We actually ended up breaking up for a brief period. During that period, school kind of sucked. Everything kind of sucked. Once we got back together, things started getting good and now she can come to RU so that made things easier.

Although Jack has experienced the feeling of homesickness that many college students experience as they are away from home and everything that is familiar to them for the first time in their lives, Jack still found an outlet to get involved on campus through the Latino student rehabilitation program. However, Max was the only student in this study that

reported that he was not actively involved with extracurricular activities on campus. While he reported that he tried to get involved outside of the classroom since being at RU, he felt that he did not have the time for extracurricular activities or felt that the other students were awkward or unfriendly. In fact, he stated “I am strictly here for business” as he would rather devote his time to his academic endeavors.

I’ve tried to go to different things. Like I’ve tried to go to different clubs and usually it just comes back to that I don’t have the time or energy to invest in things like that. I tried to get involve with the game development club and everyone there is just really awkward. Computer science people are usually awkward. I didn’t really feel that welcomed and there was a brief period where I was involved with Intervarsity here on campus. I was active with them for probably two or three months. But after the end of semester, I stopped going. I’m only here for strictly business.

**Summary: Finding community on campus.** The majority of participants in this study reported that they adjusted socially to RU. Although there were aspects of attending an Early College High School that affected student’s academic adjustment such as lacking courses to take as a result of having an associate’s degree or having to take multiple science courses within one semester, this study did not find that attending an Early College High School affected students’ social adjustment. While Jack and Paul reported that that they experienced issues adjusting socially due to being away from their long-time girlfriends, this aspect of their social adjustment was not the result of having attended an ECHS. The majority of participants found their community of friends on campus and reported getting

involved in extracurricular activities outside of the classroom. Only one participant, Max, reported that he was not involved in any extracurricular activities and did not wish to devote the time to do so. The next section of this chapter will discuss the factors that were found to enhance or hinder the success of Early College participants at a research university.

### **Factors that Enhance and Hinder Success at a Research University**

The second research question in this study addressed the factors that were found to enhance or hinder the success of Early College participants at a research university. While each of the participants acknowledged that the transition to college was unlike any other transition in life that they had ever encountered, their collegiate experiences varied across the board. In regards to the hindrances, it is important to note that while Early College students experienced some difficult situations since they've been at RU, they found ways to overcome those obstacles.

### **Factors that Enhance Success**

#### **Feeling Prepared for College**

Some students felt that certain aspects of their Early College High School experience prepared them for collegiate life at RU. In fact, Early College High Schools often provide assistance to high school students in areas such as time management and navigating the new college environment (Thompson & Ongaga, 2011). College success strategies such as attending class daily and putting academics first, going to office hours, and being exposed to college jargon such as the terms “syllabus” or “prerequisites” were reported by some students as a factor that helped to enhance their success at RU. Sam pointed out that his Early

College High School was designed to prepare students to go beyond the associate's degree. Since students would be taking community college courses alongside adults from various walks of life, Sam felt as though his Early College High School taught students the necessary skills to become an adult by being proactive, paying attention to body posture and body language, and to actively engaging with professors.

At the Early College they basically prepare you and let you know that you are getting your associates degree to prepare to do more. That it wasn't the end. I felt pretty prepared for the college work. You go to office hours and everything [while in Early College]. We had syllabi. Some people when they got to college didn't even know what a syllabus was. It also kind of prepared me for college in different ways. Early College always told us to be proactive. Correct your grammar when speaking in front of adults. It was such a learning process. It got me ready for the college setting whereas I was finally going to be in a classroom with adults. I was used to that and it didn't intimidate me. It prepared me to sit in the front row. Lean forward. Pay attention. Take good notes. Nod your head and let the professor know that you are listening. Raise your hand if you have a serious question. Interact with the professor and make it more of a learning experience versus you going to class and just learning or trying to learn. That was definitely very beneficial for me.

Paul and Jasmine reported that their Early College High Schools taught them the notion of sacrifice, which is critical since college students must learn that academics always



come first. Time management and prioritization were key skills that Paul gained from his Early College experience which has been beneficial to him since he's been at RU.

We focused a lot on time management and prioritizing...that helped a lot for sure.

Time management and prioritization in general is important to figuring out which assignments deserve the most attention. If you can't get everything done due to time constraints, then you have to prioritize what you can get done. Those are the skills they harped on in high school that I think I brought with me.

Similar to Paul, Jasmine understood that academics come first in college.

Furthermore, typical high school issues such as what one wears or who one dates were irrelevant at Early College as academics was always on the forefront of students' minds.

Because Jasmine was used to having this type of mentality, she found this to be helpful when it came to putting academics first at RU.

Early College prepared me to know that fun comes last. They put it in perspective how important academics are. I noticed in regular high school when I was there, there were a lot of distractions about clothes and how you look. In Early College, you go to class like this. Comfortable. Here [at RU] it is the same. You don't have that focus on what you look like and who is the cutest and who is dating who. Nobody cares. Just get work done. That was different. I know a lot of my other friends who didn't do Early College that was different for them [at RU].

**Being accustomed to a rigorous curriculum.** Four of the participants in this study—Andrea, Jasmine, Ashley, and Christina, all attended an Early College High School that

integrated the theme of health and science throughout their curriculum. As such, each of these students reported that they were accustomed to a demanding curriculum as their Early College High School was rigorous. While in Early College, these students took a heavy load of science and math courses, which oftentimes can be more challenging courses. Although several participants in this study mentioned that they had to redefine what it meant to study learn how to study once they got to RU, Andrea was already accustomed to having to study and that studying at RU was simply a continuation of her Early College experience.

I was already like accustomed to having to study really, really hard for hard tests.

And having tests that weigh so much. Being given the freedom like you have homework but it is not due so it is your responsibility if you do it. So just being accustomed to having a college environment that is structured. So being used to that aspect coming into my freshman year was just like continuing in the year from my Early College.

Ashley stated that because her Early College High School was so rigorous, not studying was not an option if a student wanted to be successful. She has continued have this mentality at RU.

We had to study constantly which is just the way it has to work in college. Courses were really difficult in Early College. You cannot afford not to study.

Interestingly enough, Christina was the only participant in this study that commented that the humanities courses at RU were more difficult than those in high school. She also felt

that the Early College science and math courses that she took were more rigorous than the courses at RU.

I feel like a lot of the courses I took in high school, especially in math and science, were a lot more difficult. In terms of the humanities I think here [at RU] might be a little bit more difficult but in terms of math and science it was a lot more difficult at my early college.

**Summary: Feeling prepared for college.** Students who felt as though their Early College High School provided preparation for college in terms of college success strategies, time management, and prioritizing academics, felt that this enhanced their success at RU. The four participants who attended an Early College High School with a health and sciences focus commented that their High School curriculum was rigorous and as a result, they were not surprised by the rigorous curriculum at RU. The next theme addresses making connections with faculty and staff at RU in an effort to enhance success.

### **Connecting with Faculty and Staff at RU**

Connecting with faculty and staff on-campus was a factor that appeared to enhance the success of Early College students. At a large institution where a student may have a class with 300 or more students, it was important for Early College students to have a point person or cheerleader on campus—someone who was able to serve in a mentor capacity or give students the proper direction. In the College of Engineering, the largest college at RU that enrolls over 10,000 undergraduate and graduate students, it was important for Andrea to not

only develop a relationship with a faculty member that knew her on an individual level but also to connect with another woman in a male-dominated field.

Last summer I got a job on campus. So through that, I have been able to network with a lot of the college of engineering faculty. One was Dr. Yi. She is the one I took EC212 with, one of my favorite classes. Just having a relationship with her. Not only just having someone that knows me enough to write me a letter of recommendation but just it felt good having a relationship with a faculty that knows me because I don't have like any faculty that I can like go to for a recommendation and things. Plus she is an electrical engineer so like if I have any questions or need advice she is the person I can talk to.

Whereas it was important for Andrea to connect with a female faculty member in a male-dominated field, Christina also felt that as a minority, it was important to connect with faculty who would be supportive in advancing her post-graduate goals. Christina is involved with a mentoring program that is designed to increase the number of students of color in undergraduate research. For Christina, it has been extremely beneficial to have a faculty mentor who has not only been supportive but one that has looked out for her to ensure to extend her learning beyond the classroom and help prepare for her for future doctoral work.

I'm a member of the IMSC program and it pretty much puts minority students in research. So if minorities are interested in behavioral or biomedical sciences it puts them with a faculty mentor and puts them in research with the goal of getting them into Ph.D. programs. That's been super supportive in every way possible because

they even fund travel and pay me for research and everything and it's been really nice because a lot of people don't get that as undergrads and it is super important for Ph.D. programs to have research experience. I feel like RU has been awesome finding ways to support people. I do research with my faculty mentor; I've known him since I was a freshman. When I went to a conference, I won best oral presentation and when I told him he said, "I'm so proud of you!" and was really nice about it. In general all the professors have been really nice.

Ashley and Max found that connecting with faculty at RU who genuinely cared about their academic success and took the time to get to know them personally, was of the utmost importance, especially at a large institution like RU. Ashley stated:

There is a professor that is in my department. He's another wonderful professor. What I loved about him is that he really cares about his students. You can tell that he cares about our education. I remember this one time where we had to write papers and I didn't do so well on the first one. I emailed the TA because I know he's [the professor] busy so that I can get some help with doing better on the next paper. He [the professor] emails me back and he says 'hey, so it was a good thing that you went to our TA but you know what can help you is if you come by my office. I'll squeeze you in for 20 minutes'. He helped me a lot! I wrote a quick rough draft of the paper and he looked at it and said 'just work on this and this.' I was just so amazed. That still gets me to this day.

For Max, connecting with a faculty or staff member that he was able to develop a one-on-one relationship with and that he felt had a genuine interest in him as a student has been extremely beneficial.

I did take a class that helped with applying for jobs, building resumes, how to interview and the teacher was really enthusiastic and really passionate about her job and what she does. She was very, very encouraging to her students. I had her look at my resume and she just gave really helpful feedback like “you can also go here and here and here. And send some emails out and do this.” She was just very knowledgeable about it and was willing to sit down and spend that time with you. I guess that the only person that I ever felt like gave a crap if I passed or failed or dropped out is my career counselor. She was very enthusiastic and knew everyone by name, knew their faces and would sit down and actually remembered stuff that you told them and ask you how things were going. That’s the only time where I felt like someone actually cared. I don’t feel like I’ve really made any personal connections with any of them [faculty or staff] other than that one career counselor.

Because of the challenging curricula in the physics major, it was important for Paul to connect with graduate student teaching assistants who can provide academic coaching and hands-on support which he has found helped him persevere with the physics major.

One of the most positive experiences I’ve had has been with the research group I’m with. I worked with some of the graduate students who are working on their Ph.D.’s in physics and are TA’s, they can talk about some of the experiences they have had

and relate to some of my experiences They suggest different things, different ways to tackle a class or whatever kind of issue that might be. I'd say they've definitely some of the most helpful people. They stay up late too sometimes. The research group is what keeps me going in physics honestly because the curricula gets very difficult sometimes but it's the hands-on aspect and seeing things happen and doing things. That's the part that keeps me going.

**Summary: Connecting with faculty and staff at RU.** Several participants noted the importance of connecting with faculty and staff at RU. Through these connections, students found mentors, individuals who assisted them academically outside of the classroom, and individuals that genuinely cared and were invested in their success as a student. Similar to connecting with faculty and staff on campus, several students of color in this study found that it was important to remain connected to their cultural community. The next section will discuss the theme of maintaining cultural connections.

### **Maintaining Cultural Connections**

Three students of color in this study expressed that specifically connecting with other minority faculty, staff, and students was instrumental to their adjustment to RU as well as enhancing their overall success. Connecting with other minorities allowed students of color to feel a sense of belonging and connection to a predominantly white institution. Building community on campus others with shared similar experiences because of their racial/ethnic backgrounds as well as having a support out proved to be beneficial for Early College students of color.

Austin formed a strong connection with this academic advisor who is also a faculty member of color in the engineering department. Not only does she serve as his point person to assist him with his academic and career goals, they were able to form a connection outside of the academic realm where they can just be themselves and connect on a personal level. As such, Austin knows that there is always a point person on campus for him.

She's helped me prepare for the career fair, resume, critiquing, how to go through an interview. We simulated an interview and she gave me tips on that. And then sometimes, she just kind of helps me with cultural appropriations too. RU is majority white and my academic advisor is black. So sometimes, I'll go in there, we won't talk nothing academics. Black people talking about choir and the fish fry. And I really need that! And that's why I miss home sometimes because we used to do hoodrat things and just be ratchet. And then we go to school and be all professional. And then school ends and we be right back doing hoodrat stuff. I'm glad that worked out for me. She's been helpful with that, just culture-wise. My advisor and I clicked from day one. It's like we're right here. And I need that! I really do!

Jasmine felt empowered as a person of color when she participates in various African-American events at RU as it provides comfort for her and has helped her gain a sense of community in a predominately white environment. For Jasmine, it was important to connect with other students of color who have the same goals through cultural events and that would provide a "safe space" for her.



When I came to RU, I was ready to get involved with the black community and just see other black students who are striving for their goals and were just grateful to be here. I was excited to meet some black people that I felt actually matched me. That I would be happy and willing to hang out with outside of school. So, I actually really love going to the African American events. Anything that is driven towards learning about our history, I love that. The community is so empowering. You go and you are feeling sad because you did badly on your test and they are like “you beautiful black people. You are all kings and queens and you came from a wonderful place and wonderful people.” That is always very spiritually uplifting because walking around campus because to be honest, I don’t see a lot of people that look like me. I have to seek out the environment to where I feel comfortable. Going to those events, I love those. Last week was African week and so they had a lot of diversity education events. Black community stuff and mentoring stuff. That is close to my heart. Similar to Jasmine, Sam found that the multicultural center is his “safe space” on campus where he can just be himself in a supportive environment.

The multi-cultural student center is very influential in my college experience. I’ve always felt like I could go to them and talk to them about anything. Life. Classes. Like anything. They always had resources. That’s like the safe place here. If I can’t go anywhere else I know that I can go there and there is somebody there that I can talk to.

Sam went on to discuss a transition program called the African-American symposium which helped him build community with other African-Americans—faculty, staff and students, early in his college career.

I actually had the opportunity to participate in a transition program called the African-American Symposium. So they actually allowed us to move in like a week before or a couple days before everybody else moved in and they had more of an African-American cultural experience where we got to meet more minority students. Talk to the minority advisors. See some faculty advisors that were in our major that were African-Americans. And have a chance to meet each other and talk on a more personal level. That helped in my transition to college 100% because I actually then got to talk to someone who kind of could tell me who I needed to talk to who could help me more. So that was definitely beneficial for me to this day.

**Summary: Maintaining cultural connections.** Several students of color found that maintaining a cultural connection to their community was essential to their overall success at RU. At a predominantly white institution where a student may feel like the “other,” it was important for these students to find their safe space on campus whether that is through connecting with other faculty, staff, and students of color or attending cultural events that empowered them to persevere through life’s difficulties as a person of color. The next section will discuss hindrances to an Early College student’s success. For a few participants of color who participated in this study, they discussed experiencing racism and racial

microaggressions on RU's campus. As such, this made the case for maintaining cultural connections at RU for students of color even more important.

### **Factors that Hinder Success**

#### **Experiencing Racism/Racial Microaggressions**

RU is a predominantly white institution with a minority enrollment of almost 20% (excluding international students). Although the university has a plethora of diversity initiatives in place such as a director or an assistant dean that handles diversity in every college, various diversity partners across the institution, and a chief diversity officer and a multicultural affairs office on campus, unfortunately it still does not exempt students of color from encountering some type of racism or racial microaggressions. While the topic of racism was not a question on the interview protocol for this study, it is noteworthy that two Black/African-American participants willingly and openly discussed their experiences in this arena. Although Jasmine identified as Black or African-American, she had never encountered any type of racism prior to attending RU. She stated that while there were other minorities in her early college high school, mainly other ethnic minorities, in her words, "there was never any blatant disrespect or ignorance." Jasmine described her first encounter with racism at RU. This particular incident made her feel very uncomfortable and as a result, she no longer felt welcome at RU.

Coming here was the first time that I experienced any racism. Coming here, I've encountered it first-hand. I was like it is 2015. Are we serious? We are in higher education. It baffled me. There was a specific incident that happened when I was a

freshman and this is the reason that I've only been to one football game since I've been here. I don't plan to go to anymore. I went to a football game and there were people tailgating and I was out with my roommate, my suite mates who were all white. They were going to the white fraternity and sororities that were tailgating and kind of walking through that area. Those people were offering them, their white friends, offering them food and drinks and stuff. They acted like I was absolutely invisible. That was before the game even started. Then I get to the game and I'm looking at the screen and everything and it is like all the people that are showing up on the screen were all white. I think there was one black girl. I was like looking around just feeling like I did not belong. Then I go out and get a chicken sandwich and come back and sit down. There was a white guy sitting next to me. I opened up my packet, my chicken sandwich, and he tries to reach over and take some of my sandwich and says "break a little piece off." I was like "Oh my gosh! I don't know you." I patted his hand like no. And he said out loud, "boy, you black people really are crazy about your friend chicken." For the first time in my life I was speechless. I was like; it was like everything froze. Did you just say that to me? Another guy said, "Dude, that is racist. Why did you say that?" I was just quiet. I did not know what to say. It was just like why did you do that? It bothered me. I called my mom. I wanted to go home after that. I was like I'm done here [at RU]. I do not feel welcome or comfortable. I feel like I'm surrounded by ignorant people. I don't want to be here anymore. I called my mom and told her I had never experienced anything

like this. It hurt my feelings. It made me sad that there are still people out here that think that way. They think it is ok to say stuff like that. Very derogatory. Then I could just only imagine how many other people walking around campus with those same views.

While Sam did not report blatant racism toward him specifically, he did mention that he has been exposed to racism through various incidents have happened around campus and racism toward his historically black fraternity. He also pointed out that the fight song mentioned the notion of “Dixie Pride” which is affiliated with the southern confederacy and is often interpreted by many Blacks or African-Americans as racist.

Yeah, I’ve definitely experienced racism. Again, not towards me but towards my fraternity or towards the things that some organizations that I’ve been in have done. They painted the N word on the free expression wall before. They have covered up murals. They’ve put just disrespectful things. There are rumors spread about, I mean just petty stuff that shouldn’t exist at a university where we supposed to be enlightening people, we are supposed to be educated people. It kind of surprises me that people still act that way. I wasn’t really surprised about it. I know they have an agricultural school and I know Dixie pride is something that we’re actually debating right now. It’s like whether they should keep the Dixie in the fight song or whatever. And so it is just a part of the early beginnings of the university and some people feel as though things in the past should remain the way they were.

Both Jasmine and Sam described the racial undertones that exist at RU. Jasmine was extremely bothered by the derogatory comments that were made when the first black SGA president was elected. Since she had never encountered racism prior to arriving at RU, she was extremely bothered and disturbed that these racial undertones existed at RU.

And then the first SGA black president of RU, when he was elected. There were so many people on there being so derogatory, so negative. Not happy about the fact that there was a black student leading RU. What is the problem? Even before he was president, he was doing so much for the campus. None of that mattered because he was Black. I was like wow. That is disgusting. Just absolutely disturbing. I was completely not expecting that. Any type of racism. I had no idea.

Sam also commented on the racial undertone of the climate at RU and the misconceptions that are held about being a black student at RU.

There is a culture I feel here of white supremacy sometimes. Some people feel like we got here based on numbers. They think we are here to fill a quota. I've heard that before. That we're not as smart as the white kids that go here. We are just here because we are black. There are a lot of sub tones of things or microaggressions that we're not able to get certain venues that other organizations get or certain recognition or exposure. Those are definitely things that I've experienced here.

**Summary: Experiencing racism/racial microaggressions.** Although the concept of racism was not included on the interview protocol used for this study, it was very telling that this concept was discussed willingly by Jasmine and Sam, both of whom identify as Black or

African-American. As the researcher, I felt it necessary to include Jasmine and Sam's personal experiences with racism and racial microaggressions at RU to illustrate that regardless of one's educational level, what they have achieved, or how many diversity initiatives are in place, unfortunately students of color are not exempt from this social construct. This certainly proved to be a hindrance to one's success in college as students at RU were being judged strictly by the color of one's skin as opposed to the content of their character.

### **Feeling Unprepared for College**

While a couple of students commented that their Early College High School provided a good foundation for academics at RU, there were several participants who did not feel like their Early College High School prepared them for academics at RU. Brian stated that his high school met the threshold in terms of providing a high school education although it did not go above and beyond the call of duty. He felt as though what he learned was self-initiated as opposed to learning from the classroom.

I got a high school education and then some. The Early College was a little bit of a joke. I didn't show up to most of my classes most of the time and was doing mostly stuff outside of class. I was just out learning by myself about particular things that I was interested in. Obviously we learned what we were expected to learn but I don't think it went above and beyond.

Max complained that his Early College High School did not teach students to be independent. He felt as if Early College High School faculty acted like their parents instead

of their instructors and were more concerned about the politics of making sure that students did well academically.

I feel like Early College didn't really prepare you for the college environment because I felt like they were more focused on grades. So whenever a student wasn't doing so well in a college course, they politic-ed and talked to the professors and figured something out. So their main focus was that we were getting good grades and when something went wrong, they acted like, your parents. "Oh, how's that grade? You're making below a B, why is that?" So when you get to college, you're on your own and so you basically didn't have someone looking out for you. I guess that's been my main complaint about Early College. It got you ahead but as far as getting you prepared for college, they should have done a better job of letting the students do stuff themselves.

Austin and Sam stated that their Early College High Schools did not provide them with a strong STEM preparation and as a result, they felt as though their non-Early College peers were much more well prepared to take the STEM courses than they were. Because he did not take many STEM courses in his Early College High School, he explained that it is still difficult for him to grasp these concepts.

I wish I would have done more math and science classes [in Early College High School]. Actually coming in, I had to take pre-calc which a lot of the guys on my hall didn't have to take. They just jumped into Calc 2. Sometimes even Calc 3 because they took AP and IB courses so it wasn't nothing to them. One thing I do feel like my



non Early College peers had over me is that they had their AP credits and their IBs and I see them now in my Calc 1,2, 3 where we are learning integrals and how to derive stuff, statistics, and how easy they can grasp some of that stuff. And it takes me a little longer and honestly, I'm still trying to get it. I see how easy they can grasp some of that stuff and it takes me a little longer. So I wish that I would have in Early College we focused a lot more on the maths and sciences than everything else. I would say that's one thing that has definitely hindered me at RU.

Sam asserted that the STEM courses at RU are very rigorous and theoretical and were not taught in this manner in his Early College High School. Unfortunately, not having the proper STEM background may have contributed to him experiencing academic difficulty and eventually landed him on academic probation.

When I was an engineering major, I had a 1.9 [GPA] and I was on academic probation. I've definitely experienced a lot of academic difficulties just with sitting in classes that are very rigorous and theoretical. Like my physics class or chemistry. Things that we didn't touch at Early College. Which were completely new and having to learn that in this different setting was very difficult.

Stephanie reported an interesting paradox as it pertained to her Early College High School. She stated that high school did not prepare her for college but yet mentioned that her Early College High School taught time management. So while she was taught this particular skill in high school, because she never had to study in high school she found it hard to transfer that particular skillset to helping her be successful at RU.

They [Early College] set me up to have a nice starting place but because I never had to study in high school. I have time management skills and know how I should be managing my time but that does not mean that I do it. Same with the tests; I'll try and study for tests but I still don't know what I'm doing. At this point I've figured out how to do it well enough. I don't fail anything anymore.

Jasmine previously mentioned that her Early College High School prepared her for collegiate life at RU in that it taught her to always put academics first. However, she still pondered the idea as if high school, whether it is Early College or not, can truly prepare you for college work.

When I think about it, you can't take somebody who just got out of high school and give them some junior level college science classes. It's not going to work. It just takes a different—you have to just approach the class in a completely different way than you would have in high school. No I don't feel like I was prepared but I'm not sure that there is anything that they could have done to prepare me.

**Summary: Feeling unprepared for college.** While a number of participants noted that their Early College High School prepared them for college, conversely, there were several students who felt as though their Early College did not provide the adequate preparation for college. A couple of participants felt as if their Early College did not provide the proper STEM preparation to be successful in those classes. Other participants noted that the Early College was a “joke” or that the Early College did not encourage its students to be independent. While it is certainly important that a high school, whether Early College or not,

prepares students for college-level coursework, sometimes there is no level of preparation that can truly prepare students for what college entails.

### **Chapter Summary**

This chapter presented the findings revealed by this study. Data from individual interviews were included to describe the Early College participants' perceptions of their transition to a research university and the factors that enhanced and hindered their success. Sample quotations from the interviews with the Early College students and the academic advisors were used to portray the Early College student experience at a research university.

Research question one explored Early College High School participants' perceptions of their transition to a research university. The first theme that surfaced was that Early College students felt as though they received repetitive/irrelevant information matriculating into RU. Although they were considered by RU as first-year students, their experiences were not congruent with the typical incoming first-year student as they were not transitioning into college for the first time.

The second theme to surface from the first research question was the struggle to cultivate meaningful advisor relationships. Participants noted that they would have liked to have fostered more meaningful relationships and interactions with their academic advisors as opposed to feeling like another number or feeling as though their advisors were pressed for time. Conversely, there were participants who reported positive interactions with academic advisors. Being familiar with the Early College model, helping students to think outside of the box in regards to their career pursuits, and making a genuine effort to get to know their

students were all found to lead to positive advising experiences for Early College participants. The third theme illustrated the need for Early College participants to understand the academic implications of having an associate's degree. Although this was definitely a perk of attending an Early College High School, the downside was that students lacked courses to take, had to take multiple sciences classes within a semester, or encountered an "Early College unfriendly" policy called the tuition surcharge.

The fourth theme to emerge in response to the participants' perceptions of their transition to a research university was that they had to acclimate to a rigorous curriculum. Participants noted distinctive curricular and pedagogical differences as well as differences between the Early College faculty and the faculty at RU. Participants also discussed having to learn how to study effectively in order to be successful at RU. Several participants reported experiencing academic difficulty as a result of the rigor. Adjusting to the particulars of RU proved to be a learning process for Early College students as this was distinct from anything that they had ever experienced before. The final theme to emerge from the first research question was that the majority of Early College reported finding community on campus. Their social adjustment into the university was not compromised by the fact that they had attended an Early College High School. The majority of participants reported that they had found a sense of belonging among their friends and were involved in extracurricular activities outside of the classroom.

The second research question in this study sought to identify the factors that enhanced or hindered the success of Early College participants at a research university. Factors that

were found to enhance Early College student success included feeling prepared for college, connecting with faculty and staff at RU, and maintaining cultural connections. Experiencing racism/racial microaggressions, and feeling unprepared for college-level coursework were found to be factors that hindered the success of Early College students at a research university. Although Early College students encountered some obstacles while they were at RU, they found ways to overcome those barriers. Each Early College participant in this study had a unique educational journey to share that was reflective of them as an individual. When asked if they would choose RU if they had to do it all over again, all eleven participants replied “yes” and that they would not trade this experience for anything.

## **CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS**

This dissertation sought to gain an understanding of the transition experiences of students who attended an Early College High School on a community college campus and are now attending a doctoral-granting large public research university (with very high research activity) in the southeastern United States. Using a qualitative methodology, this study sought to answer the following research questions:

1. What were Early College High School participants' perceptions of their transition to a research university?
2. What factors enhanced or hindered the success of Early College High School participants at a research university?

The following chapter begins with a description of the study along with an overview of the themes that emerged from data analysis. Based upon these findings, I was able to derive key conclusions and will discuss how these conclusions align with, challenge, and extend the literature on community college transfer students who were the parallel population to Early College students. Next, the theoretical implications of the study will be discussed. The chapter will conclude with a discussion of the implications for practice and policy and the implications for future research.

### **Summary of Findings**

This study was based on semi-structured interviews with eleven students who attended an Early College High School on a community college campus. Five female students and six male students participated in this study. The students ranged in age from 18

to 24 years old. Five students identified as Black or African-American, one student identified as Egyptian, and the other five students identified as White or Caucasian. All eleven students entered RU with an associate's degree from a community college in the state in which RU is located. Six students identified as first-generation college students, meaning that neither parent obtained a bachelor's degree. While two of the students did not identify as a first-generation college student, they did acknowledge that their parent(s) attended college outside of the United States and as a result, they felt like a first-generation college student in that they had to learn to navigate the college application process and the college experience on their own. Self-reported GPAs ranged from 2.6 to a 3.95. Two academic advisors at RU were also interviewed in order to shed additional light on the transition experiences of Early College participants from an advising perspective as advisors often have the most regular interactions with students from the time of matriculation through graduation (students at RU are required to meet with an academic advisor prior to registering for the next semester's classes).

The student interview protocol included questions about their experiences at the Early College High School they attended, their transition into RU, as well as their academic and co-curricular experiences at RU. These interview questions were situated within the 4 S's (situation, self, support, and strategies) of Schlossberg, Waters, and Goodman's (1995) Transition Theory, which provides insight as to how a person responds to transition as well as the characteristics of the individual experiencing the transition (Schlossberg, 1981). Strengths or weaknesses in any of the "4 S's" can either facilitate or hinder a successful

transition (Schlossberg et al., 1995). The academic advisor interview protocol included questions intended to shed light on Early College students' transition from an advising perspective, including any challenges associated with advising these students and any institutional policies that they felt enhanced or hindered the success of this particular student population. Qualitative analysis of the interview transcripts provided data to answer the research questions.

For research question one, regarding Early College participants' perceptions of their transition to a research university, the first identified theme was that Early College students felt that they received repetitive/irrelevant information upon matriculating into RU. Although they were considered first-year students by RU, these students were accustomed to a collegiate environment and as a result, had a different set of needs than the typical incoming first-year student. Unfortunately, their needs were not met through their new student orientation experience. The second theme addressed Early College participants' struggle to cultivate relationships with their academic advisors. Some participants reported dissatisfaction with the advising process and felt as though they were simply another number on the advisor's caseload, were inaccessible, or that the advising interactions were brief and did not contain substance. Conversely, there were some participants who reported positive and nourishing interactions with their advisors. Advisors who were familiar with the Early College model and knew how to adequately advise students with an associate's degree, were able to look at the bigger picture in terms of what would help them achieve their career pursuits,



and advisors who carved out time for their students in an effort to genuinely get to know their students were found to be qualities that led to having a positive advising experience.

The third theme illustrated the need for Early College participants to understand the implications of entering college with an associate's degree. While having an associate's degree as a first-year student at RU was advantageous in terms of course registration, this degree proved to be burdensome as well in some aspects such as lacking courses to take, having to take multiple science courses within a given semester, or encountering the tuition surcharge policy which had an adverse effect on Early College students.

An additional theme regarding Early College participants' transition to a research university was that these students had to acclimate to a rigorous curriculum. Although Early College participants were previously accustomed to a collegiate environment, several participants noted that the curriculum at RU was much more rigorous than any community college course that they had taken previously. Subthemes within this theme included 1) noting distinctive curricular and pedagogical differences, 2) noting differences between Early College and RU faculty, 3) learning to study effectively, and 4) experiencing academic difficulty as a result of a rigorous curriculum. The final theme in regards to the first research question was that Early College students were able to find community on campus. The majority of students reported that they had acclimated socially to RU. Early College students had found their community of friends on campus and were actively involved in activities outside of the classroom. Coming from an Early College High School was not found to have a direct impact on these students' social adjustment into the university.

Research question two sought to identify the factors that enhanced or hindered the success of Early College participants at a research university. Factors found to enhance the success of Early College students included feeling prepared for college, connecting with faculty and staff at RU, and maintaining cultural connections. Students who expressed that their Early College High School prepared them for college felt that this was a contributing factor to their success at RU. In fact, being accustomed to a rigorous curriculum was a subtheme that emerged in this study. Four of the participants, all of whom attended an Early College High School with a health and science focus, felt as though their Early College curriculum was rigorous and as a result, they were familiar with taking demanding courses. The second theme, connecting with faculty and staff, also enhanced the success of participants. At an institution with over 30,000 students, it was important for students to find a faculty or staff member on campus who served as their point person, mentor, or cheerleader. The final theme, maintaining cultural connections, was found to be of the utmost importance for students of color at RU. Connecting with other faculty, staff, and students of color produced a sense of belonging amongst these students, which was important in a predominantly white institution. It was through these connections where students of color felt safe and felt empowered to persevere in light of life's atrocities as a person of color. This was particularly important as one of the themes that was found to hinder the success of Early College students involved encountering racism/racial microaggressions. Maintaining those cultural connections with other faculty, staff, and students from similar

racial/ethnic backgrounds was a way to ameliorate the racism and racial undertones that they encountered at RU.

Feeling unprepared for college was another theme that was found to hinder the success of Early College students. While a number of participants noted that their Early College High School prepared them for college, conversely, there were several students who felt as though their Early College did not provide the adequate preparation for college. A couple of participants felt as if their Early College did not provide the proper STEM preparation to be successful in those classes. Other participants noted that their Early College was a “joke” or that their ECHS did not encourage students to be independent. Although some of the Early College students faced obstacles at RU, they have found ways to persevere and overcome these barriers as they knew that obtaining a degree from RU would be well worth it in the long-run.

### **Key Conclusions**

Based on the narratives that Early College participants shared regarding their collegiate experiences at RU, I have drawn four key conclusions that elaborate on this study’s findings and connect them to the literature. As the reader may recall, community college transfer students were considered to be the parallel population for this study as both community college transfer students and Early College participants shared similar demographic characteristics. The following sections discuss each conclusion in detail.

### **The Academic Transition for Early College Students is Not Always Smooth**

Going to college can be an exciting (and sometimes overwhelming) transition for students. Oftentimes, students are leaving home for the first time and entering a completely new environment. While students may have been accustomed to a more structured environment in high school where a parent reminded them to do their homework or the parent did their laundry for them, students now find themselves having to be self-sufficient and having to learn how to handle these everyday life tasks on their own. In addition, students have to confront the reality of the higher expectations that their new academic environment imposes upon them and as a result, students may find the academic rigor of college to be challenging. Although Early College students were familiar with a collegiate environment, as they previously attended high school on a community college campus and took community college courses, the participants in this study still noted that there were several aspects of their academic transition to RU that were not as smooth as they would have expected. Pascarella and Terenzini (1991) described the transition of moving from one educational environment to another as a form of culture shock in that the two environments differ greatly from one another. This was certainly the case for the Early College participants in this study as they noted distinctive differences between their former academic environment and their new academic environment which suggests that the transition of moving from a community college to a four-year university is not always a smooth one.

Although community college transfer students were considered to be the parallel student population for the purposes of this study, the Early College student population is still

a unique population in and of themselves. Townsend and Wilson (2006) asserted that community college transfer students, unlike first-year students, do not receive the same amount of attention in regards to certain areas, such as orientation, to facilitate a seamless transition into the university. While it is true that RU offers comprehensive two-day new-student orientation sessions for all incoming first-year students, contrary to this assertion by Townsend and Wilson (2006), simply attending an orientation session in an effort to get Early College students acclimated to RU was not enough. These students desired to receive information that was specific to their unique academic situation as an Early College student which is an important contribution to the literature regarding this particular student population. These students entered RU with an associate's degree and as a result, were unsure as to what requirements they had fulfilled and which requirements they would need to fulfill at RU. Furthermore, the Early College students in this study expressed their discontent with the academic component of orientation as the information that they received was repetitive or irrelevant. Early College students were coming from an academic environment that was atypical of the average incoming student. Some of the information presented during new student orientation such as the college success strategies of note-taking, sitting in the front of class, time management, and so forth were all familiar to Early College students as these were concepts that were taught in high school. Thus, while it is important that the university offers a comprehensive orientation for all incoming students, it is even more critical that the university provides various student constituents with the proper information that they need to assist in a seamless transition.

In addition, there was a lack of understanding in regards to the academic implications of having an associate's degree and how that would affect their experience at RU. The Early College participants in this study entered RU with an associate's degree and as a result, they fulfilled the vast majority of their general education requirements. Although a number of participants reported that an associate's degree worked to their advantage in terms of course registration, there were also participants who lacked the courses to take, as they had fulfilled a plethora of their degree requirements, or found themselves having to take multiple science classes within a given semester. This was particularly an issue for STEM majors as they were unable to take courses concurrently because of prerequisites or had to take several science courses within a given semester as they had fulfilled their other degree requirements. Aligned with the community college transfer student literature, inconsistencies and differences between the community college curriculum and the four-year college curriculum may not always prepare students for the academic rigor that research institutions impose among their students (Laanan, 1996; Townsend, 2006). Several Early College participants noticed that the courses at RU were much more rigorous than the courses that they took at their community college. Early College participants noted that courses were taught at a much faster-pace and contained a much greater volume of information than what students were accustomed to. Students also had to adapt to a new concept of "studying" as this was something that several Early College students never had to do before or students found themselves having to adjust their study habits at RU. As a result there were a number of Early College participants that experienced academic difficulty in some of their classes. The

rigor of the curriculum was found to impact the academic transition of several of the Early College participants in this study.

Another cause of misunderstanding in regards to the implications of having an associate's degree was whether they could (or should) graduate in two years versus four years. One of the advantages of Early College is the fact that students can simultaneously earn a high school diploma and up to two years of transferrable college credit—tuition free (Jobs for the Future, 2015). As a result, some Early College High Schools communicate to students and their families that once they reach the four-year institution, students will be able to graduate in two years. At RU, this was not necessarily the case, especially for STEM majors. Although Early College students had fulfilled the majority of their general education requirements, several majors at RU are designed to be completed in four years as opposed to two years due to prerequisites and certain admission criteria into majors. Furthermore, even if an Early College student is able to graduate in two years, depending on his or her educational pursuits, graduating in two years may not be in the best interest of the student. Christina touched upon this point during her interview. Since she was planning to pursue a Ph.D. in psychology upon graduation, graduate schools would favor her much more highly if she completed her degree in four years as opposed to two years because extended time in college would allow her the opportunity to participate in undergraduate research. In fact, although the eleven Early College participants in this study represented a variety of majors, only one student, Jack, expressed an interest in graduating in two years. Jack was an accounting major and explained that his academic advisor informed him that if he took

eighteen credit hours each semester, there was a strong possibility that he would be able to graduate in two years. The downside of graduating in two years for Jack would be that he would lack the internship experience that accounting firms required of candidates, as the “Big Four” accounting firms in the country oftentimes do not hire first-year or second-year interns. Based upon the students’ narratives in regards to their academic experiences at RU, simply possessing an associate’s degree as a first-year student was not always cut and dry as there were “several moving pieces” that the Early College students did not understand upon entering RU.

Furthermore, a couple of Early College participants in this study encountered the tuition surcharge policy. According to the tuition surcharge policy, degree-seeking students who exceed credit hour limits towards their degree may be subject to a 50 percent tuition surcharge if students complete more than 140 degree credit hours toward the bachelor’s degree (Tuition Surcharge, 2016). This includes transfer courses and as such, included all of the transfer credits that Early College students brought into RU. Thus, encountering the tuition surcharge policy was another adverse effect of entering RU with an associate’s degree. Early College participants expressed their dissatisfaction with this policy and felt that it was burdensome and a hassle to resolve. Interestingly enough, AP, IB, and CLEP credits were excluded from this tuition surcharge policy so students who entered RU with any of these credits would not likely encounter this tuition surcharge policy. The tuition surcharge policy proved to be an unfair institutional policy that did not favor Early College students who entered RU with an associate’s degree.



Although the transition was not always smooth for Early College participants at RU, a student's "Self," which includes psychological resources such as optimism, self-efficacy, ego development, and values influenced their ability to cope with a situation (Schlossberg et al., 1995). This component of "self" can essentially affect the other "S's"—support and strategies—in terms of how a student navigates the transition. For instance, although Sam, a former engineering major, experienced numerous academic difficulties during his time at RU and once found himself on academic probation, it was something within him that would not let him give up. He utilized various campus resources such as the tutorial center, joined a study group, went to office hours, and even changed his major. Brian, on the other hand, also began RU as an engineering major. However, during his first semester when he began to experience academic difficulty in his classes, instead of reaching out to his professors or utilizing campus resources, he essentially "checked out" and stopped attending his engineering classes for the remainder of the semester. This illustrates how one's "Self" can approach the same situation (academic difficulty) in different ways depending upon the person's psychological resources.

Based on the Early College participants' accounts of their academic experiences at RU, the academic transition was not always a smooth one. While it may be thought of that having an associate's degree as a first-year student would be advantageous to a student, this was not always the case for Early College students at RU. As a result, Early College students

at RU sometimes experienced several bumps along the road in regards to their academic transition.

### **Academic Advising Was Viewed as Hit or Miss by Early College students**

One area in which an institution can implement quality exchanges between students and the academic environment is through academic advising (Habley, 2004). Academic advisors are among the few individuals on campus with whom students can obtain access and make a connection (Council for the Advancement of Standards in Higher Education, 2017). Academic advisors can also help to craft meaningful learning experiences as well as encourage achievement of a student's educational, career, and life goals (Hunter & White, 2004). Academic advising has been considered one of the leading resources related to student retention, especially among first-generation students (Lowe & Toney, 2000; Nutt, 2003, Tinto, 2006).

Early College participants' academic advising experiences at RU were reported as either a hit or miss. The students who expressed dissatisfaction with their advisors felt as if their interactions were "superficial." Students reported feeling pressed for time, feeling like another number, or not feeling like their advisor did anything beyond "checking off the box." One student, Brian, reported that his advisor was inaccessible and that despite his numerous efforts to get in contact with his advisor, it was impossible to even get a response from him, let alone an advising session. As a result, he went for several years at RU without interacting with an advisor. Another student, Max, described his initial advising experiences as an Early College student as feeling as if he was the "elephant in the room" as advisors knew that his

academic situation was different but they were unable to meet his needs. He also had a negative advising experience with an advisor in his major department whom he felt was very demeaning and intimidating and as a result, he tried to avoid seeing his advisor at all costs. Furthermore, even though he experienced significant academic difficulty during his tenure at RU although he did not utilize resources to help him handle this difficulty. As it pertains to Transition Theory, encountering a negative support source can have an influence on the other S's. Perhaps if Max's academic advisor had served as a positive source of "Support" it would have influenced the psychological resources of his "Self" to view academic difficulty from a different perspective (perhaps more optimistically), which would then cause him to develop effective "Strategies" (modifying the situation, managing stress) to transition through his "Situation," which was the academic difficulty.

It is noteworthy that the students who reported negative advising experiences were all first-generation students. Academic advising has consistently reported in the literature as having a positive influence on student retention (Habley & McClanahan, 2004; Ishitani, 2006; Kirk-Kuwaye & Nishida, 2001; Nutt, 2003). Although none of these students dropped out from RU, their advising experiences had the potential to have a damaging effect on their overall collegiate experience. Sam even acknowledged that had he had a meaningful relationship with his academic advisor, there would have been a possibility that he would have been able to stay in the engineering major, as he and his advisor could have had a substantial conversation about his educational and career goals and developed an appropriate educational plan for him to follow.

Not all Early College participants reported having a negative experience with their academic advisors. In fact, several Early College participants reported that they developed positive and nourishing relationships with their academic advisors. Being familiar with the Early College model and knowing how to adequately advise students with an associate's degree was credited with having a positive academic advising experience. In addition, advising students beyond their degree requirements and helping students to look and think "outside of the box" in regards to their career pursuits was another factor that was associated with a positive academic experience. Finally, advisors who simply carved out time for their students in an effort to get to know their students in a genuine way also led to a higher level of satisfaction with academic advising. In fact, quality academic advising can promote student engagement by influencing student achievement, encouraging student involvement inside and outside of the classroom, as well as helping students identify their strengths and interests related to their educational and career goals (Young-Jones et al., 2013). While it is important for all college students to have a positive advising experience, it is particularly important for Early College students to have a positive and meaningful advising experience. This is an important dimension of the Early College student experience. These students' advising needs are so complex and as demonstrated by this research study, having an associate's degree as a first-year student sometimes had an adverse effect on the academic transition. Similar to the community college transfer student literature, Early College students who experienced dissatisfaction with advising is often the result of the lack of clarity in policy understanding and delays in communication (Ellis, 2013; Flaga, 2006; Gawley &

McGowan, 2006). If Early College students can establish quality advising relationships early in their collegiate career and gain clarity about the ins and outs of how their associate's degree will impact their educational journey at RU, it will make for a more meaningful collegiate experience overall.

### **Early College Did Not Affect the Social Transition to RU**

While coming from an ECHS with an associate's degree directly affected the academic transition for a plethora of Early College participants, it did not appear to compromise the social transition into the university. The majority of the Early College participants reported that they adjusted socially to RU. "Support," according to Transition Theory, refers to social support and includes intimate relationships, family units, networks of friends, and institutions and communities (Schlossberg et al., 1995). All eleven participants in this study noted that they had positive support networks in their lives that included family and friends. The majority of participants found a community of friends on campus and reported getting involved in extracurricular activities outside of the classroom, which also served as a mechanism of support. Contrary to the community college transfer student research that suggests that these students have difficulty making friends once they enter a four-year institution (Ishitani and McKitrick (2010); Townsend & Wilson, 2006; Tobolowsky & Cox, 2012), this finding did not apply with the Early College participants in this study. Since the Early College participants in this study were considered first-year students by RU and since they entered RU from day one as opposed to a transfer student who enters the university during their sophomore or junior year, Early College participants

experienced a similar social transition as other incoming first-year students. Therefore, Early College participants had access to all of the initiatives that the university established in an effort to acclimate students into RU such as Welcome Week activities, living-learning communities within the residence halls, and movie nights. Through these activities, Early College students, like other first-year students, not only got a chance to get familiar with the university but they were able to begin establishing peer networks within their first year of college. While Early College High Schools do not provide opportunities for extracurricular activities such as athletics, band, and clubs (Smith et al., 2012), the Early College participants in this study were open to the idea of getting involved on campus. This could possibly be due to the fact that their high school did not offer such activities and as a result, they wanted to feel socially integrated to campus life.

Although Early College participants were accustomed to a small high school environment, which is one of the facets of an ECHS, the large size of RU was not found to affect the participants' social integration into the university. Contrary to research that suggests that a large collegiate environment can cause difficulty in the social integration for community college transfer students (Astin & Chang, 1995; Kim & Sax, 2009; Townsend & Wilson, 2006), this finding did not apply to the Early College participants in this study. Another contrast to the community college transfer student literature regarding the social transition into a four-year institution is that community college transfer students often view the classroom as a site of social engagement and as such, can feel frustrated by the anonymity in large lecture classes and by the unwillingness of other students to form study

groups. The Early College participants in this study did not report viewing the classroom as a site of social engagement nor did these students report feeling anonymous in their classes. A few Early College participants, such as Paul, Sam, and Andrea, reported forming study groups with the classmates in an effort to be successful in their classes. As such, this was not a source of frustration for Early College students as it was for community college transfer students. Although some participants noted that RU was much larger than their ECHS or that they preferred to sit in the front of the class to block out distractions, it was not apparent from the participants that the large size of RU had a direct impact on the social aspect of their transition as these students were able to establish friendships and get engaged in campus activities.

### **STEM Majors Experienced Academic Difficulty**

Among the eleven Early College participants in this study, there appeared to be a distinct difference between the experiences of those who majored in STEM areas (or were previous STEM majors). While all participants acknowledged that the curriculum at RU was much more rigorous than it was at their Early College High School, the students who reported the greatest amount of academic difficulty were those who were STEM majors. Tiffany, Life Sciences academic advisor, explained that taking a science course at RU is an extensive time commitment. While a science course may have a lecture that meets three days a week, the labs and required supplemental instruction sessions could mean that a student is essentially spending five days (and multiple hours a day) dedicated to that one particular science class. Considering that STEM majors had to take multiple sciences courses within

one semester, this can prove to be a very demanding work load for a student as opposed to a student who is majoring in the humanities or social sciences where courses do not require an additional component such as a lab. Paul, a triple STEM major, discussed the concept of “weed-out” classes which are commonly referred to as entry-level courses in the sciences that essentially weed-out those students who may not be able to handle the academic rigor of the course and as a result, eliminate the student’s opportunity to take the next-level science course. Paul mentioned that psychological effects of these weed-out classes caused him to question whether he was smart enough to handle this level of coursework. Tiffany, Life Sciences academic advisor, also stated that the STEM majors may be rigorous because the courses required more than understanding the basic foundational concepts. Students cannot simply memorize and regurgitate what they have learned; they must apply what they have learned as the professors are training students to actually think like a scientist.

One finding from the community college transfer student literature is that these student experienced difficulty in STEM courses at the four-year institution because they were previously accustomed to personalized formal and informal interaction with faculty, smaller classrooms, and the opportunity to develop math and science skills in a non-threatening environment (Bailey et al., 2005). Contrary to this finding, the Early College participants who experienced challenges in their STEM courses attributed their difficulty to the lack of STEM preparation in their Early College High School. Sam felt as though his Early College did not teach STEM courses in a theoretical and rigorous manner as they were taught at RU. Austin reported having a positive high school experience but that his experience would have



been more advantageous if his Early College High offered more STEM courses as he felt that this put him at a disadvantage in his STEM courses as opposed to his peers who took AP and IB courses. While community college transfer students may attribute their difficulty in regards to faculty differences and a smaller classroom environment, the Early College participants simply desired quality STEM preparation in high school to prepare them for the rigor of STEM courses at RU.

The notion of “transfer shock” is a common phenomenon within the transfer student literature that proposes that transfer students experience a first semester dip in grade point average as they transition to a new academic and social environment (Diaz, 1992; Hills, 1965). While community college transfer students who had previously completed an associate’s degree with a GPA of 3.0 or higher were shown to have persistence rates at an equal level with non-transfer students, the researchers also found that within the STEM disciplines, math and science majors’ GPA declined significantly in the first semester at their new institution (Cedja, Kaylor, and Rewey, 1998). Cedja, Kaylor, and Rewey (1998) also found that the GPAs of students in the fine arts, humanities, and social sciences increased upon transfer. Sam and Stephanie, both former STEM majors, changed majors at RU due to their dip in grades. While Sam was an engineering major, he had a 1.9 GPA and found himself on academic probation. Stephanie repeated organic chemistry twice during her time at RU before deciding that she need to change her major to agricultural business. “I graduated high school with a college GPA of 3.67 and I have a cumulative GPA right now of 2.6 and a major GPA of 2.8. I hate every minute of it because I am not a two-point whatever

student. I've never been that and it drives me absolutely crazy." While this particular research study did not specifically study GPA by major, aligned with the community college transfer student literature, the students who reported significant academic difficulty in their majors were STEM majors.

With over half of the nation's students entering four-year universities through the community college system, and a significant portion of those students majoring in STEM areas, it will be important for these students to have a successful transition and adjustment to their new academic environment (Jackson & Laanan, 2015). The fact that Early College STEM majors experienced more difficulty in their majors than non-STEM majors was not surprising as research has shown that educational attainment in a STEM field depends, at least in part, on the adequacy of prior academic preparation and achievement (Perna et al., 2009). This suggests that the lack of STEM preparation is a much bigger issue and possibly falls back on the K-12 system.

### **Implications for Theory**

This study was guided by Schlossberg et al.'s (1995) Transition Theory. This theory explains how and why people react in a different way to certain transitions and why someone can react differently at various points in their life (Schlossberg, 1984). Transition Theory describes the transition process as "moving in," "moving through," and "moving out" (Schlossberg et al., 1995). Because the Early College participants in this study were in a state of transition when they entered RU from their community college campus, this theory

was useful in examining how the students prepared for and handled moving from one institution to another.

The “moving in” phase of the transition for Early College students was the point at which they matriculated into RU. The “moving in” phase can pose challenges to students entering a new educational institution as students need to become familiar with the rules, regulations, norms and expectations of the new system (Schlossberg et al., 1995). Although Early College participants were accustomed to a collegiate environment as they spent four years on a community college campus, they had to take on a new role as a RU student as their new environment was completely different in terms of size, location, courses, faculty, and the just the everyday processes of how things work at RU. Their new student orientation experience was the official beginning of this “moving in” phase of transition for Early College students.

The “moving through” phase was the process by which these students had to learn how to navigate the ropes at RU. In this phase, individuals confront issues such as how to balance their activities with other parts of their lives and how to feel supported and challenged during this new journey (Anderson et al., 2012). The “moving through” phase reflected the vast majority of the findings regarding Early College participants as it was during this phase that students recognized the rigor of classes compared to their former academic environment, developed their perceptions of academic advising, connected with faculty and staff, and learned to develop strategies that would help them be successful at RU which was different for different students.

The “moving out” phase of the transition process is viewed as ending one series of transitions and beginning to ask what comes next (Anderson et al., 2012). “Moving out” represents exiting the four-year institution hopefully by graduating from the institution. The “moving out” phase can also be seen as ending one series of transitions and beginning to ask what’s next (Anderson et al., 2012). Since all eleven participants in this study were still enrolled at RU, this particular phase of the transition process was not directly examined. Although participants noted that RU was much more rigorous than their Early College High School, students eventually got acclimated to their new academic environment. While they still found the curriculum to be rigorous, college became more manageable, students were able to persevere and as such, they made progression toward the “moving out” phase of the transition process.

Within Transition Theory, there are four factors, also known as the 4 S’s, which affect an individual’s transition. They include: situation, self, support, and strategies. These four variables can be regarded as assets or as liabilities (Schlossberg et al., 1995). If an individual’s liabilities outweigh their assets, it can make the transition more difficult. The 4S model employs a ratio of assets to liabilities and allows for changes in the ratio as a person’s individual situation changes (Anderson et al., 2012). Viewing the transition process from this perspective helps to explain why different individuals react differently to the same type of transition or why the same person reacts differently at different times (Anderson et al., 2012).

Transition Theory was originally designed for as a theory for counseling adults. It was only recently that Schlossberg et al.'s (1995) Transition Theory has been introduced into higher education literature to examine the transition experiences for student populations such as student veterans (Wheeler, 2012; Rumann & Hamrick, 2010) and students on academic probation (Tovar & Simon, 2006). However, I was unable to find how studies that specifically applied Schlossberg et al.'s (1995)'s Transition Theory (other than dissertations) to community college transfer students, which was the parallel population used for this study. This theory was applicable to the Early College student population to shed light on how these students experienced the transition to RU from an ECHS in the context of the individual's 4S's. While Transition Theory was a useful lens in which to view the transition experiences of Early College students at a research university, because it was originally designed as a counseling theory for adults, the model only considers one transition at a time such as changing jobs, moving, or mourning the loss of a loved one. However, for college students, they are experiencing multiple transitions at once as they are taking a full course load, having to study and do homework outside of class, being involved in extracurricular activities, maintaining friendships and relationships, having to be self-sufficient, and simply having to navigate the ins and outs of the university. As Transition Theory continues to make its way into the higher education arena, it is critical that the theory be able to accommodate the multitude of transitions that a student may experience all at once. Figure 2 illustrates the updated model of Schlossberg et al.'s (1995) 4S's to accompany the multiple transitions "or situations" that a student experiences at one time.

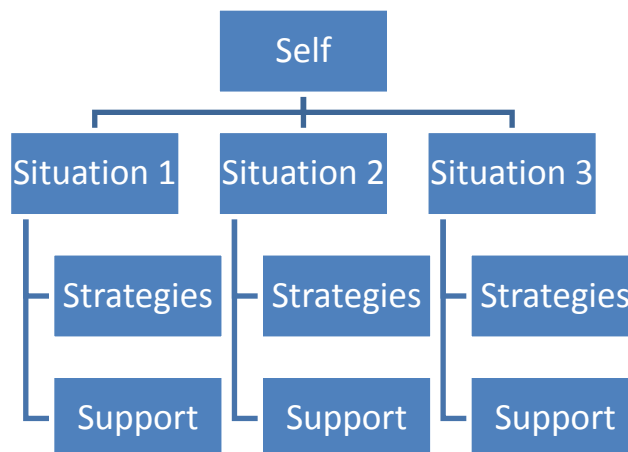


Figure 2: Updated Schlossberg et al. (1995) 4S model

In this updated model, “Self” is situated at the top of the model as a person’s “Self” which includes personal and demographic characteristics, as well as psychological resources (self-efficacy, ego development, values, and optimism), influences the other S’s to help understand how a person copes with a transition. The participants in this study also discussed their Early College High School experience in which educational background can be argued as a component of “Self.” Depending on whether the participant felt that their Early College High School prepared them for RU, affected how they handled the transition to college. If the student was accustomed to a rigorous curriculum in high school or were introduced to college success strategies such as note-taking, sitting in front of class, and so forth, it affected how they coped with various aspects to transition to RU. As a result, these students either utilized campus resources or modified their approach to help them be successful. When participants reported that their ECHS did not prepare them for college, such as Brian, Max, and Stephanie, these student did not necessarily seek out the resources at

RU to assist in their transition so in that sense, their “Self” became a liability instead of an asset.

Schlossberg et al. (1995) emphasize the role of perception in transitions and that a transition exists only if it is defined by the person experiencing it. This goes back to a person’s “Self” and is the reason that I argue that it should be placed at the top of the 4S model. “Self” also influences why different people react differently to the same “Situation.” “Strategies” and “Support” merge from the “Situation” and each will depend on the particular transition or “Situation” that a student is experiencing. For instance, while Sam, a former engineering major, reported a positive Early College High School experience and expressed that his high school prepared him for college, he still experienced numerous academic difficulties during his time at RU. Although Sam once landed on academic probation, it was something within his “Self” that would not let him give up. Sam utilized various “Strategies” to return to good academic standing with the university and utilized numerous campus resources such as the tutorial center, joining a study group, going to office hours, and even changing his major. One of his former high school counselors whom he still considered a mentor served as a major source of “Support” for Sam and her advice and encouragement also helped him to return to good academic standing. Brian, on the other hand, also began RU as an engineering major. However, during his first semester when he began to experience academic difficulty in his classes, instead of reaching out to his professors or utilizing campus resources, he essentially “checked out” and stopped attending his engineering classes for the remainder of the semester. This illustrates how one’s “self”

can approach the same situation (academic difficulty) in different ways depending upon the person's psychological resources.

The updated model also places several boxes for the "Situations" that derive from the "Self." This is to accommodate the multiple transitions that a student may experience concurrently while they are in college. As it pertains to the college transition, "Situations" often intersect with one another. For example, when Jack entered RU not only did he have to learn how to navigate his new collegiate environment but he also experienced difficulty in his economics course and had to adapt an entirely new concept of studying by moving from simply memorizing concepts to learning how to apply the concepts. At the same time that these transitions were occurring, he was extremely homesick in that he missed his family and his longtime girlfriend who was attending college three hours away. This updated 4S model represents a more complete depiction of Early College participants' transition to college as it accommodates the multiple transitions that students experience during college as opposed to simply focusing on one transition.

### **Implications for Practice and Policy**

The results of this study have several implications for practice and policy regarding the Early College student population at a research university. These include creating a new student orientation session that specifically addresses the needs of Early College students, improving the quality of academic advising for Early College students, rebranding the concept of Early College High Schools, and addressing the tuition surcharge policy.



### **Creating Orientation Sessions for Early College Students**

It is important for colleges and universities to periodically assess the characteristics of their incoming first-year students to ensure that students are getting what they need to succeed at the university. While the Early College participants in this study were viewed as first-year students by the university, the vast majority of participants did not feel that their new student orientation benefitted them academically. While RU was a new collegiate environment for Early College students, it is important to note that these students are not first-time college students as they have spent four years on a community college campus and have taken classes alongside community college students. Early College students felt as though the information presented during their new student orientation was either repetitive or irrelevant. Furthermore, the fact that these students entered college with an associate's degree and fulfilled most, if not all, of their general education requirements, made it difficult for students, as well as advisors, to determine what they have fulfilled and what they still need to take.

Colleges and universities with a significant number of Early College students should consider implementing a session at new student orientation for students who attended an Early College High School. At RU, new student orientation sessions are conducted throughout the summer and each College has designated orientation dates for incoming students (and transfer students) to attend. At every orientation session, incoming students are required to attend an "Academic Success 101" workshop that explains the role of an academic advisor, academic expectations, and becoming familiar with the General Education

Program. Considering that Early College participants felt that this information was repetitive or irrelevant as they were previously accustomed to a collegiate environment, an “Early College Student Success” session could be offered as an alternative. This session would ideally be conducted by professional academic advisors or faculty advisors who are well-versed with the Early College model and with advising this particular student population. The Early College Student Success session should be able to offer insight and strategies on how to maximize Early College experience for a more effective transition to the academic expectations at RU (or the respective institution). The session should also include information about how course equivalencies can fulfill general education and major requirements, the feasibility of graduating in two years versus four years, entry requirements into certain majors, along with providing suggestions to increase academic success by appropriately balancing the first-year academic course load. The Early College Student Success session should also include current Early College students who can offer a “student perspective” on the transition into college. This could be accomplished by having a student panel or just simply having a couple of students present to validate the information that the advisor presents. Having an Early College student(s) present during the session is critical as students are often more receptive from hearing from other students as opposed to faculty and staff.

For colleges and universities who are unable to offer a full Early College Student Success session during new student orientation, there are other alternatives that the college can explore if they have a significant number of Early College students entering their

institution every year. Most colleges and universities hold floating interest sessions at some point during their new student orientation sessions which cover topics such as Study Abroad, Undergraduate Research, Fraternity and Sorority Life, and so forth. An Early College interest session could easily be implemented during in an effort to meet the needs of this particular student population. Another option for colleges and universities to explore is ensuring that all academic advisors are well-versed in the Early College model and working with students entering with a plethora of transfer credits and can adequately address the academic needs of Early College students. Academic advising for Early College students will be discussed further in the following section. Regardless of whether a college or university is able to offer an in-depth Early College Student Success session, a floating interest session, or simply having advisors who are familiar with Early College, it is extremely important for colleges and universities to find ways to address the needs of this population so that these students can be successful on their campuses. All eleven participants in this study stated that they did not feel as if their new student orientation benefitted them academically and that they needed “more.” While other colleges and universities may have already addressed ways to better serve their Early College students upon entering college, it was apparent in this study there was a critical component missing from the new student orientation at RU. As the number of Early College High Schools continues to increase in the United States, more and more four-year colleges and universities will see an influx of Early College students on their campuses. New student orientation programs are designed to help students make a successful transition to the college environment, initiate the process of

higher learning, and set the tone for student expectations and begin the process of integrating students into the campus culture (Robinson, Burns & Gaw, 1996). If this holds true, then institutions will need to find ways to ensure that all students are properly oriented into the university and that they feel equally valued entering the university.

### **Improving the Quality of Academic Advising**

While there were several Early College participants who expressed dissatisfaction with academic advising on RU's campus, there were also participants who had positive experiences with their academic advisors. One of the factors found to contribute to a positive academic advising experience was when the academic advisor was familiar with the Early College model and advising students who entered college with an associate's degree or ample transfer credits. All advisors on campus, whether they are full-time professional advisors or faculty advisors, should be trained on the Early College model. Advisors should possess a working knowledge of how to advise a first-year student who has an associate's degree or a plethora of transfer credits from another institution and assist them in developing an academic plan that ultimately is in the best interest of the student. Whether advising occurs within a centralized or decentralized unit, advising should not operate within a vacuum as effective advising requires a holistic approach (Creamer, Creamer, & Brown, 2003; NACADA Core Values, 2005). Holistic advising focuses on the "whole" student in that advisors should effectively communicate with students in assessing their personal and vocational goals and encourage students to take responsibility for their own progress and success (NACADA Core Values, 2005).

Advisors should be educated about how to advise certain student populations and if they are not familiar with how to advise a particular student, then it is the advisor's responsibility to recognize their limitations, actively seek resources, and make referrals to other advisors who can further assess student needs and provide access to the appropriate programs and services (NACADA Core Values, 2005). The first tenet of the National Academic Advising Association (NACADA) Core Values (2005) is that advisors are responsible for the individuals that they advise. Therefore, being unfamiliar with the Early College student population is not an acceptable reason to not provide the highest quality of advising to an Early College student. Academic advisors and counselors at both college and university are critical sources of information and the need for the advisors to be both accurate with their information and accessible to the students is well established (Hartman, Bjerregaard & Lord, 2009).

NACADA is a non-profit organization that was established to promote quality academic advising and professional development of its membership to ensure the educational development of students (National Academic Advising Association, 2017). NACADA offers a variety of different resources such as to assist academic advisors such as webinars, regional and annual conferences, a scholarly journal, special publications, books, and monographs. There is also a specific interest group, "High School to College Advising," that is designed to promote best practices, information, and strategies for advising high school students in a college setting (National Academic Advising Association, 2017). Getting involved in NACADA is a great way for advisors, whether they are faculty advisors or professional advisors, to gain more

exposure of the Early College student populations and learn best practices to support these students on their respective college campuses.

For those advisors who choose not to participate in NACADA or are unable to do so due to financial constraints, advising offices can designate individuals within their unit to serve as a point person or person of expertise for various student populations, i.e., Early College students, transfer students, student athletes, and so forth. The advisor can research the intricacies of what it means to advise that particular student population and share that expertise with other advisors within their advising unit so that they will be familiar with the Early College model and will have a better understanding as to how to advise an Early College student. If an advising office has a peer advising program, ensuring diversity amongst peer advisors by purposefully selecting that are reflective of the various student populations at a college or university, is another mechanism that can be effective in adequately advising students—in this case, Early College students.

Advising students beyond their degree requirements and helping students to look and think “outside of the box” in regards to their career pursuits was another factor that was associated with a positive academic experience. When advisors practice career advising, they provide information on the nature of the workforce and realistic preparation for career fields and help students make sound decisions that further their goals (Menke, 2016). This is particularly important in a time where students (and their families) want reassurance that the student will be able to obtain a job after graduation. While academic advisors are not expected to be career advisors or career experts, there are strategies that advisors can use to

weave career advising into their work. First, academic advisors should get familiar with the career services office on their campus as well as all of the resources that they provide to students such as career assessments, resume and cover letter assistance, mock interviews, graduate school preparation, and any job and internship fairs that may be on campus.

Academic advisors can discuss these resources with their advisees and refer students to the career services office on campus. When students return to their advisors for follow-up advising appointments, advisors can engage in a meaningful conversation with their advisees about their experiences using career services and if it had any impact on their future career goals as well as helping students think about the next steps in exploring their career goals and interests. Additionally, academic advisors can weave coaching into their advising sessions. According to Menke (2016), encouraging students to establish career goals along with their academic goals can help uncover any potential issues before they become obstacles. For example, if a student has chosen a career field that does not match their academic needs, students should be encouraged to brainstorm resolutions to these issues and referrals to campus resources such as career services or faculty in their areas of interest can help students gather more information about career fields in their area (Menke, 2016).

Finally, advisors who simply carved out time for their students in an effort to get to know their students in a genuine way also led to a higher level of satisfaction with academic advising. Students who reported dissatisfaction with advising stated that they felt like another number or felt pressed for time. While advisors oftentimes have heavy advising loads and may be expected to do more with less due to financial constraints, it can be hard

for advisors to devote an equal amount of time to each of their advisees. However, simple strategies such as making sure that the advising session is strictly focused on the student's holistic development and engaging in a meaningful conversation about their degree requirements and career goals can go a long way, even within a short advising appointment. Students should be encouraged to schedule follow-up appointments if their needs were not addressed during their initial advising appointment so that any issues that were not addressed are not simply pushed to the back burner. Advisors can also follow up with students via email which makes an effort to let the student know that their advisor cares about them. Whether an advising appointment is allotted for fifteen minutes or thirty minutes, making a student feel welcomed and not having the student feel like they are being rushed in an effort for the advisor to see their next advisee can go a long way with students and increase their satisfaction with advising.

### **Rebranding the Concept of Early College High Schools**

Early College High Schools blend high school and college into a rigorous program and allow students to earn both a high school diploma and an associate's degree and reduce the time it takes to earn a college degree (Kisker, 2006). As a result, many Early College High Schools are marketed to students and their families that because of their associate's degree, the bachelor's degree can be completed in two years versus four years. In a time where tuition and fees have skyrocketed over the past five years, compressing the time to degree is an attractive option for students and their families (NPR, 2014). However, the findings from this research suggest that Early College students do not always have a seamless



transition into a research university. Early College participants in this research study had pre-conceived expectations of what their experience at RU would look like but those expectations fell short once they got to RU. This was due to the unwarranted effects of having an associate's degree in which students found that they lacked courses to take, had to take multiple science courses within a given semester, or encountered the tuition surcharge policy. A couple of participants were also confused as to whether they could graduate in two years or four years as they were under the impression by their ECHS that they would be able to graduate from college in two years. Because the transition of coming from a community college to a four-year university is not always flawless for Early College students, it is necessary for Early College High Schools to consider rebranding the concept of how these high schools are marketed to students and their families in an effort to help manage the expectations of Early College students. While compressing the time to obtain a bachelor's degree is certainly an important component marketing concept for Early College High Schools, for students who decide to continue their education beyond obtaining an associate's degree, this should not always be the sole goal as to why students should attend these high schools. While it is understandable that everyone wants to get the most "bang for their buck" and would like to do so in a cost-effective manner, it should not be done at the risk of jeopardizing a student's success.

Rebranding the concept of Early College High Schools should involve managing student expectations while these students are still enrolled in high school. Early College educators need to be transparent with students and their families about the reality of

graduating from a college in two years, especially if a student decides to attend a research institution or decides to pursue a STEM major. For certain majors, such as engineering, it is simply not feasible for a student to graduate early, regardless of how many credits a student has once they matriculate into a university due to the structured curriculum that students have to follow. For those students who plan to major in engineering, another STEM major, or even for those who decide to follow the pre-med track, this is an important concept that should be communicated to students while they are still in high school so that they do not arrive at the four-year university with unrealistic expectations of what academics will look like once they arrive at their new institution.

Furthermore, Early College educators should also point out to students that while they may be able to feasibly graduate from a four-year university in two years, depending on a student's interests or what the student ultimately wants to do after college, graduating in two years may not always be the best solution. For instance, Christina was a psychology major that could have feasibly graduated within two years once arriving at RU. However her ultimate goal was to become a psychologist and as such, Ph.D. graduate programs in psychology recommended that students obtain undergraduate research experience while they were in college. As a result, Christina decided that it was more beneficial for her to spend four years at RU as opposed to two years where she could have an opportunity to make herself an attractive Ph.D. candidate by participating in undergraduate research and extracurricular activities outside of the classroom. If she would have decided to graduate

from RU in two years, she may not have been a viable candidate for graduate programs and this could have possibly extended the time for her to reach her ultimate goal.

Another important aspect of ECHS rebranding is to remodel the value of obtaining an associate's degree in a different manner. Currently, obtaining an associate's degree as a result of graduating from an ECHS is marketed as a way to reduce the time that it takes to earn an associate's degree. While this may be the case for some Early College students once they attend a four-year institution, this is certainly not the case for all Early College students who decide to continue their education beyond high school. Early College High Schools should market obtaining an associate's degree as a college preparatory learning tool that will serve to augment their collegiate education once they arrive at a four-year institution. Early College High Schools should heavily advocate the "learning" component of ECHS in that these schools help students learn how to take college courses; ECHS help students learn how to study; and ECHS help students learn how college courses are structured. While receiving college credit may certainly be a benefit, the overall goal of Early College High Schools should be that they provide students with the tools to learn how to be successful once they enter a four-year institution as opposed to simply offering credits that will possibly fulfill their degree requirements. If the concept of Early College High Schools are rebranded from this perspective, this will also help students to develop realistic expectations while they are in high school. This in turn will assist students in the transition to college as they will not expect their college colleges to be similar to the college courses that they took while in ECHS.

Additionally, the associate's degree earned from an Early College High School should be rebranded in a way that encourages students to use this degree as a way to supplement their collegiate education at a four-year institution. Having an associate's degree can be marketed in a way to emphasize that it gives students an advantage in educational journey at a four-year institution, not just in regards to earning college credits. If an Early College student enters a four-year institution with an associate's degree that accepts the majority of their credits as fulfilling their general education requirements, it gives the Early College student a tremendous amount of flexibility while they are at the four-year institution. Early College educators should communicate to students while they are still in high school that there are a plethora of opportunities that four-year colleges and universities offer that supplement a student's education outside of the classroom and the importance of participating in such activities. These opportunities include study abroad, undergraduate research, service learning, and participating in clubs and organizations. Given the fact that Early College students fulfill the majority of their general education requirements, it gives these students a tremendous advantage over other students to utilize these activities to supplement their collegiate experiences as opposed to a student who did not enter college with any college credits who may not have as much flexibility. Early College students can also use their time at the four-year institution to take classes of interests, explore different areas, or pick up an additional major or minor which is a luxury that many students do not have. Early College educators should also communicate to students that while there is value in earning an associate's degree, each institution will vary in terms of what credits they will

accept or how they will apply toward their degree requirements. For example, at Duke University, only 17 of the 34 credits that students are required to take can be non-Duke credits which include a combination of AP, IB, and transfer credits (Trinity College of Arts & Sciences, 2017). While educators at Early College High Schools cannot or should not be expected to know the ins and outs of every institutional policy, communicating realistic expectations to students and their families is crucial so that they will be able to utilize the information to make a college choice decision that is in their best interests.

### **Addressing the Tuition Surcharge Policy**

As more Early College students continue to pursue their educational pursuits at four-year colleges and universities across the country, state and institutional policies should be revisited to make sure that they are not putting certain student groups at a disadvantage in regards to their educational pursuits. For example, a number of participants in this study commented on the tuition surcharge policy. In regards to this particular policy, degree-seeking students who exceed credit hour limits towards their degree may be subject to a 50 percent Tuition Surcharge if more than 140 degree credit hours are taken to complete a bachelor's degree (Tuition Surcharge, 2016). This also includes any transfer credits that a student may have transferred in (Tuition Surcharge, 2016). It is noteworthy to mention that Advanced Placement (AP), International Baccalaureate (IB), and College Level Examination Program (CLEP) credits are excluded from this tuition surcharge policy at RU (Tuition Surcharge, 2016). When participants in this study encountered the tuition surcharge policy, it was very burdensome for the students as they had to submit a written petition process

through the Financial Aid office. As such, they did not receive an immediate response to whether their petition was approved or not and it affected their refund checks and financial aid packages, which took time to resolve.

Thus, there are some discrepancies in the tuition surcharge policy, privileging some groups of students over others. Early College students who enter a four-year institution with an associate's degree are being put at a disadvantage as they have to experience this burdensome policy while a student who has earned AP, IB, or CLEP credit does not have to encounter the tuition surcharge even though students potentially could enter RU with the same amount of AP, IB, or CLEP credits as a student who enters college with an associate's degree. This particular tuition surcharge policy has the potential to send the message to Early College students that AP, IB, or CLEP credits are valued over entering college with an associate's degree. As Early College High Schools are still the most recent form of college preparatory programs in the United States, it is highly likely that this tuition surcharge policy was written long before the concept of an Early College High School was manifested. While this tuition policy is likely not purposeful, this illustrates the importance of governing boards and individual institutions to revisit their policies periodically to ensure that they are not putting certain student groups at a disadvantage for something that is beyond their control. There is an old adage that states, "there is power in numbers." If that holds true, students, advisors, administrators, and other educators should challenge the Governing Board to revise this policy to reflect a new face of higher education.

### **Implications for Future Research**

Considering that there is a need for research that examines the postsecondary experiences of Early College High School participants, there are several areas of research that would be helpful to examine. Although having an associate's degree had a couple of adverse effects at RU, the Early College participants in this study were fortunate in that the state in which RU is located in has an articulation agreement with all of the public community colleges in the state. As a result, when students from a community college transfer to a public four-year institution, the articulation agreement is designed to cover the vast majority of their general education requirements. For an Early College student who has an associate's degree but decides to attend a four-year college or university in another state, what will the transition look like for that particular student? How will these students perceive their academic and social transition into a college or university that is located in a different geographic region? Although all of the participants in this study did not spend their entire lives in the state in which RU is located or even within the southeastern United States, they did attend high school in this state and as such, location was not factor in adjusting to RU.

Furthermore, the Early College students in this research study were considered as first-year students upon matriculating into RU despite the fact that they entered college with an associate's degree. However, it would be helpful to examine the academic and social transition for those institutions who would classify their Early College students as transfer students. In this instance, would their academic and social integration closely mirror the

transition experiences of transfer students or would Early College students be a distinctive student population with distinctive advising needs? The more research that exists examining various aspects of Early College students and their transition, the more helpful it will be for institutions to develop the appropriate support mechanisms for these students to be successful.

Jackson and Laanan (2015) examined the socialization factors that impact the transition and adjustment experiences of community college transfer students in STEM disciplines. Their study revealed that being a male positively impacts the academic adjustment experiences of community college transfer students in STEM (Jackson & Laanan, 2015). Their study also revealed that females in STEM disciplines are more likely than males to have difficulty adjusting to the four-year environment. While this particular research study did not focus on any aspect of gender identity in regards to how students transition into RU, research examining Early College High School participants and the role that their gender identity plays among STEM majors at a four-year institution would be an important research study as women are significantly underrepresented in STEM jobs and among STEM degree holders (U.S. Department of Commerce, 2011).

Considering that the United States has a need for individuals who possess training and expertise in STEM fields (Jackson & Laanan, 2015), examination of Early College students experiences in the STEM majors, particularly by institution type, should warrant a certain level of future research as well to determine if certain types of four-year institutions such as research universities, liberal arts colleges, historically black colleges and universities



and so forth, are doing a better (or worse) job of retaining Early College students in the STEM majors.

As Early College High Schools continue to grow in the United States, it is imperative that more research exists that explores what happens to Early College students after they graduate from high school and attend four-year institutions. Both qualitative and quantitative research is needed to explore various aspects about Early College students' postsecondary experiences. These students are a distinctive student population with unique needs. As the number of Early College students continues to grow at postsecondary institutions across the country, more research should be conducted regarding this student population to assist institutions in creating resources to adequately meet the needs of these students.

### **Conclusion**

This qualitative research study examined the transition experiences of Early College High School participants who attended an Early College High School on a community college campus and are now attending a doctoral-granting large public research university. Through their stories, I was able to learn more about their transition into college along with their collegiate experiences since they've been at RU. I am honored that these participants chose to share their stories with me and I hope that the findings from this study make important and significant contributions to the literature regarding Early College students who decide to continue their education at a four-year college or university. The Early College student population is steadily growing and it is critical that institutions begin to develop initiatives to adequately serve this student population. Despite some of the challenges

experienced by the Early College participants in this study, all eleven participants agreed that they made a good decision to attend a school with a strong academic reputation and expressed pride in attaining a degree from this particular institution. Though their experiences varied, the students they seemed pleased with their overall collegiate experience at RU. Sam, a graduating senior, expressed his appreciation for his time at RU.

I'm ready to be done but it was definitely a great experience. One of the best life experiences I've ever had is coming to college at RU and being a black man on RU's campus. Very different perspective I feel like from anyone else. It's a very unique experience. I wouldn't have traded it for the world.

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**APPENDICES**

## Appendix A—Recruitment Email to Students

Opportunity for Early College High School Graduates!!

If you graduated from an early college high school, please read on!

Early College High Schools are steadily increasing in numbers across the United States, however very little research exists that examines what happens to these students after they graduate from high school and enter a four-year university. As a doctoral candidate, I'm interested in Early College High school participants' perceptions of their transition to a research university and the factors that enhance or hinder these experiences.

I want to hear from you and allow an opportunity for your voice to be heard! Your story may be instrumental in giving higher education educators a better understanding of Early College students in an effort to provide better support services future Early College students!

If you're interested in participating in this research study, you'll need to agree to an in-person interview, lasting no longer than an hour. This data will be completely confidential and will only be used for research purposes. You'll also get to select a pseudonym to use to ensure that your identity is completely confidential! In appreciation of your participation, a \$25 e-gift card to Target will be emailed to you upon completion of the interview process!

If you are interested in participating in this study please email me directly at [sredwar2@ncsu.edu](mailto:sredwar2@ncsu.edu). Your participation is greatly appreciated and important to the success of research for Early College!

Sincerely,

Stacy E. Outlaw

## Appendix B—Recruitment Email to Academic Advisors

Dear \_\_\_\_\_ (insert name of the Academic Advisor),

My name is Stacy Outlaw and I am a doctoral candidate at North Carolina State University. I would like to invite you to participate in a research study focusing on Early College High School participants' perceptions of their transition at \_\_\_\_\_ (insert name of the institution) and the factors that enhance or hinder their experiences.

If you have been in academic advising for at least 1 year, then you are eligible to participate in this study.

In order to participate in this study, you will need to agree to an in-person interview. The interview will last no longer than an hour so it will only require a minimal amount of your time. This interview will take place during the fall 2015 semester. I will ask questions during the interviews which will allow me to learn about your advising experiences with Early College students. Interviews will occur on campus at a time and location that will prove convenient for you. Upon transcription of the interview, you will be contacted via email if you would like to set up a time and place to review your interview transcript to make sure that it captures your true perspective as an academic advisor.

All interviews will be digitally recorded; however, the data will remain completely confidential and will only be used for research purposes. In addition, participants will be asked to select a pseudonym that will be used when reporting the findings.

If you are interested in participating in this study please reply to this email. Your participation is greatly appreciated and important to the success of this research study.

Sincerely,  
Stacy E. Outlaw

## Appendix C—Informed Consent Form for Students

North Carolina State University

### INFORMED CONSENT FORM for RESEARCH

Title of Study: Early College High School participants' transition to a research university

Principal Investigator: Stacy Outlaw

Faculty Sponsor (if applicable): Dr. Alyssa Rockenbach, Dr. Paul Umbach

#### **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 named above.

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

This study will explore Early College High School participants' transition to a research university as well as the factors that enhance or hinder their success in college.

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

If you agree to participate in this study, you will be asked to share insight about your transition to a research university as an Early College High School graduate. You will be asked to sit down for an in-person interview session (lasting no longer than an hour ) on campus where the interviewer will ask you questions about your transition to college as an Early College High School graduate. You will be allowed to skip any questions that you do not wish to answer, and you will be allowed to terminate the interview at any time. Upon transcription of the interview, you will be contacted via email if you would like to set up a time and place to review your interview transcript to make sure that it captures your true perspective of your collegiate experience.

#### **Risks**

There are no foreseen risks to participating in this study.

#### **Benefits**

The benefit of this study is to provide a better understanding of the transition experiences of Early College High School participants who are now attending a research university. Currently, very little research exists that explores this student population once students graduate from high school and enroll in four-year institutions so this research study will be contributing to the literature surrounding this particular student population.

#### **Confidentiality**

The information in the study records will be kept confidential to the full extent allowed by law. The identity of the participants in the study will be kept confidential. Several steps will be taken to secure written and digital data. Contact information for participants will be kept in a file separate from any written or digital data. Each

participant will be assigned a pseudonym that will be used on all files related to that participant. Because the number of participants in the study is small (<12 participants), a written roster matching pseudonyms with participant identities will not be needed. Handwritten notes from the interviews will be recorded in one notebook and will be secured at the residence of the researcher. Audio files of the interviews will be stored on the personal computer of the researcher, which will be password protected. Email messages will only be used to coordinate interview appointments and to check in on participants, not to send transcripts or to request responses to interview questions. Email messages to and from participants will be stored in a password protected folder. These email messages will be deleted following the completion of the study. Transcripts of the interviews will also be stored on the personal computer of the researcher. Data will be stored using filenames without identifying remarks. Care will be taken in the writing of the final report to eliminate references that may allow for the identification of the participants. No reference will be made in oral or written reports which could link you to the study. You will NOT be asked to write your name on any study materials so that no one can match your identity to the answers that you provide.

#### **Compensation**

For participating in this study you will receive a \$25 e-gift card to Target pending completion of the interview process. If you withdraw from the study prior to its completion, you will not receive compensation.

#### **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, Stacy Outlaw at sredwar2@ncsu.edu.

#### **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 at dapaxton@ncsu.edu or by phone at 1-919-515-4514.

#### **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—Informed Consent Form for Academic Advisors

North Carolina State University

### INFORMED CONSENT FORM for RESEARCH

Title of Study: Early College High School participants' transition to a research university

Principal Investigator: Stacy Outlaw

Faculty Sponsor (if applicable): Dr. Alyssa Rockenbach, Dr. Paul Umbach

#### **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 named above.

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

This study will explore Early College High School participants' transition to a research university as well as the factors that enhance or hinder their success in college.

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

If you agree to participate in this study, you will be asked to share insight about your advising experiences with Early College High School students as well as the factors that you feel may enhance or hinder their success at a research university. You will be asked to sit down for an in-person interview session (lasting no longer than 60 minutes) on campus where the interviewer will ask you questions Early College High School participants. You will be allowed to skip any questions that you do not wish to answer, and you will be allowed to terminate the interview at any time. Upon transcription of the interview, you will be contacted via email if you would like to set up a time and place to review your interview transcript to make sure that it captures your true perspective as an academic advisor.

#### **Risks**

There are no foreseen risks to participating in this study.

#### **Benefits**

The benefit of this study is to provide a better understanding of the transition experiences of Early College High School participants who are now attending a research university. Currently, very little research exists that explores this student population once students graduate from high school and enroll in four-year institutions so this research study will be contributing to the literature surrounding this particular student population.

#### **Confidentiality**

The information in the study records will be kept confidential to the full extent allowed by law. The identity of academic advisor participants in the study will be kept confidential. Several steps will be taken to secure written and digital data. Contact information for participants will be kept in a file separate from any written or digital

data. Each participant will be assigned a pseudonym that will be used on all files related to that participant. Because the number of participants in the study is small (<3 participants), a written roster matching pseudonyms with participant identities will not be needed. Handwritten notes from the interviews will be recorded in one notebook and will be secured at the residence of the researcher. Audio files of the interviews will be stored on the personal computer of the researcher, which will be password protected. Email messages will only be used to coordinate interview appointments, not to send transcripts or to request responses to interview questions. Email messages to and from participants will be stored in a password protected folder. These email messages will be deleted following the completion of the study. Transcripts of the interviews will also be stored on the personal computer of the researcher. Data will be stored using filenames without identifying remarks. Care will be taken in the writing of the final report to eliminate references that may allow for the identification of the participants. No reference will be made in oral or written reports which could link you to the study. You will NOT be asked to write your name on any study materials so that no one can match your identity to the answers that you provide.

### **Compensation**

There is no compensation associated with this study. Your participation is completely voluntary.

### **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, Stacy Outlaw at sredwar2@ncsu.edu.

### **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 at dapaxton@ncsu.edu or by phone at 1-919-515-4514.

### **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 E—Student Demographic Questionnaire

### Demographic Questionnaire

Please complete the following questionnaire to the best of your ability. All information provided will remain completely confidential.

1. Gender Identity: \_\_\_\_\_
2. Age: \_\_\_\_\_
3. Class Year: \_\_\_\_\_
4. Race/ethnicity: \_\_\_\_\_
5. Name and city of your Early College High School: \_\_\_\_\_
6. Did you enter your current institution with an associate's degree? \_\_\_\_\_
7. What is your intended major? \_\_\_\_\_
8. What is your current cumulative GPA? \_\_\_\_\_
9. What is the highest level of education completed by your mother (circle one)?
  - Did not complete High School
  - High School/GED
  - Some college
  - Bachelor's Degree
  - Master's Degree
  - Advanced Graduate work or Ph.D.
  - Not sure/Not applicable
10. What is the highest level of education completed by your father (circle one)?
  - Did not complete High School
  - High School/GED

- Some college
- Bachelor's Degree
- Master's Degree
- Advanced Graduate work or Ph.D.
- Not sure/Not applicable

## **Appendix F—Student Interview Protocol**

This study seeks to garner an understanding of the transition experiences of students who attended Early College High Schools on a community college campus who are now attending a doctoral granting large public research university (with very high research activity) in the southeastern United States. The two research questions guiding this study are:

1. What are Early College High School participants' perceptions of their transition to a research university?
2. What factors enhance or hinder the success of Early College High School participants at a research university?

The interview questions are situated in Schlossberg, Goodman, and Waters (1995) transition theory and are situated within the 4 S's—situation, self, support, and strategies. Schlossberg et al. (1995) have also endorsed a concept of transitions consisting of a series of phrases that they term “moving in,” “moving through,” and “moving out.”

### **Interview Questions**

***Background Questions*** (to break the ice and make participant feel comfortable as well as establish rapport with the participant).

1. How is your semester going so far? How are classes going? What classes are you taking?
2. What has been your favorite course so far since you've been at \_\_\_\_?
3. What's your major? What made you decide to choose that major?
4. What would you like to do after you graduate from college?

### ***Moving In: Preparing to enroll in college***

- ❖ Let's start by talking about your pre-college experiences including new student orientation. Think back to the summer before you enrolled at \_\_\_\_.

### **Situation**

1. Tell me about your decision to choose to attend \_\_\_\_?
2. Did attending an Early College High School influence your decision to attend a 4-year university in any way?
  - a. If student answers yes: How so?
  - b. If student answers no: What made you answer “no?”
3. What influenced your decision to attend an Early College High School?
4. Considering that you entered college with an associate's degree, what were your perceptions of your new student orientation?
  - a. How did orientation benefit you academically?

- b. How did orientation benefit you socially?
  - c. In what ways did orientation prepare you for life at \_\_\_\_?
5. Do you recall if there were any sessions during orientation that were specifically geared toward early college students?
    - a. If student answers no: Would it have been beneficial to have a session geared specifically toward Early College students?
  6. How does registration work at orientation (did you register for classes at orientation or did an advisor register you for classes)? Describe your initial experience registering for classes during orientation (i.e. course availability, being able to take courses that applied toward specific requirements even though you came in with an associate's degree).
  7. Tell me about your interactions with academic advisors the summer BEFORE enrolling in college (i.e. during orientation and the summer before you officially began college)?
  8. Tell me about your interactions and perceptions with other faculty or staff at \_\_\_\_ BEFORE enrolling in college (i.e. the summer before you officially began college)? (Possible probes: Housing, Financial Aid, Undergraduate Admissions, etc.)

### **Self**

1. Before you entered \_\_\_\_, how did you feel about the transition to a new college environment? (Possible probes: excited, anxious, overwhelmed, stressful, etc.)
2. Had you experienced any change or transition that was similar to attending college?
  - a. Could you tell me about that change or transition and how it impacted you?
  - b. Specifically, what did you do that allowed you to successfully cope with that experience?
3. On a scale of 1-10, with 10 being the highest, how would you rate your coping skills before you began college? Why did you give yourself a score of \_\_\_\_?

### **Support**

1. In what ways were your family members instrumental or knowledgeable with the college application process (including applying for financial aid if applicable)?
2. In what ways were your family members supportive of your decision to enroll at \_\_\_\_?
3. Were there any family members that were not supportive of your decision to enroll at \_\_\_\_?
4. Did your friends from your high school enroll at a 4-year college after graduating from high school? In what ways were your friends supportive of your decision to enroll at \_\_\_\_?

## Strategies

1. When you first encounter a problem or a new situation, what is your first reaction? Then what?
2. In high school, what strategies did you use when encountering a difficult situation? (Possible probes: proactively seek resources/assistance, sit back and see what happens and just observe, handle it on your own, get advice from peers)?
3. When things aren't working out are you the type of person who endures, quits, or tries to change your behavior (Possible probes: the amount of time that you study, your study environment, etc.) or tries to change the circumstances (Possible probes: change classes, teachers, etc.)?

## *Moving through: College experiences at \_\_\_\_\_*

The following questions are in regard the fall semester that you began at \_\_\_\_\_.

Let's move on and talk about college life once you started classes the fall after attending new student orientation. We'll start from your very first day of class at \_\_\_\_\_ and talk about your college experiences up until this point.

## Situation

1. What has been your experience during registration (after your initial semester) in terms of the ease of getting into the classes that you need?
2. Could you tell me about the academic rigor of the courses you've taken at \_\_\_\_\_ so far compared to the college courses that you took while you were in high school?
3. In regards to academics, what has surprised you the most about \_\_\_\_\_ since you've been a student here?
4. Did you have to study in high school? Do you have to study here at \_\_\_\_\_?
5. In what ways did your Early College High School prepare you for \_\_\_\_\_ academically?
6. Considering that you have an associate's degree, did you enter \_\_\_\_ thinking that you would graduate in 2 years? If this was not the case for you, how did you feel knowing that you would be here for a prolonged period of time?

7. On a scale of 1-10, with 10 being the highest, how would you rate the stress in your life that has resulted from you attending college? Why do you give yourself a score of \_\_\_\_\_?

### **Self**

1. Have you experienced any changes or transitions since you've been at \_\_\_\_\_ that have affected or impacted your college experience?
  - a. Could you tell me about that change or transition and how it impacted you?
  - b. Specifically, what did you do that allowed you to successfully cope with that experience?
2. On a scale of 1-10, with 10 being the highest, how would you rate your coping skills as a college student? Why would you give yourself a score of \_\_\_\_\_?

### **Support**

1. In what ways have your family members been instrumental or knowledgeable with helping you to navigate college life?
2. Do your family members offer support since you've been in college (Possible probes: affection, feedback, aid, affirmation)? Could you give examples of how they give you support?
3. Do you feel that the university as a whole offers support to students to make sure that they will be successful in college? Could you give me examples of how they gave you support?
4. Has there been anyone or anything in particular that was not supportive of your education, more of a barrier? Can you provide a specific example?
5. What has been the most positive or beneficial experience or interaction with \_\_\_\_\_ since you've been at \_\_\_\_\_? Could you talk about that experience?
  - a. faculty and/or staff member
  - b. student
6. Have you encountered any negative interactions with \_\_\_\_\_? Could you talk about that experience?
  - a. faculty and/or staff member
  - b. student
7. In your opinion, what are the differences, if any, between faculty in high school and faculty in college (in terms of expectations, teaching style, etc.?)
8. Have you run across faculty, staff, or students who have never heard of ECHS?
  - a. If student answers yes: Do you usually have to explain the concept of ECHS? If yes, do you feel that others begin to understand what an ECHS is or do you feel that they are still confused?

9. Can you talk about your interactions with the following offices:
  - a. Undergraduate Admissions
  - b. Housing
  - c. Financial Aid (if applicable)
  - d. Academic Advising
  - e. Other

### Strategies

1. Are you involved in any extracurricular activities on campus (clubs/student organizations/sports (i.e. club, intramural, varsity)?
  - a. For those that are involved in extracurricular activities: What made you decide to get involved on campus?
  - b. For those that are not involved in extracurricular activities: What made you decide not to get involved on campus? Are you planning to get involved?
2. Did you utilize any institutional support such as a religious organization, counseling service, or student center (Possible probes: Women's Center, LGBTQIA Center, Multicultural Student Affairs) to help you adapt to becoming a college student? Could you explain how they helped you adapt?
3. Throughout your experiences at \_\_\_\_ so far, what techniques or strategies did you use to navigate the collegiate system, i.e. learning institutional policies (registering for classes, etc.), finding your way around campus, identifying specific people and offices on campus?
4. What has been the greatest barrier you encountered while attending college? What did you do to try to overcome that barrier?
5. How have your coping mechanisms changed since you've been in college (i.e. when encountering a new problem or situation)? (Probes: proactively seek resources, see what happens and just observe, explore resources, get advice from peers)?
6. Now that you're in college, when things aren't working out are you the type of person who endures, quits, or tries to change your behavior (Possible probes: the amount of time that you study, your study environment, etc.) or tries to change the circumstances (Possible probes: change classes, seek another advisor, etc.)?
7. Have you experienced any academic difficulties in any of your classes so far? If so, what specific strategies did you use to overcome these difficulties?

***Moving out:*** “Moving out” involves the process of graduating and students will be asked the following questions since they have a goal to ultimately graduate from the institution.

1. If you had to do it all over again would you have chosen to attend \_\_\_\_? Why or why not?
2. What motivates you to stay in college?

3. What are some things that “if you had only known” may have made a difference in where you attended college, what you majored in, etc.?

**Wrap-up Questions:**

- If you were in a position of authority at \_\_\_\_\_, what, if anything, would you do to make the transition process smoother for Early College participants?
- Is there anything else you would like for me to know about your experience at \_\_\_\_\_ so far?



## **Appendix G—Academic Advisor Interview Protocol**

This study seeks to garner an understanding of the transition experiences of students who attended Early College High Schools on a community college campus who are now attending a doctoral granting large public research university (with very high research activity) in the southeastern United States. The two research questions guiding this study are:

1. What are Early College High School participants' perceptions of their transition to a research university?
2. What factors enhance or hinder the success of Early College High School participants at a research university?

### **Interview Questions**

1. How long have you worked as an academic advisor at \_\_\_\_?
2. What led you into this profession?
3. Which specific majors do you advise?
4. Are you actively involved in any specific initiatives that are geared toward Early College students?
5. Do you feel that you've seen an increase in the number of Early College students that you advise now as opposed to when you first began advising at \_\_\_\_?
6. From an advising standpoint, what is the transition to \_\_\_\_like for these students?
7. Could you give a specific example(s) of advising interactions that you've had with these students?
8. In your opinion, from an advising standpoint, what, if any, are the benefits of Early College High schools as it pertains to academics here at \_\_\_\_?
9. What would you say is the most challenging aspect, if any, of working with Early College students at \_\_\_\_?
10. In your opinion, do you feel that the institutional policies and procedures at \_\_\_\_ are designed to enhance or hinder the success of Early College students? Could you give specific examples of each?
11. Do you think that Early College students proactively seek academic advising at a higher or lesser demand than the other college students at \_\_\_\_?
12. What, if any, issues have you seen when an Early College student enters college with an associate's degree or ample college credits?
13. Do you think that the Early College experience at \_\_\_\_ differs depending on the students major? If so, which majors and why?
14. If you were in a position of authority at \_\_\_\_, what, if anything, would you do to make the transition process smoother for Early College participants?

15. Is there anything else you would like for me to know about Early College students at \_\_\_ as it pertains to academic advising?