

EARLY COLLEGE HIGH SCHOOL GRADUATES' PERCEPTIONS OF COLLEGE
READINESS DURING BACHELOR'S DEGREE ATTAINMENT

A Record of Study

by

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ABSTRACT

Texas has approximately 200 designated early college high schools (ECHS). The present study aimed to acquire feedback from ECHS graduates to identify how students could be prepared more effectively for postsecondary education degree attainment and identify potential areas of disconnect between ECHS and 4-year colleges. To explore early college student postsecondary preparation, former ECHS students were interviewed using a semi-structured interview design.

Three dimensions of Organizational Socialization were used to frame findings from the document review and participant responses: performance proficiency, people, organizational goals and values. Participants shared stories illustrating how ECHS provided many college preparatory supports and activities in all three dimensions to help socialize students within institutions of higher education.

Students reported they felt prepared for postsecondary education after graduation. They also said they continued to use several college preparatory activities in their postsecondary setting. Participants discussed some areas in which they felt underprepared and recommended more support in the areas of personal finance, social network support, and college match.

DEDICATION

I dedicate this work to Stephan Richardson, my husband, best friend, and the love of my life. He endured my academic journey with grace and patience. When I doubted myself, he encouraged me to keep going. He ensured our family and house were cared for to give me time to study and write. His eternal love and patience gave me the strength to finish.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Closing the race/ethnicity gaps in higher education participation and degree attainment is critical to addressing the projected rising poverty rate and decreased family income in Texas (60x30TX Plan, 2015; *Closing the Gaps*, 2000; Murdock et al., 1997). Regardless of the state of the economy, research repeatedly shows the more education one attains, the higher their earnings and the less likely they are to experience unemployment (Tropey, 2021). For example, the median weekly earnings for a person with a bachelor's degree are \$1,305. In contrast, the median weekly earnings for someone with an associate's degree and only a high school diploma are \$938 and \$781, respectively (Tropey, 2021). While unemployment, caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, increased for all education levels, it was significantly lower for those with higher education. The unemployment rate for those holding a bachelor's degree was 5.5%. In comparison, those with an associate's degree or only a high school diploma were 7.1% and 9.0%, respectively (U.S. Bureau of Labor and Statistics, 2021).

The Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board (THECB), the Texas state legislature, and the Texas Education Agency (TEA) united around the statewide strategic plan to address the higher education gap, *Closing the Gaps by 2015*. In 2015, *Closing the Gap* was reviewed, updated, and rebranded as *60x30TX*. The state has dedicated billions of dollars to implement strategies that improve higher education outcomes to support these plans. Under *Closing the Gaps by 2015* and *60x30TX*, Texas authorized the opening of early college high schools (ECHS) as part of a larger strategic plan to increase the enrollment of underrepresented students in higher education (THECB, 2015).

ECHSs provide an opportunity for students to begin work on a postsecondary degree or certification before high school graduation (TEA, 2019).

Background of the Problem

The primary goal of ECHS is to provide low-income, first-generation, and at-risk students an opportunity to earn an associate's degree or 60 transferable college credit hours prior to high school graduation (TEA, 2020). Studies on ECHSs report positive effects on high school graduation rates, college enrollment, and college completion (Berger et al., 2013; Edmunds et al., 2020; Haxton et al., 2016; Lauen et al., 2017; Song & Zeiser, 2019). However, while ECHSs have led to significant increases in 2-year college enrollment and associate's degree attainment, results fail to show the same level of success with four-year college enrollment and completion (Haxton et al., 2016; Lauen et al., 2017; Song & Zeiser, 2019).

In 2019, THECB reported progress for the 60x30TX plan. In the academic year 2018, there was an annual rate increase in certificate/degree completion of 3.1%. While this rate represents an increase, the degree completion rate is too low to meet the state goal of at least 550,000 certificates, associate's, bachelor's, or master's degrees by 2030. Target subgroups of students also missed the degree completion goal, including economically disadvantaged by 2.5%, Hispanic students by 2.4%, and African American students by 5.7%. The report recommends that K-12 leaders evaluate their policies and practices to become more effective.

When specifically examining ECHS progress in Texas, the TEA reported the following data in April 2021:

- Prior to high school graduation, 40% of ECHS students completed an associate's degree or certificate.
- The Texas College Core (TCC) 42 credits were by 25% of ECHS students. (TCC is a 42-credit-hour curriculum for all undergraduate students in Texas public higher education).
- During the fall after graduation, 43% of ECHS students enrolled in higher education.

National Clearinghouse data for the ECHS of focus for the present study further illustrates the trend. In the fall after high school graduation, 82% of the Class of 2017 graduates entered college. Only 69% of those students persisted to their second year. As of Fall 2020, only 23% have earned their bachelor's degree.

Statement of the Problem

The ECHS model was strategically implemented to increase postsecondary degree attainment for students traditionally underrepresented in higher education. ECHS uses various policies, procedures, and interventions to socialize students for success in the postsecondary environment. As with any program, these policies, procedures, and interventions should be examined to determine if services function as intended or if changes in practice should be considered.

The defining features of ECHS include the opportunity to earn college credit through academically rigorous coursework with various academic and social supports. Supports include tutoring, self-advocacy, organization, study skills, transition to college skills, etc. (Atchison et al., 2019). These elements create a college preparatory culture that aligns with the Four Keys to College Readiness framework developed by David Conley

(Conley, 2012) and the Association of American Universities. Based on the strategically designed college preparatory culture implemented at ECHS, students should be highly prepared to persist and complete a four-year degree. However, evidence suggests that either the ECHS framework or the implementation of the framework fails to yield significant gains for underrepresented bachelor's degree attainment. If ECHSs are to make a more meaningful and long-lasting impact on students' lives and the economy, a more substantial effect on bachelor's degree attainment is required.

In the present study, I sought to identify why ECHSs fail to produce the desired effects on bachelor's degree attainment. I conducted a case study analysis of one ECHS that opened in 2007 by interviewing graduates of the Class of 2017. The present study sought answers to the following research questions.

Research Questions

The present study focuses on the following questions:

1. What are the college preparatory activities, strategies, or interventions implemented by the campus?
2. Which ECHS activities and opportunities do graduates identify as influential in their postsecondary educational pursuits?
3. In what ways did identified activities or experiences affect postsecondary educational plans or intentions?
4. Which activities or experiences, if any, did graduates identify as unhelpful?
5. What firsthand postsecondary experiences did alumni feel their ECHS could have better prepared them?

Significance of the Study

Several studies indicate that an area of future research is the examination of ECHS mechanisms and experiences that affect students' postsecondary success (Duncheon, 2020;

Haxton, 2016; Song et al., 2021). Research shows that college preparatory activities, interventions, and support systems are essential to student success in ECHS (Duncheon, 2020; Edmunds, 2020; Haxton et al., 2016). Many ECHS studies focus on general tenants of college readiness, such as academic preparedness, cognitive strategies, positive relationships, and learning skills that help students (Calhoun et al., 2019; Edmunds et al., 2017; Edmunds et al., 2020; McDonald & Farrell, 2012).

However, fewer studies address specific strategies or activities most effective in helping students succeed in postsecondary education after high school. The present study sought to extend the research by examining whether ECHS graduates felt lessons learned from ECHS experiences affected their postsecondary education outcomes, especially outcomes associated with four-year college enrollment and bachelor's degree attainment. Understanding which experiences students found most and least valuable after graduation can help ECHS leaders evaluate their campus college preparatory activities and areas that may need improvement.

Limitations

ECHSs have varied service models with diverse student populations (Walk, 2020). The present study focuses on one relatively small ECHS with no more than 150 students per class. The ECHS is a stand-alone campus in which college courses are taught by college faculty located at the high school and college campuses. Henry Early College High School (HECHS) is a stand-alone early college. It is in a separate location and operates independently from the college partner or any other secondary school. Most college courses taken by HECHS students are taught on the college campus and led by college faculty.

Other ECHS models comprise a school-within-a-school or a transformed comprehensive high school of over 2000 students who earn dual credit through classes taught by credentialed high school teachers on the high school campus. Additionally, while there are no academic criteria to enroll, the ECHS student must choose to attend. The desire to participate in an ECHS demonstrates the student maintains some level of motivation to attend college. The small sample and the fact that all participants graduated from the same ECHS do not allow the findings to be generalized confidently.

Delimitations

The present study examined students' perspectives on their preparation for postsecondary success. One ECHS, Henry ECHS (HECHS), became the focus of the present study. All participants graduated from this HECHS in May of 2017.

Definitions

Defining several terms, often used in research but with varying definitions, provide clarification for the present study.

- *At-Risk*-A student in danger of dropping out of school under 26 years of age and meets at least one of the 13 qualifying characteristics (Texas Education Code 29.081).
- *College Readiness*-The level of preparation a student needs in order to enroll and succeed without remediation at a postsecondary institution that offers a baccalaureate degree or transfer to a baccalaureate program (Conley, 2007).
- *First Generation*-Refers to students in which neither parent completed a baccalaureate degree or, in the case of an individual who resided with and received support from only one parent, did not complete a baccalaureate degree (Higher Education Act of 1965, 1998).
- *Low Income*-A student who participates in the free or reduced lunch program while in K-12 education.

- *Underrepresented Students* – College students who have been traditionally denied access or underserved in higher education. This includes first-generation students have low socioeconomic backgrounds, and ethnic and racial minority students (Billingsley & Hurd, 2019).
- *College Success* – For the purposes of this study, college success is defined as students who have completed a degree (Engle & Tinto, 2008).

Summary and Organization of the Present Study

Five chapters make up the present study. Chapter One introduced the problem, purpose, and significance of the study. In addition, the questions that guided the present study were put forth. Chapter Two establishes the theoretical framework for the present study. Additionally, it contains a review of the literature and research related to ECHS. Chapter Three focuses on the current methodology, including research design, population, sampling, and the research perspective. It also includes descriptions of data collection and analysis. Chapter Four presents and discusses the results. Chapter Five provides interpretations of findings and suggests opportunities for future study.

CHAPTER II

LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature review for the present study begins with a review of the progress of higher education opportunities and outcomes for underrepresented college students, as well as an examination of the research. Next, the historical background and model of early college high school (ECHS) are provided. Lastly, research on the effectiveness of ECHS and ECHS student perspectives is reviewed.

Recent studies on underrepresented students generally show that progress has been made to increase the number of underrepresented students earning a bachelor's degree. However, the degree attainment gap continues to grow between White and high-income students and underrepresented students (Pell Institute, 2021). Research and historical documents on ECHSs indicate that they aim to address the needs of underrepresented students via rigorous academic preparation and the opportunity to earn free college credit (American Institutes for Research, 2020).

Reviewed literature shows that the early college model increases college enrollment and college graduation rates for ECHS students compared to non-ECHS students (Berger et al., 2013; Lauen et al., 2017; Song & Zeiser, 2019). ECHS students also attain postsecondary degrees faster than non-ECHS students (Song et al., 2021). However, while 29% of ECHS students earn an associate's degree compared to 11% of students in the comparison group, the difference is significantly less when considering bachelor's degree attainment. Within six years of high school graduation, 30% of ECHS students attained a bachelor's degree compared to 25% of the comparison group of non-ECHS students (American Research Institute, 2020).

College Success for Underrepresented Students

For this study, college success is defined as college degree attainment. Since 2015, The Pell Institute for the Study of Opportunity in Higher Education has published a report on the status of higher education equity, identifying policies and practices that promote equity and illustrating the need for additional policies and programs to improve equity of opportunities and outcomes in higher education.

The Pell Institute analysis uses data from the U.S. Department of Education, U.S. Census Bureau, and the National Center for Education Statistics studies including High School Longitudinal Studies program, National Postsecondary Student Aid Study, Beginning Postsecondary Students Longitudinal Study, Baccalaureate and Beyond Longitudinal Study, and Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System. The following are some highlights from The Pell Institutes' 2021 publication.

- The attainment of bachelor's degrees for people over 25 in all ethnic groups has been continually increasing since 1940. However, White (non-Hispanic) and Asian students attain bachelor's degrees at much higher levels than African American and Hispanic students. In 2020, 61% of Asian and 41% of White (non-Hispanic) students had earned a bachelor's degree compared to 28% of African American students and 21% of Hispanic students.
- The socio-economic gap in postsecondary education enrollment has decreased since 1990, but a significant disparity between the low and high socioeconomic students remains. In 2019 the gap between those in the lowest income quartiles and those in the highest was 30 percentage points, while in 1990, the same gap was 42 percentage points.
- College participation rates for low-income students in 2019 were 30 percentage points lower than those in the highest income quartile.
- A longitudinal study following 9th-grade students in 2009 found that 51% of low-income students did not enroll in college the fall after high school graduation compared to 90% of students in the highest income quartile.

- While the cost of college tuition has increased from \$9,698 in 1970 to \$24,623 in 2019. Federal Pell Grant awards for low-income students have not increased at the same rate. Federal Pell Grants are awarded only to undergraduate students who display exceptional financial need and have not earned a bachelor's, graduate, or professional degree (Federal Student Aid, 2022). In 1970 the average Pell Grant award was \$3,277, and in 2019, the average Pell Grant award increased to only \$4,170. In 1970, low-income students could depend on the Pell Grant to cover approximately 60% of their college expenses. In 2019, the Pell Grant only covered approximately 25% of their college expenses.
- Only 4–5% of students planning to enroll in the “most competitive” colleges and universities were from the lowest socioeconomic quartile versus 67–69% in the highest economic quartile.
- Students who were both low-income and the first generation to attend college had a 21% chance of completing a bachelor’s degree in 6-years. College students who were neither low income nor first generation had a 66% chance of completing a bachelor’s degree in 6-years.

The gap between White, African American, and Hispanic students is more than 20% when examining degree attainment. Further, there is a significant gap in enrollment when looking at low-income students. As of 2019, the difference between low and high-income students enrolling in college is 30 percentage points. The Pell Grant, meant to assist low-income students with access to higher education financially, has not kept pace with rapidly increasing college tuition. The Pell Institute’s analysis of underrepresented students illustrated that while minor progress has been made in some areas, there is still a need for improvement to reach equity in opportunities and outcomes.

The College Board released findings in its 2019 report similar to The Pell Institute’s findings. The College Board *Education Pays 2019* report found that college enrollment rates have increased, but gaps persist among demographics (Ma et al., 2019). Additionally, they discovered that higher-income students were more likely to complete a degree than low-income students (Ma et al., 2019).

Studies have found a positive correlation between educational attainment and life outcomes, including higher earnings, lower unemployment rates, a healthier lifestyle, more active citizenship, and more active parenting (Jepsen et al., 2014; Ma et al., 2019; Oreopoulous & Salvanes, 2011). Considering the positive life outcomes and the lack of substantial progress accomplished to date, it is imperative to find successful strategies to support underrepresented students' degree attainment.

Barriers to College Access and Degree Attainment for Underrepresented Students

Research on college access and degree attainment for underrepresented students has been studied by examining student characteristics, institution organization factors, and environmental variables (Demetriou & Schmitz-Sciborski, 2011; Kinzie, 2008, Nora et al., 1996; Page & Clayton, 2016). Students' characteristics, such as academic achievement, self-concept, and social support, help explain how students adjust and perform in college (Hurtado, 2000). Institutional factors such as faculty-student interactions and students' experiences on campus are important considerations when examining student retention (Tinto, 1987). Student environmental factors such as family responsibilities, work, and other life events potentially affect student persistence for underrepresented students (Nora et al., 1996).

One of the essential personal characteristics, not just for acceptance into college but persistence to degree attainment, is academic preparation prior to postsecondary enrollment (Bean, 1980; Conley, 2007; Nora et al., 1996). First-generation students enter college academically disadvantaged compared to continuing-generation peers (Strayhorn, 2014). Similarly, high SES students outperform low SES students when looking at college readiness indicators (Strayhorn, 2014). Students who do not complete academically

challenging high school coursework tend to do poorly, leading to low retention and graduation rates (Arbora & Nora, 2007; Conley, 2007, Kenzie et al., 2008; Light & Stayer, 2000; Strayhorn, 2014). The strongest predictor for Hispanic students attending a four-year college is participating in a rigorous academic course sequence focused on college preparedness (Arbona & Nora, 2007).

In addition to academic content knowledge, contextual knowledge of college is important in determining college success (Strayhorn, 2014). Information is often a barrier for underrepresented students. Some students lack information about financial aid, the application process, and what to consider when choosing a college. Others find themselves overwhelmed by the amount of information and opportunities (Page & Scott-Clayton, 2016). The summer transition to postsecondary education can be problematic when students and families are trying to complete registration and housing information and no longer belong to their high school system but are not yet integrated into the new college system (Page & Scott-Clayton, 2016).

Social networks with family, peers, or mentors have positively impacted college completion (Almedia et al., 2021; Mishra, 2020). Encouragement from friends and family positively affects academic achievement for underrepresented students (Terenzini et al., 1996). Lending further evidence of the impact a social network has are studies that found the level of college preparedness and having a critical mass of friends planning for college predicts enrollment in a four-year university for high-risk students of all ethnicities (Arbora & Nora, 2007; Horn, 1997).

Environmental factors, such as family responsibilities and work, strongly influence student socialization and academic experiences on a college campus. However, Nora et al.

(1996) found no relationships or experiences that outweigh negative pull factors. Nora (2003) defines pull factors as family responsibilities, working responsibilities, and whether a student commutes to college. Evidence shows that persistence can be reduced by 36% for minority students who work off-campus (Nora, 1996). Low-income students are more likely to work many hours, which makes it challenging to integrate into the social and academic life, affecting persistence toward college graduation (Nora, 2003)

Tinto (1987) theorized that students who socially integrate themselves into the college institution are more likely to graduate because they have an increased commitment to the institution. He later amended his theory to include interventions that are needed for underrepresented student groups (Tinto, 1993). Garriott and Nisle's (2017) study reinforced the importance of institutional support for underrepresented students. Underrepresented students need to interact with college faculty and services such as faculty mentorship, peer tutoring, and or counseling services (Castleman & Goodman, 2022; Mishra, 2020; Wyckoff, 1998). Nora et al. (1996) found that the female student persistence rate benefited from non-classroom interactions with college faculty.

Evidence suggests that college “match” is important to persistence and degree attainment (Arbona & Nora, 2007; Castleman & Goodman, 2022; Page & Scott-Clayton, 2016). Match refers to a student choosing a college that matches their goals and culture. Counseling has been essential in helping students find a college in which they can succeed, shifting some students from two-year to four-year colleges (Castleman & Goodman, 2022). Further, there is evidence that the likelihood of bachelor’s degree attainment increases when there is a match between student abilities and college quality (Light & Strayer, 2000).

Recommendations have been made to support the retention of underrepresented students through teaching and learning opportunities in college classes. As part of any intervention, provided study skills and academic expectations must be clearly communicated (Kenzie et al. 2008). It is further suggested that university faculty focus on using pedagogy that encourages engagement, collaborative activities, and believe that all students can learn (Kenzie et al., 2008).

The Student/Institution Engagement Model proposes that college persistence is an interaction between the student and the institution (Nora, 2003). A student's pre-college characteristics include academic achievement, experiences, financial circumstances, and psychosocial factors developed at home and in school environments (Nora, 2003). Elements of this model are reflected in other models, such as Conley (2007) and Roderick et al. (2009). Their work on college attainment focuses more on sets of skills students must obtain.

Several studies on college access and degree attainment for underrepresented students focus on skill sets that students will need to access and be successful in college. The most common skill or knowledge barriers include financial aid, the college-going process, organizational knowledge, and academic content knowledge and basic skills (Conley, 2012; Mishra, 2020; Page & Clayton, 2016; Roderick et al., 2009; Strayhorn, 2014). In response to these identified skill sets, Conley (2007) defined a set of college readiness skills he referred to as Keys to College Readiness (a) Key Cognitive Strategies, (b) Key Content Knowledge, (c) Key Learning skills & Techniques and (d) Key transition skills. ECHS supporters such as Educate Texas, the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, and Jobs for the Future have all supported the use of Conley's Keys to College Readiness as

part of any college readiness program model (Conley, 2007; Educate Texas, n.d.; Education Weekly, 2016).

College Readiness Programs

For decades, government, private organizations, and nonprofit organizations have implemented programs to reduce the education gaps by meeting the needs of underrepresented students through different college readiness programs. Dual Enrollment, The High School Puente Project, Gaining Early Awareness and Readiness for Undergraduate Programs (GEAR UP), TRIO, and Advancement Via Individual Determination (AVID) are all college readiness programs focused on increasing positive educational outcomes for underrepresented students.

Dual enrollment allows high school students to take college courses and receive credit at high school and college levels. Program implementation varies for cost as well as who teaches the college courses. Schools offer free or reduced tuition and can also have high school faculty teaching the courses versus college faculty. Over 70% of community colleges allow high school students to take dual enrollment courses (Kurlaender & Rodriguez, 2022). Dual enrollment aims to increase the rigor of academic preparation and reduce college tuition costs for students (Cowan & Goldhaber, 2015). Research shows that positive outcomes for dual enrollment include increased college enrollment and students' exposure to more rigorous academic preparation (An, 2013; Cowan & Goldhaber, 2015). Dual enrollment was also found to positively impact associate and bachelor's degree attainment (An, 2013).

The High School Puente Project started in 1994 and focused on serving 36 high schools in California. The goal of the Puente (meaning *bridge* in Spanish) was to increase the number of underrepresented students enrolling in college and attaining degrees (Gándara, 2004). The primary characteristics of this program included intensive academic counseling, college preparatory coursework, and mentoring from community members. In a four-year study that included matching Puente students with similar non-Puente students, the findings showed that Puente students enrolled in college at high rates and strongly affected college persistence (Gándara, 2004).

TRIO, enacted through The Educational Opportunity ACT (EOA), created seven programs, three of which focus on college readiness: Student Support Services, Talent Search, and Upward Bound (U.S. Dept of Education, 2022). All three programs were designed to prepare underrepresented students for postsecondary education (Quinn et al., 2019). All three services focus on academic preparation for college through tutoring and rigorous academic instruction. Career counseling, cultural enrichment activities, and college enrollment and financial aid advising are also critical elements of the programs. Results have indicated that TRIO has supported higher high school graduation rates and increased college enrollment (U.S. Dept of Education, 2022).

The GEAR UP program began in 1998 and provided college readiness services to students, teachers, and families at high-poverty schools (U.S. Dept of Education, 2008). The program starts with a seventh-grade student cohort and provides support and services to the cohort and their families until one year after graduation. GEAR UP was found to have a positive impact on parents' knowledge of postsecondary education opportunities, an increase in college enrollment, and reduced the college enrollment gap between low-

income and higher-income high schools (Bowman et al., 2018). While there is evidence that GEAR UP helped increase college enrollment rates, it did not contribute to college persistence (Bowman et al., 2018).

AVID is a college readiness elective course founded by teacher Mary Catherine Swanson in 1980. The program is now implemented in over 6,400 schools in 47 states (AVID, 2018). The AVID elective focuses on rigorous academic preparation, opportunity knowledge, and student agency (AVID, 2021). Research has shown that AVID students experience higher rates of first-year college retention, are on track to graduate within six years of college enrollment, and are less likely to enroll in remedial courses (Huerta et al., 2013).

All these programs began in the 1990s and added to the research on how to increase positive educational outcomes for underrepresented students. While none of these programs are the same as the ECHS, each program shares similar elements with the ECHS model. Investigations of these programs have found that each program has positively affected college enrollment, college persistence, and or degree attainment. These findings support the promise of ECHS. The ECHS model adopted successful elements of each program, such as dual enrollment courses, high-quality counseling, rigorous academic preparation, self-advocacy, and motivation, to combine into one model.

Theoretical Framework

The present study applied the Chao et al. (1994) organizational socialization model that includes six specific dimensions. Any higher education institution's organizational structure and policies play a significant role in not only successful student outcomes but also in inequity of outcomes (Eller, 2019; Jeffery, 2020; Tinto, 1987). An organization

socialization model was used to view how well ECHS students felt they were prepared to succeed in an organization of higher education after graduation.

To succeed in any type of organization, a member must understand their role, expectations, and rules. The same idea can be applied to students' understanding of their role, expectations, and the rules of institutions of higher education. Organizational socialization is described as how people learn about and adjust to the knowledge, skills, attitudes, expectations, and behaviors needed for a new organizational role (Berkelaar & Harrison, 2019).

Chao et al. (1994) identified six dimensions within organizational socialization to further define how people understand, adapt, and succeed within organizations. These six dimensions include performance proficiency, language, people, politics, organizational goals and values, and history. Applying a socialization lens to this study will focus the research on how students learn, adapt, and succeed in their college environment.

Organizational socialization has been used to evaluate how activities at an ECHS can help students overcome college success barriers. Employing this theoretical lens to study ECHS students, Duncheon (2020) applied three of the dimensions to students transitioning to college as follows. The *performance proficiency* focuses on how well students develop academic content, critical thinking, and cognitive skills needed to succeed in college. The *people* domain focuses on how students build successful relationships with professors, administrators, and other students within the academic organization. Lastly, *organizational goals and values* refer to a student's ability to navigate the logistics and culture of a college campus. While Duncheon (2020) found evidence to support

development in these three dimensions, less is known about ECHS's success with the other three dimensions; *politics, language, and history*.

The present study also used the same three dimensions of Organizational Socialization as Duncheon (2020). These three dimensions provided the lens through which activities at Henry Early College High School (HECHS) were viewed. The three dimensions are:

- *Performance proficiency*: How well do students develop academic content, critical thinking, and cognitive skills needed to succeed in college.
- *People*: How students build successful relationships with professors, administrators, and other students within the academic community.
- *Organizational Goals*: Students' ability to navigate the logistics and culture of a college campus.

Focusing on these three dimensions of Organizational Socialization reflects Nora's (2003) Student/Institution Engagement Model, which specifically considers how a student's pre-college characteristics and experiences interact with the institution environment.

Historical Background of ECHS

In 2002, the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation initiated the push to create 170 ECHSs across the country (AIR, 2004). The Gates Foundation Early College High School Initiative (ECHSI) focused on traditionally underrepresented students in postsecondary education. The ECHSI intended to create high schools that target historically underrepresented students, with a rigorous curriculum that included high school and college courses, giving students the opportunity to earn up to 60 tuition-free college credit hours. As a result, small, effective schools developed through partnerships built with higher education in mind (AIR, 2004; Moreno et al., 2019; Vargas et al., 2019).

ECHS built upon existing dual enrollment programs (Walk, 2020). Dual enrollment programs were showing limited success but were working in isolation. Underrepresented students were not enrolling, could not financially afford to register, or did not meet the enrollment criteria (Berger et al., 2010). ECHSI would also develop with different options for implementation (Walk, 2020). While some schools accredited high school teachers to teach college courses, others had strict requirements that allowed only college faculty to teach college courses. Similarly, while some students took college courses only on their high school campus, in other ECHS models students took college courses on the college campus (AIR & SRI International, 2005).

In 1997, state demographer Steve Murdock shared with the Texas Legislature that the changing demographics of Texas would lead to Texans becoming undereducated and unemployable in higher-paying jobs by the year 2050 (Murdock et al., 1997). According to Murdock, in 2050, more than half of Texas residents will be Hispanic, a third or less White, and 20% of Texas households will be in poverty (Degrave, 2017). To prevent a highly unequal society, higher poverty rates, an undereducated workforce, and tremendous strain on social services and the criminal justice system, Murdock stated, “Texas must invest in the rapidly growing Hispanic population and close gaps in educational achievement between Latino students and their white peers” (Degrave, 2017). In response, the Texas Legislature, together with The Higher Education Coordinating Board (THECB), set forth a series of goals and strategies to increase the level of education and postsecondary opportunities in Texas (THECB, 2000).

ECHSs were put forth as one of the strategies to meet the goal of increased postsecondary participation and degree attainment (THECB, 2015). In 2005, the Texas

Legislature passed Senate Bill 1164, which authorized the creation of ECHSs in Texas. The ECHS initiative began with one goal: to propel traditionally underrepresented students to postsecondary degree attainment by providing students an opportunity to earn college credits while still in high school. To achieve this goal, ECHSs provided a highly supportive school featuring rigorous coursework and the skills to navigate the college environment at no cost to families (TEA, 2019).

In 2006, a unique public-private partnership was established between the Gates Foundation and the TEA (SRI International, 2011). Each entity would fund ten for a total of 20 ECHSs throughout Texas. In 2008, the TEA developed a designation process for districts wishing to open an ECHS (TEA, 2009). The designation process was implemented to ensure new ECHSs maintained fidelity to the model and monitored outcomes. The ECHS Blueprint is the document that guides implementation for all ECHS campuses (TEA, 2020).

The ECHS Blueprint states that students must be provided an opportunity to earn 60 college credit hours and are expected to have at least 30% of graduates earning an associate's degree. By earning an associate's degree prior to high school graduation, Texas makes progress toward its 60x30TX Plan goal that, by 2030, 60% of 25–35-year-olds will earn a postsecondary degree or certificate (THECB, 2015).

According to the TEA Early College High School webpage, to be designated as an ECHS in Texas, the school or district must submit an application to TEA and meet all requirements of the ECHS Blueprint. As of 2019, Texas recognizes 182 ECHSs that serve approximately 65,000 students. The Texas ECHS Blueprint set forth the following six

benchmarks and three outcome-based measures that guide school districts and leaders in designing and running an ECHS. The ECHS will:

- Benchmark 1: serves grades 9–12 and will target at-risk students or those who may not otherwise attend college.
- Benchmark 2: maintain a signed memorandum of understanding with an institute of higher education (IHE).
- Benchmark 3: develop a leadership team with representation from the school district and the IHE to address design issues and sustainability.
- Benchmark 4: provide a rigorous course of study with the academic, social and emotional support that enables students to earn a high school diploma and complete the THECB core curriculum, obtain certifications, earn an associate degree, or earn at least 60 credit hours toward a baccalaureate degree during grades 9–12.
- Benchmark 5: ensure academic rigor and readiness by administering the Texas Success Initiative Assessment to assess college readiness and use the results to plan individual intervention plans.
- Benchmark 6: will be a full-day program at an autonomous high school with its own leadership making implementation decisions (TEA, 2020).

While all ECHSs in Texas adhere to the benchmarks, each campus may differ.

For example, an ECHS may be a stand-alone campus, a school-within-a-school, or a stand-alone located on a college campus. Dual credit courses may also look different from campus to campus. College faculty may be responsible for teaching all college courses or high school teachers may be credentialed to teach the college-level classes. Each school designs its academic, social, and emotional support systems.

Effectiveness of ECHS

As the ECHS initiative ages, short-term and longitudinal quantitative studies have been completed and show positive results for the early college model. Positive effects include improved high school outcomes, college enrollment, and degree attainment when

comparing ECHS students and non-ECHS students (Berger et al., 2013; Edmunds et al., 2017; Haxton et al., 2016; Song & Zeiser, 2019). There have also been multiple qualitative studies that feature student perspectives through interviews (Cravey, 2013; Duncheon, 2020; McDonald & Farrell, 2012; Schaefer & Rivera, 2020; Thompson & Ongaga, 2011; Woodcock & Beal, 2013). Most qualitative studies focus on the student experience while they attended their ECHS. Very few studies focus on ECHS graduates and how activities during ECHS affected their experiences in postsecondary education after ECHS graduation.

The AIR stated three ECHS implications for policymakers to consider based on multiple studies. Based on data from 10 ECHSs, AIR found similar positive impacts for economically disadvantaged and traditionally underserved students and students from advantaged backgrounds, indicating that ECHS works for students of diverse backgrounds. AIR also found that school-wide focus, college credit earned with no expense to families, and the positive outcomes of ECHS should guide policymakers and educators to a school model that directly addresses secondary and postsecondary priorities (AIR, 2020).

Studies have shown that early college positively affects high school outcomes. Edmunds et al. (2020) found that students at ECHS attended school at higher rates than non-ECHS students. There is also evidence through state assessments, college readiness assessments, and course completion that early college students experience high levels of academic rigor (Berger et al., 2013; Edmunds et al., 2013; Kaniuka & Vickers, 2010). Further, several studies present evidence showing a higher high school graduation rate when compared with national data at ECHSs (Edmunds et al., 2017; Lauen et al., 2017).

ECHSs positively impact postsecondary outcomes. Berger et al. (2013) conducted a randomized experimental design study using data from 2,500 students who applied to ten ECHSs across five states. Lotteries were used to determine admission. According to the findings, ECHS students had significantly higher rates of high school graduation, college enrollment, and degree attainment (Berger et al., 2013).

Using the same data set as Berger et al. (2013), Song and Zeiser (2019) found that ECHSs continued to positively affect college enrollment and degree attainment for at least six years after ECHS graduation. A similar study concurred that ECHS positively affected college enrollment and degree attainment (Song et al., 2021). However, Song et al. (2021) found that ECHS impacts on enrollment and degree attainment did not significantly differ by student characteristics (ethnicity and low income). Moreno et al. (2022) found a similar equity gap for low SES students. ECHS students identified as at-risk or low-income were the least likely to move on to postsecondary education after ECHS graduation.

Studies also found that ECHS students were more likely to complete two-year (Lauen et al., 2017) and four-year (Berger et al., 2013; Song & Zeiser, 2019) degrees. Dual credits earned in high school were the strongest mediators of degree completion (Moreno et al., 2022; Song & Zeiser, 2019). When an ECHS partnered with a two-year college, the likelihood that students attained a bachelor's degree improved and allowed them to do so in a shorter time (Zeiser et al., 2019). However, between year five and year ten, ECHS students were similarly likely to enroll in college and complete a bachelor's degree when compared to non-ECHS students (Song et al., 2021). ECHS students who graduated high school with an associate's degree moved on to a four-year institution more often than ECHS who did not earn an associate's degree (Moreno et al., 2022).

Garcia et al. (2018) studied ECHS student persistence toward attaining a bachelor's degree. Their mixed-methods study included ECHS graduates from the Class of 2012 who attended an ECHS in the Lower Rio Grande Valley area of Texas. Interviews were conducted with six former students. Students were sorted into subgroups based on the number of college credits they earned while enrolled in ECHS. Subgroups were <19 college credit hours, 20–39 college credit hours, or > 40 college credit hours. Garcia et al. (2018) found students who obtained 20–39 college credits at ECHS were 2.81 times more likely than those with less than 20 college credit hours to persist in college and four times more likely to attain a bachelor's degree. A student who graduated ECHS with more than 40 college credit hours was 2.81 times more likely to persist in college than those who earned less than 20 college credit hours and 5.4 times more likely to attain a bachelor's degree than those who earned less than 19 credits.

In addition to improved educational outcomes, Atchison et al. (2019) examined the cost-benefit of ECHS. They compared the per-student cost of an ECHS and the per-student cost of a traditional high school. While the ECHS results in \$3800 more per student than a traditional high school, the increased educational attainment results in lifetime benefits of \$58,000 per student. When comparing the cost to benefits, Atchison et al. (2019) found that ECHS enrollment shows increased earnings for ECHS students, increased tax revenue, and decreased government spending.

An unintended consequence of ECHS students earning 60 hours prior to high school is a reduction in admissions opportunities to four-year universities. The transition from ECHS to four-year institutions can be difficult. Due to the number of credits students earn, students do not have access to some special admissions opportunities, struggle with

the transfer of credits, and can feel overwhelmed with a challenging first-year course load (Hoffman et al., 2022).

ECHS Student Perspective

Several studies have examined students' perspectives while attending an early college high school. McDonald and Farrell (2012) used focus groups with 141 ECHS first- and second-year students to capture their experiences. The ECHS met students' academic and emotional needs through a tailored curriculum, a cohesive learning environment, and strong academic and emotional support. Edmunds et al. (2013) also used focus groups with enrolled ECHS students as part of a mixed-methods student on ECHS engagement. They found students believed they were held to high expectations, provided strong academic preparation, and social-emotional support. This perspective highlighted the belief that their teachers conducted engaging instruction.

Thompson and Ongaga (2011) conducted a case study of an ECHS in which enrolled students and teachers were interviewed individually. Their results found students believed they were academically engaged and on track to graduate high school and move on to college successfully.

While several studies have interviewed students, who graduated from an ECHS, their research aimed to learn about their experiences while attending the ECHS and how to improve student success while enrolled in the ECHS. Few studies focus on how students perceive ECHS experiences and how ECHS experiences influence postsecondary success after ECHS graduation. Do students believe that ECHS experiences contribute to their postsecondary experiences?

Woodcock and Beal (2013) conducted one-on-one interviews with ECHS graduates to produce a narrative of student perspectives. Narratives were created for three ECHS graduates who were enrolled in college at the time of their study. Their results also found a positive perception of academic readiness and emotional support at ECHS helped them achieve college success. Within these narratives, students generally discussed earning college credit while in high school, the school climate of the ECHS, and feeling that they were academically prepared for college. The graduates interviewed did not mention any specific design features, strategies, or support services that contributed to their success.

Swiderski et al. (2021) studied ECHS students after graduation to determine if there were “spillover” effects for ECHS graduates beyond educational outcomes. They hypothesized that ECHSs not only help students succeed in postsecondary education but also improve their capacity and willingness to engage with society as responsible citizens. Their study was quantitative, using 19 ECHSs and 44 unique school-year cohorts. The findings suggest that attendance at an ECHS increases prosocial behaviors, including voting, voter registration, and lower criminal conviction rates (Swiderski et al., 2021).

Duncheon (2020) studied students after ECHS graduation to understand how the ECHS practice of socialization to higher education translates into practice. The study sampled 111 students and 14 ECHS faculty members using questionnaires and interviews. Duncheon (2020) found that students consistently believed that participation in dual credit courses helped prepare them academically and socially for college. Additionally, Duncheon found that academic scaffolding and social support facilitated and sometimes undermined students’ transition to college (Duncheon, 2020).

Summary

The present chapter reviewed the progress of higher education opportunities and outcomes for underrepresented college students, examined the barriers to higher education for underrepresented students, provided a historical background of ECHS, reviewed research on the effectiveness of ECHS, and reviewed ECHS student perspectives. Data has shown that while there has been some improvement in enrollment of underrepresented students, gaps persist for underrepresented students in enrollment and degree attainment (College Board, 2019; The Pell Institute, 2021).

Barriers to college opportunities and successful outcomes are typically focused on skill sets students need to access and succeed in college. The most common skill or knowledge barriers identified include financial aid, college-going process, organizational knowledge, and academic content knowledge and basic skills (Conley, 2012; Mishra, 2020; Page & Clayton, 2016; Roderick et al., 2009). Conley's (2012) Keys to College Readiness focused on these common barriers and have influenced the development of ECHSs.

Reviewed literature shows that the early college model increases college enrollment and college graduation rates for ECHS students compared to non-ECHS students (Berger et al., 2013; Lauen et al., 2017; Song & Zeiser, 2019). One area of future study suggested by Haxton et al. (2016) is to focus on the mechanisms used by ECHSs to affect postsecondary success. Many ECHS studies focus questions and discussion on general tenets of college readiness such as academic preparedness, cognitive strategies, positive relationships, learning skills, transition skills, etc. However, most ECHS studies do not focus on what specific strategies or activities are most effective once a student graduates

from the ECHS. The present study seeks to understand what ECHS activities former students perceived as valuable or important after high school graduation.

CHAPTER III

METHODS

The purpose of the present study was to examine the experiences of Henry Early College High School (HECHS) students after high school graduation and how activities during their early college high school (ECHS) enrollment may have impacted their postsecondary experiences. Understanding how experiences during HECHS enrollment affected their postsecondary experiences can help identify potential areas of improvement for ECHS models. The present chapter discusses the research design, data sources, data collection, and data analysis.

Research Design

The method used for the present study was based on a case study approach. A case study is a method in which a bounded system is investigated using data collected from multiple sources of information such as interviews, documents, and reports (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The five steps for conducting a case study are (a) determining if a case study approach is appropriate for the research problem, (b) identifying the specific case, (c) selecting multiple sources for in-depth data collection, and (d) deciding the type of data analysis to be used and finally, (e) use the analysis to interpret the meaning of the case (Stake, 1995).

A case study was most appropriate for this investigation because it allowed for an examination of the group's activities instead of the group itself or shared behaviors (Creswell, 2015). Case studies are optimal when educators seek to answer “how” and “why” questions (Hays & Singh, 2012). Using a single-case study method, I captured how

the HECHS alumni perceived their experiences at HECHS and any effect those experiences had on their postsecondary education.

As a single-case study, the present research was bound to a specific place and time (Creswell, 2015). More specifically, the present study was bound to HECHS, located in central Texas. HECHS is part of a small urban-like school district that serves approximately 16,000 kindergarten through twelfth-grade students. The HECHS campus opened in August of 2007 as part of a public-private partnership between the Texas Education Agency (TEA) and the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation (TEA ECHS Grant, 2006). As a grantee of the public-private partnership, HECHS was one of the first ECHS campuses in Texas. The fact that HECHS has been open for almost 15 years provides an opportunity to study a campus that has had time to improve and evolve into a thriving campus; it was recognized as an Exemplar ECHS campus by Texas High School Projects in 2009, a designated ECHS Demonstration Site by TEA in 2016, and as an ECHS Spotlight campus by the TEA in 2020. These distinctions indicate that HECHS has been recognized as successfully implementing the elements and activities of the Early College High School Blueprint (TEA, 2020) and used as a model for other ECHS campuses.

I conducted one-on-one semi-structured interviews for the present study to collect participant perspectives. A semi-structured format uses interview questions and protocols as a starting point and guide for the interview (Hays & Singe, 2012). As the interviewee, I oversaw the pace and flow of the interview. As a result, questions could have been skipped or asked in a different order with each interview. The strength of the semi-structured format includes more participant voice that provides a more in-depth examination of the

issue in focus. With a background in ECHS leadership, I could understand terminology and nuances that allowed ask more complex follow-up questions.

All participants for the present study had graduated from high school and were over the age of 18. I followed the district guidelines for research studies and was granted permission to access student demographics, contact information, and academic records under the condition that personal information remained confidential. All participants were assigned participant numbers. Post-interview, participants were sent a copy of their interview transcript to perform a member check, ensuring the authenticity of their statements.

Population Interest

HECHS had its first graduating students in 2011. The present study focused on the HECHS Class of 2017 graduates, the most recent class to have had enough time to attain a postsecondary degree. According to the 2016–2017 Texas Academic Performance Reporting (TAPR), 451 students were enrolled, and the Class of 2017 included 6% African American, 69% Hispanic, and 23% White. There were 69% of students on free or reduced lunch, 6% were English language learners, and 40% were categorized as at-risk of dropping out of school before earning their high school degree.

HECHS was chosen as the focus because it was designated by TEA as an early college high school for 15 years, one of the longest-running in Texas. Further, it has served as an ECHS model for other schools and leaders. The campus remains true to the ECHS open enrollment model; HECHS does not consider academic, attendance, or disciplinary records when enrolling students. Any student within HECHS's district may attend by

completing the enrollment process. HECHS is similar to the demographic population of all ECHS in Texas, as shown in Table 1.

Table 1

ECHS Statewide Demographics versus HECHS Demographics

	Texas ECHS 2019–2020	HECHS 2019–2020
At-Risk (Grade 9)	49%	55%
Economically Disadvantaged	75%	73%
English Learners (9–12)	12%	15%
SPED	4%	1%
African American	9%	6%
Hispanic	80%	77%
Male	43%	42%

Data Sources

Data for the present study include interviews, field notes, audio-visual recordings, transcripts, National Student Clearinghouse data, and documents from the campus and district. I used campus documents such as the HECHS website, ECHS designation application, handbooks, and campus improvement plans to build campus background information and develop interview questions. Prior to the interviews, I reviewed the ECHS application, ECHS benchmark documentation, and campus handbook to identify what activities and strategies the campus claimed to employ for college preparation.

I selected participants for semi-structured interviews using purposeful sampling. The Class of 2017 was chosen for two reasons. By 2017, HECHS was well established. It

featured a wide range of college preparatory activities and academic support systems as part of the school operations which were not present in the earlier years. Secondly, at the time of data collection, the class of 2017 was the most recent graduating class that had four years since high school graduation to complete a postsecondary degree, which provided a variety of student voices.

There were 68 graduates in the Class of 2017. All graduates, except one, graduated with a Distinguished Level of Achievement high school diploma. The Class of 2017 was 44% male, 56% female, 3% African American, 62% Hispanic, 32% White, and 3% Asian. Additionally, 62% of students were of low socioeconomic status, 75% were first-generation students, and as of May 2020, 33% of students had earned a postsecondary degree.

Sampling

Purposeful sampling allows the researcher to intentionally select individuals who have experienced the phenomenon in focus (Creswell, 2015). To identify the sample group, the sampling process began with identifying students in the Class of 2017. Potential participants were part of the early college high school targeted population as stated in the TEA ECHS Blueprint. The blueprint says that an ECHS shall target students who are at-risk as defined by PEIMS or are historically underrepresented in college courses, including first-generation college-goers, students of low socioeconomic (SES) status, English learners, and students with disabilities (TEA, 2020).

A roster was obtained from the district extracted from the PEIMS system. The roster included demographic data including ethnicity, gender, SES status, at-risk status,

date of birth, and first-generation status. That information was used to establish the official roster for the Class of 2017 from which the sample was pulled.

Of the 68 students in the Class of 2017, 54 were identified as meeting at least one of the characteristics of the ECHS Blueprint targeted population, as shown in Table 2.

Table 2

Class of 2017 Demographics

	Class of 2017	ECHS Targeted Characteristics
African American	2 (3%)	2 (4%)
Hispanic	42 (62%)	41 (76%)
White	22 (32%)	10 (19%)
Asian	2 (3%)	1 (2%)
Female	30 (44%)	29 (54%)
Male	38 (56%)	25 (46%)
Total	68	54
Low SES (Free/Reduced Lunch)	42 (62%)	42 (77%)
First Generation	51 (75%)	51 (94%)
Earned Postsecondary Degree as of May 2020	21(31%)	18 (33%)

To discover multiple perspectives, I used maximal variation sampling (Creswell, 2015) to find participants who not only fit the ECHS target characteristics but also included whether a postsecondary degree had been attained. After the targeted sample was identified, students were sorted into two groups, those who had not earned a postsecondary

degree and those who had earned a postsecondary degree. Once these two groups were established, the students were randomized to determine the order in which students were recruited to participate in an interview. Contact was made using text messages, emails, or Facebook messenger based on the contact information provided by the district. A contact log was kept to track each contact attempt.

I contacted 32 students, and the study included a final sample of five participants: three who had earned a postsecondary degree and two who had not. After contacting five students, I achieved my target of gaining three participants who had earned their postsecondary degrees. I only recruited two participants who had not earned postsecondary degrees to participate. Of the 36 students who did not earn a degree, I had at least one form of contact for 27. Of these 27 students, I received a response from only two. I believe possible reasons for lack of participation include insufficient contact information, nervousness, lack of comfort with the thought of being interviewed by their former principal, or insufficient time to participate.

Once participants agreed to be interviewed, they were sent the informed consent form, and a time and place were established for the interview. Participants were given the option to participate over Zoom or conduct an in-person interview. Only one participant chose an in-person interview. Table 3 reflects participant information. She stated that being recorded on Zoom video made her nervous but agreed to an audio recording.

Table 3*Participant Information*

Participant #	Race	Gender	Earned Degree	Identified Target Demographic	In-Person or Zoom Interview	Date of Interview
1	Hispanic	Female	Yes	Low Income First Generation	In-Person	8/20/2021
2	Hispanic	Female	Yes	Low Income First Generation	Zoom	9/6/2021
3	Hispanic	Female	Yes	Low Income First Generation	Zoom	9/6/2021
4	Hispanic	Male	No	Low Income First Generation	Zoom	9/6/2021
5	Hispanic	Female	No	Low Income First Generation	Zoom	12/14/2021

Data Collection

I used multiple sources to develop an in-depth understanding of the case (Creswell, 2015). Data collection included interviews with former HECHS students, HECHS faculty, campus documents, district documents, and state ECHS documents. In addition to developing an in-depth understanding of the case, multiple sources were used to triangulate data for validity and trustworthiness (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). A brief profile of each participant is provided using information gathered during the interview and my knowledge of each participant as their former principal.

Participant Profiles

Participant 1 (Ana)

Participant 1 was a 22-year-old Hispanic female. She was a first-generation college-goer who grew up in a primarily Spanish-speaking home. While attending HECHS, her older brother was her primary support. He attended teacher conferences, parent nights, and other school activities. While at HECHS, she earned 55 college credit hours with a college grade point average (GPA) of 3.01. Unfortunately, she was not admitted to her first-choice college, Texas A&M University (TAMU). After completing one semester at a two-year college, she was able to transfer to TAMU. She graduated from TAMU with a Bachelor of Arts in Communication in May 2020. She currently works for a school district in their communications department.

Participant 2 (Stephanie)

Participant 2 was a 23-year-old Hispanic female. She was the first in her family to attend college. While attending HECHS, she earned 56 college credits, and her college GPA was 3.26. She was accepted at Sam Houston State University (SHSU) and began attending the fall semester of 2017. Due to health reasons, she took a hiatus from school during the summer of 2019 but returned to SHSU after a year. She talked about how supportive her parents were throughout her illness and return to college. She was surprised how her parents did not pressure her to hurry to return to school and even supported her in starting a small business on Etsy. She graduated from SHSU in May of 2021 with a degree in Healthcare Administration. After gaining work experience, she plans to return to school for a nursing degree.

Participant 3 (Margaret)

Participant 3 was a 22-year-old Hispanic female. She was part of a large, close-knit family. She attended HECHS, following in the footsteps of her older brother, and has younger siblings currently attending HECHS. Spanish was her primary language, and neither of her parents attended college. Before graduating from HECHS, she earned 52 college credits and had a 3.2 college GPA. She enrolled at TAMU in the Fall of 2017. She was able to start as a sophomore because she had earned 52 college hours from HECHS. Participant 3 majored in political science. As a political science major, she was able to join a unique program that awarded a bachelor's degree that continued to a master's and doctorate. Before the interview, she had completed her bachelor's degree in May 2020 and a master's degree in May 2021. At the time of the interview, she was working on her Ph.D. During the interview, she revealed that one of the primary reasons for joining the multi-degree program was that she felt too young to graduate college. Continuing onto graduate school has given her more time to mature and develop a better sense of what she ultimately wants to do.

Participant 4 (Alex)

Participant 4 was a 22-year-old Hispanic male. His parents immigrated to the United States from Mexico. His supportive family includes an older sister who also attended HECHS. Spanish was the primary language spoken at home, and neither parent attended college. While at HECHS, he earned 56 college credits and had a college GPA of 1.9. After graduating, he attended the local community college for one semester with plans to major in computer science.

One of his family's concerns was the stress that both of his parents were undocumented immigrants. To help his parents gain legal residency, Participant 4 joined the United States military. During his interview, I could see how proud he was not only to serve his country but also to have the ability to help his parents. He shared that many of his peers were tired and struggling during boot camp. However, he was excited because he knew he was helping his family. He stated that the military presented him with an exciting new challenge.

Upon returning home, he decided not to return to college to complete a degree in computer science. He said his military training showed him how much he enjoys working with his hands. He is currently working with a construction company and is planning to return to college for a 2-year or 4-year degree in construction management.

Participant 5 (Adriana)

Participant 5 is a 23-year-old Hispanic female. She began attending school in the United States during Pre-Kindergarten but experienced several withdrawals to return to Mexico but would return to the same district. She participated in bilingual services and was exited from the Limited English Proficiency program in 2015. During her enrollment at HECHS, she earned 53 college credits and had a college GPA of 3.32. While she has not yet graduated, she currently attends TAMU. In her interview, she said she is one semester away from graduating but will not graduate until Fall 2022. Her degree requires her to complete an internship. She plans to complete the internship in the summer of 2022. Her college completion has been delayed due to family issues. Her major is in Bioenvironmental Sciences and she plans to work as an environmental technician.

Participant Interviews

The interviews conducted provided valuable student perspectives. According to Bahou (2011), many initiatives exist around using students' voices in education research. These initiatives advocate for students' role in education research and reform. Cook-Sather (2006) stressed the importance of students being the author of their experiences. Educators should consider the legitimate perspective that students provide when making educational policy and practice changes. Students' voice has the power to initiate change in the structure of schools and empower students to make a difference in school improvement (Flutter & Rudduck, 2004).

By giving ECHS graduates a voice in research, there is potential to identify both areas of strength and improvement in the early college high school model. Interview questions sought to determine whether students believe they were socialized for success in college using the three socialization dimensions of performance proficiency, people and organization goals, and values (Chao et al., 1994).

Individual interviews are the most used data collection method in qualitative research, and they are highly beneficial in obtaining in-depth information in a case study (Hays & Singh, 2012). Interviews were conducted based on the preference of the participant. Each participant picked the location (in-person or Zoom) as well as the date and time of the interview. An informed consent form was emailed to each participant before the interview and, once signed, emailed back to the researcher. At the beginning of the interview, participants were asked if they had any questions or concerns about the informed consent. Participants 1 and 2 had questions about data sharing and anonymity. I informed the participants that the present study was part of my Record of Study for my

doctoral degree and would only be shared in my paper and defense. I also assured them that their identities would be masked.

The interview included four primary questions with several sub-questions to prompt the discussion. To achieve the depth desired, the interview was conducted to create a feeling of conversation (Hays & Singh, 2012). For example, probing questions were used to help expand responses, making responses more personally meaningful. In a semi-structured interview, an interview question may have been skipped because it was a question already answered by the participant. There were also moments when the researcher followed up on a topic the participant discussed to gain clarification. The interview's final question was used to ask if participants had anything to add, allowing them to have the last word and include important information personal to their experience (Hays & Singh, 2012).

The in-person interview was recorded using the audio recording application on my computer. The audio-video record feature within the Zoom platform was used for the virtual interviews. Interview recordings and transcripts were stored on a password-protected memory drive. Interviews were transcribed using the Temi Audio to Text Automatic Transcription Service for speech-to-text translation. After receiving the transcript of the interview, I carefully reviewed each transcript while listening to the interviews a second time to ensure the accuracy. During transcript review, I engaged in memoing by making notes, highlighting commonalities and comments that were distinctive or important (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

HECHS Faculty Interviews

To triangulate information collected from participant interviews and documents, two members of the HECHS faculty were interviewed. The first interview was conducted with Reece (a pseudonym), the current HECHS principal. The principal has been a member of the faculty since 2010. He has also served in multiple positions over the years at HECHS. His experiences prior to the principalship included time as a math teacher, department chair, instructional coach, and associate principal.

The second interview was with the current associate principal. Hannah (a pseudonym) has served the campus since it opened in August 2007. Before becoming an associate principal, she served as an English teacher, Path College Career (PCC) teacher, and department chair. She is also the last remaining original faculty member. Her tenure at HECHS provides her with a wealth of historical knowledge about the campus.

Given the longevity of their service and the multiple positions held, their information is valuable for understanding campus documents and a different perspective to compare with student interviews. The same interview strategies used with participants were utilized with the faculty members.

District and Campus Documents

The HECHS website provided all the necessary campus documents. The website provided access to the ECHS Designation application that is completed yearly as well as the ECHS Blueprint supporting documentation. The information collected from the website and other documents was confirmed as applicable to the Class of 2017 by the HECHS principal and associate principal.

Posting information for transparency is a requirement of the ECHS Designation application (TEA, 2020). The ECHS Blueprint (TEA, 2020) is divided into six benchmarks and a series of outcome-based measures. Documentation for Benchmark 1, The Target Population provided evidence about how and who HECHS recruited for admission. Benchmark 4, Curriculum & Support, and Benchmark 5, Academic Rigor and Readiness, provided documentation of what types of academic and social-emotional supports were part of the HECHS system. The campus also provided all contact information for the Class of 2017.

In addition to those provided by the campus, the district also provided documents. The first document provided was a class roster for the Class of 2017. The roster included demographic data including ethnicity, gender, socioeconomic status, at-risk status, date of birth, and first-generation status. The information was used to establish the official roster for the Class of 2017 from which the sample was pulled.

The district also shared reports from the National Student Clearinghouse (NSC). The NSC is a nonprofit organization that provides educational reporting and verification for a nationwide network of approximately 3600 colleges and universities. The NSC data represents 97 percent of postsecondary enrollment (National Student Clearinghouse, 2022). NSC reports provided a list of all Class of 2017 students for HECHS and their college enrollment date, last enrollment date, and date of college graduation.

The TEA was another source of ECHS information as well as campus data. The Texas Academic Performance Reports (TAPR) system provided demographic data for the campus and information for the graduating Class of 2017.

Data Analysis

I used thematic analysis for the interview data. Boyatzis (1998) describes thematic analysis as a process for encoding qualitative information using an explicit code. Thematic analysis allows themes and patterns across the data to emerge. The thematic analysis process used for the present study is based on Glaser and Strauss's (1967) constant comparative approach to analysis. The process involves joint coding and analysis, which assisted me in connecting the data to my theoretical framework.

Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness is the concept used by Lincoln and Guba to describe a qualitative equivalent to reliability and validity in quantitative research. Strategies were used to establish credibility, authenticity, and dependability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Member Checking

Member checking is the process of allowing participants to review and confirm the accuracy of the report (Creswell, 2015). After each interview was transcribed, reviewed, and annotated, a post-interview member check was conducted (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Participants were sent a copy of their interview transcript and asked to review and verify its authenticity and accuracy. Only Margaret (Participant 3) submitted changes to the transcription. She returned her interview transcript with digital edits in a different color. Her edits did not add significant changes to the data; they were minor clarifications.

Triangulation

Triangulation is used to establish the credibility of a study (Hays & Singh, 2012). The process of triangulation involves corroborating evidence using multiple sources of

data collected. In the present study, triangulation was conducted using participant interviews, information from the HECHS faculty, and campus and district documents.

Audit Trail

Dependability and confirmability are established through the auditing and research process (Hays & Singh, 2012). An auditor or other interested parties can follow my conclusions by reviewing an audit trail of physical evidence with systematic data collection and analysis (Hays and Singh, 2012). The audit trail was maintained throughout the research process of the present study. The audit trail contains informed consent forms, interview protocols, field notes, interview recordings, codebook, and transcripts.

Limitations and Positionality

To the best extent possible, I set aside personal beliefs and assumptions to examine the topic from the participants' perspectives (Creswell, 2018). Mortari (2008) described this process as "emptying the mind." While interviewing, transcription, coding, and analysis, I focused on only hearing what the participants shared instead of looking for confirmation of my previous experiences and personal thoughts. I acknowledge that institutional knowledge, background, and opinions exist regarding this topic. I was the principal of HECHS from August 2007 to July 2017. In my present district-level position, I supervise the current principal of HECHS. Additionally, I continue to receive information and training at the state and national levels about ECHS. Responses from participants or refusal to participate could have been affected by the fact that I was the principal during their enrollment at HECHS.

Using only graduates from a single cohort within a single ECHS for the present study could affect the ability to generalize conclusions to all early college high schools or even to other cohorts within this single ECHS. Recruiting participants who had not graduated college was difficult. Possible reasons for lack of participation include insufficient contact information, nervousness, unease with being interviewed by their former principal, or insufficient time to participate.

In addition to small sample size, early colleges are designed in multiple ways, with varying student populations. While there are no academic criteria to attend, the ECHS student must choose to attend. HECHS is a relatively small (no more than 150 students per grade level), stand-alone early college in which college courses are taught on the college campus by college faculty. Other ECHS models may be a school-within-a-school or a transformed comprehensive high school of over 2000 students who earn dual credit through classes taught by credentialed high school teachers on the high school campus.

Conclusion

The present study is a qualitative study that used a case study methodology to examine the perceptions of former HECHS students. Through thematic analysis of participant interviews, I was able to establish themes and compare participant perceptions. Trustworthiness was established through member checking, triangulation, and an audit trail.

CHAPTER IV

FINDINGS

The present study aimed to find out how graduates perceived experiences at HECHS and if those experiences influenced their postsecondary experience. Dimensions of Organizational Socialization (Chao et al., 1994) provided a lens to view the experiences. Through interviews with HECHS Class of 2017 graduates, I attempted to capture their voices and describe what factors affected their postsecondary education after HECHS. The present study sought to answer the following questions:

1. What college preparatory activities, strategies, or interventions are implemented by the campus?
2. Which HECHS activities and opportunities do graduates identify as influential in their postsecondary educational pursuits?
3. In what ways did identified activities or experiences affect postsecondary educational plans or intentions?
4. Which activities or experiences, if any, did graduates identify as being unhelpful in this aim?
5. What firsthand postsecondary experiences did alumni feel as though their ECHS could have made them better prepared?

Thematic analysis was used to interpret the interview data. Boyatzis (1998) describes thematic analysis as a process for encoding qualitative information using an explicit code. The thematic analysis process used for the present study is based on Glaser and Strauss's (1967) constant comparative approach to analysis. The process involves joint coding and analysis which assisted me in connecting the data to my theoretical framework.

The first step was to review campus documents, including the campus website, the HECHS faculty handbook, lesson plans, the HECHS student handbook, and the HECHS

designation application. Each participant interview was analyzed by coding each transcript and identifying the emerging themes. Academic records were used to verify information in participant responses. Interviews with the principal and associate principal confirmed some information and added their point of view.

Through purposeful sampling, five members of the Class of 2017 were selected and interviewed. Three of the five participants earned a postsecondary degree. All five participants are Hispanic, four female and one male. To provide depth and context to the findings, a brief profile of each participant was included in Chapter Three.

To provide a framework for the findings, I used three organizational socialization dimensions Chao et al. (1994); *performance proficiency, people, organizational goals and values*. These dimensions helped categorize the types of activities that were offered and what kind of activities participants found most impactful.

The findings are presented in five sections to address each research question. Participant responses in each section are divided into the three dimensions previously mentioned. At the end of the first section, information from HECHS faculty interviews is provided. Direct quotes from the principal and associate principal are also be used throughout each section if they provide specific information which correlates to participant information.

College Preparatory Activities

To identify the college preparatory activities, strategies, or interventions used at HECHS, I first examined the campus website, lesson plans, the HECHS student handbook, and the HECHS designation application. College readiness supports were offered for each grade level in multiple content areas and implemented in various ways. I organized college

preparatory activities, strategies, and interventions on the six dimensions of Organizational Socialization. I describe college preparatory activities related to their identified Organizational Socialization dimensions. More comprehensive, detailed descriptions of these activities are provided in Appendix C and D. I confirmed the use and implementation of these supports with the principal and associate principal during their interviews.

Performance Proficiency

Activities or experiences that support performance proficiency development focus on what students need to master; the required knowledge, skills, and abilities to succeed in college. Layers of support are built-in through regular classroom activities, special support courses, teacher tutorials, and ancillary homework help. The first layer of support for college readiness is classroom instruction. Regardless of the content area, teachers are trained and expected to use the Common Instructional Framework (CIF) from Jobs for the Future (2013). The CIF (Appendix C) are research-based college readiness instructional strategies that support the development of students' writing, speaking, and critical thinking skills for college success (Jobs for the Future, 2013).

HECHS supports students academically by enrolling students in specific courses related to core content, lessons to build academic skills, and tutorial services. Courses that support core courses include Algebra I and Geometry, Read180, practical writing, and dual credit labs. These courses are taught by teachers certified in the content area, part of the student's eight-period schedule, and focus on specific content knowledge and skills.

Path College Career (PCC) is taught at four levels, and all HECHS students are required to enroll each year. PCC focuses on academic skills such as time management, organization, notetaking, and study skills. While most skills can be used in high school or

postsecondary education, some lessons are specifically taught to serve postsecondary education demands. For example, students are taught how to read a syllabus, navigate college student information systems, and read a college degree plan. Students participate in different activities each year that focus on developing these skills.

Additionally, students research colleges and careers to set future goals. PCC also serves as a support to other courses by providing structured tutorials and grade monitoring. Students are taught about GPA calculations, their importance, and how to monitor their academic transcript.

Ancillary supports include support in other areas and are only used as students' need. Examples of ancillary services include the Intensive Care Unit (ICU) and tutorials. ICU is a "no-zero" homework system. Students are assigned to ICU during the day if a teacher reports they have either missed an assignment or turned in unsatisfactory work. If assigned to ICU, students spend their lunchtime and an advisory period working on assignments submitted by teachers. Students continue to be assigned to ICU until all assignments are satisfactorily completed. Teachers must hold at least two hours of scheduled tutorials each week. A tutorial schedule is published to the families on the website. Additionally, the campus has various open study areas and computer labs available to students before and after school and on Saturdays.

People

The people dimension of Organizational Socialization helps students learn how to build successful relationships with faculty, peers, and others. HECHS conducts activities that support this dimension which include formal and informal activities. An example of a formal and intentional lesson in communication and relationship building is done through

the PCC class. Students are assigned a task that requires them to make an appointment to meet with one of their college course instructors to discuss grades, ask questions or talk about their progress in the class. Students also practice writing formal emails to teachers and others. The PCC teachers discuss when to use formal language and when it's appropriate to use slang. Through this activity, students learn about proper communication and build relationships with people who will be critical to their academic success.

Informally, faculty and administration at HECHS build strong relationships with students through academics, school events, and community service. These relationships are built intentionally to help students build confidence, learn how to self-advocate, and have a connection to those around them, providing social-emotional support that, according to participant interviews, is invaluable. According to the participants and administrators interviewed, these relationships often continue after graduation.

HECHS intentionally cultivates relationships between peers as well. Students are often asked to collaborate in group projects and study groups as part of classroom instruction. All juniors are required to lead a community service project which requires students to communicate with members of the community, administrators, as well as organize team members.

Organizational Goals and Values

The organizational goals and values dimension focuses on the ability to learn the rules of an organization (Chao et al., 1994), reflecting Conley's (2012) college knowledge. For students, this refers to a student's ability to understand and navigate the logistics and culture of a college campus (Duncheon, 2020). HECHS requires students to participate in

various activities to learn about higher education structures and navigate a college campus's logistics and culture.

The PCC teacher assigned the first activity of this type. The lesson requires students to attend the writing lab and math lab at the college campus and get help on homework assignments. The objective of this lesson is for students to practice seeking needed resources and gain confidence interacting with people on the college campus. In addition to seeking out specific places on a college campus to get help, students at HECHS also attended college classes on the college campus during their junior and senior years. Students gained experience navigating a college campus when treated like traditional college students.

Students must complete a service project they design and implement during their junior year. The primary purpose of this activity is to build a sense of community and provide an understanding of the importance of giving back to the community. Through this project, students interact with leaders of community service organizations, businesses, and higher education. Many of the students begin building relationships with these leaders, leaders who later write letters of recommendation and or become unofficial mentors of students.

As part of PCC, students visit college campuses and receive visits from college recruiters and financial aid officers. Both opportunities give students the chance to learn about the culture of the college in which they are interested as well as who will be important to aid them in their education on that specific campus. In addition, students learn about the responsibilities of different departments and the varied roles of college personnel.

Faculty Interviews

Faculty interviews were used to cross-check document information. The interviews also served to reinforce or refute participant perceptions. During faculty interviews, the principal and associate principal confirmed that the activities outlined in this section from documents were in effect while the Class of 2017 was enrolled at HECHS. According to the principal, these activities were strategic and based on TEA ECHS Blueprint requirements. The blueprint requires an ECHS to provide activities that align with David Conley's Keys to College Readiness (a) Key Cognitive Strategies, (b) Key Content Knowledge, (c) Key Learning skills & Techniques, and (d) Key transition skills (Conley, 2007).

Both administrators agreed that the most impactful activity on the campus is PCC because it teaches academic skills, college content, and focuses on socialization. As part of my faculty interviews, I asked the principal and associate principal what they felt could be done better. The principal, Reece, said he thought the financial literacy lessons during the spring of the senior year could be stronger. Hannah, the associate principal, felt like more structure was needed in dual credit labs and additional training was required on the CIF to keep up with teacher turnover.

Helpful Activities

Each participant was asked to describe what activities at HECHS helped them in their postsecondary education after graduation. During the interview, a list of preparatory activities, which was developed from campus documents, was shared and reviewed with participants. During faculty interviews, the same list of college preparatory activities

participants viewed was also shared with the two faculty members. Questions for faculty interviews are included in Appendix B.

Performance Proficiency

One participant mentioned elements of the CIF as helping them meet postsecondary academic expectations. Adriana, who has not earned a postsecondary degree, discussed how the intensive writing in both PCC and English III was helpful. She said she struggled with writing and liked how teachers would “give hints” and help with the structure. Along with the writing process, Adriana enjoyed collaborating with peers to edit and discuss each other’s papers. Peer review aligned with her college coursework. Adriana stated,

We would do peer review. That was helpful for me just because my major is science-based and we did do a lot of that peer review. And, once when we went to college and they told us that, I thought, okay, I knew how to peer review.

Additionally, Adriana describes how other collaborative groupwork at HECHS helped prepare her for college academics,

We would have group projects cuz [sic] they were similar to the ones I had in college, just because of the way they were structured. We had to do our own research and we all had to participate obviously. But I'm not really of a... I'm an introvert more than like, you know, an outgoing person. So that really helped me build confidence. Yeah, cuz [sic] in college you're not really given a choice, you either participate or your grade goes down for that. And projects are a big thing or were a big thing for me.

While Adriana spoke highly of CIF strategies, the other four participants did not mention this strategy specifically.

PCC was identified by all five participants as an impactful activity. Each participant described how they continued using the lessons learned after graduating from HECHS. Stephanie, who earned her postsecondary degree, commented that every school should have something like PCC. She stated,

Yeah, definitely PCC. [sic] Even now I'm like, why does every school not have these things? When my cousins are trying to do college and stuff, I'm like, don't you have a class that teaches you these things? And then I realized it's just not very universal, I guess. But yeah, I really appreciated the PCC classes.

Participants commented how PCC taught them things that helped them feel comfortable in the college environment. Stephanie, who earned her postsecondary degree, stated, "Whereas I really think if I hadn't taken that class, I would've been like a fish out of water. So yeah. [sic] I really liked that those classes." Margaret, a postsecondary degree completer, stated that PCC not only made her more confident, but she was able to share what she learned to help other first-generation students;

I'm trying to think of what I learned while at HECHS; I even used to help other students that I knew when I was a Regent scholar during my undergrad. And part of that was helping other first-generation college students. And yeah, there was a lot that I felt like I knew about college based on my time at HECHS, within PCC that I was having to you know, helping explain to other students that were in the same position as me.

Alex, who has not earned a postsecondary degree, also commented that PCC made his transition to the college classroom easier. He stated,

I felt comfortable. I didn't have that adjusting where you're like, oh, I'm so used to being in a high school class. [sic] And now all of a sudden, I'm in a college classroom. It made the transition a lot easier.

Several participants specifically stated that time management, organization, and notetaking learned in PCC helped them after leaving HECHS. Ana (a postsecondary degree completer) and Adriana (who did not finish a postsecondary degree) said they did not follow all the strategies precisely as they were taught in PCC. Instead, PCC helped them acquire the knowledge to build their own system. Margaret commented,

The introduction to notetaking and the idea that we would need to better manage our time in the future was something that I still think about, or I try to organize my own time using the different strategies that we learned.

Alex felt like there was a lot of notetaking in PCC and HECHS that helped him prepare for the college classroom, "I feel like we did a lot of notes over different things and, and it wasn't anything new there that caught me off guard, I was back in the college classroom."

Adriana discussed how learning how to read and use a syllabus in PCC helped her in college classes after leaving HECHS,

The syllabus part. Putting everything I saw on the syllabus in my calendar was really helpful cuz [sic] it would help me keep a track of finals or if anything changed I would have, the agenda and keep track of everything. So that way I wouldn't be that student like, oh man, we have a test tomorrow. But yeah, that definitely helped just reviewing the syllabus that first week transferring everything to the agenda, and keeping track of it.

The two HECHS administrators described PCC as the most influential activity on campus. The HECHS principal stated,

I would definitely say the PCC framework that we have in place. And simply anecdotal, because we have so many kids that come back and say things like, “oh, I felt so prepared. I’m sitting in class, am I whatever class at the university, and the kid next to me doesn’t even know how to read the syllabus or doesn’t know, they don’t understand how to really take notes effectively or those kinds of things.” So, it’s all of those soft skills that we build along the way through the course sequence over the, you know, duration of four years. I don’t think it happens magically in the freshman year or the senior year. It just it’s, it builds on itself over and over again. And, you know, it’s funny. I was talking to a kid who is currently at TAMU who only did their freshman year here at HECHS. And then they left to go to Smith HS and they were telling me, “yeah, I actually have to like use a planner and a calendar now of all of my assignments and projects that are due. And I did not learn how to do that sophomore, junior, or senior year at Smith HS. I learned to do that my freshman year in PCC.” So, I think, PCC is probably our strongest support structure that we have in place then and now.

Hannah, the ECHS associate principal, mirrored those sentiments about PCC being the most important activity,

I would say that PCC is the number one support for students. Primarily it’s supported them academically and grew them as students. PCC helped them set goals, you know by having them thinking about, you know, yes, long term, “I want this career, well, [sic] how am I get there and how am I gonna [sic] be supported

there.” That was also where relationships, I felt strong relationships were built with PCC teachers, and those PCC teachers additionally supported them in their college courses. They are the primary person who says, “how are you doing in your history class? Okay. Let's pull up eCampus [eCampus is a commonly used platform for hosting college course's online materials and resources] and let's look and verify.” I see students say that they think that other schools should have PCC. And that it should be a requirement for every student in high school that what PCC did, was one of the most valuable things in their college life after leaving us.

In summary, all students, degreed and non-degreed, felt PCC was one of the most important activities that helped prepare them for postsecondary after high school. One student also referenced the CIF as important to her ability to complete assignments in the college classroom. The other four students did not say anything (positive or negative) about CIF. Two students, both postsecondary degree earners, said positive things about specific skills learned in PCC including time management, organization, and notetaking. One student, a non-degree earner, also agreed that extensive practice in notetaking helped in the postsecondary classroom.

People

According to Hannah, associate principal, and a former PCC teacher, as a class activity, each student was required to visit their professor during office hours and communicate with professors through email using professional communication skills. The intent was to help students practice professional interactions, advocate for themselves, and become acclimated to contacting college faculty for help. Margaret discussed how this activity helped her after she left HECHS. She stated,

Those are actually pretty helpful because by the time I was an undergrad at TAMU it felt a little less daunting going to office hours. And, you know, we have like the first experience, like I would go with my friends like we would go to office hours together. And so, by the time I was at TAMU I was like, not afraid to ask questions during office hours. And the same thing with the email, like, I think we get, like, in every class that I've had are most of them, we have professors that are like, please do not email me by my first name and other email etiquettes expectations. I guess we were introduced to those like, applications, like those formal emails beforehand, which I think it helps because oftentimes professors say, "this is the email format I would like you to use". And I guess I didn't have to spend that much time learning about that.

Adriana also described how practicing interactions while at HECHS helped after higher school graduation stating,

In general, just talking with your teacher or professor was kind of helpful just cuz sometimes you're struggling with the specific objective in the course and just knowing that you can talk to them, like during office hours. So, that was helpful just knowing, okay, you can go and ask your professor outside of class hours or even right before or after. There was this one time, I don't remember what class, but this teacher would tell us we have a few minutes to discuss with our like classmates about questions or what we learned during this specific class. That was pretty nice cuz [sic] whenever I was in college, I could just, I felt comfortable, you know, asking somebody else, Hey, like if I'm coming late to class, what happened or do

you get it? Can you like explain to me what's going on? Just stuff like small things like that. That was really nice.

Participants believed that the relationships between students and faculty created a positive and supportive environment. Diana and Ana said they felt they had good relationships and could ask for help if needed. Every participant mentioned that their relationships at HECHS were important to them and continued to be important after graduation. One example of this continued relationship came from Alex. He reflected,

The teachers were always open to students coming and asking for advice or asking for help on something. I know Mr. Roberts [HECHS teacher faculty member] specifically; I messaged him about needing a book for a class that Evelyn [a fellow HECHS alum] and I were taking. HECHS had it and he was nice enough to lend it to me. So, I wouldn't have to go out and buy a textbook out of pocket. And just things like that. I'm more than sure that I wasn't the only one that approached him. And I'm sure plenty of teachers get messages all the time from students that graduate and they're always open to help. So, the teachers for sure are a big help.

Margaret discussed how continuing relationships with HECHS faculty helped her after graduation and enjoyed maintaining HECHS peer relationships. Margaret recalled,

I was able to keep in contact with certain faculty members and I felt like since I was still in the area, I would always have the opportunity to reach out to like Mr. Roberts for instance. Like when I was applying to my master's program, I asked him for a recommendation letter, because I didn't really, like, I wasn't close to like faculty at A&M or anything, but I still had those good relationships with the faculty at HECHS. And it's something that me [sic] and my friends like to do, like that are

still in town. We'd go to the soccer games. And I think that sense of community is really nice to still have even like with the students that we graduated with. Like I may not see all of them or speak to them, but I think that since we shared like the experience of going to HECHS, there is always the chance to like reach out and see, you know, like how everyone is doing.

Building relationships with members of the HECHS faculty and interactions with peers and college faculty helped build socialization skills participants needed after graduation while in postsecondary education. Degreed and non-degree students alike felt like they had strong relationships that helped them transition to postsecondary education. Margaret and Adriana mentioned they felt more comfortable interacting with peers. Adriana recalled how helpful it was to have already gone to office hours with a professor and felt comfortable asking for help from classmates or faculty. Alex and Margaret gave a specific example of support relationships from HECHS continuing after graduation.

Organizational Goals and Values

All the participants felt comfortable navigating the logistics of a college campus. Alex, who did not earn a degree and is not currently enrolled, stated that he felt great walking into a college classroom and expected no surprises. Ana noted that she felt comfortable finding what she needed on her college campus. Ana and Margaret, who both attended TAMU, mentioned that learning about college admissions and financial aid was extremely helpful in navigating to college and continuing. Margaret stated,

Learning about financial aid and applying for scholarships because if I hadn't filled out the scholarship page when I was applying to A&M, then I don't think I would

have received the Regent scholarship, which was what funded a majority of the two years that I was an undergrad and even part of my master's program.

Diane, who attended a medium-sized four-year university, felt like taking dual credit classes on the college campus made a difference in feeling prepared for college after graduation.

I know we had a few classes at the HECHS campus, like Anthropology. And there, I feel like even the professors kind of cut you some slack, like they teach more like [sic] a high school teacher would on our campus as opposed to being in their own element. And like, you're just one of everybody else. Like nothing special about you. But yeah, I think having kids go to actually go sit in like actual classes and take a class like other college students. That was really helpful because I don't think I was unprepared at all for college.

Participants mentioned several ways they felt as though they developed and used socialization skills in postsecondary education. An activity that none of the students mentioned was field trips to college campuses. According to the ECHS application and benchmark documentation, students attend at least one college campus visit every year during their four years of high school. College tours seem like a very effective way to acclimate students to a college environment, so it is interesting that none of the five mentioned the trips.

Influenced Postsecondary Plans

One of the questions the present study sought to answer was how HECHS activities may have influenced postsecondary plans for HECHS graduates. Participants were asked

whether any activities helped shape or change their plans or choices after graduating from HECHS.

Performance Proficiency

Participants discussed several activities in the PCC classroom that helped shape their postsecondary plans. Three participants discussed that what they learned about applying to school continued to be important. For example, Stephanie stated, “I’m still thinking that I’m going to go back to school and get another degree. And I’m like, well, I know how to apply for things and how to do things now.”

Ana and Adriana both mentioned the career day HECHS hosted at the end of the year as helpful in making future plans. Career day was mentioned in the benchmark documentation on the campus website. Adriana stated,

I think there were people majoring in certain careers and [sic] were talking about their experiences. That was really helpful. Just giving it as an insight as to how it worked for them and why they chose that career and everything. I really like that.

Ana shared that career day helped change her mind about what she thought she would pursue.

Can I tell you, you use that event actually, the career fair? I remember somebody came in to talk about engineering and I wanted to be an engineer. I heard this person talking. I was just like, I don't see myself doing this actually. So that's a pretty cool event because, I mean, although I didn't take away what I did want to do, I took away what I didn't want to do.

Margaret's experiences in PCC shaped her ability to continue onto her Ph.D. and helped her find a course of study for which she was passionate. The lessons of financial aid and scholarship searches from her senior year at HECHS continued to help shape her plans,

I guess I would have to go back to financial aid, and I think I knew there was aid out there and there was aid that can help fund the rest of my education. And so, I was looking for, you know, different scholarships and I was able to get scholarships for my master's program and also a fellowship right now for my Ph.D. program. I think it was instilled in me to like, look for different opportunities that were going to help me out. Because I know without like funding, I wouldn't be able to continue studying.

In addition to financial aid and scholarships, the community service component of PCC made a lasting impression that even helped her determine a career path. Margaret shared,

One thing that was really important for me was the service aspect that HECHS had for us because I was studying public service for those two years. And I think it was a great introduction to the type of work I would have done if I had gone into the public sector. It's what I really cared about during my master's program. Like more in the academic study of public service. Within, I guess, public administration research, we talk about public service motivation a lot. And I think HECHS does a great job of increasing public service motivation in individuals. For instance, when I started at the Bush School I was already really interested in like community development within our community. Because I was introduced to all these different service opportunities very early on at HECHS. And I even talked to a professor

about, the junior service project at Collegiate and he thought that was like a really great idea for students to gain that basic understanding of like I guess volunteerism.

Like the career fair, Alex discussed how the career research in PCC guided his thinking about his future career. Immediately after graduation, Alex joined the military reserves. After his training, he returned home and began taking computer science courses. Ultimately, he ended up not continuing in computer science but began working full-time in construction and is considering going back to school to pursue construction science. Alex stated,

I think the one thing we really did do a lot actually in PCC too, is we did research a lot of what we wanted to do in the future, our majors our jobs. And that is kind of where I started questioning maybe I don't really want to do computer science because of the research we did. But computer science really is more technical than that I think. And that wasn't really what I was striving for. I wanted something more, like I said, hands-on and I think the research that, that they had us do really made me realize what exactly I was wanting to do as far as the future.

During my interview, Hannah's opinion of which activities helped shape future plans was very similar to the responses given by participants. Hannah shared,

I mean, I'd say being there, the relationships the advice that we gave them, and the support, we gave them through the application process. So, there were college essays, just the experience of sending them out into the world for community service because they weren't just serving. They were also learning how to work in a world with different people of varying needs. And so, you know, essentially they were often taking leadership roles through that and given tasks to figure out on

their own. And I think that was just a vital skill that I've seen them transfer even to a career. So some of those students are working for nonprofits. And so those were directly transferable skills to the workplace.

Several activities at HECHS were mentioned as influential in helping students make choices prior to and after high school graduation. Three participants (two degreed and one non-degreed) talked about the career fair and the career research that helped them plan what they do and do not want to do for the future. Margaret credited lessons in admissions and financial aid, and the opportunity to complete community service shaped her ability and interest in pursuing her Ph.D.

People

As part of HECHS, students have an opportunity to earn up to 60 college credit hours before graduating high school. Margaret earned 52 hours before graduating high school. This put her on an accelerated track to graduate with her bachelor's degree in approximately two years. She was very nervous about graduating so early. She found an alternative to early graduation through a relationship she had built with a faculty member. Margaret stated,

I had a professor that encouraged me to apply to the Bush School, like their joint degree program. And I think that really, really helped because it gave me more time to like, sit on what exactly I wanted to do. And then also prepare me to potentially enter the workforce. Cause I feel like finishing undergrad in two years, like graduating at 19 or 20 can feel like a scary experience.

Three degreed participants talked about how influential their relationships with their families were in completing their degree. Margaret mentioned how much she relied

on her older siblings, who also graduated from HECHS. Stephanie discussed how important her parents were when she was having health issues and their encouragement for her to go back to school. Ana talked about how much she relied on her older brother's emotional support and encouragement while working on her degree. While family support itself is not an activity provided by the school, it can and should be cultivated through ECHS activities. Participants did not mention any family-centered activities taking place at HECHS.

Organizational Goals and Values

Diana provided an interesting response about attending a two-year versus four-year college. She felt like HECHS influenced her decision to attend a four-year university too much. Diana stated that if she could make a choice again, she would have gone to a two-year school to focus on a nursing degree. She felt like the HECHS faculty put too much emphasis on attending a four-year school and felt like she was “wasting” an opportunity if she did not enroll in a four-year institution.

Additionally, I think one of the above examples would fit this category. Under the performance proficiency dimension, lessons on admissions and financial aid are discussed. Those lessons could also work in this category because they add to the student's college knowledge and ability to understand the logistics of the campus. Additionally, this would have been an appropriate dimension if students had specifically mentioned visits to college campuses.

The participants mentioned many positive activities and experiences that influenced their postsecondary lives. Positive experiences included relationships with family, college faculty, career exploration, and community service. Notably, one participant mentioned a

negative experience that also influenced her postsecondary education. She focused on the perceived pressure from HECHS faculty to attend a four-year institution.

Dual credits earned were also mentioned as an influencing factor. Margaret graduated from HECHS with 52 college credits which accelerated her path to bachelor's degree attainment. She discussed graduation at age 19 or 20 influenced her to enter a graduate program that would delay her graduation.

Unhelpful Activities

In addition to understanding what activities helped former HECHS students, I also wanted to know if there were activities they felt were useless or considered a waste of time. Overall, all five students did not name anything specific as being unhelpful. Ana said, "I honestly didn't mind anything." However, there were things participants expressed they did not like at the time or did not understand how it could help them until later experiences.

Performance Proficiency

Stephanie reflected on ICU, the homework intervention system. Although she did not like the system at the time, in her own words, it was an effective method to get students to complete their homework. Stephanie even admitted it could have helped other students. She stated,

I remember not being a big fan of ICU because I would deliberately not want to do assignments and I'm like my grade can take a zero, but now it's like, you have to do the assignment. I feel like it would cause frustration, like, you wait for lunchtime to chill for a second, and then it's like, no, you have to go to ICU. And like, kids will get picked out of lunch to go to ICU. If they didn't know they were supposed to be

there. I don't know. I just, I always felt like it was kind of counterintuitive in a way. Like, I don't know. I wasn't a big fan of it. That's how I try to stay out of it. If I knew I was going to get sent to ICU, I might as well just do the homework, even if I didn't want to do it. Then again, I wasn't in there often, so I mean, it could have helped a lot of kids

Similarly, Adriana discussed not understanding why writing the objective in the planner was important. It wasn't until she was in her postsecondary institution that she made the connection;

So, you know how we used to write the objective? I used to think it wasn't helpful at all. I think it was...it might have been the objective in the planner. Yeah! Writing the objective and then just breaking it down. That was very helpful because science is just sometimes too crazy or just very detailed. So that would help me focus on what I needed to focus on in the classroom when professors would just like go off a tangent and they forget they're teaching or something. But that was very helpful just focusing in on what the class is really about or even a chapter because science has objectives and then it's like 20, 40 pages a chapter and that would help me focus on what I really needed to focus on rather than focusing on the little things that really didn't make the big picture. I don't really remember anything that I might have thought was a waste of time.

People

Participants did not mention unhelpful or unneeded activities related to building relationships and socialization at the postsecondary institution. Based on previous responses in the helpful and influential activities, participants appear to have a favorable view of how HECHS approaches this dimension.

Organizational Goals and Values

Overall, participants did not specifically name anything they found unhelpful. They did express how their understanding of the activity changed once they entered a postsecondary institution. Hannah, HECHS associate principal, echoed this sentiment during her interview;

I haven't really had anyone say specifically there's [sic] things that we did that weren't positive. I think most students I've spoken with have been able to see the value of, at least looking back, you know, maybe they didn't value it then, but just with fresh eyes, you know, as young adults and adults in the working world, they could see why we did that now. Even if it's not something they enjoyed then.

Better Preparation Needed

Participants were asked if there were things they encountered in their postsecondary education they did not feel prepared for or would have wanted more information about. For the most part, participants felt like they were academically prepared for postsecondary education. As previously mentioned, Alex stated that he felt ready for the college classroom and expected no surprises. Adriana couldn't believe that other students did not have previous knowledge of syllabus reading. Stephanie stated,

I feel like I was very well-prepared for college. The only thing I struggled is finding the classrooms, but I mean, that's nothing like that can be taught really. No, I feel like I was very well-prepared like in all aspects like even I know we would get suggested when a professor said, oh, you're going to need this textbook, wait to the first day, like don't just go out and buy the textbooks if they're not going to use it. Because sometimes on the first or second day, they're like, oh, we won't actually be going from the textbook. Like small things like that I feel like I was even prepared for.

Participants asked for some non-academic issues to be clarified, expanded upon, or addressed.

Performance Proficiency

Adriana and Alex both thought that more time should have been spent in PCC talking about GPA, how to prioritize assignments and understanding grade weights. Alex explained,

For me, I think how college hours from college classes you get a HECHS can affect admissions after the fact at other universities. I would see classes, oh, this class is one hour. This class is three hours. This class is four hours. But all I saw was that just hours. I didn't realize how they affected my GPA and how ours could pile up and maybe affect how universities look at you when it comes to admissions. For example, A&M, if you have a certain amount of hours, they might kind of shy away from you because they have caps for certain majors and things like that. And maybe, maybe going over that a little bit more, I feel like it would be a big help.

Adriana talked about the error she made in her class;

The course just depending on what course you took, the grades were different. And so, finals would either weigh more or not as much as other ones. And so, I wouldn't prioritize which ones to study more on. I prioritized each one equally and rather than focusing on one that was like half my grade. I was focusing more on another one that was like what, 30, 20, 5% of my grade.

Financial literacy was one area that Ana and Margaret thought needed to be stronger. Margaret stated,

I know we briefly touched on budgeting my senior year. And I mean, like there's so much to cover whenever you're trying to prepare someone to start college, but yeah, I struggled with budgeting, I think my freshman year because I was living on campus and I was just like, you know I had like struggled with that, but that's more of like the basic life skills that we were covering during my senior year.[sic] Like we stuff on like loans and taxes.

One specific area Stephanie believed needed improvement was helping students focus on a college that is the right fit for them. She mentioned this several times throughout the interview. While she went to a four-year college and graduated with a bachelor's degree she wished she had done something different.

I mean the fact that I went for a four-year degree was something that I feel like was really heartbreaking. I wish I would have known more about two-year degrees in like other technical schools. Like, I feel like if I was doing good and I had pretty good grades, I was expected to do a four-year degree. I think in hindsight I would've done something different. If it hadn't been for PCC, like harping, like you

should do a four your degree, you should do a four-year degree. I probably would've gone a different route.

People

Multiple times, participants mentioned relationships with faculty and peers as a positive influence. Two participants appreciated their relationships with HECHS faculty but felt those relationships also had a disadvantage. Both participants felt like they went from an environment with a positive culture and a lot of support from faculty and peers to feeling alone after graduation. Adriana believed the environment was good at HECHS and “thought you would always have that around you”. She went on to say,

You know, mostly it's up to you if you wanna [sic] really succeed. I went to the dorms directly the first year. I didn't know anybody. Basically, my roommate and I, we were just, she would come in, I would go out, I would go in, she would go out and like, it was just basically by ourselves. But yeah, I guess for me, like I said, I'm a very introverted person, so I really excluded myself from activities.

Ana felt a similar loss after leaving HECHS. She described some struggles with transitioning, including talking about financial aid to doing things independently,

In terms of like PCC, I feel like we cover a lot of stuff, but like once you get to college you're kinda [sic] like, you are on your own and you don't have Ms. Carr to help you or you don't have your counselors. And I think that's part of the struggle. They can tell you about financial aid and stuff, but not really dealing with it until you get there. And you're like, okay, my payment's due this day or if I don't, you know?

She further described an experience similar to Adriana. Ana felt that she was in a positive and supportive environment at HECHS but felt that went away after graduating;

I think it's just like you go from being in a place where it's all about college. Right. And like, you know, for me, at least it's like, I knew I wanted to go to college. So, I knew what I had to do. And I had, you know, even though my parents didn't go to college, I had a sibling or whatever. I had somebody there. It gets kind of difficult because you don't have that environment where it's all about college. And so, it's easy to just be like, oh, okay. You know, to make your own choices. And whether that just be, oh, I'm gonna [sic] go eat with a friend instead of going to go study like little decisions like that catch up to you.

Organizational Goals and Values

Margaret discussed the need to help students of color prepare for a college culture that is predominantly White. She had powerful feelings about this topic. Therefore, I have included a lengthy portion of our conversation to allow Margaret's thoughts and feelings to be expressed in her own words.

My family is like really, really close, and like we're always doing stuff together. And then when I was on campus was like, it was completely different. I was just like on my own in a way, or just like with my friends only. So that was really different for me. I also was not prepared for the fact that A&M is a predominantly White institution versus like at HECHS where I was surrounded by you know, like different students, like me who are like, you know, the children of immigrants or like Hispanic students or students who speak Spanish.

And then when I was at TAMU, it did, it felt, I guess people call it like a culture shock. It was not that I hadn't interacted with like White students, but there was a majority of Hispanic students at HECHS versus me being like the only person of color in like my German class or something A&M. And so yeah, like those interactions, I felt like there were times when I didn't know, well, it just, it was hard to feel like you fit in, but there's also like the, the fact that we went to a very diverse school, whereas at A&M there are students who had like low percentages of like Hispanic students at their high schools.

And so, I guess maybe what I'm trying to get at is like we become use to and appreciate diversity within our school, [HECHS]. And then we then are put in classes where there are students who have never talked to us or met students like me. It was difficult navigating those interactions. And then for me, like I guess with these interactions you have to do a lot of work to kind of like express your identity and make sure that people view you the way that you truly want to be viewed. Which can be hard.

Margaret was very passionate about this issue during our interview. The feeling of not belonging or lacking connection is seen in other students who are part of immigrant families (Suárez-Orozco & Hernandez, 2020). The university she attends has several student organizations that focus on Hispanic students or culture. She did not mention belonging to any of these organizations but talked about how important it was to maintain her friendships with students from HECHS.

Pull Factors

Pull factors, described as family and work responsibilities, have been found to be among the most critical issues preventing students from attaining college degrees (Nora et al., 1996). While these may not be factors that any secondary school can prepare a student for, they are important to mention because of their impact on degree attainment. Three participants experienced pull factors at some point after high school graduation.

Stephanie, who graduated, discussed taking time off due to health issues. Her graduation was delayed about a year while she recovered. She stated her parent's support was instrumental in her returning to school. Adriana also took almost a year off from school. She said that during the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, her family needed her help. She also returned to school with the support of her family.

Alex was pulled from the pursuit of a degree due to family responsibilities. His parents, who are undocumented immigrants, were concerned about their immigration status and deportation. This pull factor is also seen in a study done by Suárez-Orozco & Hernandez (2020). The population for the study was undocumented students but the stressors and anxiety are similar for Alex who is a child of undocumented parents. Like the undocumented students, Alex was highly concerned about his family being separated because of their legal status (Suárez-Orozco & Hernandez, 2020). In response to this fear, he dropped out of college to enlist in the Marine Corps Reserves as not only a way to serve his country but also to help his parents gain permanent residency status. He spent several minutes during our interview discussing how proud he was to be helping his family. He returned to school briefly after military training but ultimately decided that he wanted to work in construction.

While pull factors affected two students, they were both able to return to school with the encouragement and support of their families. Alex did not return to school but is thinking about returning in the future. All three of these instances are consistent examples of pull factors.

Summary

Using open-ended questions during a semi-structured interview provided rich data about each participant's perceptions of the activities at HECHS and whether those activities supported them in postsecondary education. Activities were coded to identify the activity and then sorted again into the three dimensions of Organizational Socialization; performance proficiency, language, people, politics, organizational goals and values, and history (Chao et al.,1994). These dimensions helped categorize what types of activities were offered and which activities participants found most impactful, least helpful, and where improvement is needed.

Participants most often discussed activities that were part of the performance proficiency and people dimensions. The PCC class, career activities, CIF, relationships with family, HECHS faculty, peers, and college faculty were viewed as positively impacting postsecondary education. Students also mentioned activities that were part of the organizational goals and values dimension. Lessons focused on college admissions and financial aid were mentioned several times as helpful and important.

When looking at areas of improvement, students mentioned wanting more help with personal finances. Stephanie wanted better support in finding the college that is the right fit. Margaret talked about wanting support when faced with cultural differences and

interactions when attending a predominantly White college. Two participants appreciated the support given at HECHS but strongly felt its loss after graduation.

In Chapter Three, I provided a portrait of each participant to help the reader better understand and connect with the participant's perceptions. In a qualitative study, rich, thick descriptions invite readers to connect with the participants and allow readers to make judgments about transferability (Creswell, 2007). Each participant had unique and relatable stories to tell. These students shared what activities supported them and helped them become successful.

In the final chapter of the present study, I will discuss the findings using my theoretical framework, Organizational Socialization (Chao et al., 1994). I will make connections between my findings and previous research. Further, implications and recommendations for future research will be discussed.

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSIONS

Chapter Five consists of a discussion of the findings, connecting findings to previous research, and the limitations of the present study. Additionally, recommendations for future research and implications for practice are presented.

The present study aimed to acquire feedback from early college high school (ECHS) graduates, identifying how students could be more effectively prepared for postsecondary education success. In addition, the present study sought to identify potential areas of disconnect between ECHS and colleges. To explore Henry Early College High School (HECHS) student preparation, former HECHS students were interviewed using a semi-structured interview design. Interviews focused on the following research questions:

1. What college preparatory activities, strategies, or interventions are implemented by the campus?
2. Which HECHS activities and opportunities do graduates identify as influential in their postsecondary educational pursuits?
3. In what ways did identified activities or experiences affect postsecondary educational plans or intentions?
4. Which activities or experiences, if any, did graduates identify as being unhelpful in this aim?
5. What firsthand postsecondary experiences did alumni feel as though their ECHS could have made them better prepared?

Past studies showed the ECHS model increases college enrollment and college graduation rates for students when compared to non-ECHS students (Berger et al., 2013; Lauen et al., 2017; Song & Zeiser, 2019). However, when focusing on six years after high graduation, the ECHS model appears to have a more significant impact on associate degree

attainment than on bachelor's degree (American Research Institute, 2020). Most ECHSs are partners with 2-year colleges which explains the significant impact on associate degree attainment. However, research shows that relatively few underrepresented students like Latina/o students persist from 2-year colleges to transfer or complete a degree at 4-year institutions (Acevedo-Gil et al., 2014). Some evidence shows that ECHS continues to struggle with the socioeconomic equity gap. Findings suggest there is no significant impact on enrollment and degree attainment when looking at student characteristics. Students identified as low-income or at-risk were least likely to continue to postsecondary education (Moreno et al., 2020; Song et al., 2021).

Prior studies on ECHSs primarily focused on student performance while enrolled in an ECHS. Fewer studies have examined what happens to ECHS students after graduation and what it is like during bachelor's degree attainment. Bachelor's degree attainment can lead to positive life outcomes such as higher earnings, lower unemployment rates, and healthier lifestyles (Jepsen et al., 2014; Ma et al., 2019; Oreopoulous & Salvanes, 2011). Given the positive life outcomes associated with earning a bachelor's degree, it is important to find strategies that support underrepresented students' bachelor's degree attainment.

Discussion of Findings

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with five Class of 2017 graduates of HECHS. Three participants had already attained their bachelor's degrees, and two had not. One of the participants who had not attained their bachelor's degree returned to their university after withdrawing for a brief period and is currently enrolled. The second

participant who did not earn a degree joined the United States Marine Corps Reserves and now works in construction with plans to return to school.

Three dimensions of Organizational Socialization were used to frame findings from the document review and participant responses: *performance proficiency, people, organizational goals and values* (Chao et al., 1994). According to Duncheon (2020), performance proficiency focuses specifically on the knowledge, skills, and abilities students need to help them succeed in college. Further, the people dimension of Organizational Socialization helps students learn how to build successful relationships with faculty, peers, and others. The organizational goals and values dimension focus on the ability to learn the rules of an organization (Chao et al., 1994). For students, this refers to a student's ability to understand and navigate the logistics and culture of a college campus (Duncheon, 2020).

An Organization Socialization model helped me understand how well ECHS students felt they were prepared to succeed in an organization of higher learning after graduation. Nora's (2003) Student/Institution Engagement Model specifically considers how a student's pre-college characteristics and experiences interact with the institution environment.

College Preparatory Activities at HECHS

A review of campus documents and the campus website revealed various college preparatory activities used to prepare students for success in a postsecondary organization. Table 4 reflects the college preparatory activities found at HECHS with a specific organizational socialization dimension.

Table 4*Organizational Socialization Dimensions*

Dimension	Name of College Prep Activity
Performance Proficiency	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Common Instructional Framework ● Path College Career Course (PCC) ● Intensive Care Unit (ICU) ● Dual Credit Labs ● Study Hall
People	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Deliberate practice with professional communication ● Meeting with professors ● Collaboration in the form of group projects and study groups ● Community service projects as an opportunity to network with members of the community
Organizational Goals and Values	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Exploring college campus resources ● College tours ● Visits from College recruiters and financial officers ● College and career research

Most of the college preparatory activities fell into the performance proficiency dimension. Performance proficiency activities focus on academic knowledge, highlighting core academic content and non-academic skills like time management, organization, and study skills. Maintaining a strong focus on academic preparation reflects research that found academic preparation is one of the most important characteristics of college enrollment and degree attainment (Bean, 1980; Conley, 2007; Nora et al., 1996). Often, underrepresented students enter college academically unprepared (Arbona & Nora, 2007; Conley, 2007; Kenzie et al., 2008; Light & Stayer, 2000; Strayhorn 2014). Arbona & Nora (2007) found that participating in rigorous academic courses is the strongest predictor for

Hispanic students attending a four-year college. Given these research findings, a strong focus on academic preparation is appropriate.

While most of the college preparatory activities focused on academic knowledge, there were multiple activities related to both the people and organization and values dimensions. These activities focus on building relationships and learning about the college environment. Lack of understanding of contextual knowledge of college, including information about financial aid and the application process, is often a barrier for underrepresented students (Page & Scott-Clayton, 2016; Strayhorn, 2014). Additionally, studies have shown that social networks comprised of friends, family, and faculty have a positive effect on academic achievement and college completion for underrepresented students (Almedia et al., 2021; Arbora & Nora, 2007; Horn, 1997; Mishra, 2020; Terenzini et al., 1996).

Activities Students Found Helpful

All participants, regardless of degree attainment status, agreed that Path College Career (PCC) was helpful to them after graduation. The HECHS administrators, Reece and Hannah, agreed in their interviews that PCC was the most effective college preparatory activity at HECHS. The PCC course curriculum covers all three dimensions: *performance proficiency, people and organization and values*. Students have the opportunity to work on academic assignments, monitor grades, learn to read a college course syllabus, and test preparation. Some lessons ask students to contact professors, use college campus resources, connect to community members, and work collaboratively with peers. Students work on college and career research, interact with college recruiters, take college tours, and learn about financial aid. PCC is an intense college preparatory activity that addresses all

of David Conley's Keys to College Readiness (a) Key Cognitive Strategies, (b) Key Content Knowledge, (c) Key Learning skills & Techniques, and (d) Key transition skills (Conley, 2007).

Students also believed that taking dual credit classes on the college campus instead of the high school campus made a difference. Being on the college campus and interacting with other college students and faculty made them feel more prepared for postsecondary education after high school. Duncheon (2020) also found that ECHS students believed attending college classes on the college campus was important to their preparation. This also connects to the concern in maintaining college-level standards when college courses are taught by accredited high school faculty and not the college faculty (Mokher, 2021). Like PCC, attending dual credit courses on the college campus spans all three dimensions of Organizational Socialization by providing academic rigor, opportunities to build social networks, and familiarity with a college campus's logistics.

Activities Influential on Postsecondary Choices

While many activities were discussed as helpful, there were a few activities that participants specifically mentioned as having influenced the postsecondary choices they made. First were the lessons on applying to college, financial aid, and scholarships. The three participants who earned degrees talked about how these lessons helped them get into and continue college.

Margaret discussed how the community service opportunities influenced her after graduation. The experience of working with different community agencies led her to pursue studies in community development and policy. In addition to community service, Margaret also discussed how earning over 50 college credit hours influenced her.

Faced with the prospect of graduating at the age of 19 or 20, Margaret decided to pursue a program that included a master's and doctoral degree.

Social networks were found to be influential for participants. Participants described how relationships at HECHS with faculty and peers continued to be important even after graduation. The value participants placed on these social networks match other research findings (Almedia et al., 2021; Mishra, 2020). Margaret's relationship with a faculty member influenced her to continue into graduate school. The fact that Margaret finished her bachelor's degree the quickest and has moved on to graduate school aligns with Nora et al. (1996) findings that female students persistence rate benefited from non-classroom interactions with college faculty.

Career research and speakers were also mentioned as influential by three participants, two without degrees and one with a degree. The opportunities to research careers and interact with speakers were effective in helping participants determine what they did not want to pursue as a career.

Activities Students Found Unhelpful

Participants were asked if there were college preparatory activities at HECHS that they viewed as unhelpful or unnecessary. None of the participants named any specific activities. Two participants, one with a degree and one without, discussed two academic activities they did not like while at HECHS but later found helpful.

Areas Students Wanted Better Preparation

While students did not specifically name unhelpful activities, they discussed areas where they thought improvements were needed. In the performance proficiency dimension, two students asked for more lessons in personal finance. While financial information was

taught during senior year, both students felt like they needed more help in that area. Two students discussed the need to learn more about grade weights, GPA, and transfer credits. They discussed wanting to know more about prioritizing assignments based on grade weight and how their GPA and college credits earned while at HECHS would affect their postsecondary choices.

Within the people dimension, two concerns were mentioned. The first is related to matching the college to meet student goals. Stephanie felt like there was overwhelming pressure only to attend four-year colleges. Although she graduated, she wished she had attended a two-year school. Research demonstrates that match is important to persistence and degree attainment (Arbona & Nora, 2007; Castleman & Goodman, 2022; Page & Scott-Clayton, 2016).

Participants discussed that while the support during their time at HECHS was incredible, there was a distinct feeling of loss after graduating. The academic and social network support provided at HECHS was important to participants. After graduation, they no longer maintained the same level of support on the college campus. Similarly, Duncheon (2020) found that academic scaffolding and social support both facilitated and, in some cases, undermined students' transition to college. None of the participants talked about trying to integrate into the campus by joining campus groups socially. One participant was too introverted to join groups, and another said she was too busy with work and family. Transitioning from a social network in high school to a social network at college is important. Students who socially integrate themselves into the college institution have an increased chance of college persistence and degree attainment (Tinto, 1987).

Lastly, Margaret discussed not being prepared for the college culture in terms of ethnic differences. She was very passionate when describing the tension and awkwardness she felt attending a predominantly White university. Margaret said it was difficult coming from a small high school that reflected her cultural background to interact with White students who did not come from similar backgrounds at a large university. Her own family social network was strong enough to overcome this barrier to degree attainment, but I included it because it is important to consider when looking at support structures. Higher education institutions need interventions and support systems for underrepresented students (Castleman & Goodman, 2022; Garriott & Nisle, 2017; Mishra, 2020; Tinto, 1993; Wyckoff, 1998).

Pull Factors

Nora et al. (1996) defined pull factors like environmental factors such as family responsibilities and work that become barriers to college persistence and degree attainment. Acevedo-Gil, et al. (2014) describes pull factors as creating a non-linear path to degree completion with multiple start and stop points for Latina/o students. While these pull factors are not within the ECHS college preparatory activities, it is important to review these and consider whether ECHSs or a college institution can lessen their effects. Three of the participants experienced some type of pull factor after high school graduation. Two of the three returned to college after receiving support and encouragement from their families. The third participant who did not return to college decided to continue working instead of pursuing a bachelor's degree.

Limitations of the Study

The findings from the present study may not be generalizable to all ECHSs. The sample of graduates from a single cohort within a single ECHS is too small for generalizations. As the former principal of HECHS, I must acknowledge that my position could have affected student participation or responses. Therefore, my positionality may have biased my findings. Recruiting participants who had not graduated college was difficult. Possible reasons for lack of participation include insufficient contact information and nervousness. Lack of comfort being interviewed by their former principal or insufficient time to participate.

In addition to the small sample size, ECHSs are designed in multiple ways, with varied student populations. The ECHS in the present study was in central Texas and is a stand-alone campus near a two-year college, and students are taught by both high school and college faculty. While there are no academic criteria to attend, a student must choose to attend. Other ECHS models may be a school-within-a-school or a transformed comprehensive high school of over 2000 students who earn dual credit through classes taught by credentialed high school teachers on the high school campus. In the case of a comprehensive high school that transformed into ECHS, students had no choice to attend since it was their attendance zone school.

Conclusion

The purpose of the present study was to examine postsecondary life for graduates of ECHS. Are the supports and activities experienced at ECHS useful once students are in postsecondary education after leaving ECHS? Participants reported that they felt prepared for postsecondary education after graduation. HECHS provided many college preparatory

supports and activities in all three dimensions that helped them as they attended institutions of higher education. The activities align with Nora's (2003) Student/Institution Model and David Conley's keys for college preparation (Conley, 2007).

Participants felt like HECHS succeeded in preparing them for college life after graduation. They also reported continuing to use several college preparatory activities in their postsecondary setting. Participants discussed some areas they felt underprepared for and recommended more support in the areas of personal finance, social network support, and college match. A disconnect from organizational socialization appears in the dimension of *people*. Participants discussed how much the loss of support from HECHS affected them and how much support was needed from their families. No HECHS documents, interviews with participants, or HECHS administrators revealed any school activities connecting to parents.

Recommendations for Future Research

The present study focused on a single graduating class of a single ECHS. A more extensive study of graduated ECHS cohorts in postsecondary education would be valuable to help guide practitioners at ECHSs and institutions of higher education. Most of the current research focuses on postsecondary success in dual credit courses and associate's degree attainment while still enrolled at ECHS. It is equally important to ensure students are moving forward and completing their bachelor's degree to benefit from the positive life outcomes and narrow the economic gap for underrepresented groups.

The second area of future research should focus on the institutes of higher education and whether they provide support for the socialization of underrepresented groups on campus. How could they partner with ECHS to create a seamless transition of

support? If they currently offer a variety of supports, are students using them and do they have evidence of student success?

Implications for Practice

The family was repeated, a vital source of support and encouragement for all participants. Two participants with degrees emphasized how important older siblings were to their persistence and degree attainment. For two of the students, the only reason they returned after experiencing pull factors was because of their families. There is no evidence of strong family engagement at HECHS. None of the participants spoke about parental involvement at HECHS, nor was there evidence in any campus documents. Families engaged in the college process, including learning about admissions, financial aid, and college culture could be an important strategy in the continuity of support after ECHS graduation.

HECHS should consider how they can help bridge support gaps when students transition to postsecondary institutions. The campus could implement a family program in June after graduation to check in on students and families. The check-in would ensure the completion of paperwork for housing and registration. Another strategy might be continued support, such as an alumni newsletter. The newsletter could potentially ease students from dependence on their high school support. Finally, while still enrolled in HECHS, a senior research activity that could help socialize students to their new campuses should require students to identify advisors, student groups, and other student activities in which they are interested.

Summary

After decades of research and programs aimed at helping increase the number of underrepresented students in college, the data shows slight improvement in degree attainment. The ECHS model seeks to help underrepresented students earn a degree by providing a supportive environment and the opportunity to earn free college credit while still in high school. HECHS's college preparatory activities continue to positively impact postsecondary success even after students graduate from HECHS.

The present study helped shine a light on what ECHS students experience after ECHS graduation in postsecondary education. Many studies have examined what strategies and interventions are effective while students are enrolled in an ECHS. However, few studies have followed ECHS students after graduation to determine if they feel prepared for college and how ECHS activities help them progress to bachelor's degree attainment in a four-year college. ECHS has demonstrated positive outcomes at the high school and postsecondary level. However, several studies have found that impact is not significant when you desegregate data to the student characteristic level like low-income, first-generation, ethnicity (Edmunds et al., 2017; Lauen et al. 2017; Mokher, 2021; Song and Zeiser 2019). Finding the disconnect between the ECHS model and postsecondary outcomes is important to decreasing educational and economic gaps for underrepresented students.

The findings from the present study affirm relationships, lessons in college admissions, and rigorous academic preparation as important for student postsecondary success (Conley, 2012; Duncheon, 2020; Nora, 2003). There are still lingering questions about how K–12 schools and institutions of higher education can work together to ease the

transition for these students, ensuring continued support through degree attainment. Future studies should also consider the role of the family and whether a stronger school/family relationship can help students beyond high school graduation. Despite the limitations of the present study, lingering questions about ECHSs, and identified areas for improvement, these schools provide valuable insights and models for addressing chronic disparities in postsecondary access and attainment.

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APPENDIX A

PARTICIPANT INTERVIEWS

1. What if any post-secondary education experiences have you had?
 - a. What was the last year in which you were enrolled in college?
 - b. Which, if any, college degrees and/or certificates did you earn?
 - c. What factors affected your ability to complete your degree?
2. Based on the Bryan Collegiate website and campus documents the following are described as activities, strategies, or interventions used to help prepare students for college. (show the list to participants)
 - a. Which of these activities, strategies, or interventions did you experience at ECHS?
 - b. Are there any activities not on this list that you believe helped you prepare for college? If yes, please describe the activity and why you think it helped.
 - c. Did you continue to use anything from any of these activities, strategies, or interventions while attending college? If yes, which ones?
 - d. Did any of these activities, strategies, or interventions influence your college decisions or experiences?
 - e. Which activities, strategies, or interventions do you think were not helpful in preparing you for college? Why?
3. Was there something in your college experience that you felt you were not prepared for? If so, what do you think the school could have done to better prepare you?
4. Were there factors that you believe may have affected your college completion (or lack thereof), positively or negatively, that were beyond/unrelated to your BCHS school experiences? Please describe any such factors.

APPENDIX B

HECHS FACULTY INTERVIEWS

1. How long how have you worked at the campus?
2. What roles have you served at the campus?
3. Looking at the list of student support services, can you confirm these were all available to students in the class of 2017?
4. What do you feel is the most important support the campus offers?
5. What do you think needs improvement?
6. When you speak with former students who were in the class of 2017 (or later), what is the thing(s) that they mention as most helpful or important that the campus did to help them after graduation?
7. What do they mention as the least helpful?
8. Have former students made suggestions for improvement?

Is there anything you would like to share that I haven't mentioned or asked?

APPENDIX C

COMMON INSTRUCTIONAL FRAMEWORK

Collaborative Group Work

Students are grouped intentionally to engage in learning by constructing group solutions, texts, or experiments. Each student is held accountable and activities are meaningful tasks in the subject area that is conceptually rich, engaging, and have multiple entry points for all students.

Writing To Learn

Writing to learn encourages students to develop their ideas, critical thinking abilities, and writing skills. It helps students practice with everyday written language and increase their fluency and mastery of written conventions.

Scaffolding

Using information based on prior assessments, Teachers plan a strategic sequence of instruction and activities to help students connect prior knowledge and experience with new information and ideas. This instructional strategy helps students connect with and understand increasingly more complex concepts.

Questioning

Teachers use questioning to enable students to investigate and analyze their thinking. Effective questioning can improve the classroom conversation and deepen the level of discourse while listening to their peers and analyzing text.

Classroom Talk

The discussion allows students to articulate their thinking and strengthen their voices. The classroom talk strategy will enable teachers to facilitate instead of lead

discussions in higher levels of discourse. An important aspect of this strategy is for teachers to introduce and reinforce the use of academic language in the conversation.

Literacy Groups

Literacy Groups feature small groups of students assigned specific roles in the group. This provides students with a collaborative structure for understanding a variety of texts and problem sets while ensuring all members of the group have an opportunity to participate in the discussion.

APPENDIX D

HECHS COLLEGE PREPARATORY ACTIVITY DESCRIPTIONS

ICU Homework System (est. 2014)

A "no zero" homework system runs during the school day. Teachers would assign students to ICU if they did not turn in homework. ICU is conducted in the middle of the day during learning communities and lunch. Students must turn in the missing work to be able to leave ICU and will be reassigned until all work has been satisfactorily completed.

Algebra I & Geometry Math Lab (est. 2012)

A high school math teacher teaches this course. Students are enrolled in their state assessments, or course grades indicate they need additional help in math. Students work on skill gaps, math homework, and preview upcoming lesson skills. Imagine math software is used to help fill skill gaps.

Read 180 (est. 2011)

Read 180 is a reading intervention course that assists students in building fluency and comprehension skills. The course is a mix of computer software and scripted teacher lessons. Enrollment consists of freshmen and sophomore students who read below grade level and did not pass the previous year's state standardized test.

Practical Writing (est. 2014)

This course is designed for students who have not passed the Texas Success Initiative Assessment Reading and Writing sections, which is needed to enroll in upper-level dual credit courses. The course provides a series of lessons designed by the college for students considered "remedial" in reading and writing.

Dual Credit (D.C.) Lab in English, Math, U.S. History, & Science (est. 2012)

A high school course taught by a high school teacher strictly supports students in the corresponding dual credit courses by monitoring their progress, helping them form study groups, tutoring as needed, etc.

Path College Career Levels I – IV (est. 2014)

All students are enrolled in the PCC course each year of high school. The curriculum for these courses focuses on:

- Note-taking
- Organization
- Time Management
- Study Skills
- PSAT/SAT/ACT Test Prep
- College Research
- Career Research
- Financial Aid/Scholarships

College Applications