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A Case Study of Student and Faculty Experiences in a High-Achieving Early College High School Along the Texas-Mexico Border

Kelly Louis Stuart
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A CASE STUDY OF STUDENT AND FACULTY EXPERIENCES
IN A HIGH-ACHIEVING EARLY COLLEGE HIGH SCHOOL
ALONG THE TEXAS-MEXICO BORDER

A Dissertation

by

KELLY L. STUART

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements for the Degree of
DOCTOR OF EDUCATION

Major Subject: Curriculum and Instruction

The University of Texas Rio Grande Valley

December 2023

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December 2023

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ABSTRACT

Stuart, Kelly L., A Case Study of Student and Faculty Experiences in a High-Achieving Early College High School Along the Texas-Mexico Border. Doctor of Education (Ed.D.), December, 2023, 527 pp., 55 tables, 17 figures, references, 329 titles.

This study explores the high academic achievement of Excelencia Early College High School (EECHS), located along the Texas-Mexico border. EECHS serves students who are characteristic of the lower Rio Grande Valley including those with low socioeconomic backgrounds, minorities, first-generation, and those typically underserved by higher education. Over two years, seven student focus-group interviews and fifteen faculty personal interviews were conducted addressing key research questions such as: What are the lived experiences of students and faculty at this high-achieving school? What motivates students to overcome challenges and persist to graduation? What factors contribute to student success? How do teachers and faculty maintain the rigor required of college-level work?

Results revealed multiple success factors, including a skilled teaching staff with high expectations and strong emotional support, an environment promoting student belonging through clubs and extracurricular activities, use of the AVID college preparatory program that teaches essential college readiness skills, and school systems used to ensure student induction and progress, including Summer Bridge and self-reporting of grades.

The early college high school reform movement gained momentum from the Early College High School Initiative (ECHSI), sponsored in 2002 by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation. This initiative aimed at bridging academic performance gaps through smaller schools and accelerated instruction for underserved populations. Texas has adopted this school reform model statewide, largely inspired by the late state demographer Steve Murdock. Efforts like Closing the Gaps (2000-2015) and 60x30TX demonstrate Texas's commitment to improving postsecondary outcomes for all its citizens.

DEDICATION

This study is dedicated to my parents who helped guide and shape me into the person that I have become. Their care and influence has helped me to believe in myself, and to become comfortable about asking questions and seeking answers as part of the learning process. They were also my first best teachers and encouraged a love of music, language, and learning which I continue to benefit from every day.

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I would also like to thank the students and faculty at Excelencia Early College High School who volunteered much of their time to participate in this study. Their candor and contributions helped move this study along toward its completion as well as inspired much thought about my own self-regulation and time management skills. Special thanks also to Mr. Reynolds and Mrs. Sutter, key administrators in the creation and implementation of Excelencia Early College High School.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Background of the Study

In recent years, American education has witnessed a pronounced and continuing emphasis on college, career, and workforce readiness. This focus is not merely rhetorical but is also supported by key federal legislation, including the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) of 2015. The ESSA underscores the national priority placed on preparing students for postsecondary education and the workforce by incentivizing states to craft comprehensive college and career readiness plans for secondary schools (ESSA, 2015).

As one of a series of reauthorizations of the original Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 (Jennings, 2015), the ESSA continues in the same tradition of providing student support by offering states financial incentives for improving the educational outcomes of lower-income, minority, students of color and first-generation students. However, this federal legislation offers new incentives encouraging higher and secondary education to work cooperatively to improve student outcomes and postsecondary degree attainment. This joint venture between higher education and public education thus aims to rectify long-standing high school and college articulation issues by improving curriculum alignment that enhances students' college readiness and likelihood of postsecondary success.

Amidst this backdrop, the early college high school (ECHS) model has emerged as a viable educational initiative that bridges secondary and postsecondary education, notably in

states such as Texas. ECHSs have been instrumental in improving the college readiness of traditionally underserved populations, addressing the challenges students in these demographics face, and embodying effective targeted educational reforms in the contemporary American educational landscape.

Data from extensive state demographic reports and the influential book *Changing Texas* indicates significant shifts in Texas's demographic profile (Murdock et al., 2014). Murdock et al.'s work illustrates the potentially negative socioeconomic implications of Texas's rapidly changing population. Without appropriate interventions, Texas could experience reduced economic competitiveness and prosperity. Through the presentation of extensive data and economic forecasts through 2050, Murdock's insights offer a glimpse of Texas in the mid-twenty-first century. His objective demographic information has helped shape Texas's governmental and private-sector policies, crucial for the state's future prosperity.

Parallel to the national trend towards college readiness, Texas has demonstrated proactive legislative approaches to solving its educational challenges. Motivated by Murdock et al.'s demographic forecasts, Texas legislators have enacted significant educational reforms. These reforms have mandated a closer collaboration between higher education and secondary education sectors, with an emphasis on improving curriculum alignment.

Texas's embrace of the ECHS as a significant school reform measure mirrors the national movement toward college and workforce readiness. However, while generally impactful in improving college readiness and educational outcomes, such reforms in Texas have not yet yielded uniformly high-achieving early college high schools.

This study focuses on a single high-achieving early college high school in Texas. It aims to understand what distinguishes it from its counterparts, how it achieves its elevated status, and

what insights it might offer for replication. The overarching purpose of this study is to investigate the practices, strategies, and mechanisms that make this high-achieving early college high school stand apart from its peers. By investigating this unique ECHS, this study aims to provide educational leaders, policymakers, and stakeholders with actionable insights to replicate such success.

Texas's early college high school landscape, especially its top performers, are exemplars worth studying. Through the specific analysis of a particular high-achieving early college high school's accomplishments, valuable insights for educational reform within and beyond Texas's borders might be obtained.

The Early College High School

With increased standards and accountability in K-12 education brought about by the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB, 2001) and the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA, 2015), states are partly motivated to increase student achievement to qualify for all federal monies possible. One response to address college readiness issues in public education has been the adoption by many states of early college high schools.

In 2002, the Early College High School Initiative (ECHSI) began with major philanthropic funding from the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, the Carnegie Corporation of New York, the W.K. Kellogg Foundation, and the Ford Foundation, as well as other public and private contributors (Berger et al., 2010). A nationwide movement, the ECHSI was originally intended to address the academic achievement gap between white students and students of color and low socioeconomic status. Today's early college high school continues to improve all students' college readiness, postsecondary attainment, and high school graduation rates (Webb & Gerwin, 2014).

Early college high schools (ECHS) are educational institutions established in the United States as a collaboration between high schools and colleges or universities. They serve primarily low-income and underrepresented students by helping them earn a high school diploma and up to two years of college credit toward an associate's or bachelor's degree (Carnevale et al., 2016). Students take college-level classes and receive support to ensure their successful completion. ECHS programs aim to increase college access and success for low-income, Hispanics, other students of color, and first-generation students who are underrepresented in higher education.

Demographic Trends in the United States

While total enrollment in public schools from K-12 has increased in the United States since 1995, enrollment by race and ethnicity has differed by various student subgroups, suggesting a gradual shift in the complexion of America. Hispanic student enrollment in public education has more than doubled, with an increase from 6 million in 1995 to over 13.6 million in the fall of 2017. Hispanic public-school enrollment increased greatly from 13.5 % to 26.8 % in this same period. The National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES) predicts that Hispanic public school enrollment will continue to increase to 14 million students and represent 27.5 % of the total public school enrollment by fall 2029 (Wang & Dinkes, 2020).

In contrast, during this period of increasing Hispanic enrollment, White public-school enrollment steadily decreased from 29 million students in 1995 to 24.1 million by fall 2017. The NCES anticipates that this downward trend will continue and that by 2029, White student enrollment in public schools will reach a low of 22.4 million. While the percentage of White students in public schools was 64.8 % in 1995, the NCES further predicts that by 2029, White students will represent just 43.8 percent of the total enrollment in public schools (Hussar et al., 2020).

Hispanics, Latinos, and the U.S. Census

The term Hispanic was first used officially for representational purposes in the 1980 decennial census after glaring errors and an undercount of Hispanics, Blacks, and other minorities occurred in the 1970 decennial census (Anderson, 2015; Taronji, 1974). While the census bureau had added Mexican as a racial descriptor in the 1930 census, due to political pressure from LULAC and other Mexican-American groups, the census bureau removed any descriptors for those of Spanish or Latin American background until the 1970 census (Anderson, 2015; Dowling, 2014).

While Hispanic originally referred to someone of Spanish origin because Hispanic is a derivative of the Latin *Hispanicus* referring to Spain (Merriam-Webster, n.d.), today Hispanic as well as Latino are often used interchangeably to refer to someone who is Mexican-American, Puerto Rican, Cuban, as well as one of South American origin (Verdugo, 2012). Importantly, these terms do not imply a single racial group and that there are differences in how Hispanics and Latinos are viewed socially and politically in the United States (Casas & Cabrera, 2011; Pino et al., 2012).

The U.S. Census Bureau uses five categories to describe racial origin: White, Black or African-American, American Indian and Alaska Native, Asian, and Native Hawaiian and Other Pacific Islander (U.S. Census, 2023). In this study, I will interchangeably use the terms Hispanic and Latino. In order to avoid confusion, when quoting or illustrating an author's work or an official publication such as a U.S. Census or particular state statistic within this report, I will use the identical terminology as used in the original source (DiAngelo & Dyson, 2018). For example, Murdock et al. in *Changing Texas* (2014) frequently use such constructs as non-Hispanic Black, non-Hispanic White, non-Hispanic, and Asian. While in the U.S. Census Quick Facts for

Cameron County, Texas, they sometimes use either Black or African American (U.S. Census, 2023).

The United States Hispanic or Latino population is not drawn from one source but may originate from many different countries. Hispanics of Mexican origin accounted for 36 million or 63.3 % of the United States Hispanic population in 2015, with Mexico contributing the largest percentage of Hispanics of all countries of origin. Contrary to much of the political rhetoric and mainstream media portrayal, the percentage of population increase due to immigration in the U.S. from Hispanics of Mexican origin has been decreasing as fewer Hispanics arrive from Mexico and some of those that do reside in the U.S. leave (Frey, 2021; Gandara, 2017; Murdock et al., 2014). Rather, the Mexican-American population increase is primarily due to natural increase and not immigration (Frey, 2018; Murdock et al., 2014).

The next largest percentage of Hispanic population growth is created from Hispanics of non-Mexican origin, which comprises 36.7% of the nation's Hispanic population. Within this general category includes Hispanics from Puerto Rico, with 5.4 million distributed throughout the 50 states and D.C., as well as 3.4 million people living in Puerto Rico and five other Hispanic origin groups contributing more than one million people to the U.S. population, including Cuba, San Salvador, the Dominican Republic, Guatemala, and Columbia (Flores, 2017).

Demographic Trends in Texas

The Texas Education Agency annually compiles public education statistics and other pertinent school-related data statewide using its comprehensive Public Education Information Management System (PEIMS) database. This information is gathered on the last Friday in October, known as the PEIMS "snapshot" date. The data obtained from this snapshot includes information about all school campuses, school districts, administrators, teachers, charter schools,

and Education Service Centers (ESCs) in Texas (Du et al., 2020). Demographic data is also included for students who are enrolled in non-traditional secondary public schools such as early college high schools (ECHS), Pathways in Technology Early College High Schools (P-TECH), and Texas Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics Academies (T-STEM) (Du et al., 2020).

Since 1994, school performance and accountability ratings have been derived from the PEIMS snapshot data as Texas law requires. In Section 39.022, this law states:

The State Board of Education by rule shall create and implement a statewide assessment program that is knowledge and skills-based to ensure school accountability for student achievement that achieves the goals provided under Section 4.002. (Education Code, 2017)

Of PEIMS and the Texas public school accountability system, State Senator Teel Bivins stated: "Under the Texas accountability system, each school district is held accountable for the test scores of all student groups, including each minority group and economically disadvantaged students" (Murdock et al., 2003, p. xxxvi).

Unsurprisingly, the various types of statistical data provided by the Texas PEIMS report foreshadowed what later became required by the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB, 2001) as prior to becoming president, George W. Bush was the 46th governor of Texas from 1995 to 2000 (Bush, 2010). The drive for accountability in public education, as evidenced in the No Child Left Behind Act, marked a "sweeping reform" and set a precedent in federal educational legislation because of its requirement that states disaggregate student data in terms of ethnicity, race, and gender so that the academic achievement of these groups could be more easily compared and monitored.

Of Bush's four main educational reform objectives in the NCLB, his first objective, Accountability for Results, requires that:

Statewide reports will include performance data disaggregated according to race, gender, and other criteria to demonstrate not only how well students are achieving overall but also progress in closing the achievement gap between disadvantaged students and other groups of students. (U.S. Department of Education, 2003)

From a civil rights and social justice perspective, the NCLB's requirement that states disaggregate data according to race and ethnicity did uncover weaknesses and gaps in some states' efforts to address educational inequality (Sunderman & Kim, 2004). While it is fair to say that there has been some national progress made towards closing achievement gaps and achieving educational equity in American public education, there remains much more to be done in closing achievement gaps, particularly those of economically disadvantaged, minority, and underrepresented youth (O'Day & Smith, 2016).

In the 2009-2010 school year, 4,847,844 students were enrolled in the Texas public school system. In 2019-2020, this number increased to 5,493,940 students. From 2009-2010, Texas's total public-school enrollment increased to 646,096 students, or 13.3 percent, over these ten years. Not only was there an increase in the total student enrollment in Texas public schools in the 2019-2020 school year, but Texas public schools also saw an increase in minority student enrollment (African American, Asian, Hispanic, and multiethnic students) and a decrease in majority students. Hispanic students represented the largest percentage of the increase in 2019-2020 (52.8 percent), followed by White students (27 percent), African American students (12.6 percent), Asian students (4.6 percent), and multiracial students (2.5 percent) (Du et al., 2020). In

2019-2020, the percentage of these students identified as economically disadvantaged increased to 60.2 percent from the 2009-2010 school year of 58.9 percent.

Compared to national statistics, Texas's public-school enrollment saw an increase of 15.5 percent from 2007-2017, more than five times the enrollment increase in the United States during this period. Texas ranked as the third-highest state in student enrollment change in the nation, with North Dakota in first place (17.7 percent), followed by Utah (16 percent).

Changing Texas

Changing Texas: Implications of Addressing or Ignoring the Texas Challenge (Murdock et al., 2014) paints a bleak picture of the economic future of Texas by 2050. With affordable housing, plentiful natural resources, and a robust economy, Texas has been an attractive destination and locale for immigrants, businesses, and native-born Texans (Leonhardt, 2021; Orrenius et al., 2015). However, former Texas demographer Stephen Murdock and his research team discovered that Texas is undergoing profound demographic changes. The population groups driving these changes include White, Hispanic, non-Hispanic Black, and non-Hispanic Asians (Murdock et al., 2014).

Based on the 2010 Census and continuing demographic trends, Murdock et al. predict that by 2050, the population in Texas will change from the present-day majority White, minority Hispanic population to a majority Hispanic, minority White population. In addition, for the next two decades increasing numbers of White, non-Hispanic Texans born during the Baby Boom (c. 1946-1964) post World War II years will reach retirement age and exit the workforce. As a result, the future Texas economy will be largely dependent on the wage-earning capacity of the newly emerging Hispanic majority (Demographic Trends, 2021; Murdock et al., 2014; O'Rourke, 2014).

Murdock et al. provide several explanations for why Texas's demographic makeup is undergoing this profound demographic change based on the 2010 Census, statistical trends in Texas indicated from previous years, and data obtained from the U.S. Census Bureau.

First, Texas's non-Hispanic White population is decreasing because of a natural decrease through deaths and a lack of natural increase through births. The demographic terms natural decrease and natural increase suggest a balance and interplay between these two factors, influencing large-scale population loss or gain over time. For example, the median age of a Texas non-Hispanic White woman is 42 and, therefore, well en route to leaving her fertile, child-bearing years. In contrast, the median age of a Hispanic woman is 28, which provides her with more than a decade of continued fertility and child-bearing years. Because of this White and Hispanic fertility differential and natural decrease of the non-Hispanic White population by falling birth rates, Murdock predicts that by 2050, non-Hispanic Whites will have provided no more than 2% of Texas's total population growth while Hispanics will have provided more than 70% of Texas's total population growth (Murdock et al., 2014; Peña et al., 2023).

Second, the non-Hispanic White population is "graying" or getting older. Based on the 2010 Census estimates, by 2030 much the non-Hispanic White baby boom generation will reach the retirement age of 65 (Frey, 2018; Murdock et al., 2014). In today's Texas economy, these non-Hispanic Whites make up almost two-thirds of all employees who possess bachelor's degrees or higher and work in managerial, higher-paying types of professional jobs.

Third, because Hispanics and minorities generally have lesser educational attainment levels, they often find themselves employed in lower-paying service types of jobs. Consequently, as non-Hispanic Whites age out of the labor market and retire, a labor vacuum will be created because fewer Hispanics have college degrees or postsecondary credentials to take their place.

As a result, the median income and quality of life for all Texans will decline. Murdock states: "In the absence of change, the Texas labor force as a whole will be less well-educated, work in lower-status occupations, and have lower incomes in 2050 than in 2010" (Murdock et al., 2014, p. 88).

Murdock predicts that by 2050, Hispanic families will outnumber non-Hispanic White families in Texas by two to one. However, "in the absence of change" of the type provided by increased postsecondary training and credentials with increased earning power, tomorrow's Hispanics will not possess the income-earning capacity as today's more educated, non-Hispanic White workers (Baum et al., 2013; Murdock et al., 2014; U.S. Bureau of Labor and Statistics, 2019).

As a state with the tenth largest economy in the world and second only to California in terms of both its physical size and gross domestic product, the future economic vitality and prosperity of Texas will largely be dependent upon the wage-earning power of its upcoming majority Hispanic and minority population (Orrenius et al., 2015; Perry, 2016).

Hispanic College Enrollment

The good news is that in the past two decades, Hispanic enrollment and college completion have improved because more Hispanics have college degrees and higher earning power than in the past. Hispanics have also made significant gains in K-12 educational achievement and high school graduation, allowing more to be successful in higher education (Carnevale, 2019; Krogstad, 2016).

However, compared to other racial groups, Hispanics still lag in college enrollment. In the total college enrollment in 2000, 35 % of all youths aged 18 to 24 enrolled in college, with this rate increasing to 41 % by 2018. Of this total enrollment, Asians took the lead with the

highest percent enrollment (59 %), followed by Whites (42 %), Blacks (37 %), and then followed by Hispanics (36 %) (Hussar et al., 2020). Concerning degree attainment, Hispanics have outpaced all other racial groups regarding longitudinal improvement in the last two decades. Bachelor's degree attainment for Hispanic adults aged 25 or older rose by more than 30% nationwide from 2005-2019 (McElrath & Martin, 2021).

While Hispanics aged 25 years and older did see the greatest overall increase as a group for bachelor's degree attainment during 2005-2019, other groups still led in terms of total bachelor's degrees attained during this same period. For example, in the most recent 2015-2019 cohort, Asians received the most bachelor's degrees at 54.3 %, followed by White alone, non-Hispanics at 35.8%, then Blacks at 21.6%, followed last by Hispanics at 16.4 % (McElrath & Martin, 2021). In Texas, bachelor's degree attainment for all racial groups overall during this period was lower than the national average. Bachelor's degree attainment for White alone, non-Hispanic was (26%), followed by Black (15%), and finally Hispanic (10%) (Carnevale & Fasules, 2017).

Frequently in *Changing Texas: Implications of Addressing or Ignoring the Texas Challenge* (2014), Murdock uses the phrase "in the absence of change" not so much, in my opinion, as a fatalistic plaint but to present the reader with a stopping point for considering what the economic future of Texas might look like based on the decisions that Texans make today.

If Texans address the educational needs of its increasingly diverse population, they are more likely to experience increased material wealth while contributing to Texas's economic vitality. If Texans ignore its diverse population and unique educational needs, they are more likely to experience scarcity of material wealth and dependency on state resources. Based on Murdock's predictions, the future economy of Texas will either progress or regress depending on

the educational attainment of its citizens, particularly its Hispanic and other minority populations (2014).

It is imperative that Texas' stakeholders accept the challenge that Murdock proposes and continue in their efforts to increase the educational attainment and wage-earning capacity of all its citizens, but especially its Hispanics and other minorities (Murdock et al., 2014).

Research Problem

Early College High Schools (ECHSs) in Texas represent a promising initiative to bridge the educational divide between high school and higher education, especially for underserved populations. There are two main types of ECHSs: the larger School-within-a-school model and the Standalone model. The School-within-a-school model consists of a comprehensive high school for the majority of students with a smaller early college high school cohort enrolled within. The Standalone ECHS is a school intended solely for early college high school students with a smaller enrollment of no more than approximately four hundred students, equally divided into 9th, 10th, 11th, and 12th grades. Notably, Standalone ECHSs have generally outperformed School-within-a-school ECHSs in academic achievement, as indicated by annual school report card grades.

The subject of this study is a high-achieving early college high school near the Texas-Mexico border which has been given the pseudonym Excelencia Early College High School (EECHS). The Excelencia Early College High School, a Standalone ECHS, consistently stands out even among its high-performing peers. Year after year, EECHS scores 98 on its school report card, exemplifying high academic achievement.

While the performance disparity between Standalone and School-within-a-school ECHSs is noted, EECHS's consistent top-tier achievement offers a unique case for study. What sets

EECHS apart, even among other Standalone ECHSs? And most importantly, what practices, strategies, and other factors can be identified at EECHS that contribute to its sustained academic excellence?

This research study examines how the students and faculty at EECHS consistently achieve high academic ratings by uncovering the factors and strategies that contribute to their success. Investigating this exemplary early college high school might reveal insights and best practices that can benefit other Standalone ECHSs and School-within-a-school ECHSs.

Purpose of the Study

This research study explores student and faculty lived experiences as members of the Excelencia Early College High School (EECHS), a high-achieving early college high school. What factors might contribute to their success in this early college high school? What motivates students to consistently achieve high academic levels, persist in completing their high school diplomas and associate's degrees, and obtain 42 core university credits? What motivates teachers and faculty to challenge their students with the expectations and rigor of college classes? This study's findings may provide educational leaders, parents, and stakeholders with insights into how high-achieving early college high schools achieve academic excellence despite numerous challenges.

Research Questions

The research questions for this study are:

RQ1: What are the lived experiences of the students, teachers, and faculty in this high-achieving early college high school?

RQ2: What motivates these high-achieving students to overcome obstacles and persist to degree completion?

RQ3: What factors or elements play a part in contributing to these students' success?

RQ4: What motivates these high-achieving early college high school teachers and faculty to challenge their students with the expectations and rigor required of college-level work?

Conceptual Frameworks

Three conceptual frameworks were discovered inductively during the process of conducting this study. These frameworks were not conceived a priori, but instead were a result of personal analysis and reflection as I considered the possible meanings of student and faculty interview comments. The first interpretive lens which I used was *Relational Capacity*, which is a quality advocated in EECHS's college preparatory program, AVID. The second interpretive lens which I used was Maslow's *Hierarchy of Human Needs*. The third interpretive lens which I used was Nel Noddings's *Ethics of Care*.

A central phenomenon present in AVID's Relational Capacity, Maslow's Hierarchy of Human Needs, and Noddings's Ethics of Care was *care*, or *caring*. EECHS student and teacher actions, behaviors, and words are all reflective of those who care. All three of these interpretive lenses are discussed and explored in more detail in Chapter II Developmental and Conceptual Frameworks.

Methodology

This qualitative study utilized student focus-group and personal interviews, teacher and faculty personal interviews, administrator interviews, campus observations, and examination of documents and other media to discover possible explanations for EECHS's notable and consistently high academic achievements as a Standalone ECHS as measured by the Texas Education Agency (TEA). While there are numerous other high-achieving Standalone early

college high schools throughout Texas, EECHS has earned a special distinction because of its consistently high academic achievement. Its yearly school report card rating of 98 places it in the upper echelon of early college high schools in Texas regarding college readiness, postsecondary degree attainment, and graduation rate for its students.

This study is organized into three parts including *Part One: Students*, *Part Two: Faculty*, and *Part Three: Documents and Other Media Review*. In *Part One: Students*, seven focus-groups with five students in each group participated in a ninety-minute focus-group, which then met the following week for a one-hour follow-up meeting. Some students volunteered to participate in a personal, one-hour interview which was conducted during school hours on campus or after school using the Zoom conferencing technology. Student personal interviews were used to corroborate and triangulate focus-group interview comments and are not presented in their entirety in this study. All students completed their participation by submitting an online student data questionnaire.

In *Part Two: Faculty*, during focus-group interviews, students recommended the names of teachers and faculty who they felt had been influential and contributed to their success at EECHS. These teachers and faculty were contacted and participated in a one-hour personal interview and a thirty-minute follow-up meeting the following week. Teachers and faculty completed their participation by submitting an online faculty data questionnaire.

In *Part Three: Documents and Other Media Review*, I examined EECHS's yearbooks from its beginning in 2008 to the present day, completed observations on the EECHS campus of school and club announcements, viewed and took notes on student pictures displayed throughout the school, observed and recorded various documents and student artifacts displayed within the AVID, English, and Mathematics classrooms of teachers interviewed at EECHS, examined the

presentation and purpose of the school's website, and examined the spring 2022 and 2023 EECHS Commencement Programs.

Significance of the Study

The high-achieving early college high school is significant for numerous reasons. From an equity, social justice, and federal initiative perspective, the high-achieving ECHS is significant because it more closely fulfills the long-standing original mission of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) of 1965. ESEA's Title I was specifically targeted at equalizing and improving the educational opportunities for economically disadvantaged students and students of color (Jennings, 2015; Osborne, 1965). This reflects the same target population of the ECHS, which includes students of lower socioeconomic status, Hispanic students or students of color who are underrepresented and underserved in higher education, and first-generation college students (Webb & Gerwin, 2014).

From a more recent federal perspective, the ESSA (2015) specifically mentions the importance of the early college high school in improving high school graduation rates and increasing college readiness and postsecondary degree attainment. What is remarkable about the ESSA is that for the very first time in the history of federal legislation, it sets a precedent by providing federal funding to encourage public education and higher education sectors to work cooperatively to increase college readiness and postsecondary outcomes (ESSA, 2015; Loss & McGuinn, 2016; Malin et al., 2017).

From a state fiscal perspective, the high-achieving ECHS is significant because successful ECHS graduates are more likely to complete their postsecondary education and graduate with a college degree. Their college degree increases their earning and spending capacity and improves their quality of life, enabling them to purchase more goods and services,

thereby increasing state revenues. Student postsecondary educational attainment is thus related to individual economic mobility and state fiscal health (Carnevale et al., 2018).

The high-achieving ECHS is also significant because, from a curriculum standpoint, it more closely realizes the original intention of the immediate predecessor of the ECHS, the Middle College High School. The original intention of the Middle College High School was: "...to design a school to reduce the dropout rate in urban high schools, to prepare students more effectively for work or college, and to attract more students to higher education" (Lieberman, 1985, p. 48). Of relevance is that the Middle College High School is the brainchild of developmental psychologist Dr. Janet Lieberman, and importantly, that her concept of the Middle College High School served as the blueprint and exemplar for the eventual launch of the Early College High School Initiative in 2002 (Edmunds et al., 2022; Lieberman, 1973; MCNC, 2021; Wechsler, 2001).

The high-achieving ECHS is also significant because its success shows what can be accomplished when state agencies such as the Texas legislature, Texas Education Agency, and the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board coordinate their efforts to improve the higher educational outcomes of Texas students (THECB, 2023). Principals, administrators, public school teachers, and faculties of higher education institutions benefit when ECHS students are successful because of the satisfaction of knowing that their efforts in education are worthwhile in improving the educational achievement of Texas citizens.

Finally, this study is significant because its results may provide educational leaders and stakeholders with broad insights into particular elements that motivate students and teachers to pursue and achieve high academic achievement in an early college high school.

While a case study typically cannot be generalized to a larger setting, it may instead serve as a guide or model illustrating how one school and one group of students consistently overcome numerous obstacles to enjoy the advantages of graduating high school while also obtaining a two-year associate's degree and 42 core university credits.

Researcher Positionality

Holmes describes positionality as a process where the researcher benefits by reflecting and identifying their past experiences in the social world, their philosophical beliefs about qualitative research such as the nature of reality (ontology), how knowledge is best obtained (epistemology), and their personal values (axiology) (Holmes, 2020; Yilmaz, 2013). Below, I reflect on certain aspects of my positionality.

I am a white, middle-aged male who has been a music educator for thirty years. I grew up in a musical household and enjoyed meeting people of all different races and nationalities during my parents' music rehearsals and get-togethers with other musicians and artists. I earned a music scholarship and graduated with a bachelor's in music from a small liberal arts college in Oregon. After completing a master's degree in music in 1994, I accepted an offer to be a music director in a public high school in the Rio Grande Valley.

At this high school, I taught boys and girls how to sing and play traditional and contemporary Mexican music using the voice, guitar, mandolin, and other instruments. I also taught dual-enrollment music classes in five of this district's seven early college high schools. My experiences as a dual-enrollment music teacher largely piqued my curiosity about conducting a study on the early college high school.

I believe in the opportunities that higher education can provide. I have seen many of my students continue on to college and receive their postsecondary degrees with encouragement and

accolades from their teachers, families, and friends. Additionally, over the past twenty years as a dual-enrollment instructor, I have seen a gradual change here in the Rio Grande Valley in students' awareness of the importance of college and how it can help provide more certain career advancements and opportunities.

In qualitative research, the researcher is considered to be the primary data collection instrument (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The significance of this assumption is that in qualitative research, the researcher is not and cannot be separate from that which is observed. What this means for me as the research instrument is to acknowledge my previous experiences as a classroom teacher and dual-enrollment instructor while at the same time not allowing these past experiences to predetermine the interpretation of new data obtained in this particular study.

Moustakas calls this awareness but detachment from previous experience the *Epoché*, which he defines as: "Setting aside prejudgments and opening the research interview with an unbiased, receptive presence" (Moustakas, 1994, p. 210). Creswell and Poth describe this same process but apply it not just to the data collected from an interview, but from all the avenues where data might be collected. In addition, rather than using the term *Epoché*, they instead call this reflexive act on the part of the researcher "bracketing" (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Both Moustakas and Creswell and Poth are implying that the researcher should be centered on capturing and describing the participants' unique story and experiences, rather than letting their own opinions influence the data.

Another aspect of my positionality relates to my exposure to a different culture over a long period. Almost all my friends and acquaintances are Hispanic teachers, students, and administrators in the South Texas border town where I reside. Because of their influence, I felt

motivated to conduct this study, hoping that it might benefit the students, families, and community of Riverbend, Texas.

Definition of Terms

CCRSM. CCRSM stands for College and Career Readiness School Models. Texas has three types of early college high school models, including the early college high school (ECHS), the Texas Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics ECHS (T-STEM), and the Pathways in Technology ECHS (P-TECH).

Dual Enrollment. Dual Enrollment (DE) is a high school class that receives both secondary and postsecondary credit through a partnership agreement between a public secondary school and an institute of higher education (IHE).

ECHS. The early college high school (ECHS) is a public high school that partners with an institute of higher education (IHE) to provide students typically underrepresented in higher education, such as lower-income, first-generation, at-risk, and students of color, the opportunity to obtain as many as 60 college credits and earn an associate's degree while in high school.

EECHS. EECHS stands for Excelencia Early College High School, the pseudonym used to refer to the high-achieving early college high school which is the subject of this study.

PEIMS. PEIMS stands for Public Education Information Management System. PEIMS is a complex and complete database system established by the Texas Education Agency (TEA) to provide a standardized way of reporting information about public education in Texas. PEIMS stores and manages all data requested and received by the Texas Education Agency about public education, including student demographic and academic performance, personnel, financial, and organizational information.

P-TECH. P-TECH stands for Pathway in Technology Early College High School. P-TECH schools are innovative public schools that allow students to receive both a high school diploma and an associate's degree, or level one or two certificates, in a science, technology, engineering, or mathematics (STEM) field within six years. These schools represent collaborations between public school districts, institutes of higher education, and industry partners.

Riverbend. Riverbend is the pseudonym given to refer to the city in which this study takes place.

TCC. TCC stands for Texas Community College, the pseudonym used to refer to one of the institutes of higher education that partners with EECHS and confers the two-year Associate's Degree in General Studies to its students.

TEA. TEA stands for the Texas Education Agency, the state agency responsible for overseeing primary and secondary public education in Texas. Located in Austin, TEA is at the helm of public education by guiding its direction, ensuring adherence to state standards, and working towards continuously improving educational outcomes for all students in Texas.

THECB. THECB stands for the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board and is the agency responsible for overseeing and coordinating the state's higher education system. Its purpose is to ensure that public colleges and universities in Texas are efficient and effective in meeting the state's higher education needs.

T-STEM. T-STEM stands for Texas Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics. T-STEM is an initiative that focuses on improving the quality and outcomes of teaching and learning in these subject areas to better prepare students for postsecondary

education and careers in STEM fields. The TEA and the THECB have been instrumental in promoting and supporting the T-STEM initiative.

TVU. TVU stands for Texas Valley University, the pseudonym for the four-year institute of higher education that partners with EECHS and provides its students with as many as 42 core university credits.

Limitations of the Study

1. The phenomena in this case study pertain solely to a single high-achieving early college high school as viewed from the perspective of a single researcher. As a result, the findings may not generalize to the larger populations of early college high schools.
2. The focus-group interviews of 12th-grade early college high school students may not be reflective of other 12th-grade early college high school students in this district or other school districts in the United States.
3. The personal interviews of teachers, faculty, and administrators in this early college high school may not reflect the majority of these same types of personnel in this district or other school districts in the United States.
4. The researcher is employed as a teacher in the school district where this study occurred.

Delimitations of the Study

1. This study was limited to the time scheduled in advance for student focus-group interviews, teacher interviews, faculty interviews, administrator interviews, campus observations, and data collection.
2. This study was limited to one high-achieving early college high school along the

Texas-Mexico border that has consistently shown high academic achievement since its first graduating class in 2012 to the present day as measured by the Texas Education Agency Accountability Rating System.

3. This particular high-achieving early college high school was chosen because of its consistently high academic achievement despite its students' low socioeconomic status, minoritized student population, and first-generation status.

Assumptions

1. The researcher was impartial in data collection and data analysis.
2. The interpretation of the data reflected the purposes of this case study.
3. Student focus-group participants, teacher, and faculty interview participants, and administrators shared information with this researcher truthfully and willingly.

Organization of the Study

This descriptive case study explored student and faculty lived experiences as members of the Excelencia Early College High School (EECHS), a high-achieving early college high school, to determine what factors might contribute to their high academic achievement.

This dissertation is composed of five chapters. Chapter I includes the study's background, the research problem, the purpose of this study, the research questions, the conceptual frameworks, the methodology, the significance of this study, researcher positionality, the definition of terms, limitations of the study, delimitations of the study, and assumptions.

Chapter II consists of the historical background and context of this study and includes the emergence of the American comprehensive high school, the small school reform movement, earlier attempts at high school and college integration, the early college high school, Texas and

the early college high school, Texas Accountability Systems, the AVID college readiness program, and Developmental and Conceptual Frameworks.

Chapter III describes the research design and methodology used in this study, including research design rationale, case study rationale, site selection, participant selection, data collection, data analysis procedures, trustworthiness, limitations of the study, delimitations of the study, assumptions, and summary.

Chapter IV includes the presentation of the data in three distinct parts. *Part One: Students* presents students' responses from the student data questionnaire and focus-group interviews. *Part Two: Faculty* presents faculty responses from the faculty data questionnaire, followed by presentations of Counselor Support, the AVID elective, AVID contextual teacher interviews, and faculty interviews. *Part Three: Documents and Other Media Review* presents an examination of EECHS yearbooks, Blue Ribbon School Award, student pictures and artifacts, the school website, and Spring 2022 and 2023 Commencement programs.

Chapter V presents an analysis and discussion of data from Part One: Students, Part Two: Faculty, and Part Three: Documents and Other Media Review. Also presented are Recommendations for Practitioners, Implications for Further Research, a Conclusion that includes a recapitulation of the study, and key factors which contribute to Excelencia Early College High School's academic achievement.

CHAPTER II
HISTORICAL BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

Introduction

This chapter provides a historical background and context of the early college high school (ECHS) and its comparatively recent emergence as a promising secondary school reform movement. Here I discuss the comprehensive high school, the small school movement, earlier attempts at integrating high school and college, Texas and the early college high school, the Texas A-F Accountability System, the AVID college readiness program, and Developmental and Conceptual Frameworks.

The Comprehensive High School

Following the end of WWII in 1945, Americans welcomed the triumphant return of more than 15 million fathers, brothers, and sons in a largely all-male military (Patterson, 1996). Overseas, these soldiers anxiously looked forward to returning to America and rejoining civilian life. However, at issue was the impact and potential economic turmoil that this many servicemen would have on the American economy by their sudden reappearance. Hoping to avoid the difficulties of mass unemployment experienced by American servicemen following their return to civilian life at the end of WWI, President Franklin D. Roosevelt signed the Servicemen's Readjustment Act on June 22, 1944. Also known as the G.I. Bill, the act offered returning veterans tuition for college or vocational programs, guarantees on loans for home purchases, and

a year of "52-20" or unemployment pay after their return paid at the rate of twenty dollars a week for 52 weeks (Patterson, 1996).

The G.I. Bill was a tremendous boost to higher education, although there were growing pains for students and faculty. According to the 1940 census, 74.8 million Americans were 25 or older. Of that number, only one-third, or approximately 25 million students, had more than an eighth-grade education then, and only twenty-five percent had graduated from high school (Polenberg, 1980). For faculty, classroom space was cramped, and the sudden influx of new students swamped college campuses and required broadening the curriculum.

Approximately 497,000 Americans received college degrees in 1950 compared to 216,500 in 1940. While the faculty at many colleges and universities pre-WWII were used to a middle-class or upper-middle-class student body, returning students had a variety of educational needs, including the traditional liberal arts degree and more practical training in career-oriented classes (Polenberg, 1980). Polenberg makes a case that the G.I. Bill is "the most significant development in the modern history of American education" (1980, p. 69). While this is certainly true in a general sense, evidence suggests that the benefits of higher education were not equally distributed to all.

Although the G.I. Bill was progressive and racially neutral, much of the country still operated under Jim Crow principles with covert as well as blatant evidence of segregation (Luders-Manuel, 2017). Discrimination was practiced *de facto* with White American servicemen receiving preferential treatment while Blacks, Hispanics, and others of color were directed towards vocational or industrial training (Herbold, 1994; Humes, 2006). Evidence supports that much of the racially neutral *New Deal* legislation of the 1930s and 1940s was subverted through

entrenched political mechanisms that discriminated against Blacks, Hispanics, and others of color (Blakemore, 2017; Katznelson, 2006).

With an economy that was booming and supercharged from the wartime victory, industry in the 1950s began once again manufacturing cars rather than airplanes for an American public that was ravenous and well-resourced after wartime rationing and saving. The consumer generation was born, and the American public flocked to car dealerships to buy new cars using cash or the newly invented credit card (Guttek, 2012; Kennedy & Cohen, 2015).

During this post-World War II period of optimism and prosperity, the American comprehensive high school came into existence. While not new, the term comprehensive high school was given renewed meaning and vigor by James Bryant Conant, a scholar and distinguished scientist who worked on the Manhattan Project and was the president of Harvard College from 1933-1953 (Guttek, 2012; Hershberg, 2018).

Much interested in American high schools and education in general, Conant was funded in 1957 by the Carnegie Corporation to conduct a major study of American high schools. From 1957 to 1958, Conant and his research team researched over 100 high school campuses in 18 states, interviewed educators, evaluated educational programs, and obtained data from educational surveys. Educators and administrators were asked numerous questions about their high school curriculums, physical plant set-ups, and courses of study available for students (Angus & Mirel, 1999). These results were consolidated and constituted what was to be informally called "The Conant Report," which was then presented in the American media in publications such as U.S. News and World Report, Time, Newsweek, Life, and Look (Preskill, 1984). The widespread coverage of Conant's Report led to almost universal adoption of the comprehensive American high school by the end of the 1950's.

Formerly the president of Harvard University, certain aspects of Conant's innovations were to be carried forward in implementing the comprehensive high school. At Harvard, he expanded the institution's mission to attract an academically talented and striving but more economically diverse student body based on meritocracy. The composition of the Harvard student body was no longer confined to the privileged sons of the New England aristocracy but was expanded to include middle-class students and those from more modest economic means. He expanded the curriculum by providing electives to give students more study choices. While admittance of those of Jewish or Catholic religious beliefs was allowed, Blacks, Hispanics, and other minorities were noticeably absent from Harvard's undergraduate enrollment (Hershberg, 2018). Previously limited to men only, under Conant's direction, Harvard became coeducational in 1946.

Conant wanted to avoid splintering the high school into separate academic and vocational schools, as was common in the European educational model. Conant's comprehensive high school "tracked" or grouped students by their perceived abilities, often resulting in Blacks, Hispanics, and other minorities taking vocational classes, manual trades, and other non-academic course offerings with which they could gain employment immediately following high school graduation (Angus & Mirel, 1999).

Conant's *The American High School Today* (1959) proposed a core curriculum for all students, with options for college preparatory studies available for some students of higher ability and vocational classes available for other students of lesser academic abilities. Conant's comprehensive high school curriculum was based on his assumption that only 10% of students could meet the academic demands of higher education. For Conant, 90% of the students enrolling in the comprehensive high school would take vocational courses and enter the blue-

collar world of work upon high school graduation. These students were almost always Blacks, Hispanics, and other minorities. The view that college was for the few and those of fair complexion was prevalent then, and Conant was one of many who held this particular viewpoint (Preskill, 1984).

Small School Reform Movement

The critical 1983 report *A Nation at Risk*, with its scathing description of large, unwieldy comprehensive high schools as "shopping malls," served further to focus Americans' dissatisfaction with the ineffectiveness of the comprehensive high school (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983). As a remedy to the dysfunctions of tracking and racism inherent in the comprehensive high school, the small schools movement received more impetus (Hess, 2010). Some of the goals of the small school movement were to "...increase student participation, reduce dropout rates, enhance academic achievement, and enhance teacher efficiency" (Raywid, 1995, p. 1).

By offering more personalized instruction in smaller settings and making instruction more relevant to American adolescents of all ethnicities, it was hoped that the small school model would transform the educational experience for all students while still retaining the resources of scale that the larger high school model had provided (Toch, 2003). Known as the doyen and founder of the small schools reform movement, Deborah Meier stated: "The question we face today is how to determine the value of small schools in redressing some of the negative consequences associated with large schools and districts without sacrificing the benefits that came along with them" (Meier, 2006, p. 657).

Earlier Attempts at High School and College Integration

Today's early college high school has largely emerged due to the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation's initial funding of the early college high school initiative (ECHSI) in 2002.

However, the contemporary ECHS is not the first attempt to integrate the last years of high school with the first years of college (Kisker, 2006).

The Junior College

The need for increased education beyond high school resulted in the creation of the Junior College, which became the first attempt to create a link or "rung" in the American educational ladder connecting secondary to postsecondary education. The emergence of the Junior College in the early decades of the twentieth century fulfilled a "local" need by providing community service by offering higher education without the cost and inconvenience of students moving far away from their parents' homes (Pedersen, 2000).

The term *Junior College* is mentioned in William Rainey Harper's organizational scheme of the newly created University of Chicago in 1892. That first year, Harper divided the University's undergraduate program into two segments, with the first two years designated as the *Academic College* and the remaining two years as the University College. These divisions were then renamed in 1896 as the "junior college" and the "senior college" (Medsker, 1960). Welcoming its first students in the fall of 1923, Hillsboro Junior College in Hillsboro, Texas, is the first four-year junior college in the nation to integrate the last two years of high school with the first two years of college (Winter, 1964). Established in 1923 as part of the Hillsboro public school system, Hillsboro Junior College peaked in 1939-1940 with a total enrollment of 410 students (Hillsboro Junior College, 1967).

The 6-4-4 Plan

Pasadena Junior College in 1928 also successfully combined grades 11 through 14 (Wechsler, 2001). Earlier twentieth-century scholars such as Frederick Eby (1928), George F. Zook (1922), and Leonard Koos (1946) supported the 6-4-4 plan, which placed grades 1 through 6 in elementary, grades 7 through 10 in junior high school, and grades 11 through 14 in a junior college high school such as the Pasadena Junior College (Cohen et al., 2013; Pedersen, 2000). An important advocate of the 6-4-4 plan, Koos wrote that the 6-4-4 plan "...is at once the most effective and the most economical means of bringing the full advantage of the junior high school and the junior college to the community" (Koos, 1946).

The city of Pasadena, California, had undergone an enrollment increase following the end of World War I. City officials, public schools, and college professors and administrators all proposed that combining the last two years of high school with the first two years of community college would be a practical and efficient way of addressing and serving the returning influx of students (Dodge, 2002). While the Pasadena public school board had established Pasadena Junior College on the campus of Pasadena High School in 1924, questions of curriculum articulation and the relationship between the public school and the community college remained unanswered.

After much debate, city officials, school administrators, the superintendent of Pasadena schools, Berkeley professors Frank Hart and L. H. Peterson, and the Dean of Stanford's School of Education, Ellwood P. Cubberley, adopted the 6-4-4 plan in 1928 and approved the merger (Dodge, 2002). The school board selected John W. Harbeson as principal, and in 1931, he published a few of his observations of the Pasadena Junior College, which included:

1. The freshman and sophomore college years are a logical part of the secondary school system rather than of the standard college or university.

2. Being secondary in character, these years should be closely articulated with the rest of the secondary system.
 3. The most efficient and economical articulation is the union of these years with the eleventh and twelfth grades as a single four-year institution...
 4. The junior college, as the top-most unit of the public school system, must be neither traditional high school nor traditional college, but must develop individuality and character of its own, with methods and policies adapted to the ages with which it deals.
 5. The four-year junior college is an institution of sufficient size and span to be a complete unit in itself. It is not a fractional part of a standard college transplanted from its native habitat into the local community.
 6. The twelfth grade is not a logical stopping place, inasmuch as it falls two years short of the completion of the secondary span.
 7. The assumption of the full responsibility of general or secondary education by the local community will give the university full and untrammelled freedom to concentrate on its proper sphere of specialization, research, and professional training.
- (Harbeson, 1931, pp. 9–10)

Pasadena Junior College continued its educational mission successfully as a four-year junior college employing Koos's innovative 6-4-4 plan from 1928 to 1953 (Winter, 1964).

Bard College at Simon's Rock

As the first school to call itself an early college, Bard College at Simon's Rock was founded in 1966 by Elizabeth Blodgett Hall. Originally called Simon's Rock, the school

underwent several name changes, becoming Bard College at Simon's Rock in 2007, although today it is commonly referred to once again as "Simon's Rock" (Smith, 2006).

Reflective of the dynamic and experimental nature of the 1960s, Blodgett founded Simon's Rock based on the notion that not all young people mature at the same rate and that the traditional high school curriculum was overly repetitive, especially in the last two years of instruction (Yanoshak, 2011). Today, Simon's Rock is a private, tuition-based liberal arts early college targeted at high-achieving high school students who are intellectually, socially, and emotionally ready for college at an earlier age than the norm (Hall, 2021; Magill, 1978, pp. 88–93).

The Middle College High School

The Middle College High School is an innovative "hybrid" high school located on a college campus. It allows students to complete regular high school graduation requirements and obtain college credits in a supportive college environment. Students targeted for Middle College High school typically are at-risk with records of academic failure, from lower socioeconomic levels, and often are minority or students of color underserved in higher education who need assistance completing college-level coursework. Student enrollment is purposefully kept smaller for more frequent student and teacher interaction. It is usually limited to 450 students, with three counselors assigned to each Middle College High school campus (Lieberman, 2004).

The first Middle College High School (MCHS) opened in 1974 on the Fiorello H. LaGuardia Community College Campus in Queens, New York (Wechsler, 2001). Faculty member Janet Lieberman believed in the “power of the site” and that bringing high school students onto the LaGuardia college campus for their classes would positively influence their behavior and give them a vision of their future (Kisker, 2006). LaGuardia's Middle College

enrollment cap was limited to 450 students and had as its two primary goals (i) increasing the college readiness of at-risk high-school students as well as (ii) increasing the graduation rates of these same students, many of whom were lower income, minority and students of color, and first-generation college students (Born, 2006; Carter, 2004; Lieberman, 2004). The background, inception, and creation of the Middle College High School is relevant because many of its structural innovations and philosophical and curricular components continue to influence the design of contemporary early college high schools today (Lieberman, 2004).

The history of LaGuardia Community College and the Middle College High School movement can be traced back to 1971 when Chancellor of City University of New York Timothy Healey expressed his concerns about the high number of dropouts in New York's high schools. Their failure to graduate high school and lack of academic preparation negatively impacted their success and continuing enrollment at LaGuardia Community College (Wechsler, 2001).

Following a conversation that professor of developmental psychology Dr. Janet Lieberman had with Healey about LaGuardia's failing freshmen, she immediately began researching adolescent psychology, considering alternatives to the traditional comprehensive high school, and reading seminal works on education by such scholars as G. Stanley Hall (2015), Leonard Koos (1946), Ralph Tyler (2013), the Four-School Study Committee (Bergquist et al., 1970), and others (Wechsler, 2001).

Following her immersive study of adolescent psychology and innovative teaching approaches at the secondary level, Liebermann met with LaGuardia Community College President Joseph Schenker and other LaGuardia faculty members, and they then jointly created over three years a design for a new type of educational structure, which they called the Middle College. Lieberman and Schenker's Middle College Plan serves as a guide for the contemporary

ECHS initiative begun in 2002 by Bill and Melinda Gates (Edmunds et al., 2022; Lieberman, 1973; MCNC, 2021; Wechsler, 2001).

The Early College High School

In 2002, the early college high school initiative (ECHSI) began with major funding from the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, the Carnegie Corporation of New York, the W.K. Kellogg Foundation, and the Ford Foundation (Berger et al., 2010). In 2002, the Gates Foundation selected and awarded a five-year grant to the Middle College National Consortium (MCNC) to serve as one of the intermediary organizations assisting in developing early college high schools. The MCNC assisted in redesigning ten existing Middle College High Schools into early college high schools (including LaGuardia MCHS) in New York, Michigan, and California (MCNC, 2021).

The ECHSI led directly to the creation of the early college high school. Today's ECHS is a public high school that works in partnership with a local community college or university to provide students with an opportunity to earn an associate's degree and as many 60 college credits at no cost while simultaneously completing their high school diploma (Webb & Gerwin, 2014).

While the ECHS is intended to improve high school graduation rates and college readiness for all students, it specifically aims at students of lower socioeconomic status, first-generation students, and Hispanic students or students of color who are underrepresented and underserved in higher education. The educational purpose and targeted student population of the contemporary ECHS thus differs significantly from the educational purpose and targeted student population of the first early college high school, Bard College at Simon's Rock, as discussed previously (Hall, 2021; Webb & Gerwin, 2014).

ECHS students may complete as many as 60 college credits before graduating high school, thus earning an associate's degree. Upon graduation, some ECHS students may transfer their 2-year associate's degree credits to fulfill part of a 4-year bachelor's degree program in a Texas university of their choice (Hurst & Uribe, 2015). Core principles of early college high schools include:

1. Early college high schools are committed to serving students underrepresented in higher education.
2. Early college high schools are created and sustained by a local education agency, a higher education institution, and the community, all of whom are jointly accountable for student success.
3. Early college high schools and their higher education partners and community jointly develop an integrated academic program so all students earn 1 to 2 years of transferable college credit leading to college completion.
4. Early college high schools engage all students in a comprehensive support system that develops academic and social skills as well as the behaviors and conditions necessary for college completion.
5. Early college high schools and their higher education and community partners work with intermediaries to create conditions and advocate for supportive policies that advance the early college movement. (Berger et al., 2009)

Early college high schools today include some of the features of the Middle College, including:

- (a) a smaller enrollment generally limited to about 400 students;
- (b) a site located on a college campus (although today's ECHSs tend to be about

equally distributed between being located on a public high school campus or being located on a college campus);

(c) planned collaboration between higher education faculty and high school faculty;

(d) adoption of high quality or best teaching practices known as a Common Instructional Framework (CIF);

(e) more intensive guidance for students because of a higher counselor to student ratio (Lieberman, 2004).

A significant challenge that the ECHS faces is a perceptual change involving parents, teachers, and students in their recognition that the high school graduation stage is no longer an arrival but more of a transitional and preparatory step necessary for college.

Carnevale et al. state that in the 1980s, a high school diploma was sufficient for the needs of that era's industrial-based economy. Now, two-thirds of all jobs require workers with at least some college background (Carnevale & Cheah, 2018). The authors also assert that "...the high school economy is gone, and it is not coming back" (Carnevale et al., 2018, p. 3). Other writers state that a 2-year postsecondary certificate is now key to earning a decent living in the 21st century and that jobs "...in the fastest-growing industries will require individuals with some postsecondary education" (Wyatt et al., 2014, p. 3) and that "...workforce projections consistently predict that the lion's share of future jobs will require a postsecondary degree" (Berger et al., 2014, p. 1).

One of the primary goals of the ECHS since its beginning in 2002 has been to increase the access and opportunities for students underrepresented in higher education so that they may obtain a postsecondary credential or college degree (Berger et al., 2014). While what at first might seem a counterintuitive idea, the ECHS holds as a premise that the key to motivating

students underserved in higher education is to provide greater academic challenges and rigor while simultaneously offering these students the support they need in developing their academic skills (Nodine, 2009; Vargas et al., 2017). The students specifically targeted by the ECHS initiative and held to these high expectations include low-income, first-generation college-goers, English language learners, Latinos, blacks, and other minorities (Edmunds et al., 2017; Webb & Gerwin, 2014).

Another important goal of the early college high school is to improve high school graduation rates, with studies showing that ECHS students tend to have higher rates of high school graduation than other students attending traditional, comprehensive high schools. In Webb and Gerwin's study, data show that the average graduation rate for ECHS students is 90%, while the national graduation rate for regular high schools is 78% (Webb & Gerwin, 2014).

However, some studies seem to contradict these findings. In the study *Longitudinal Findings From the Early College High School Initiative Impact Study* by Haxton et al., "Being admitted to an EC [Early College High School] did not have a statistically significant impact on the likelihood of graduating from high school (88.0% for EC students and 86.1% for control students" (Haxton et al., 2016).

Still another important goal stressed by the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board (THECB) is the need for improved college and career readiness. Scholars Venezia and Jaeger state that too many students arrive at college without the academic skills or habits of mind essential for college success (Venezia & Jaeger, 2013). By starting college classes as early as the ninth grade, ECHS students are exposed to the rigor and intensity of college work but are assisted in their studies by a demanding but supportive faculty (Hurst & Uribe, 2015).

While there are several definitions of what the term college readiness means, a practical definition is given by scholar Conley, who writes: "A student who is ready for college and career can qualify for and succeed in entry-level, credit-bearing college courses leading to a baccalaureate or certificate, or career pathway-oriented training without the need for remedial development" (Conley, 2012, p. 1). Indicators of college readiness, according to Conley, are that the student can understand what is expected in a particular college course, can develop strategies for learning the different types of content material presented as part of the course, and can leave the course retaining key concepts and general ideas (Conley, 2010).

An additional benefit of the ECHS is that graduates tend to have higher graduation rates from college. Studies show that ECHS students demonstrate a higher rate of postsecondary success and graduation, with 71% of ECHS students enrolling in college following their high school graduation compared to 54% of low-income students attending a regular high school (Webb & Gerwin, 2014). In a study by Berger et al., 81 % of ECHS students enrolled in college compared to 72% of non-ECHS students (Berger et al., 2014).

An additional advantage of the ECHS is the opportunity for the student to graduate from high school with as much as 60 college credits or an associate's degree. The savings in both time and money are substantial and, in fact, often provide the incentive for many low-income, first-generation college students to enroll in ECHS classes (Webb & Gerwin, 2014). For these first-generation college students, it is no small feat to take a leap into the unknown, uncharted territory of higher education and commit to the time and effort necessary to receive an associate's degree or transferable college credits. By taking advantage of the courses offered at their ECHS, students can potentially break free from the cycle of poverty, take the necessary steps towards

upward mobility, and provide a better living for themselves and their families, as well as avoid college tuition debts (Hawkins, 2018; Hurst & Uribe, 2015).

Texas and the Early College High School

In this section, I discuss Murdock et al's *The Texas Challenge* (1997), the book that first sparked Texas legislators' interest in achieving higher educational attainment for all Texas citizens, and Murdock et al's *The New Texas Challenge* (2003). I then discuss Closing the Gaps (2000), the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board's (THECB) strategic plan to improve higher education in Texas, followed by a summary of Governor Rick Perry's Executive Order RP 53, which emphasizes the need for higher educational attainment for all Texas citizens.

I then present a side-by-side comparison of the THECB's Closing the Gaps and its newest iteration, 60x30TX. I then discuss the importance of public and private partnership support of the ECHS, followed by an examination of Texas legislation relevant to the ECHS, T-STEM, and P-STEM early college high school models. I then discuss the College and Career Readiness Models, the Early College High School Blueprint, Texas and the T-Stem Initiative, and discuss Texas's legislative preparedness for the early college high school initiative in When Preparation and Opportunity Meet. I then continue with a discussion of Texas Accountability Systems since 2002 and then conclude with the Texas A-F Accountability System in use since 2017.

The Texas Challenge and The New Texas Challenge

As discussed previously, in the early 1990s a sociology research group at Texas A&M led by Dr. Steve Murdock began to notice and monitor population trends in Texas. The findings from Murdock's group were first presented as applied research reports to different state agencies and legislators in 1995 and 1996 and then expanded into two books in 1997 and 2003.

In *The Texas Challenge: Population Change and the Future of Texas* published in 1997, the authors raised important questions such as: "What will Texas's future be like? Its population is growing, but how rapidly and where will this growth be most extensive? Will Texas's wealth as a state increase along with its population, or will per capita levels of wealth and income decrease with a resulting lower standard of living and poorer overall Texas economy?" The two main ideas emphasized in *The Texas Challenge* are that Texas's Anglo population is growing older, and its population is declining and that Texas's burgeoning population increase is largely due to the diversity and natural increase of its Hispanic population.

The Texas Challenge (1997) was then followed by Murdock et al.'s 496-page technical report *The Texas Challenge in the Twenty-First Century: Implications of Population Change for the Future of Texas* (2002), which discussed *The Texas Challenge's* population and demographic predictions in relation to the U.S. decennial Census conducted in 2000. Murdock et al.'s lengthy 2002 report continues the earlier discussion but, based on the 2000 census, revises and adds important elements to the ongoing dialogue of Texas population growth and change.

In *The New Texas Challenge* (2003), Murdock et al. continue the discussion begun in *The Texas Challenge*, with a prediction that by 2005, the new minority population will be Anglo and that by 2040, Texas's new majority population will be Hispanic (Murdock et al., 2003, p. 27). Further, as Texans reach retirement age, they will place an increased demand on health and human services. Based on their updated analysis of federal and state census reports, Murdock et al. predict that Texas's future economy and fiscal health will depend, to a large extent, on the educational attainment of its Hispanic citizens.

Then Lieutenant Governor William Hobby, Jr. and Senator Teel Bivens both conceded that *The Texas Challenge* and *The New Texas Challenge* were highly influential and particularly

important in the effect that they had on their views about the future of Texas and the public policies necessary for ensuring a better Texas future. Senator Bivens stated regarding *The New Texas Challenge*:

I know of no work that offers a clearer vision of what is at stake for our state than the book you currently hold in your hands. *The New Texas Challenge* has had a greater impact on me as a legislator than any other scholarly work I have received. In a resounding fashion, it underscores the need for our state to continue building on the progress we have made toward increasing the quality and accessibility of our educational system from prekindergarten through all levels of higher education. (Murdock et al., 2003, p. xxxiv)

Closing the Gaps: Texas's Plan for Coordinating Secondary and Higher Education

In response to Murdock and his team's presentation of their demographic findings in *The Texas Challenge* (1997), Texas legislators, policymakers, the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board (THECB), and the P-16 Council began developing a strategy to address postsecondary degree attainment, which resulted in the creation of a fifteen-year plan in 2000 entitled *Closing the Gaps* which resulted in the coordination of the states' secondary and higher education systems. Texas Commissioner of Higher Education Don Brown stated:

The Texas Challenge is the foundation for Closing the Gaps. Looking back on the process that led to Closing the Gaps, I now realize that all of us began by asking what would be the worst thing that could happen to our state and people that education could prevent. We concluded the worst thing would be for the terrible part of Dr. Murdock's forecast to come about: that Texas would become a less and less well educated state with fewer opportunities for all our people. We next recognized

that to prevent that 'worst thing' from happening, we would have to close the gaps in participation, success, excellence and research by 2015. (Waller and Hase, 2004)

Closing the Gaps was a long-term plan incorporating four main state-wide goals that integrated and coordinated the resources of the State Board of Education and the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board (Collins, 2006; Murdock et al., 2014). Closing the Gaps was adopted by the THECB in October 2000 and then became the state's official 15-year secondary and higher education plan (Closing the Gaps Final, 2016).

One of the first issues Closing the Gaps addressed was the lack of alignment between high school graduation standards and the requirements for entrance into Texas colleges and universities. Too many students were graduating from Texas high schools, enrolling in Texas colleges and universities, and then being required to undergo remedial classes for academic deficiencies. The all-important first step of aligning the curriculum required close coordination of the traditionally separated K-12 and higher education sectors to create an improved articulation between high school and college. Closing the Gaps is displayed in Table 1.

Table 1: Closing the Gaps, 2000-2015

Closing the Gaps, 2000-2015
Goal 1: Closing the Gaps in Participation. By 2015, close the gaps in participation rates to add 630,000 more students.
Goal 2: Closing the Gaps in Success. By 2015, award 210,000 undergraduate degrees, certificates, and other identifiable student successes from high-quality programs.
Goal 3: Closing the Gaps in Excellence. By 2015, substantially increase the number of nationally recognized programs or services at colleges and universities.
Goal 4: Closing the Gaps in Research. By 2015, increase the level of federal science and engineering research and development obligations to Texas institutions to 6.5 percent of obligations to higher education institutions across the nation.

By recommendation of the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board and support by the State Board of Education, the Texas legislature in 2001 authorized that the standards and rigor for the Texas high school diploma be increased. By 2004, a college preparatory curriculum had become the new standard for high school graduation in Texas public schools (Collins et al., 2007). Notably, the first of the four goals in Closing the Gaps (2000) addressed the lack of alignment and articulation between high school graduation requirements and college entrance requirements in the state of Texas. Goal No. 1 states:

GOAL 1: CLOSE THE GAPS IN PARTICIPATION

By 2015, close the gaps in participation rates across Texas to add 500,000 more students.

STRATEGIES FOR THE STATE

I. Make the Recommended High School Program (college-preparatory courses) the standard curriculum in Texas public high schools and make it a minimum requirement for admission to Texas public universities by 2008. (THECB, 2000, p. 1)

Noteworthy is that the Closing the Gaps (2000) requirement that the rigor of high school course requirements in Texas be raised to the standards of a college preparatory program implies an expectation that (a) all students in the state of Texas are capable of completing a demanding high school curriculum that prepares them for college and (b) that all students are expected to continue after high school graduation and begin college classes. The other three goals in Closing the Gaps (2000) included:

Goal No. 2: Close the Gaps in Success. By 2015, increase by 50 percent the number of degrees, certificates, and other identifiable student successes from high-quality programs;

Goal No. 3: Close the Gaps in Excellence. By 2015, substantially increase the number of nationally recognized programs or services at colleges and universities in Texas;

Goal No. 4: Close the Gaps in Research. By 2015, increase the level of federal science and engineering research funding to Texas institutions by 50 percent to \$1.3 billion. (Closing the Gaps, 2000)

To convey Closing the Gaps and its central message of the importance of higher education to Texas citizens, the THECB launched an ambitious public awareness campaign called "Education: Go Get It," funded with more than 5 million dollars in seed money for advertising and other requirements of the campaign (Collins, 2006). The "Education: Go Get It" media campaign emphasized the advantages and benefits that higher education could provide for Texas students and the academic and financial requirements necessary to begin enrolling in two-year colleges and four-year universities in Texas. Finally, the "Education: Go Get It" campaign highlighted and emphasized the importance of the Closing the Gaps higher education plan for Texas citizens as well as Texas's continued economic vigor and health (Collins, 2006).

Executive Order RP 53

The title of Governor Rick Perry's Executive Order 53 issued on December 16, 2005 states: "Relating to the creation of college readiness standards and programs for Texas Public School students" (Perry, 2005, p. 1). Governor Perry writes a lengthy executive order describing the need for Texas high school students to become better prepared for college, obtain a postsecondary degree, provide well for themselves, and sustain the Texas economy.

Governor Perry's complete executive order verbatim can be found in Appendix Q. A summarized and paraphrased version of his order is presented below.

Texas students must become better prepared for college as this will help them earn a diploma, increase their wage-earning capacity, and improve their living standard and the overall economy and quality of life in Texas.

For the future economic prosperity of Texas, high school students must become college and career-ready by the time they graduate high school.

Through a rigorous high school college preparatory program, they will develop the college skills necessary to be successful without the need for remedial classes when they do attend college.

Because our modern economy, as well as the global economy, depends on the benefits and marvels that technology provides, Texas students need strong backgrounds in Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics.

They must receive integrated instruction embracing college readiness in these areas through programs created jointly by the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board and the Texas Education Agency.

Through cooperation and communication, the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board and the Texas Education Agency can promote and encourage Texas students to take advantage of postsecondary education and training made available through STEM academies throughout the state of Texas. For improvement in these areas, student college readiness and academic achievement should be monitored and assessed using a state-wide system of accountability that is easily accessible to secondary and postsecondary stakeholders.

To promote flexibility in assessment, schools may adopt individual class end-of-course semester assessments in Science, Mathematics, and other subjects

rather than the current method of evaluating student achievement using the Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills (TAKS) in the 11th grade.

To help defray test costs for economically disadvantaged students, qualifying students will be provided with the funds necessary for payment of the Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT) and the American College Test (ACT).

Finally, secondary and higher education institutions will provide summer educational opportunities or "bridge" programs for talented and gifted high school students at higher educational institutions in Texas. (Perry, 2005)

Closing the Gaps and 60x30TX Side-by-Side Comparison

The final Closing the Gaps summary progress report released by the THECB in 2016 showed that Texas did close the gaps in most areas for postsecondary attainment, and in some instances, by a wide margin. However, the 2016 summary report also revealed that some of the sub-domains within each of the four main goals fell short of the intended goal and that further progress in these areas was needed (Closing the Gaps Final, 2016). Importantly, buoyed by the progress made in Closing the Gaps, the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board has created a new 15-year plan entitled 60x30TX, which carries on and continues to build upon the successes and achievements experienced in Closing the Gaps (2000).

60x30TX is the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board's new strategic plan, implemented in 2015 and differing significantly from Closing the Gaps implemented in 2000 (60x30TX, 2015). Important changes can be seen in comparing Closing the Gaps and 60x30TX side-by side which is displayed in Table 2. While the first two goals are similar, the third and fourth goals in 60x30TX are much more "student-centered."

For example, in Closing the Gaps, Goal 3 focused on improving the quality of institutes of higher education in Texas, while Goal 3 in 60x30TX is focused on increasing the tangible benefits or marketable skills that a degree or certificate will provide for the student. Also, in Closing the Gaps, Goal 4 is oriented towards improving the quality of the institution by increasing federal science and engineering research funding. In contrast, Goal 4 in 60x30TX is focused on keeping the student's loan debt lower and not exceed a certain debt ceiling related to their first-year salary. Closing the Gaps and 60x30TX side-by-side comparison is displayed in Table 2.

Table 2: Closing the Gaps and 60x30TX side-by-side comparison

Closing the Gaps Plan, 2000-2015	60x30TX Plan, 2015-2030
Goal 1. Closing the Gaps in Participation Goal: By 2015, close the gaps in participation rates to add 630,000 more students.	Goal 1. 60x30 Educated Population: At least 60 percent of Texans ages 25-34 will have a certificate or degree.
Goal 2. Closing the Gaps in Success: By 2015, award 210,000 undergraduate degrees, certificates, and other identifiable student successes from high-quality programs.	Goal 2. Completion: At least 550,000 students in 2030 will complete a certificate, associate, bachelor's or master's from an institution of higher education in Texas.
Goal 3. Closing the Gaps in Excellence: By 2015, substantially increase the number of nationally recognized programs or services at colleges and universities.	Goal 3. Marketable Skills: All graduates from Texas public institutions of higher education will have completed programs with identified marketable skills.
Goal 4. Closing the Gaps in Research: By 2015, increase the level of federal science and engineering research and development obligations to Texas institutions to 6.5 percent of obligations to higher education institutions across the nation.	Goal 4. Student Debt: Undergraduate student loan debt will not exceed 60 percent of first year wages for graduates of Texas public institutions.

The 60x30TX progress report published in 2019 indicates progress in some areas, with other areas still needing improvement. Regarding Goal 1, "By 2030, 60 percent of Texans aged 25-34 will have a certificate or degree," there has been a significant increase in the number of

young Texans acquiring a degree or certificate: an increase from 40.3 percent in 2015 to 43.5 percent by July 2019 (60x30TX Progress, 2019). The 60x30TX progress report notes, "If on average, improvement continues at this rate of almost 1.3 percentage points per year, Texas will reach the target by 2030" (60x30TX Progress, 2019, p. ii).

However, Goal 2, relating to degree or certificate completion, showed that the growth rate for degree completion lagged between 2018 and 2017, with an annual improvement rate of 2.2 percent in 2018 compared to 3.9 percent in 2017. Degree completion rate also slowed for those among the four most underrepresented groups in the 60x30TX plan: Hispanic, African-American, male, and economically disadvantaged students. The 60x30TX progress report notes that "improvement on the completion goal and associated targets for all populations is likely to be needed to reach the 60x30 educated population goal" (60x30TX Progress, 2019, p. ii).

60x30TX Goal 3 or Marketable Skills states, "By 2030, all graduates from Texas public institutions of higher education will have completed programs with identified marketable skills." The authors state that Goal 3, Marketable Skills, has two parts working together. The first part of Goal 3 relates to institutional identification and development of marketable skills in their programs. Although in a spring 2018 survey, 41 percent of institutes of higher education in Texas reported that they had begun identifying marketable skills in their programs, 42 percent of those surveyed either did not reply to the survey or indicated that they had not yet completed the process. Another 17 percent surveyed stated that they had started identifying and developing marketable skills but had not yet completed the process (60x30TX Progress, 2019, p. iii).

The second part of Goal 3, Marketable Skills, has a goal that 80 percent of students are either employed or enrolled in continuing education within one year of degree completion. In 2016-2017, 78.5 percent of Texas students reported being employed or continuing their

education. This statistic is similar to the previous three years and supports the likelihood that achieving the Marketable Skills Goal by 2030 will occur (60x30TX Progress, 2019, p. iii).

Goal 4: Student Debt states, "By 2030, undergraduate student loan debt will not exceed 60 percent of first-year wages for graduates of Texas public institutions" (60x30TX Progress, 2019, p. iii). Goal 4 also stated that no more than one-half of students earning an associate's degree, certificate, or bachelor's degree have any debt upon graduation. This part of Goal 4, Student Debt, has also been met.

In summary, 60x30TX Goal No. 1: The Educated Population Goal seems likely to meet that goal by 2030 if higher education completion rates continue; Goal No. 2: Degree Completion Goal is in danger of not meeting the target goal by 2030 because students are not completing or showing persistence in degree completion. Degree completion was also slower for the four underrepresented population groups of Hispanics, African-Americans, males, and economically disadvantaged groups. Part of the Goal No. 2: Degree Completion strategy is that K-12 and higher education stakeholders continue to increase the number of students who enroll in higher education immediately following high school graduation, as statistics show that delaying higher education enrollment decreases the chances of obtaining a postsecondary degree (60x30TX Progress, 2019, p. ii).

Goal No. 3: Marketable Skills Goal requires that more Texas higher education institutions continue identifying and developing their curriculum concerning marketable skills. However, student employment and continuing education goals will likely meet the 60x30TX goal by 2030. Goal No. 4: Student Debt Goal has been met.

If one were to prioritize and choose only one goal to improve upon in the 60x30TX higher education strategic plan, Goal No. 2 Degree Completion would be the most logical

choice. If students begin a college degree program but fail to persist to degree completion, they have wasted their time and money, and the institution has potentially lost student support for higher education.

Public and Private Partnership Support of the ECHS

In addition to the policy and legislative infrastructure set in place to support the development of the ECHS, numerous public and private partnerships in Texas have participated and played important roles in coordinating and providing funding and support for the ECHS. In 2003, Governor Rick Perry, the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, the Michael and Susan Dell Foundation, the Texas legislature, and the Texas Education Agency launched the Texas High School Project (CFT, 2014).

The Texas High School Project (THSP) was a public-private initiative of the Communities Foundation of Texas, which assists school districts and higher education institutions in designing early college high schools, establishing effective governance structures, and improving classroom instruction and student support with goals of increasing high school graduation and college attendance of underserved students throughout the state of Texas (Educate Texas i3, 2018). Amounting to \$130 million in funds intended for Texas public schools, this public-private initiative intended to support and strengthen existing low-performing schools and to aid in creating new, innovative schools that emphasized academic achievement, rigor, and student support (Gates Foundation, 2003). As a result of the THSP's success and growth and to encompass a broader range of partnerships aimed at school improvement, the THSP was renamed by the Communities Foundation of Texas as *Educate Texas* in 2012 (CFT, 2014).

The nonprofit *Communities Foundation of Texas* (CFT) has played a central role in developing Texas's early college high schools. As a Texas nonprofit agency established in 1953, the CFT performs a dual function by receiving tax-deductible monies from philanthropic donors and granting money to other nonprofit entities or individuals, including student scholarships (CFT, 2014). In 2004, the CFT served as a fiscal intermediary and program coordinator, connecting public education stakeholders with private philanthropic donors in the Texas High School Project (THSP).

Legislation for the ECHS, T-STEM, and P-TECH ECHSs

According to the most recent figures, Texas now hosts over 207 Early College High Schools, 87 T-STEM schools, and 160 P-TECH schools (CCRSM, 2022). A contributing factor to the number of ECHSs in Texas certainly has to do with the state of Texas's visionary and strategic legislative enactments over the past twenty years. The following timeline presents some of the most important ECHS educational legislation dating from 2003.

In 2003, Senate Bill 976 (SB 976) was passed by the 78th Texas legislature authorizing the creation of a "Middle College High School Education Pilot Program" whose purpose was to increase high school graduation rates for at-risk students as well as permit students to earn both a high school degree and an associate's degree simultaneously (SB 976, 2003). Also, in 2003, House Bill 415 (HB 415) was passed, and it built upon Senate Bill 976 by providing both the high school and the institute of higher education with state funding for each student enrolled in a dual credit class (HB 415, 2003). HB 415 thus provided a financial incentive for the public and higher education sectors to work together (Educate Texas i3, 2014).

Another important act passed by the 78th Legislature in 2003 was the Texas Success Initiative or TSI (Texas Education Code 51.3062), a placement test in reading, writing, and

mathematics required of all students who wished to enroll in college classes or institutions of higher learning. Since 2013, the Texas Success Initiative has been revised and is now known as the Texas Success Initiative Assessment (TSIA, 2021).

In 2005, the 79th Texas Legislature (2005) House Bill 1 was passed, which required the P-16 Council to develop a college readiness and success plan called the "Advancement of College Readiness in Curriculum" (College Readiness, 2003). This plan aimed to increase the likelihood of student academic success in college classes and decrease the number of students necessitating remediation at the postsecondary level. Part of this legislation is indicated below because of its relevance to the state of Texas and its widespread adoption of the early college high school:

Texas Education Code Sec. 28.008

Advancement of College Readiness in Curriculum

(a) To ensure that students can perform college-level course work at higher education institutions, the commissioner of education and the commissioner of higher education shall establish vertical teams composed of public school educators and institutions of higher education faculty.

(b) The vertical teams shall:

(1) recommend for approval by the commissioner of education and the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board college readiness standards and expectations that address what students must know and be able to do to succeed in entry-level courses offered at institutions of higher education;

- (2) evaluate whether the high school curriculum requirements under Section 28.002 and other instructional requirements serve to prepare students to successfully perform college-level course work;
- (3) recommend how the public school curriculum requirements can be aligned with college readiness standards and expectations;
- (4) develop instructional strategies for teaching courses to prepare students to successfully perform college-level course work;
- (5) develop or establish minimum standards for curricula, professional development materials, and online support materials in English language arts, mathematics, science, and social studies, designed for students who need additional assistance in preparing to successfully perform college-level course work; and
- (6) periodically review and revise the college readiness standards and expectations developed under Subdivision (1) and recommend revised standards for approval by the commissioner of education and the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board. (College Readiness, 2003)

Importantly, the legislation specifies in part (a) above that "vertical teams composed of public school educators and institutions of higher education faculty" were to work collaboratively in formulating college and career readiness standards (CCRS) and expectations for what students should be able to achieve in entry-level or first-year courses offered in institutions of higher education in Texas.

Two important terms that merit further discussion include the *Vertical Teams* and the *College and Career Readiness Standards (CCRS)*. For educators, being directed to work in

“vertical teams” is unusual and sets a precedent in curriculum alignment because traditionally, public school faculty and higher education faculty have worked in separate "silos" without regard to each other’s curriculum content. This disparate arrangement was arrived at by circumstance back in the nineteenth century when the nation’s first colleges and universities were meant to educate a minority elite, all-male, white, and privileged group of students while the majority of the population was destined for labor or manual toil (Guttek, 2012). Jefferson wrote: “The mass of our citizens may be divided into two classes, the laboring, and the learned. The laboring will need the first grade of education to qualify them for their pursuits and duties: the learned will need it as a foundation for further acquirements” (Jefferson, 2010, p. 2). In Jefferson’s time, it was generally accepted that society would be divided into two classes: those who labored and those who learned. In his day, the great majority of people completed their education by eighth grade, and hence, “college readiness” was not relevant.

The coordination of vertical teams of public school educators working with higher education faculty resulted in the creation of the *College and Career Readiness Standards* (CCRS). The CCRS thus help smooth student transition from secondary to postsecondary education thereby increasing the likelihood of their persistence to degree completion.

The CCRS were developed in content areas including English and Language Arts, Mathematics, Science, and Social Studies and indicated specifically what high school students must know and be able to do in these subjects in order to be successful in most entry-level classes in Texas universities and community colleges. Traditionally, high school graduation standards emphasize mastery of basic skills and content knowledge. In contrast, college courses typically emphasize using content knowledge to evaluate and analyze important issues in a field or college major. Therefore, the vertical teams’ creation of the College and Career Readiness

Standards is quite different from high school graduation standards because they emphasize content knowledge as a means to an end or a tool with which to explore a particular subject in more depth and cognitive complexity (Texas CCRS, 2008).

Also in 2005, Senate Bill 1146 builds upon and revises SB 976 and uses the term "*Early College Education Program*" rather than SB 976's "Middle College High School Education Pilot Program." SB 976 specifies that at-risk students may begin combining high school classes with college classes beginning in the ninth grade; includes further refinements regarding articulation agreements between secondary and postsecondary institutions; provides flexibility in scheduling to meet student needs; adds academic mentoring; and includes a stipulation that the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board P-16 Council shall provide guidance in case of any conflicts that might arise between secondary and postsecondary entities (SB 1146, 2005, pp. 1, 2). Upon passage of SB 1146, the sponsor of the bill, Senator Florence Shapiro, stated:

In 2005, the legislation for early college high schools set Texas apart from other states. This opportunity incentivized students to finish the last two years of high school and the first two years of college in tandem. It was a transformational model then and now. (Educate Texas i3, 2014, p. 8)

While Texas ECHSs are helping at-risk, low-income, and minority students underrepresented in higher education graduate high school as well as receive a college degree, the ECHS model also represents a long sought-after educational goal: the possibility of curriculum alignment between secondary and postsecondary education, an important step towards the realization of the P-16 educational ideal (Van De Water & Rainwater, 2001).

Texas College and Career Readiness School Models

Texas College and Career Readiness School Models (CCRSM) have been developed by important stakeholders in the ECHS movement, including Educate Texas, the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board, and the Texas Education Agency. All three school models of Early College High School (ECHS), Texas Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (T-STEM), and Pathways to Technology (P-TECH) Early College High Schools are open-enrollment for all students and integrate high school and college classes to help historically underserved and at-risk students earn college credentials and degrees as well as develop necessary technical skills for successful placement in the workforce.

The CCRSM network in Texas currently includes 207 early college high schools (ECHS), 87 Texas Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics early college high schools (T-STEM), and 160 Pathways to Technology Early College High Schools (P-TECH) (CCRSM, 2022).

Early College High School Blueprint

An important aspect of the College and Career Readiness School Models is the *Early College High School Blueprint* or formal design plan which contains ECHS components, requirements, specifications, and other elements essential for implementing the ECHS, T-STEM, and P-TECH early college high schools (ECHS Blueprint, 2020). The following include some of the Blueprint's design specific guidelines and benchmarks for the Early College High School Model:

ECHS Blueprint Guidelines

1. Design Elements. All ECHSs must meet all the design elements for each benchmark annually.

2. Outcomes Based Measures (OBM). All ECHSs are required to meet Outcomes-Based Measures (OBMs) on data indicators related to access, attainment, and achievement.
3. Early College High School Designation. OBMs are phased in for the initial opening of a Provisional ECHS as the entering cohort of 9th graders advance toward graduation. OBMs will be used for evaluation and campus designation status for subsequent years.
4. Fidelity of Implementation. TEA provides technical assistance to promote the ECHS with fidelity. Campuses that meet the distinguished OBM criteria for any of the three OBM categories of access, attainment, and achievement will receive distinctions status.
5. Provisional Early College High School. Provisional ECHSs are new ECHSs that demonstrate they can implement all design elements for each benchmark and meet the Provisional Early College OBMs. For public purposes, ECHSs are identified as Early College.
6. Early College High School. Early College designees maintain designation by demonstrating they can implement each design element for each benchmark and meet the Early College OBMs.
7. Outcomes-Based Measures (OBMs): Distinctions. Campuses may receive individual distinctions in Access, Attainment, and Achievement for exemplary service to ECHS students.

ECHS Blueprint Benchmarks

1. Benchmark 1: Target Population. The Early College High School shall serve, or include plans to scale up to serve, students in grades 9 through 12 and shall target and enroll students who are at risk of dropping out of school as defined by statute (Texas Education Code (TEC) §29.908) and the Public Education Information Management system (PEIMS) and who might not otherwise go to college.

2. Benchmark 2: Partnership Agreement. The Early College High School shall have a current, signed memorandum of understanding (MOU) interlocal agreement (ILA) for each school year that defines the partnership and responsibilities between the school district and the institute of higher education.

3. Benchmark 3: P-16 Leadership Initiatives. The school district and institution(s) of higher education (IHE) partners shall develop and maintain a leadership team that meets regularly (e.g., quarterly or monthly) to address issues of design, implementation, ongoing implementation, and sustainability. Membership should include the Early College High School leader and individuals with decision-making authority from the district(s) and IHE(s).

Benchmark 4: Curriculum and Support. The Early College High School shall provide a rigorous course of study that enables a participating student to receive a high school diploma and complete the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board's (THECB) core curriculum (as defined by Title 19 of the Texas Administrative Code (TAC) §4.28), obtain certifications, or earn an associate degree, or earn at least 60 credit hours toward a baccalaureate degree during

grades 9-12. The ECHS shall provide students with academic, social, and emotional support in their course of study.

Benchmark 5: Academic Rigor and Readiness. The Early College High School shall administer a Texas Success Initiative (TSI) college placement exam (as defined by TAC §4.53) to all accepted ECHS students to assess college readiness, design individual instructional support plans, and enable students to begin college courses based on their performance on the exam.

Benchmark 6: School Design. The Early College High School must provide a full-day program (i.e., full day as defined in PEIMS) at an autonomous high school (i.e., a high school with ECHS leader assigned to ECHS responsibilities who has scheduling, hiring, and budget authority), an IHE liaison with decision-making authority, and a highly qualified staff with support and training. (ECHS Blueprint, 2020)

At the end of the ECHS blueprint are specific details about Outcomes Based Measures (OBMs) level distinctions in Access, Attainment, and Achievement Domains (ECHS Blueprint, 2020). Detailed blueprints for the T-STEM and P-TECH early college high schools are available on the TEA website. The ECHS Blueprint is displayed in Figure 1.

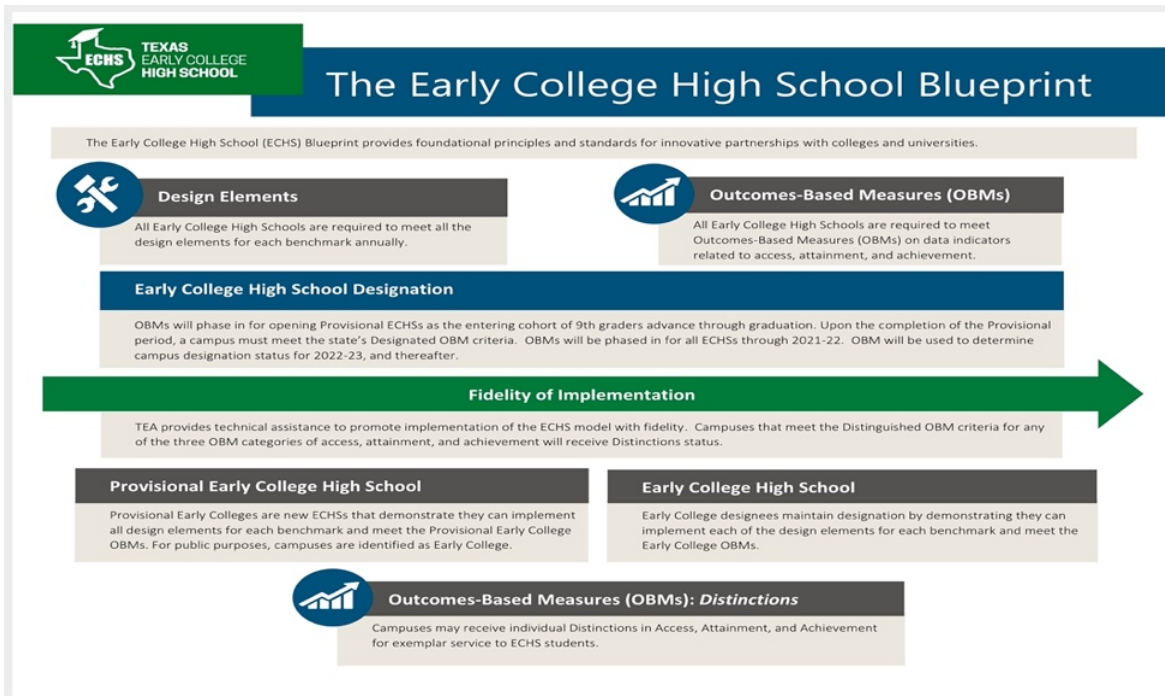


Figure 1: The Early College High School Blueprint (ECHS Blueprint, 2020)

Texas and the T-STEM Initiative

In 2005, Texas public and higher education received substantial funding through the \$71 million Texas Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math (T-STEM) initiative. The T-STEM initiative is a public-private partnership coordinated through the Texas High School Project (THSP) under the auspices of the Communities Foundation of Texas (CFT) and supported by Governor of Texas Rick Perry, the Texas Education Agency (TEA), the Michael & Susan Dell Foundation, and the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation (Peat, 2005).

Texas governor Perry stated the need for the T-STEM initiative:

Education is the lynchpin in creating a strong workforce to bring Texas and the nation into the 21st century. While gains have been made in our schools, we still have an achievement gap that will lead to an opportunity gap unless more students

of all backgrounds become proficient in science, math, and technology. This initiative will ensure that more students have the skills they need to succeed in college and the 21st century workplace. (Peat, 2005, p. 1)

The T-STEM initiative provides funding for 35 T-STEM schools, which will offer instruction to Texas high school students in core STEM subject areas and provide funding for creating five or six STEM teacher training facilities to improve instruction in STEM areas. The 35 T-STEM schools or academies will be a mixture of traditional public schools and charter schools. They will coordinate their educational efforts with an institute of higher education to provide students with college experience in STEM career areas and earn college credits.

One of the primary components of the T-STEM initiative is the establishment and support of T-STEM Academies. These academies (or School-within-a-school programs) specifically focus on STEM education. They aim to integrate rigorous academic coursework with relevant workplace experiences and serve students in grades 6-12 or 9-12. Like ECHSs and other specialized programs in Texas, T-STEM academies aim to serve all students and often operate on an open-enrollment basis, without entrance criteria based on academic achievement.

Like the ECHS design blueprint, T-STEM Academies follow their design blueprint, which lays out essential elements and criteria for the academies' design, implementation, and sustainability (T-STEM Blueprint, 2020). These criteria cover mission-driven leadership, student outreach, teacher selection and development, curriculum and instruction, and strategic alliances with colleges and employers. T-STEM Academies also often form partnerships with higher education institutions, businesses, and industries to provide students with mentorship opportunities, internships, and hands-on experiences in STEM fields.

The T-STEM initiative is part of Texas's broader effort to promote innovation in education, meet the growing demand for STEM professionals, and ensure that students in the state are ready for college, careers, or the military and have the knowledge and skills to compete in the global economy. The Texas Education Agency (TEA) and the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board (THECB) have been instrumental in promoting and supporting the T-STEM initiative.

When Preparation and Opportunity Meet

While the definition of luck might differ from one person to another, there is an element of truth in the adage that “luck often occurs as a result of when preparation and opportunity meet.” The need for higher educational attainment for all the citizens in Texas had already been voiced by Murdock et al. and understood by Texas legislators and stakeholders. The rigor of the high school curriculum had been changed, and a college preparatory curriculum had been adopted, making a smoother articulation between Texas high schools and colleges possible. The first long-term higher education goal idea for all Texans was given a structure with measurable goals, a timeline, and a name: Closing the Gaps. In 2015, the new goal for higher education for all Texans was launched, entitled 60x30TX.

Texas was “primed” educationally and legislatively to make good use of the Early College High School Initiative launched in 2002 by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation. With assistance from private and public partnerships with Jobs for the Future, The Texas High School Project (now Educate Texas), The Communities Foundation of Texas, the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board, and the Texas Education Agency, Texas was ready for the ECHS. In 2003, Challenge ECHS in the Houston ISD opened its doors and became Texas’s very

first early college high school (Ms. Jenny Eaton, Public Information Coordinator Texas Education Agency personal communication, August 10, 2023).

Texas Accountability Systems Since 2002

The Texas public school accountability system has seen several iterations since 2002, which marked the reauthorization of the original ESEA federal legislation and the transition to the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB, 2001). Texas's accountability systems are designed to evaluate school performance using various measures or metrics, typically centered around standardized test results. Below, I summarize these accountability systems and their characteristics.

TAKS

From 2000-2012, a TAKS-Based Accountability System was used. TAKS (Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills) consisted of four ratings:

1. Exemplary, or the highest rating that required schools to meet rigorous benchmarks.
2. Recognized, a rating achieved when students met a slightly lower set of standards than Exemplary.
3. Academically Acceptable, when students meet minimum criteria.
4. Academically Unacceptable, when schools fail to meet the minimum criteria.

(Vornberg et al., 2022)

TAKS accountability ratings and school report card grades were waived in 2011 because of the adoption of a new standardized testing system. In 2012, Texas transitioned from the Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills (TAKS) to the State of Texas Assessments of Academic Readiness (STAAR) for public school students. The STAAR test was introduced as a more rigorous assessment tool to assess student learning and school performance better. Due to this

change, the Texas Education Agency (TEA) decided not to issue accountability ratings for schools in 2011 to allow for a period of adjustment to the new system. This gave schools time to familiarize themselves with the new exam and the accompanying standards without the immediate pressure of accountability ratings. The ratings resumed in subsequent years as schools, teachers, and students adjusted to the STAAR system (Vornberg et al., 2022).

STAAR

From 2012 to the present, the STAAR accountability system has been used.

The STAAR or *State of Texas Assessments of Academic Readiness* consists of four ratings:

1. Masters grade level, indicating that the student has a deep understanding and is well prepared for the next level;
2. Meets grade level, indicating that the student has a strong understanding of the material and is likely ready for the next level;
3. Approaches grade level, indicating that the student has some knowledge of the course material but may need additional support in the next grade level; and
4. Did Not Meet grade level, indicating that the student does not demonstrate sufficient understanding of the course material. (Vornberg et al., 2022)

High school and early college high school students must take and pass certain required courses and the end-of-course exams for those courses. EOC exams include English I and English II, Algebra I, U.S. History, and Biology. The assessments for these EOC subjects are based on the Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills (TEKS), the state curriculum standards. These EOC exams ensure that students have learned the course content and are prepared to succeed in college and careers (STAAR, 2023; Vornberg et al., 2022).

Texas A-F Accountability System

In 2018, the 85th Texas legislature revised the state accountability system from the previous four indices to an A-F Accountability System using three domains of Student Achievement, School Progress, and Closing the Gaps. Rather than simply indicating whether a school met a standard, the new accountability system assigns traditional letter grades from A through F based on particular school performance criteria within each domain. The assessment tool utilized is still based on the STAAR, but with added criteria for evaluating school performance within each domain. In the following section, I discuss particular aspects of the Texas A-F Accountability System, including Student Achievement, School Progress, and Closing the Gaps (Vornberg et al., 2022).

1. Student Achievement. Student achievement measures what students know and can do by the end of the school year. Student achievement includes (a) Performance on the STAAR test, (b) College, Career, and Military Readiness (CCMR) for high schools and districts (which can include factors like a student's SAT/ACT scores, industry certifications, and dual-enrollment course completion, and (c) graduation rates for both high schools and districts.

2. School Progress. School progress evaluates how much better students are doing on the STAAR test in the present year compared to the previous year, as well as how the school is performing compared to schools with similar percentages of economically disadvantaged students. School Progress is divided into two parts, including Part A, Academic Growth, and Part B, Relative Performance. In Part A: Academic Growth, Academic Growth measures individual student progress on the STAAR yearly. In Part B: Relative Performance, Relative Performance considers the school's percentage of economically disadvantaged students and rates how a particular school or district compares to its demographically similar peers.

3. Closing the Gaps. Closing the Gaps contains five subdomains to indicate how different groups of students are performing. The Closing the Gaps domain emphasizes (a) Academic Performance of varying racial/ethnic student groups, (b) socioeconomic status, (c) English language learners, (d) Students with disabilities, (e) Continuously enrolled and non-continuously enrolled, and foster care and homeless students. In subdomain (a) Academic Performance, varying racial/ethnic groups and student performance data can be disaggregated into specific races and ethnicities such as White, Black, Hispanic, and Asian. TEA can thus determine academic performance differences between different racial and ethnic groups to devise strategies to ameliorate or minimize these differences.

In subdomain (b) Socioeconomic status, the socioeconomic status of students can often be discerned by student classification according to eligibility for free or reduced-price lunch since student eligibility for free or reduced-price lunch is often considered a proxy indicative of low socioeconomic status (Snyder et al., 2015).

In subdomain (c) English language learners, these students are defined as those who are identified as having a primary language other than English and are in the process of acquiring English language proficiency. Texas has used TELPAS (Texas Language Proficiency Assessment System) since the 2002 No Child Left Behind Act to assess progress in the four language domains of listening, speaking, reading, and writing.

In subdomain (d) Students with disabilities, students with disabilities refer to those students who receive special education services due to a range of identified disabilities that impact their ability to learn in the same manner as their non-disabled peers. These students may have individualized education programs (IEPs) or accommodations under Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act. Disabilities can vary widely, from learning disabilities, speech or language

impairments, and intellectual disabilities to emotional disturbances, autism, or physical disabilities.

In subdomain (e) Continuously enrolled and non-continuously enrolled, and foster care and homeless students, this subdomain recognizes challenges that may come with high student mobility rates. Students enrolled at the same school or district for the full year might be assessed differently from those who have moved during the year. Also, students in foster care or those experiencing homelessness may face special challenges that can impact their academic performance.

The Closing the Gaps domain also uses *Differentiated Targets* and *Diverse Performance Levels*. For example, in *Differentiated Targets*, English language learners might initially score lower on English language arts assessments than their English-proficient peers. In *Diverse Performance Levels*, the state might set different improvement targets for each group to account for these varying baselines. Instead of expecting every group to achieve the same raw score, the focus might be on each group making significant and appropriate gains. For instance, if English language learners scored significantly lower than non-English learners in Year 1, the target for Year 2 might be for that English language learner group to make a specific percentage of improvement rather than to match the scores of the non-English learners.

The Closing the Gaps domain aims to ensure that all students, regardless of their backgrounds or circumstances, receive the education and support they need to succeed. This domain tries to shed light on where disparities exist and prompts districts and schools to address them. Differentiated targets based on diverse performance levels promote equity over raw equality by ensuring that every student group has the resources and support tailored to their

specific needs and circumstances. An Overview of the 2019 State Accountability System is displayed in Figure 2 as well as in Appendix P.

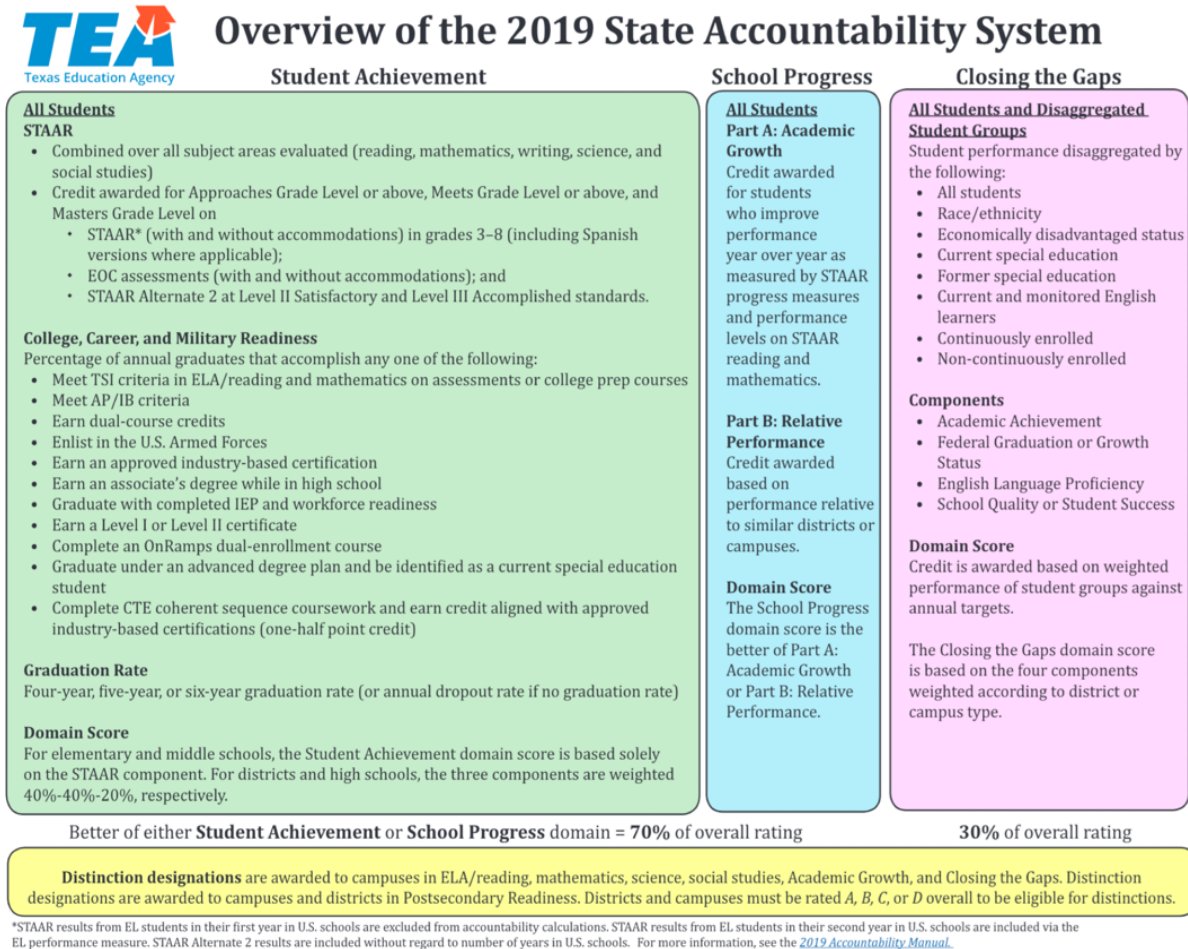


Figure 2: Accountability Overview 2019 (TEA Accountability Overview, 2019)

The AVID College Readiness Program

In the 2002 television program 60 Minutes, interviewer and journalist Scott Pelley remarked about AVID: "AVID changes the way public schools teach. AVID gives struggling students intensive tutoring, and it revolutionizes the role of the teacher. An AVID teacher is a coach, a cheerleader and a cop who pushes kids to be more than they ever thought they could be" (Making the Grade, 2002).

In this section, I discuss AVID, the college readiness program employed at Excelencia Early College High School (EECHS). AVID plays an important role in the daily educational lives of EECHS students and faculty, and an understanding of what AVID is and how it works is important in exploring the research question of how these students at EECHS consistently obtain high academic achievement.

What is AVID?

AVID is a college readiness and preparatory program that trains teachers to use specific instructional techniques to increase the college readiness of underserved youth in American public schools. Derived from the Latin root *avidus*, which means "eager for knowledge," the backronym and elaboration of the term AVID to *Advancement Via Individual Determination* suggests that the student's eagerness and thirst for knowledge and perseverance will result in progress and success.

As one of the oldest and most successful college preparation programs in the United States, AVID promotes college readiness by providing strong academic and social support within a school-wide culture. An underlying premise upon which AVID is based is that advanced instruction with support is preferable to remedial instruction, which all too often tracks students into low-level, low-expectation classes (Swanson et al., 2000). A commonly held belief by many AVID educators is: "Hold students accountable to the highest standards, provide academic and social support, and they will rise to the challenge" (Round Rock, 2016).

The Origin of AVID

AVID was created in 1980 by Clairemont High School English teacher Mary Catherine Swanson to meet the educational needs of newly arriving low-income minority students. In response to a federal court order meant to integrate California's de facto segregated schools,

Clairemont High School enrolled and bused 500 minority students from neighboring low-income communities of color. Most of these students were behind academically and lacked the preparation to be successful with the types of classes taught in predominantly white and middle-class Clairemont High School (Mathews, 2015; Swanson et al., 1993). While Clairemont High School's compliance with the court order represented a success for civil rights and educational equality, the newly transferred students presented a challenge educationally for two main reasons.

First, many Clairemont teachers had low expectations of these students. They resented the idea of redesigning their curriculum or lowering their standards to accommodate students who were behind academically. Teachers were convinced that the solution for these underprepared students would require them to take remedial classes and be tracked into other, less academically demanding classes (Freedman, 2020; Swanson et al., 1993). On the other hand, Swanson believed that all students, regardless of their background and circumstances, could take rigorous high school classes and be successful if given adequate support based on her earlier experiences with below-grade-level students.

When Swanson first began her career as an English teacher in 1966, students were often tracked or, as Mrs. Swanson stated, they were not so much tracked as they were "trapped" into different ability groupings. As a new teacher, she was often assigned to teach them in lower-level and remedial classes. Particularly challenging for her was teaching remedial reading to older students, some as old as twenty, who claimed they did not know how to read. She stated:

What I discovered was it wasn't that they couldn't read, it's that they didn't want to read and didn't like to read. And so, I had to present them with a reason to want to

read. Once I did that, they progressed very, very rapidly. It had nothing to do with intelligence. It had everything to do with what seemed interesting and relevant to them. (Swanson, 2017)

Swanson was adamant in her belief that Clairemont teachers' insistence that the new students take remedial classes reflected low expectations, was a continuation of "tracking" students based on their income and color and was not the solution for preparing all students to become college ready. She believed that she could teach them the skills they needed to succeed in Clairemont's regular and more rigorous types of honors classes. Her belief that all students could be successful if given appropriate support caused dissent and resentment in the Clairemont faculty, many of whom did not share her confidence in the ability of low-income students and students of color to achieve academically (Freedman, 2020; Swanson et al., 1993).

Second, while Swanson's high expectations and confidence in her new students' abilities were laudable, they would have to acquire many study skills, strategies, and the "college knowledge" already common coin to the white and largely middle-class students at Clairemont. Since, at that time, no curriculum or plan existed to help these students, Swanson embraced the challenge of creating a rigorous college readiness curriculum based on her years of experience as an English teacher.

With high expectations coupled with practical study skills and time management techniques, she began developing a curriculum that would allow her students to take regular and advanced classes at Clairemont High School successfully. Following approval to conduct AVID as a pilot project from her campus principal, Swanson began AVID at Clairemont High School in 1980 with an initial class of 32 low-income, minority students, all of whom except two graduated Clairemont High School and then went on to graduate from college (Freedman, 2020).

AVID History

1980-1982. To better ensure that her Clairemont AVID students were becoming college-ready, Swanson soon began consulting with local colleges and faculty in the San Diego area to understand college expectations of academic rigor better. Based on this collaboration with university and community college professors, Swanson was able to increase the rigor of the high school English curriculum and align the secondary curriculum with the postsecondary curriculum to better prepare her students for college readiness and success.

This partnership between AVID at the secondary and postsecondary levels produced curriculum materials, which were then published as part of the Clairemont Cooperative Academic Project, or C-CAP. The C-CAP then became part of the C-CAP Compendium in 1982, the first working example of AVID meant for professional development at the secondary level. As a result, high school teachers' standards of rigor became higher and more closely aligned with those of higher education while simultaneously providing growth in AVID teaching methodology and pedagogical support to fellow secondary educators (AVID Heritage, 2018).

1983. The AVID Handbook and Curriculum Guide, A Working First Edition is published. This first AVID Handbook contains college preparatory writing guidelines, "writing-to-learn" materials written for high school English classes, and lessons and materials for non-English classes (AVID Heritage, 2018).

1984. The San Diego Unified School District conducted a research report to determine the class of 1984's postsecondary status six months after graduation. Swanson's Clairemont High School graduates ranked fourth compared to the other 17 high schools in the district in terms of the number of students attending college full-time, even though Clairemont students' socioeconomic level was lower than any of the other schools.

Clairemont's scores on the California state assessment Comprehensive Test of Basic Skills (CTBS) from 1983-1985 increased to 46.6%, while the district's score increased to 17%. Clairemont's math score on the same test was 35%, while the district's scores increased to 12.5% (AVID Heritage, 2018).

The Writer's Assistance Program started with English teachers from all 17 high schools in San Diego receiving a stipend to participate in developing college preparatory writing guides after school. While discontinued after only two years, the Writer's Assistance Program was the first effort to accelerate AVID concepts districtwide (AVID Heritage, 2018).

1986. Swanson resigned from Clairemont in the spring of 1986 for personal reasons and a desire to develop AVID into a program that could be implemented at scale. When Swanson was hired by the San Diego County Office of Education as a project specialist to develop an AVID curriculum for county use, her short job description read simply: "Disseminate AVID throughout San Diego Schools" (Mathews, 2015, p. 23).

By the September 1986-1987 school year, 26 color-coded boxes containing six years of Clairemont High School's AVID classes had been distilled into the first AVID Handbook and Curriculum Guide (Freedman, 2020). More than 500 pages long and three inches thick, the 3-ring binder "first edition" of the AVID curriculum was organized by divider and tabs into a logical sequence of clear goals, expectations, lesson plans, rubrics, and assessments for each grade level. Replete with student examples of English essays, Cornell Notes, student schedules, and other student artifacts, the first edition AVID handbook was considered flexible and a "work in progress" rather than a completed curriculum. Swanson stated: "It was a major work: to take what was in my head and create a philosophy of teaching and a step-by-step approach for implementation" (Freedman, 2020, p. 197).

1987. The San Diego County Unified School Board mandates that all San Diego School District high schools implement the AVID curriculum. In the fall of 1987, over 1,500 students were enrolled in AVID elective classes, while teachers received AVID support through monthly professional development (AVID Heritage, 2018).

1988. By 1988, 30 high schools and six middle schools within San Diego County had implemented the AVID curriculum. In nearby Riverside County, Ramona High School became the first school outside San Diego County to adopt the AVID curriculum. An AVID policy board is created, including Mrs. Swanson, superintendents from five major San Diego school districts, California state representatives, and chancellors from the University of California and California State University. A Memorandum of Understanding is created for each of these institutes of higher education, indicating college eligibility requirements and retention goals. A high school evaluation process was begun to evaluate AVID's effectiveness at the high school level (AVID Heritage, 2018).

1989. The first AVID Summer Institute is held at the University of San Diego. The week-long event is organized into eight parts, including an introduction for new AVID teachers called Implementation, and seven strands, including administration, counseling, and applying AVID techniques to content areas such as English, history, science, math, and foreign languages. Attended by 450 educators, the AVID Summer Institute has become an essential annual event for disseminating AVID curriculum and instructional techniques (AVID Heritage, 2018; Mathews, 2015).

1990. AVID continues to grow in popularity in California and is adopted by 45 high schools and 35 middle schools in San Diego and nearby Riverside and Whittier school districts.

School district data indicate increases in 15 high schools' graduation and college eligibility rates (AVID Heritage, 2018).

1991. Swanson receives the Charles A. Dana Foundation Award for Pioneering Achievement in Education in recognition of AVID. Derek Bok, as well as other luminaries in the field of higher education and medicine, were also honored in the Dana Award ceremony. Described in the Chronicle of Higher Education as "a rigorous, academically advanced college-preparatory curriculum," AVID's significance and stature was enhanced as Swanson became the first public school teacher to receive the prestigious Dana Award (Freedman, 2020; McMillen, 1991).

1992. AVID became a non-profit organization, and the AVID Center was created. Inspired by conversations with school district administrators, Mrs. Swanson consults with CEOs, businessmen, and financial advisors to increase the reach, accessibility, and financial foundation of AVID. By achieving non-profit status, AVID becomes more accessible to other schools in the United States while at the same time centralizing educational and professional development resources needed to retain fidelity to the AVID mission (AVID, 2018; Freedman, 2020; Mathews, 2015).

1996. AVID was selected by the Department of Defense Educational Activity (DoDEA) to educate the children of American servicemen and women worldwide. The DoDEA is: "...primarily responsible for operating the DoD elementary and secondary school system, ensuring the students that attend DoDEA schools remain on track towards being ready for college or a career upon high school graduation. DoDEA schools are: "... globally positioned, operating 160 accredited schools in 8 districts located in 11 foreign countries, seven states,

Guam, and Puerto Rico (including the DoDEA Virtual School) (AVID Heritage, 2018; DoDEA, 2023).

2001. Mary Catherine Swanson is featured in the September issue of Time Magazine as "America's Best Teacher." Time writer Goldstein states: "Swanson's philosophy is simple: raise expectations and then give students the support they need to meet them" (Goldstein, 2001).

2002. AVID is featured on the national television program 60 Minutes with reporter Scott Pelley. Pelley states: "AVID changes the way public schools teach... AVID gives struggling students intensive tutoring, and it revolutionizes the role of the teacher. An AVID teacher is a coach, a cheerleader, and a cop, who pushes kids to be more than they ever thought they could be" (Pelley, 2002).

2005. AVID introduces a new Certification Report and Self-Study Continuum with 11 Essentials of AVID. AVID publishes 25 Years, 25 Stories, a book featuring the personal stories of AVID students and teachers. More than 500 educators attend AVID's 2005 National Conference (AVID History, 2018).

2006. AVID for Elementary school is introduced beginning with a pilot project elementary school located in the Cherry Creek School district near Boulder, Colorado. While initially introduced in kindergarten, AVID in fourth and fifth grades is now emphasized (Mathews, 2015).

2008. The AVID for Higher Education (AHE) program begins development with support from Traveler's Insurance and is pilot tested at two colleges. Five middle schools in Garden Grove, California, participate in pilot testing of AVID's Excel program for academic language acceleration for middle school English Language Learners. Garden Grove students participate in

intensive two-week-long Summer Bridge classes, and Excel is offered as an elective for 7th and 8th graders the following fall (AVID Heritage, 2018).

2009. AVID is implemented in Australia, beginning with one school district in Wodonga, Australia. Tasked by the vice-chancellor of Victoria University to find a way to increase student enrollment in Australian universities, university problem solver Claire Brown discovers AVID via an online search and travels to Texas in 2008 to meet with AVID staff. Convinced of AVID's efficacy, Brown returns to Australia and collects data on the AVID program in Wodonga (Mathews, 2015).

The Australian government created the Higher Education Participation and Partnerships Program (HEPPP) based on a desire to increase college enrollment and success for Australian students. Based on the data and first-hand observation by Brown on student achievement in the Wodonga AVID program, Brown submitted a grant proposal to HEPPP and Victoria University in 2011 to receive \$1.4 million to conduct a trial and research study to determine the Implementation of AVID in Australia (Mathews, 2015). The trial was successful, and AVID Center U.S. provided AVID Australia with an exclusive site license in 2015. AVID continues today with 70 AVID teaching sites throughout Australia, more than 50,000 students enrolled in AVID programs, and more than 3,800 teachers trained in AVID techniques and methodologies (AVID Australia, 2022).

2010. AVID for Higher Education (AHE) is launched. AHE is described by Shapiro and Cuseo as: "...an integrated, research-based, college success system designed primarily for underrepresented students who have the determination to succeed and for campuses committed to promoting their students' success" (Shapiro & Cuseo, 2018, p. V). High-impact instructional techniques such as AVID's Writing, Inquiry, Collaboration, Organization, and Reading

(WICOR) are utilized in the college classroom combined with AVID professional development for faculty.

For college students, AVID publishes *"Thriving in College and Beyond with AVID for Higher Education"* (AVID Center, 2018). For college instructors, AVID publishes *AVID for Higher Education: High Engagement Practices for Teaching and Learning*, which examines and provides examples of how college instructors can utilize WICOR, AVID's high engagement instructional techniques in their teaching (Shapiro & Cuseo, 2018).

AVID updated its mission statement to reflect its goals for all students more clearly: "AVID's mission is to close the achievement gap by preparing all students for college readiness and success in a global society" (AVID Heritage, 2018).

2013. The AVID Center receives a grant from the Michael & Susan Dell Foundation to implement the AVID for Higher Education (AHE) program in a select number of colleges and universities in the U.S. Six four-year institutions and three 2-year colleges participate in the Dell AHE program whose primary goal is to improve student persistence and college graduation completion. Program contents include AVID professional development for college faculty, the AVID inquiry-based WICOR curriculum, student-centered high engagement and active learning strategies, time management, test-taking strategies, and other topics.

An independent study conducted in 2019 showed that students participating in this grant program had higher rates of persistence and degree completion. However, AVID's effectiveness varied with the degree of fidelity with which AVID was employed at the various institutions (Shields et al., 2019).

2015. Time magazine once again features AVID and its positive influence in reshaping students' learning outcomes. At Bell Gardens High School, a school with more than 3,000

students located in east Los Angeles County, student scores showed steady improvement following the introduction of AVID. With a student body of 98% Hispanic and a median income of slightly more than \$30,000, student scores on California's 1,000-point Academic Performance Index (API) went from 469 in 1999 to 704 in 2013. Enrollment also grew, starting with 29 ninth graders in 1997 and increasing to 566 students by 2015 (Mathews, 2015).

AVID launched Excel, an extension of AVID designed to accelerate middle-school long-term English Language Learners (ELLs) acquisition of academic language literacy and prepare them for high school college preparatory coursework. AVID professional development in Excel concepts supports teachers in improving the outcomes of emergent bilingual students enrolled in middle school (AVID Excel, 2022).

2022. AVID continues to show growth and development and is used in approximately 8,000 schools in 49 states throughout the U.S. Every year, more than 85,000 educators participate in AVID professional development and share this training with 2 million students annually enrolled in AVID programs in the U.S. as well as throughout the world through the Department of Defense Education Activity. AVID programs are also used in Canadian and Australian schools.

The AVID College and Career Readiness Framework

At the core of AVID is the belief that all students can be successful in the rigorous coursework necessary to become college and career-ready if they receive support. Based on this fundamental premise, the AVID College and Career Readiness Framework displayed in Figure 3 provides a graphic illustration of the dynamic elements of *What Students Need* and *What Educators Do*, which are contained within AVID's Four Domains of Instruction, Systems, Leadership, and Culture (AVID CCR Framework, 2022).

AVID College & Career Readiness Framework

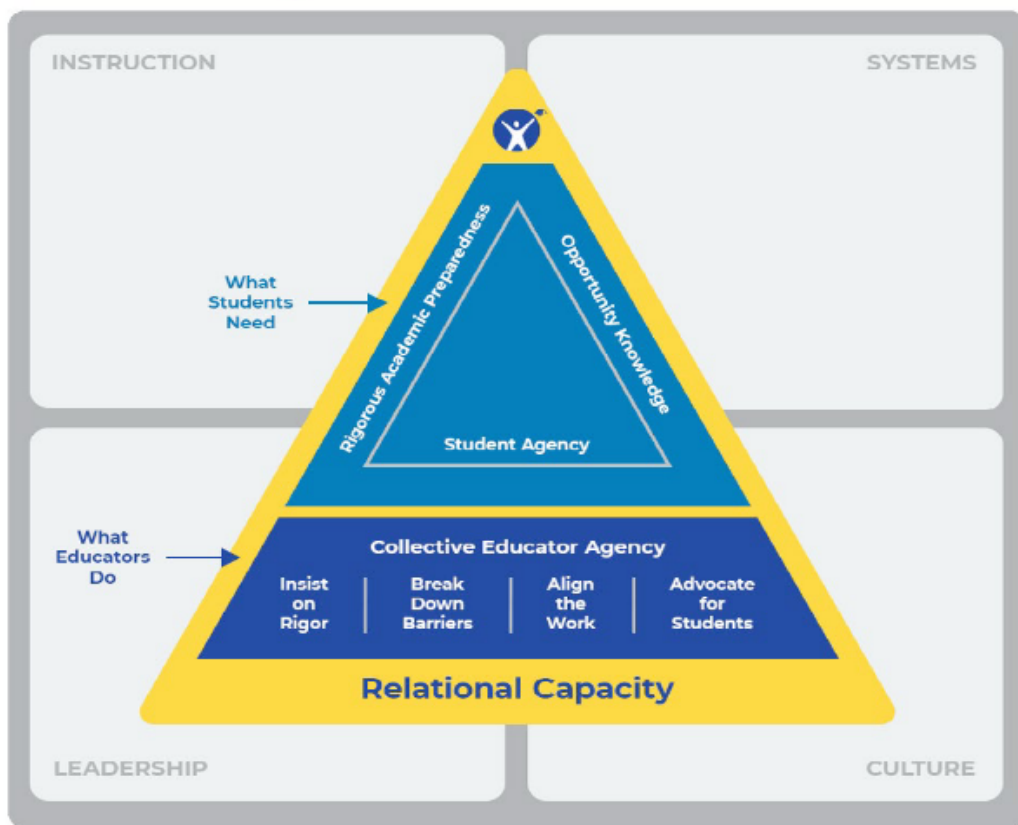


Figure 3: AVID College and Career Readiness Framework (AVID CCRF, 2022)

In Domain 1: Instruction: What Students Need, Student Agency provides the base and foundation from which *Rigorous Academic Preparedness* and *Opportunity Knowledge* can be accessed. AVID defines Student Agency as: "Students believe in themselves and act intentionally to build relationships, persist through obstacles, and activate their social, emotional, and professional knowledge and skills to reach their potential" (AVID CCR Framework, p. 1, 2022).

Student Agency lies at the heart of AVID because, at the outset, AVID membership is voluntary and a personal choice students intentionally make. Furthermore, Student Agency is not fixed but dynamic and growth-oriented as students' mindsets and self-efficacy change through AVID program mastery experiences (Bandura, 2006; Dweck, 2007).

To be successful in college, students need Rigorous Academic Preparedness. AVID defines rigor as: "Using inquiry-based, collaborative strategies to challenge and engage students in content, resulting in increasingly complex levels of understanding (Hammond, 2015). Inquiry-based means that students learn and develop the ability to think critically by asking probing and pertinent questions about the subject of their study and seeking specific answers. Collaborative strategies mean that AVID students often work together in groups or "co-labor" to help solve problems and clarify points of confusion to understand a particular topic better.

The "increasingly complex levels of understanding" referred to above are achieved through teacher emphasis and student use of higher-order thinking skills, as exemplified by the integration of Costa's Three Levels of Questioning and Bloom's Taxonomy into the AVID elective class (see Appendix R, Costa's and Bloom's Levels of Thinking: Comparison Chart).

Opposite and to the right on the pyramid of *What Students Need* is *Opportunity Knowledge* or what Conley calls 'college knowledge' (Conley, 2010). Opportunity Knowledge suggests that while opportunities related to learning about college and careers might exist, these remain dormant without explicit presentation by teachers and active investigation by students. AVID speaker and presenter Patrick Briggs (2016) stated that the achievement gap between white students and students of color has two corollaries: the *expectation gap* and the *opportunity gap*. While AVID addresses the expectation gap by holding as a foundational tenet that all students are capable of rigorous college work if given adequate support, the AVID curriculum addresses the opportunity gap by providing explicit instruction and 'college knowledge' for high school students engaged in planning their academic and professional careers (Briggs, 2016).

EECHS students develop their Opportunity Knowledge by completing AVID assignments throughout their four years at EECHS. Depending upon their grade level, students

determine their short and long-term goals, make choices consistent with their career aspirations, take college placement exams such as the SAT and ACT tests, and complete university and scholarship applications during their senior year.

In *What Educators Do*, educators foster and develop Relational Capacity, which is at the base undergirding and supporting the entire College and Career Readiness framework. Through the day-to-day process of classroom instruction and interaction, teachers and students develop interpersonal relationships. Bendall, Bollhoefer, and Koilpillai (2015) refer to the quality of these interpersonal relationships as Relational Capacity and define them as: "...the established level of trust and safety between teachers and students, as well as between students" (p. 5). AVID defines Relational Capacity as: "...the connection among individuals that develops over time when interactions are built on respect, trust, and authenticity" (AVID Framework Overview, 2022, p. 1).

Positioned at the base of the AVID College and Career Readiness Framework, *Relational Capacity* is teachers' primary mission and central responsibility. It is through Relational Capacity that the essential foundation of trust and safety is developed upon which student growth, development, and empowerment can flourish (Bendall et al., 2015; Maslow, 1954).

Insist on Rigor. Teachers who set high academic standards and insist on rigor in all coursework can only be successful if students cooperate. High standards and rigor for academic work are directly related to the relational capacity that EECHS teachers develop with their students. This foundation of trust and safety motivates students to go beyond mere compliance in completing their assignments at EECHS.

Break Down Barriers. Teachers identify obstacles that interfere with personal growth. These might be a barrier originating within the teacher, such as a deficit mindset (Dudley-

Marling, 2015), a student-owned barrier, such as a fixed mindset or self-limiting beliefs about their potential, or any one of many barriers that might prevent personal growth and development from occurring. Breaking down a barrier can only occur if a barrier is first acknowledged to exist. Through Relational Capacity, teachers can play an important role in helping students recognize and confront self-limiting beliefs and barriers and encourage them to develop a growth-mindset (Dweck, 2007).

Align The Work. As students grow and are ready to meet the next challenge, teachers must make adjustments to keep the work and curriculum aligned by revising school policies and practices when necessary and keeping student success in mind as the lens through which school policies are created and evaluated. When teachers advocate for students, they provide not only academic help but also social and emotional support. By advocating for students, teachers challenge policies that limit student potential and encourage students to make decisions by offering choices and options whenever possible.

One of the most difficult barriers for educators and our society to address is the recurrent gaps and inequality in academic achievement between racial groups in American society. The AVID College and Career Readiness Framework Position Paper states:

Decades of research have done little to impact the persistent gaps in academic achievement and college and career readiness between ethnic and socioeconomic subgroups of students. This is due, in large part, to widely accepted notions that these gaps are primarily a result of student attributes, such as poverty, minority status, lack of familial support, and low educational attainment of parents-few of which are directly impacted by schools. *An alternative perspective is to consider subgroup differences as a reflection of system inputs (for example, opportunity and expectation gaps) or*

how schools go about the business of schooling. [emphasis mine] (AVID CCR Framework, 2022, p. 1)

AVID suggests alternative and practical solutions to academic gaps by "untracking" students and providing schools with a different way of "going about the business of schooling" by providing educators with a repertoire and practical toolbox of high-engagement instructional techniques based on Writing, Inquiry, Collaboration, Organization, and Reading (WICOR).

AVID: Four Domains of Instruction, Systems, Leadership, and Culture

Since its humble beginnings in one teacher's classroom in 1980, AVID has grown and developed into a school-wide integrated system consisting of four essential domains. These domains include Instruction, Systems, Leadership, and Culture as illustrated in Figure 4.

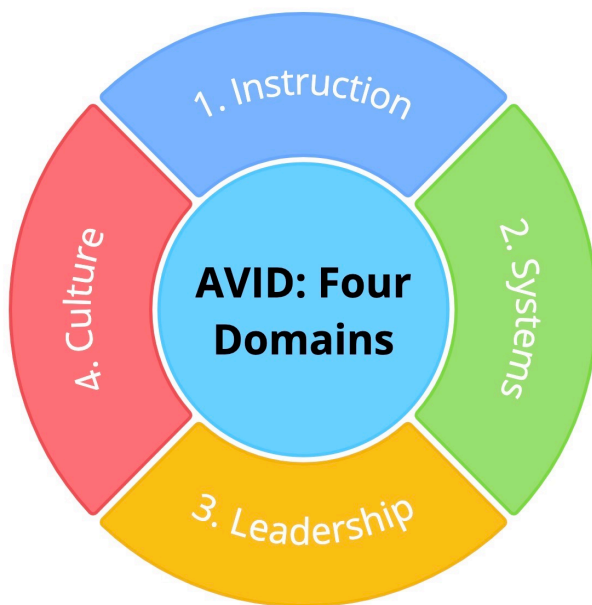


Figure 4: AVID Four Domains of Instruction, Systems, Leadership, and Culture

Domain 1: Instruction

Domain 1: Instruction refers to the set of high-engagement and research-based instructional techniques and curriculum developed by AVID, which include Writing, Inquiry,

Collaboration, Organization, and Reading, which collectively are referred to as WICOR. All teachers on a campus that has adopted AVID school-wide are conversant with and employ WICOR techniques and curriculum in their classrooms, which they learn through AVID Summer Institutes, ongoing AVID Professional Development, and in-district teacher collaboration and mentoring (Bendall et al., 2015).

Domain 2: Systems

Domain 2: Systems refers to the organizational infrastructure that schools create and use to assist in implementing the AVID Elective classes and AVID program. Examples of EECHS's Systems include the AVID student selection and admission process, creation of the school master schedule, AVID elective class schedule, the creation of AVID site teams, scheduling of data analysis by site teams, and numerous other infrastructure elements discussed earlier in this document.

Systems are an important part of the AVID program because the creation of effective school systems helps the school function as a social organization with maximum effectiveness and minimal confusion. Establishing and maintaining effective school systems are analogous to teachers who teach procedures and routines to their students in the first weeks of school as part of classroom management (Wong, 2018).

Domain 3: Leadership

Domain 3: Leadership refers to creating and modeling a vision that promotes college and career readiness and high expectations for all those engaged on the AVID campus. A key element of Leadership in AVID is the Site Team, a group of educators at an AVID school responsible for implementing, monitoring, and refining the AVID strategies and methodologies.

Site Team members include the principal, AVID District Director, AVID Elective teachers, content Teachers, and counselors. Site team members engage in a variety of activities, including planning and implementing the AVID program, arranging sessions for AVID professional development, monitoring student data, assessing the effectiveness of campus AVID strategies, supporting AVID elective teachers, and coordinating school-wide activities that align with AVID's college-readiness mission (AVID Handbook, 2020).

Domain 4: Culture

Domain 4: Culture refers to the collective behaviors, beliefs, values, and norms that shape the attitudes of students, educators, and the school community toward learning, college readiness, and future aspirations. Culture on a campus where AVID is schoolwide is characterized by high expectations for all students, accompanied by strong academic and social-emotional support. Students are challenged but provided the tools and resources to meet those challenges.

A key goal of AVID is to nurture a "college-going culture" in schools, which means that the entire school environment is geared toward preparing students for college and career success. The expectation is set for academic readiness and developing the necessary soft skills or what Conley (2010) calls college knowledge.

An important element contributing to Culture on an AVID campus is "Relational Capacity." Bendall et al. define Relational Capacity as "...the degree of trust and level of safety between members of a group" (2015, p. 5). In classrooms, this trust manifests itself in the relationships teachers foster with students, and the friendships students create among themselves.

High relational capacity empowers and helps create a classroom atmosphere where learning is a shared responsibility, and diverse student backgrounds become an asset rather than

a hindrance. This environment, which thrives on mutual trust and safety, primes students for college readiness by allowing them to benefit from collaborative activities such as the AVID Ten-Step Tutorial and group projects in core content areas such as English, History, or other classes.

In AVID, Culture results in an environment where going to college and being successful is the norm rather than the exception.

The AVID Curriculum

AVID instruction is designed to promote college readiness through a curriculum emphasizing writing, inquiry, critical thinking, collaboration, problem-solving, organizational skills, reading, and ongoing tutoring (Mathews, 2015). Mrs. Swanson's AVID curriculum emerged from the ground up based on intuition, classroom experimentation, student response and feedback, support, suggestions from fellow teachers, her academic research regarding best practices, and constant reflectivity on her part about what was essential for getting her students college ready.

Swanson's training as an English teacher helped her motivate and teach her students the importance of reading and writing to learn. While she stressed rigor in all literacy matters, she was also sensitive about what methods and approaches would best support her students' learning needs. Swanson's curriculum has evolved today into an organized inquiry-based learning system that uses writing to learn while embracing rigor and higher-order thinking skills.

AVID Curriculum Overview

The AVID curriculum consists of Writing, Inquiry, Collaboration, Organization, and Reading, abbreviated as WICOR. While each element of WICOR may be described individually, in practice, any particular WICOR element may have additional WICOR elements contained

within it. For example, a student may have a reading assignment requiring that they write Cornell Notes to better ensure text comprehension. In order to write Cornell Notes effectively, the student must read and determine the main idea of the text using higher-order thinking skills, use inquiry by asking questions about the meaning of the text, analyze the structure and organization of the text, and consider the supporting details in order to format the Cornell Notes according to Cornell Note guidelines. Cornell Note guidelines include identifying the main idea or question addressed by the reading selection, writing questions in one column, providing answers in another, and including a summary at the bottom of the page. When a particular assignment uses more than one element of WICOR, it is said to be "AVIDized" and necessarily involves critical and higher-order thinking skills.

Several elements of WICOR are immediately engaged during a student's creation of Cornell notes. These elements include Writing or, as the case may be, re-writing in their own words, simplifying, summarizing, or paraphrasing the writer's thoughts; Inquiry because the student must actively analyze the meaning of the text by asking such questions as: What is the writer trying to say? What do they mean here? What is the main idea of this paragraph? Are there unstated assumptions in this reading? How can I simplify what the writer is trying to say?; Collaboration, which occurs when the student interacts with peers in discussing the assigned reading for the Cornell Notes; Organization because the student must try to discern how the particular reading selection is organized, how the main, as well as supporting details, are expressed, and how the writer's flow of thoughts and text might be illustrated using Cornell page formatting as a guide. Finally, Reading occurs as a natural outgrowth of inquiry in the quest for understanding the meaning and significance of a particular reading selection.

AVID Elective Common Elements

AVID employs a differentiated curriculum where students in AVID I, AVID II, AVID III, and AVID IV have a common set of instructional elements (WICOR) presented to them each year, but at increasing levels of rigor and complexity. For example, activities involving Writing, Inquiry, Collaboration, Organization, and Reading are introduced at beginning levels to 9th-grade freshmen, which then undergo further development in terms of rigor and cognitive complexity as they progress through their sophomore, junior, and senior years.

Besides the common AVID instructional elements of WICOR, 3 Non-Negotiables or activities have demonstrated their worth and value to AVID teachers and students and are always included in every AVID classroom. These activities include AVID Binders, Cornell Notes, and AVID Tutorials (Mathews, 2015).

AVID Binder. As a part of WICOR, the AVID Binder reflects AVID's emphasis on the non-cognitive, but essential, college knowledge that helps students stay organized and maximize their study time (Conley, 2010). The AVID Binder consists of a large, three-ring binder which contains all of the student's classes organized by subject with dividers, class syllabi, and other materials specific for each class. Each AVID Binder also contains an assignment planner, a section for class notes, and a notebook grade form which the student uses to keep track of their overall AVID Binder notebook grade. Every AVID student receives a weekly AVID Binder grade for their Binders' organization and completeness. The AVID student also receives a grade for self-reporting their college classes and EECHS grades.

Cornell Notes. Cornell Notes are an important part of WICOR which utilize Writing, Inquiry, Collaboration, Organization, and Reading. Cornell Notes were developed by Walter Pauk in the 1950s when he realized that his students were unable to recall his lecture topics

discussed previously in class and were doing poorly on exams, as a result (Pauk & Owens, 2013). Cornell Notes are a particular style of taking notes that require students to structure and organize a blank page for notes by providing areas for identifying the main topic, questions, and a summary for a particular reading. At EECHS, AVID students must take at least five pages of Cornell Notes for each subject. These notes are then graded by the AVID teacher for inclusion and completeness in the student's AVID Binder.

AVID Tutorial. The AVID Tutorial occupies the majority of the instructional time during AVID elective classes each week. As another aspect of WICOR, students learn how to collaborate and establish procedures and routines from the very beginning and develop behavioral norms and shared responsibility for conducting the AVID Tutorial. On designated Tutorial days, the AVID teacher divides the class into student tutorial groups based on core subject areas such as English, Mathematics, History, and Science. The AVID Tutorial consists of three main parts, with several subsidiary steps in each of the three main parts.

These three main parts are: Before the Tutorial where students take Cornell Notes, identify questions, and complete a Tutorial Referral Form; During the Tutorial where students divide into groups of seven, with one student presenting to the other group of six students; and After the Tutorial, which repeats the Tutorial process for the other six students, who each take turns presenting and receiving comments and suggestions about their particular point of confusion or academic question.

Developmental and Conceptual Frameworks

Students' enrollment at EECHS coincides with adolescence, a period rivaled only by the first five years of life in terms of brain *neuroplasticity*, according to adolescent psychologist Laurence Steinberg (2014). Steinberg defines neuroplasticity as: "...the term scientists use to

describe the brain's potential to change through experience” (Steinberg, 2014, p. 9). During adolescence, there is a “first time” for everything, and these experiences are vividly remembered and indelibly etched on the adolescent brain. Steinberg further asserts that during adolescence, social, emotional, and cognitive growth is undergoing major development, although not always at the same rate.

Adolescence presents a jarring and seemingly contradictory period of an increasing need for independence and self-reliance juxtaposed with strong social needs for belonging and interdependence (Erickson, 1963). Within this developmental context of adolescence, I discuss challenges that EECHS students face, along with important psychologists and theoretical concepts for understanding the research questions and types of analysis presented in Ch. V, Discussion, Recommendations, and Implications.

Jean Piaget and Cognitive Development

Swiss psychologist Jean Piaget's theory of cognitive development describes how children's cognitive abilities grow and change over time. His theory consists of four distinct stages: the sensorimotor stage, preoperational stage, concrete operational stage, and formal operational stage. Each stage is characterized by specific cognitive abilities and ways of looking at the world. The final, formal operational stage is particularly relevant for students as they begin adolescence and early adulthood at EECHS (Piaget, 1972).

Piaget states that during the formal operational stage, adult-like cognitive abilities begin to emerge, which help adolescents solve difficulties in their academic studies. Students can comprehend more abstract mathematical concepts, deduce potential outcomes of hypothetical scenarios, plan for the future, and better understand moral, ethical, and political issues. These

developments in cognitive functioning play a crucial role in college readiness as students can better anticipate outcomes, strategize accordingly, and adjust their plans when necessary.

EECHS students are challenged to use these newly developing abilities by their AVID teachers, who make liberal use of higher-order thinking skills. As a part of the AVID curriculum, AVID teachers employ Bloom's Taxonomy, Costa's Three Levels of Questioning, Socratic Inquiry, and other approaches to foster higher-order thinking skills (Bloom et al., 1956; Costa, 2001; Paul & Elder, 2006). Since AVID emphasizes that all students can be successful when provided with both a rigorous curriculum and support, students are challenged by their AVID teachers' instruction while they learn essential college readiness skills such as time management, organization, and planning (AVID, 2023; Bendall et al., 2015; Swanson, 1993).

Self-Regulation and Time Management

However, despite the changes and improvements in cognitive functioning occurring during Piaget's formal operational stage, EECHS students face another challenge: self-regulation. According to noted educational psychologists Zimmerman (2002) and Steinberg (2014), self-regulation refers to students' becoming aware of, managing, and directing their thoughts, behaviors, and emotions toward particular goals. Zimmerman states: "Self-regulation is not a mental ability or an academic performance skill; rather, it is the self-directive process by which learners transform their mental abilities into academic skills" (Zimmerman, 2002, p. 65). A primary challenge of college is completing assignments on time. At EECHS, students must learn to regulate their behaviors, particularly regarding time management as they complete multiple assignments, often with strict completion deadlines.

The Need to Belong and Maslow's Hierarchy of Human Needs

Amid the profound cognitive and intellectual growth that adolescents experience, students at EECHS begin experiencing emerging social needs. One of the most dominant social needs is belonging to a group and forming friendships with others. The roots of school belonging can be traced back to Abraham Maslow's Hierarchy of Human Needs, published in his seminal 1943 paper *A Theory of Human Motivation*. Maslow's Hierarchy of Human Needs proposes that people have fundamental needs ranging from physiological and safety needs to higher needs such as love and belonging that must be met for personal growth, development, and fulfillment to occur (Maslow, 1943).

While the familiar pyramidal structure used to depict Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs did not originate with Maslow (Bridgman et al., 2018), it does clearly illustrate five distinct levels of human needs, including physiological needs, safety needs, love and belonging needs, esteem needs, and self-actualization needs. As one of the top 14 most cited psychologists of the twentieth century, Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs continues to influence students and scholars in psychology, education, management, and other fields because of its simplicity and "common sense view of human nature" (APA, 2002; Bridgman et al., 2018, p. 81).

Before Maslow, other educational researchers and scholars had associated belonging as an inherent aspect of school. Dewey's concept of supportive school environments proposed that they nurtured growth, encouraged exploration, and fostered social interaction (2007); Vygotsky's work (2012) supported the notion that student-to-student and student-to-teacher social interactions were crucial for cognitive development; and Erikson's (1968) work on psychosocial development based on adolescents' needs for social interactions and self-identity development

through peer-group association all support the notion that belonging and school are innately intertwined.

Baumeister and Leary and their Belongingness Hypothesis

Other, more recent psychological and educational theories refer to belonging (e.g., Bowlby, 1969; Bronfenbrenner, 1977; Josselson, 1992, and others), but perhaps one of the most influential works establishing a foundation for belonging research as a subject unto itself was published in 1995 by Baumeister and Leary. Their *belongingness hypothesis* posits that the need to belong is a fundamental and universal motivator of human behavior. Baumeister and Leary's definition of the need for belonging is: "...a need to form and maintain at least a minimum quantity of interpersonal relationships, is innately prepared (and hence nearly universal) among human beings" (Baumeister & Leary, 1995, p. 499).

Furthermore, Baumeister and Leary's belongingness hypothesis proposes that belonging is an innate and universal human need based on biology and evolution. They state that belonging to a group serves an evolutionary purpose because it helps ensure individual survival through shared resources of food, housing, protection, kinship, familial ties, and reproduction (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). Baumeister and Leary's belongingness hypothesis argues that the need for belonging motivates goal-directed activities, is essential for an individual's sense of well-being, and that the absence of belonging has negative health consequences. They also add that the two salient features of the belongingness hypothesis include the need for frequent personal contacts and the perception that these contacts and relationships are stable over time (Baumeister and Leary, 1995).

Willms and A Sense of Belonging and Participation

While Baumeister and Leary's definition of belonging and their belongingness hypothesis provide solid ground for a conceptual understanding of belonging, its relationship to school has also been explored and discussed by other researchers. In his PISA study, *A Sense of Belonging and Participation* (2003), Willms positions school belonging as a phenomenon that occurs within the context of student engagement. He states in the study's Foreword: "Most students participate in academic and non-academic activities at school and develop a sense of belonging – their friends are there, they have good relations with teachers and other students, and they identify with and value schooling outcomes" (Willms, 2003, p. 3).

Willms's (2003) definition of school belonging places it within the larger context of student engagement. He states that student engagement has two components: a psychological component, which relates to students' sense of belonging at school and their acceptance of school values, and a behavioral component relating to student participation in school activities such as attendance, completion of assignments, and participating in extracurricular activities or clubs. He adds that the psychological component focuses on "...students' sense of belonging or attachment to school, which has to do with feelings of being accepted and valued by their peers and others at school" (Willms, 2003, p. 8).

Goodenow and Grady and the Psychological Sense of School Membership (PSSM)

A definition of school belonging frequently cited in the literature is offered by Goodenow and Grady (1993), who state that school belonging is "the extent to which students feel personally accepted, respected, included, and supported by others in the school social environment" (p. 80). This definition has been operationalized in Goodenow's analytical tool, *The Psychological Sense of School Membership* (PSSM) (Goodenow, 1993). This bilingual

measurement tool, written in English and Spanish, assesses a student's sense of belonging or psychological membership in a school community. This measure uses a Likert scale with responses ranging from 1 (Not at all True) to 5 (Completely True). The PSSM survey questions are stated in a variety of ways to reflect the complexity of the sense of school membership and are illustrated below:

Psychological Sense of School Membership Survey Questions

1. I feel like a real part of (name of school).
2. People here notice when I'm good at something.
3. It is hard for people like me to be accepted here. (reversed)
4. Other students in this school take my opinions seriously.
5. Most teachers at (name of school) are interested in me.
6. Sometimes, I feel as if I don't belong here. (reversed)
7. There's at least one teacher or other adult in this school I can talk to if I have a problem.
8. People at this school are friendly to me.
9. Teachers here are not interested in people like me. (reversed)
10. I am included in lots of activities at (name of school).
11. I am treated with as much respect as other students.
12. I feel very different from most other students here. (reversed)
13. I can really be myself at this school.
14. The teachers here respect me.
15. People here know I can do good work.
16. I wish I were in a different school. (reversed)

17. I feel proud of belonging to (name of school).

18. Other students here like me the way I am. (Goodenow, 1993)

Relational Capacity

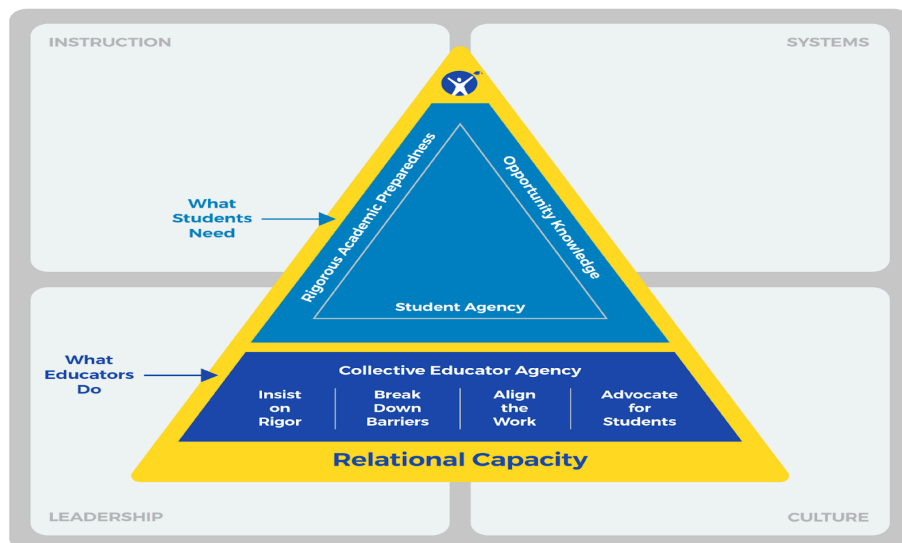
In the AVID resource textbook *AVID Critical Thinking and Engagement: A Schoolwide Approach* (Bendall et al., 2015), *Relational Capacity* is foremost and occupies almost eighty pages of the first chapter. Fundamentals of group dynamics and corresponding team-building activities for creating a successful classroom community are presented. These can help teachers and students develop Relational Capacity in the AVID elective and core subject area classrooms.

Relational Capacity is defined by Bendall et al. as:

Relational capacity is the degree of trust and level of safety between members of a group. In an educational context, this specifically refers to the established level of trust and safety between teachers and students, as well as directly between students. Classes that are low in relational capacity are often teacher-centered, with little dialogue or collaboration amongst students. Alternatively, classes that are high in relational capacity are characterized by energy and comfort, where students feel mutual ownership in the expectations and learning within the classroom. (Bendall et al., 2015, p. 5)

Relational Capacity is a central aspect of the AVID College and Career Readiness Framework, as illustrated in Figure 5 below.

The AVID College and Career Readiness Framework



The intent of the AVID College and Career Readiness Framework is to provide educators, community members, parents, and students with a model of what is needed to develop college and career readiness schoolwide.

Figure 5: AVID College and Career Readiness Framework (AVID CCRF, 2022)

Relational Capacity is developed through an over-arching *Collective Educator Agency*. Collective Educator Agency refers to the corpus of teachers working independently as well as with agreed upon AVID strategies for increasing college readiness which includes:

- Insist on Rigor: Referring to the primary tenet of AVID, coupled with support;
- Break Down Barriers: Referring to challenging student as well as educator or institutional beliefs that promote deficit models of student potential and achievement;
- Align the Work: Referring to scaffolding work in increasing levels of complexity to help ensure student comprehension and mastery;
- Advocate for Students: Referring to teachers' central role in helping students believe in themselves and their ability to obtain high academic goals as well as personal objectives and ambitions. (Bendall et al., 2015, p. 5)

Relational Capacity is the key and *lynchpin* supporting Maslow's safety needs of establishing trust and safety so that higher academic and personal growth levels can be achieved.

Nel Noddings's Ethics of Care

During analysis of student comments in Focus-Group question No. 4, I discovered the works of Nel Noddings. As I investigated her works on caring and the *Ethics of Care*, her writings seemed to offer an intuitive way to interpret the numerous comments students made about their teachers. In essence, EECHS teachers care about their students. One might say, "Well, of course, they care about their students. All teachers are supposed to care about their students!" But Noddings defines caring differently than this idealized, abstract caring or what she calls "virtue" caring. For Noddings, caring must be visible and recognized by the one being cared for. In the following sections, I summarize basic concepts and provide vocabulary used in Noddings's Ethics of Care (Noddings, 2005; 2013).

Noddings's Ethics of Care articulates how we interact with and care for one another, especially in a teaching and learning environment. Her ethical caring theory is built on the idea of a "caring relation" whereby one person (the one-caring) takes care of another (the cared-for). An essential aspect of the "caring relation" is that the person being cared for recognizes that they are being cared for. "What does caring look like?" implies that caring is evident and recognized by the one being cared for. This caring relation extends beyond merely helping someone with their homework and involves understanding and appreciating the needs, feelings, and goals of the cared-for, a concept Noddings calls *engrossment*.

A significant part of this care involves *motivational displacement*, where the one-caring (such as the teacher) puts the cared-for's (such as the student) needs and goals before their own.

Dialogue is a key part of the caring relationship, with open and genuine conversation helping to build understanding and trust between the one-caring and the one cared-for. In addition, caring may be either *natural caring* or *ethical caring*. Natural caring is the type of caring characterized by love and affection, such as what a parent might have towards their child; Ethical caring is the type of caring that one might feel out of a sense of obligation or duty because it is the right way to treat someone else. The following represents vocabulary as well as common concepts in Noddings's Ethics of Care (Noddings, 2013).

Ethics of Care Vocabulary and Common Concepts

1. Carer (one-caring): The person who exhibits care towards someone else.
2. Cared for: The individual who receives care from the one-caring.
3. Dialogue: A meaningful conversation between the carer and cared-for, which aids in understanding and forming deeper connections. Dialogue is a crucial component of the caring relationship.
4. Engrossment: Thinking about someone to gain a deeper understanding of their situation; Engrossment is a necessary part of caring.
5. Motivational Displacement: The process where the actions of the one-caring are determined primarily by the needs of the person being cared for.
6. Natural caring: Acts of caring that occur because of a personal desire to care.
7. Ethical caring: Acts of caring that occur not out of personal desire but because of the belief that it is the correct way to relate to people.
8. Ethical ideal: An image of the kind of person someone wants to be, which is developed through the experiences of giving and receiving care.

Summary

Ch. II presented a brief historical background and context outlining the major elements that have anticipated the arrival of the early college high school. These elements included the Comprehensive High School, the Small School Reform movement, and earlier attempts at aligning and coordinating the high school and college curriculum.

While this study focuses on a high-achieving early college high school in the Rio Grande Valley in Riverbend, Texas, consideration of the events that led to Texas's embrace of the early college high school is particularly important. These events focus upon the demographic analysis and predictions of Texas's first state demographer, Steve Murdock, and the responses and resultant legislation enacted by the Texas state legislature since 2000 to improve the postsecondary educational attainment of all Texas citizens.

Following an examination of Texas Accountability Systems since 2002, Ch. II continued with an exploration of AVID, the college-preparatory program employed at EECHS, and then concluded with a presentation of Developmental and Conceptual Frameworks relevant to understanding the discussions presented in Ch. IV Presentation of Data, and Ch. V Discussion, Recommendations, and Implications.

In Ch. III, this study's methodology is presented, which includes an overview, discussion of the research methodology and rationale, site selection, participant selection, data collection and data analysis procedures, and considerations of trustworthiness, limitations, delimitations, and assumptions of the study.

CHAPTER III
METHODOLOGY

Overview

The purpose of this chapter is to introduce the research methodology used to discover why one early college high school in a border city in South Texas consistently achieves academic excellence. Additionally, I will present and discuss the order, sequence, and data collection procedures used for students, faculty, and documents and other media review.

In *Part One: Students*, demographic information was collected using an online student data questionnaire, seven five-member student focus group interviews were conducted, and nine individual student interviews were conducted.

In *Part Two: Faculty*, faculty demographic information was collected using an online faculty data questionnaire. Eleven teachers, two counselors, and two administrators were personally interviewed.

In *Part Three: Documents and Other Media Review*, a close examination of EECHS yearbooks from its first year to the present day yielded valuable information about its history and formation. Student artifacts, the school's website, and Commencement Programs for Spring 2022 and Spring 2023 were also examined.

Data collected in Part One: Students, Part Two: Faculty, and Part Three: Documents and Other Media Review helped provide answers to the following research questions:

RQ1: What are the lived experiences of the teachers, students, and

staff in this high-achieving early college high school?

RQ2: What motivates these high-achieving students to overcome obstacles and persist to degree completion?

RQ3: What factors or elements play a part in contributing to these students' success?

RQ4: What motivates these high-achieving early college high school teachers to challenge their students with the expectations and rigor required of college level work?

This chapter also provides an overview and description of the rationale, methodology, and procedures which were used to explore the lived experiences of students and faculty in a high-achieving early college high school in a border city in South Texas. Included is the introduction, qualitative research design rationale, case study methodology rationale, research design, and instrumentation. Also presented is the site selection process used for choosing the Excelencia Early College High School, Texas Community College, and Texas Valley University.

I then discuss the participant selection processes used for students and faculty, followed by a discussion of data collection procedures used for students, faculty, and documents and other media. The chapter concludes with a discussion of data analysis procedures, trustworthiness, limitations of the study, delimitations of the study, assumptions, and a summary.

Qualitative Research Design Rationale

A qualitative rather than quantitative research approach and methodology was chosen for this study because of the nature of the phenomenon being explored. A central paradigm of qualitative research is that reality is subjective and that individuals experience, interpret, and construct multiple realities based on the social and cultural world in which they live. Merriam states: "...the key philosophical assumption upon which all types of qualitative research are based

is the view that reality is constructed by individuals interacting with their social worlds”
(Merriam, 1998, p. 6).

Quantitative, qualitative, and the relatively recent addition of mixed methods research methodology all represent different analytical approaches to investigating and answering various types of issues and problems in the social sciences (Teddlie & Johnson, 2009). Each of these research methodologies have different paradigms or worldviews that inform the community of scholars or researchers who discover, create, and share knowledge in their particular research areas (Morgan, 2014). Because participants in this study share the common social and lived experience of being members of a high-performing early college high school, a qualitative and constructivist analytical approach was selected as the method most likely to reveal insights as to the nature and possible explanation of their high-academic achievement.

As popularized by Kuhn in his *Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (2012) the term *paradigm* has since entered into the social sciences vocabulary as a way of describing a particular way of viewing the world. Elaborating upon Kuhn's paradigm concept, scholars Johnson and Ongwuegbuzie state: "... by research paradigm we mean a set of beliefs, values, and assumptions that a community of researchers has in common regarding the nature and conduct of research. The beliefs include, but are not limited to, ontological beliefs, epistemological beliefs, axiological beliefs, aesthetic beliefs, and methodological beliefs" (Johnson & Ongwuegbuzie, 2004, p. 24). Noted qualitative research scholars Teddlie & Tashakkori continue the discourse by defining a paradigm as a "...worldview, complete with the assumptions that are associated with that view" (Teddlie & Johnson, 2009, p. 4).

Denzin and Lincoln elaborate further that a paradigm is composed of four constituent parts including ontology, epistemology, axiology, and methodology (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018).

These paradigm components have relevance to the rationales used in collecting, analyzing, and interpreting the data in the present study. For example, the ontology of interpretivism in qualitative research is one of relativism. From this perspective, reality is individually experienced and mediated, subjective, and necessarily differs and varies from person to person (Creswell, 2013; Guba & Lincoln, 1994; Scotland, 2012). Obtaining and comparing multiple participants' viewpoints of their shared social realities through focus-group interviews and personal interviews is based on the ontological premise of relativism.

The epistemology of interpretivism is one of subjectivism in that while the researcher and the research subject are both part of the same reality, each will have a different experience in their perception of this reality (Teddlie & Johnson, 2009; Yilmaz, 2013). Axiology in qualitative research addresses the reality that research is value laden, that biases will be present, and that it is a responsibility of the researcher to acknowledge and reflect on these tendencies to increase research trustworthiness (Creswell, 2013; Yilmaz, 2013).

Students, teachers, and faculty members of the Excelencia Early College High School (EECHS) share common social and lived experiences of being part of a school which has become known for its high academic achievement in the domain of the early college high school. The interpretive, naturalistic approach of qualitative research situating the researcher within the phenomena as a participant-observer seemed most appropriate. Observing, gathering, interpreting, and producing a thick description of the data from the multiple perspectives and lived experiences of the research participants seemed the most logical choice of research method for this study (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2018; Geertz, 1973; Ravitch & Carl, 2016).

Case Study Rationale

A descriptive case study design was chosen for this study based on the nature of the research phenomenon. The phenomenon of interest is a high-achieving early college high school along the Texas-Mexico border where poverty and minoritized populations are the norm rather than the exception. Despite economic hardships and limited means, the students and faculty in this school consistently achieve exemplary ratings as evaluated by the Texas Education Agency (Appendix Q, EECHS SRC 2018-2019).

Yin states that the descriptive case study approach might be chosen whenever the nature of the research questions concern the "why" or "how" things are occurring and are of a contemporary phenomenon (2018). Why and how this high-achieving early college high school achieves academic excellence with a predominantly minoritized student body enrollment of limited economic means are the concerns of this study and for which the case study design seems most appropriate.

Scholars Hancock and Algozzine assert that a case study typically focuses on an individual representation of a particular group, that the particular case study is explored within its natural context as bounded by space and time, and that the case study is richly descriptive because of the variety of sources from which data can be collected (Hancock & Algozzine, 2016).

In applying Hancock and Algozzine's description of a case study's focus, the high-achieving Hispanic students in this study are individually representative of a particular group because they share the same characteristics of being underrepresented in higher education, first-generation students, and students of lower socioeconomic strata. This study was conducted within the natural boundaries of space and time on the stand-alone EECHS campus within the

rhythm of the regular academic school year. Finally, a thick description and wealth of information was obtained through student focus-group interviews, teacher, counselor, and administrator interviews, on-campus researcher observations, and document and other media review. Through these data sources and researcher examination, understanding and insight of the research phenomena was obtained.

The Excelencia Early College High School is a school that is clearly different, separate, and unique in its very conception from the traditional comprehensive high school. Yet within the boundaries of this early college high school exists the unique phenomena and subject of this study: the high-achieving early college high school.

Research Design

A variety of analytical approaches may be used in qualitative research for understanding shared social experiences as well as individual participants' lived experiences. In this study, a descriptive case study design seemed most appropriate for presenting the data obtained from focus-group interviews, semi-structured, open-ended interviews, and document and other media review.

Yin (2018) states that descriptive case studies are primarily aimed at describing an event, a condition, or a phenomenon within its context within a real-world setting. In this study, a rich description of student and faculty experiences was obtained in the real-world setting and context of one high-achieving early college high school.

Instrumentation

In qualitative research, the researcher is considered to be the primary instrument for data collection and analysis (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Seidman, 2019). The role of the researcher as the main data collection instrument is shaped and influenced by both the ontology and the

epistemology of qualitative inquiry (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Ontology as discussed in these authors' seminal work *Naturalistic Inquiry* refers to the view that in terms of human experience, reality is subjective, not absolute, and will necessarily differ from one person to another.

Epistemology in these same authors' work refers to the manner of how knowledge is obtained. In qualitative inquiry Lincoln and Guba (1985) assert that knowledge is gained through direct experience and observation of the phenomena by the researcher, thus positioning the researcher in the role as the primary instrument for data collection. They also maintain that a human being (the researcher) is perfectly suited to be the instrument of choice in qualitative data collection or naturalistic inquiry because of the primary characteristic of versatility. Lincoln and Guba present an expansive list descriptive of human versatility including such characteristics as:

- (a) responsiveness
- (b) adaptability
- (c) holistic expansion
- (d) knowledge base expansion
- (e) processual immediacy
- (f) opportunities for clarification and summarization
- (g) opportunities to explore atypical or idiosyncratic responses

(a) Responsiveness. The "human as primary research instrument" is sensitively attuned to environmental, personal, and other cues or indications that might present themselves in the research environment. Because of this flexibility the researcher can examine and revise research schema as necessary, clarify the less obvious, and discard the unessential.

(b) Adaptability. While lacking perfection in any singular aspect, human beings are unique in their ability to adapt to their environment. Regarding data collection, the human

researcher has the capacity to collect data from multiple sources at once by adapting to a changing scenario.

(c) Holistic expansion. The human as data collection instrument has the unique capacity to see the individuality of the parts without losing the perspective of the overall dimension. In other words, the human-as-instrument can see the "trees" of all the data points that make up the aggregate of a phenomenon without losing the perspective about how that data fits into the larger conceptual "forest" of the phenomenon of interest.

(d) Knowledge base expansion. Lincoln and Guba state that the "human instrument is competent to function simultaneously in the domains of propositional and tacit knowledge" (1985, p. 194). By this they mean that the researcher's modalities of thought includes both a theoretical type of knowledge and a type of knowledge borne of personal experience, and that these two modalities of knowledge acquisition combine and work synergistically to increase the knowledge base of the researcher.

(e) Processual immediacy. The authors assert that the human instrument has the unique capacity to process data immediately, revise previous concepts, and both generate and test new hypotheses in the field as they occur.

(f) Opportunities for clarification and summarization. In the process of data collection, the researcher has the capacity to check with participants about the veracity of data summaries, receive feedback from participants, and make additions and corrections as necessary.

(g) Opportunity to explore atypical or idiosyncratic responses. The human as instrument possesses the ability to pursue further and collect more data in the event of responses that are unexpected and that might represent the possibility of contributing to a higher level of understanding of the phenomenon (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Lincoln and Guba further state that in qualitative or naturalistic inquiry, the "naturalness" of the inquiry results when the researcher allows no manipulation of the phenomenon being observed and allows no a priori conceptions to influence his or her interpretation of the phenomenon being observed (1985). My role as a researcher was to observe and experience the participants in this study in an unbiased manner without manipulation, and to use the concept of the Epoché or what Cresswell and Poth call bracketing or the intentional setting aside of preconceived ideas or assumptions about the subject being studied (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Site Selection

After a previous dissertation topic proved to be unproductive, my curiosity was piqued when my doctoral advisor suggested the high-achieving early college high school as a possible topic. Although the early college high school is a relatively new school reform movement having begun in 2002, there is a considerable body of literature beginning to amass on this subject with a variety of dissertation topics discussed (Edmunds et al., 2020; Jett & Rinn, 2020; Miller et al., 2013). One topic which seemed to be under-researched, however, was the high-performing or high-achieving early college high school (ECHS). While much research has already been done on economically disadvantaged, high-achieving elementary schools and high schools (Angelis & Wilcox, 2011; Barth et al., 1999; Carter & Meyerson, 2000), comparatively few studies have been conducted on economically disadvantaged, high-achieving ECHSs.

To select an appropriate high performing ECHS in Texas for this study, I first downloaded all ECHS school report cards from the Texas Education Agency (TEA) website for the 2017-2018 academic year. TEA annually evaluates all publicly funded school districts and schools within the state of Texas using a variety of measures including: Student Achievement, School Progress, and Closing the Gaps (TEA Accountability Overview, 2019). Each of these

three measures is then averaged together to produce one overall score which then becomes the TEA annual school report card grade as shown in Appendix Q, EECHS School Report Card 2018-2019. I then entered these school report card grades into an Excel spreadsheet and sorted them numerically from greatest to least to determine high-achieving ECHSs.

Of the 203 ECHS school report card grades for 2017-2018, only one school in Texas received a grade of 99, while twenty schools received a grade of 98. The school receiving a grade of 99 was Trinidad Garza Early College High School at Mountain View College in the Dallas Independent School District.

Choosing Excelencia Early College High School (EECHS)

Of the 20 other ECHSs which had school report card grades of 98, The Excelencia Early College High School (EECHS) was chosen because the students in this high-achieving ECHS are representative of the intended group which the ECHS model is specifically designed for. EECHS students are lower socioeconomic status, Hispanic and other minoritized groups, and are representative of the demographic groups typically underrepresented in higher education.

The school name "Excelencia" was chosen as a pseudonym for this school because it seemed appropriate. The city in which the Excelencia Early College High School is located has been given the pseudonym "Riverbend" due to the school district's proximity to the Rio Grande River. Excelencia ECHS's school district has been given the pseudonym "Rio Independent School District" (RISD). The pseudonyms given for the institutes of higher education which serve EECHS students include Texas Community College (TCC), a two-year community college, and Texas Valley University (TVU), a four-year university.

Early college high schools vary in configuration, enrollment, and location. Some ECHSs are situated within a regular, comprehensive high school building in a "School-within-a-school"

cohort type of arrangement. Such schools typically have a combined enrollment of more than 2,000 students. Other ECHSs are constructed solely for ECHS students, and these are called the “Standalone” type of ECHS. Standalone ECHSs typically have no more than about 400 students equally distributed from 9th to 12th grade. EECHS is an example of the Standalone ECHS and resides on a separate and distinct campus constructed specifically for EECHS.

Gaining Access to the Site

Site access provided advantages by allowing me to make in-person observations, conduct interviews, and experience EECHS’s school climate first-hand. After this dissertation proposal was approved by the Texas Valley University Institutional Review Board, (Appendix A: IRB Approval Letter), an email was sent to the superintendent of the Rio Independent School District requesting permission to conduct research at the school (Appendix B: Letter to Superintendent).

After receiving the superintendent’s approval, I visited EECHS, met with the campus principal, and discussed with her the nature and purpose of this study (Appendix C: EECHS Principal Meeting). She then directed me to one of the school counselors who helped me schedule a time for a senior presentation of the study as well as possible days and times for student focus-group interviews.

Excelencia Early College High School

The Excelencia Early College High School (EECHS) is representative of the original early college high school Standalone model proposed by Janet Lieberman (Lieberman, 1985, 2004) in two respects. First, EECHS is separate in its physical structure from the other two institutes of higher education which serve its student population. Conveniently, both TCC and TVU are within walking distance of EECHS and provide its students ease of access to their

facilities, classes, and professors in pursuit of their two-year associate's degree and 42 core university credits.

Second, the EECHS curriculum is accelerated with ninth and tenth grade students completing their high school graduation requirements as well as beginning their associate's degree during their first two years of instruction on the EECHS campus. Juniors and seniors continue with AVID III and AVID IV classes on the EECHS campus but complete their 42 core university credits by taking classes on the Texas Valley University campus.

EECHS is situated within the Rio Independent School District (RISD) near the Texas-Mexico border. The EECHS student body is composed of approximately 400 students from grades nine through twelve. EECHS's demographic makeup is quite similar when compared to the RISD demographic profile with Hispanic (96%), White (2%), Asian (1.3%), and African American (0.8%) students comprising the enrollment for the 2018-2019 academic year (EECHS TAPR, 2018).

Texas Community College

Established in the mid 1920's, Texas Community College (TCC) was created to provide higher education opportunities for the graduates of the Rio Independent School District as well as meet the higher education needs of Riverbend community members. While originally established solely as an academic institution, in the 1970's TCC broadened its course offerings and began offering vocational and occupational programs leading to certificates and other types of workforce certifications. Today, TCC offers more than 50 programs of study leading to an associate's degree or other certificate.

Texas Valley University

The Texas Valley University (TVU) is a four-year university within the Texas higher education system. With an enrollment of more than 31,000 students in the 2022-2023 academic year, more than 5,000 first-generation students began as first-time entering freshmen. TVU has a variety of undergraduate, graduate, and doctoral programs available to students who wish to continue their education. TVU also has the distinction of being designated as a Hispanic Serving Institution (HSI) with a Hispanic student population of more than 90%. TVU offers a variety of higher education opportunities and postsecondary degree academic programs available for Excelencia Early College High School students and is ranked third in the nation for the number of Hispanics that receive bachelor's degrees.

Participant Selection

Because both students and faculty were interviewed in this study, I divided them into two different groups for clarity of organization and presentation. Part One: Students, refers to student focus-group participants as well as students who volunteered for a personal interview. Part Two: Faculty refers to teachers, counselors, and administrators who volunteered to participate in a personal interview. In the following sections, I will first discuss the selection process for Part One: Students, and then discuss the selection process for Part Two: Faculty.

Part One: Students

With the counselor's assistance, a senior presentation was given on Monday, January 10 (Appendix D: Research Study Presentation for EECHS Seniors). While EECHS's student body consists of a total of 400 students evenly divided into freshmen, sophomore, junior, and senior classes, 12th grade students were chosen because of their maturity as well as breadth of

experience and understanding of the early college high school curriculum which they have had direct experience with.

This presentation was given to the entire senior class of 82 students, almost all of whom were in attendance. During this twenty-minute presentation, the nature of the study, its purpose, requirements, and benefits were all explained. Time was allotted so that at the end of the presentation, student questions could be answered. Fifteen students volunteered to participate and completed the required Parental Permission and Consent Form (Appendix E), Assent Form (Appendix G), and Informed Consent Form (Appendix H) which they returned to the school's AVID IV counselor on Friday, Jan. 14. Of these students, four volunteered to participate in individual student interviews. Student interviews were conducted either on EECHS campus during normal school hours or using the Zoom conferencing technology after school. Student interviews are not presented in Ch. IV or V but instead were used to verify and triangulate certain statements made during student focus-group interviews.

These first fifteen students participated in three focus groups during spring semester, 2022. Unfortunately, a gender imbalance with more females than males had inadvertently occurred, and a fourth focus group was scheduled to correct this issue. However, this all-male fourth focus group had to be cancelled because of the Uvalde school shooting. This tragic shooting occurred during the last weeks of instruction at EECHS, and out of an abundance of caution, many schools in the RISD including EECHS became closed campuses. As a result, I decided to conduct another series of focus groups in the spring of 2023 rather than complete this study with an unequal gender representation.

In the spring of 2023, I repeated the same senior research study presentation in the EECHS school cafeteria to a slightly smaller senior class of 76 students, twenty of whom

volunteered to participate. These twenty students were then grouped into four, five-member focus-groups. All students participated in their focus-group interview, their follow-up meeting, and completed their online student data questionnaire by the end of the spring 2023 semester. Of these students, five volunteered to participate in individual student interviews which were conducted either on EECHS campus during normal school hours or using the Zoom conferencing technology after school.

Part Two: Faculty

The faculty participants in this study were those mentioned by seniors as having been important or influential in their development at EECHS. Based upon their recommendations, these faculty were sent an email invitation which included an Introduction Letter and Informed Consent Form (Appendix L) describing this research study's purpose, methods, research guidelines, risks, benefits, and possible benefits.

All eleven EECHS teachers and two counselors returned their Informed Consent Signature pages either to the AVID IV teacher or myself via email, after which I contacted them to arrange their first interview. Following completion of their personal interview and their follow-up meeting, I then emailed them a link to complete the online Faculty Data Questionnaire (Appendix N).

During these thirteen interviews, both teachers and counselors mentioned the names of previous administrators who had been influential in the creation and implementation of EECHS. A dissertation amendment was submitted to the Texas Valley University Institutional Review Board, and approval was granted allowing me to contact these administrators and see if they might be interested in participating in this study. Both administrators were sent the Administrator Introduction Letter and Informed Consent Form (Appendix M) to which they both responded

positively. A personal interview and follow-up meeting was then arranged and conducted successfully with each administrator.

Data Collection

Qualitative researchers typically gather data from a variety of sources including interviews, observations, and documents or other types of media rather than relying upon a single source of data (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Guest et al., 2013). In this section, I present the data collection methods used in Part One: Students, Part Two: Faculty, and Part Three: Documents and Other Media Review.

Part One: Students

In *Part One: Students*, data collection began about one week following the senior presentation as previously mentioned. Prior to student data collection, seniors who chose to participate provided the Parent Permission and Consent Form (Appendix E), and either the Assent form (Appendix G), or Informed Consent Form (Appendix H).

Following student submission of the appropriate forms, students were then grouped into five-member focus-groups. Each focus-group participated in a one and one-half hour interview, of which I made an audio-recording for accuracy. In the following sections I will discuss the different aspects of student data collection, including (a) the Focus-Group Interview; (b) the Follow-Up meeting; (c) the Student Data Questionnaire; (d) Focus-Group questions; and (e) Focus-Group issues.

(a) Focus-Group Interview. The focus-group interview is a group interview technique where a small group of participants participate and are guided in a focused discussion on a topic of shared or common interest and experience (Morgan, 2019). I chose student focus-groups because of two main advantages. First, focus-groups are by their very nature social and

interactive and can thus generate an abundance of data from several different student's viewpoints. Second, small group interaction can often be less intimidating for students when involved in student-and-adult interactions, and thus might inspire more confidence towards self-disclosure (Krueger & Casey, 2015). *Structured Informality* might best be used to describe both the nature and character of the focus-group interview.

In the spring semester of 2022, fifteen students participated in focus group interviews, with gender representation of twelve females (80%) and two males (20%). A fourth focus group of all males was scheduled, but this focus group was cancelled because of the Uvalde school shooting, as previously mentioned. In spring of 2023, four additional focus groups were conducted which had a more balanced gender representation of nine females (45%), and eleven males (55%). The combined focus-group gender representation from spring 2022 and spring 2023 was twenty-one females (60%) and fourteen males (40%) and is reflective of EECHS's gender balance.

(b) Follow-Up Meeting. The follow-up meeting is an opportunity for the researcher to share their initial impressions and interpretations of the focus-group interview with the focus-group participants to get their responses and feedback (Morgan, 2019). The purposes of the follow-up meeting are several: to verify that what the participant intended was interpreted correctly as such by the researcher; to summarize the general ideas discussed in the focus-group interview; and to provide an "opportunity to assess intentionality" by corroborating the shared reality of the focus-group meeting participants and the researcher with an inquiring stance such as: "This is what I heard. Is that what you meant?" (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

The follow-up meeting is an important part of any qualitative research study involving interviews because it can help to verify that what the researcher heard is not only what was said,

but what was actually meant by the interview participant. As such, the follow-up meeting or member check may increase both the credibility of the interpretation as well as improve the overall trustworthiness of the research study (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

(c) Student Data Questionnaire. The purpose of the student data questionnaire was to efficiently obtain important background information about the student including their age, grade level, gender, ethnicity, parent educational background, and aspirations regarding college and career goals (Appendix J). Before the very first focus-group meeting in spring 2022, students completed this student data questionnaire. However, during the first focus-group meeting, students enthusiastically shared important information about their involvement in clubs and extracurricular activities at EECHS which then led me to revise, and then readminister the student data questionnaire to the same student focus-group.

Following that meeting, I contacted the AVID IV teacher who then loaned me several of EECHS's yearbooks. These yearbooks contained detailed information describing student and faculty life as well as the numerous clubs and extracurricular activities available at EECHS. I then revised the online student data questionnaire to include a question about student clubs and extracurricular involvement.

For the focus-groups that followed, I chose to have them complete the online student data questionnaire as the final step in their study participation prior to receiving their Target Gift Card incentive. All thirty-five students completed the online student data questionnaire (Appendix J).

(d) Focus-Group Questions. The 13 focus-group questions used in focus-group interviews are based on the original research questions with a small amount of elaboration and extension and are shown below (Student Focus-Group Interview Protocol, Appendix K).

RQ1. What are the lived experiences of the students, teachers, and faculty in this

high-achieving early college high school? Extensions of RQ 1 below are all open-ended questions and intended to elicit a variety of student responses.

1. What are some of the reasons that you decided to enroll at EECHS?
2. Looking back to your freshman year, what was it like for you?
3. What is it like now for you as a senior here at EECHS? How have things changed for you?
4. What are some of the things that you like the most about being a student at EECHS?

RQ 2. What motivates these students to overcome obstacles and persist to degree completion? Extensions of RQ 2 below are intended to elicit student descriptions of their subjective reasons for desiring high achievement, and their reasons for persisting despite difficulties.

5. What are some of the things that have been challenging or difficult for you as a student at EECHS?
6. What has helped motivate you to obtain high grades at EECHS?
7. Were there any times that you considered dropping out of EECHS?

RQ 3. What factors or elements play a part in contributing to these students' success? Extensions of RQ 3 are intended to elicit student success strategies as well as external factors which helped them achieve and persist at EECHS. The last two questions were provided for closure, as well as additions of any items previously overlooked.

8. What are some of the things that you have done to overcome challenges at EECHS?
9. Are there particular teachers, faculty, or staff at EECHS that you feel have made a difference or influenced your progress at EECHS?

10. Are there particular family members that you feel encouraged or supported your progress at EECHS?

11. Are there any particular classes at EECHS that you feel were helpful in preparing you for college classes?

12. Looking back at your freshman year, what advice would you offer to an incoming EECHS freshman?

13. Looking back on our discussion today, what in your opinion is most important? Are there other things that you would like to add? Have we missed anything?

(e) Focus-Group Issues. One concern about focus-group interviews is that it is possible for a few participants to dominate or otherwise overshadow other students in the discussion. Also, there are students who, even within the context of a small and relatively comfortable group setting, may be shy and may not speak up. Importantly, the success of a focus-group is greatly influenced by the skill of the researcher in both guiding without monopolizing the general direction of the conversation, as well as encouraging quieter students to participate (Guest et al., 2013).

Morgan (2019) discusses how the total of number of participants in a focus-group varies depending on their level of interest and engagement with the topic. Morgan asserts that if participants are interested in the topic being discussed, their participation and conversational contributions will tend to be high, or in other words, data-rich. Since EECHS is a high-achieving early college high school, it is reasonable to assume that students would be engaged in the process of their education and forthcoming in discussing their experiences and opinions as members of the EECHS community.

In keeping with the nature of the EECHS, a smaller focus-group size of five students was used in this study. As a result, students were able to answer all focus-group interview questions thoughtfully, while candidly sharing many of their thoughts and opinions of their experiences of being a student at EECHS. In general, focus-group interviews went smoothly with few issues and were conducted in the EECHS library on either Monday or Wednesday mornings.

Part Two: Faculty

In *Part Two: Faculty*, data collection began about one week following the receipt of faculty members' return of their Informed Consent Form (Appendix M). Faculty members were contacted, and interview times were arranged. In the next section I discuss: (a) Faculty Interviews; (b) Follow-Up Meetings; (c) Faculty Data Questionnaire; (d) Faculty Interview Questions; and (e) Faculty Interview Issues.

As previously mentioned, seniors provided names of faculty who they felt were important and who had influenced their progress at EECHS. All faculty were mentioned at least once, with some mentioned several times. Since I am a teacher with the RISD, I accessed these same faculty members' district email addresses and sent them an invitation to participate with the Introduction Letter and Informed Consent Form (Appendix L). This introductory letter explained how their names were chosen as possible participants, introduced this study, its purpose, voluntary nature, what the requirements were, and specific research study guidelines including confidentiality, risks, benefits, and potential benefits.

Eleven teachers and two counselors responded by returning the signed Informed Consent signature pages (Appendix L) to the AVID IV teacher or my personal RISD email account. Teachers and counselors indicated on their Informed Consent Form the best time to call to arrange a personal interview. After contacting them and arranging for interview times, faculty

interviews then began with the majority of them starting immediately after school at 4:15 p.m. on the EECHS campus, and usually concluding by 6 p.m. Eleven teachers and two counselors were interviewed in this manner beginning in the spring of 2022 and concluding in the spring of 2023.

During these interviews, both teachers and counselors recommended two additional RISD administrators who were influential in the creation and implementation of EECHS. One administrator, Mr. Reynolds, was the district's Advanced Academics administrator and was principally responsible for introducing the early college high school to RISD by writing the grant which funded EECHS. The other administrator, Mrs. Sutter, was EECHS's first principal and was influential in creating and coordinating the curriculum of the school and selecting and hiring the teachers for the school's opening in the fall of 2008. Based on faculty recommendations, I then submitted an amendment to my original study requesting permission from the IRB to interview these previous EECHS administrators.

(a) Faculty Interviews. An open-ended, semi-structured personal interview method as discussed by Seidman (2019) was used to obtain faculty members' perceptions of their lived experiences as members of the EECHS learning community. The questions which teachers and faculty responded to during their personal interviews are based on the original research questions with a small amount of elaboration and extension and are shown in section (d) below as well as in Appendix O, EECHS Faculty Interview Protocol.

While Seidman recommends using three different personal interviews with each participant in order to establish rapport, provide context, and allow for more in-depth of exploration regarding their experiences, I believe that the purpose of the first interview can be just as effectively accomplished by use of the online faculty data questionnaire similar to what

was used in *Part One: Students* of this study, and so I have made an adjustment in Seidman's interview protocol accordingly (Seidman, 2019).

(b) Follow-Up Meeting. The purpose of the follow up meeting affords the researcher an opportunity to meet once again with the participant with a goal of verifying the interpretation of the interview and make additions or modifications to the narrative as needed. For teachers, faculty, and administrators, a follow-up interview was conducted approximately ten days after the initial interview.

After several teacher interviews, it became apparent that the AVID program played a greater role in the academic, social, and emotional well-being of EECHS students than I had originally thought. As a result, I conducted two more personal interviews with the AVID, English, and Mathematics teachers as well as researched AVID more thoroughly for inclusion in Ch. II, Historical Background and Context.

(c) Faculty Data Questionnaire. The purpose of the online faculty data questionnaire was to efficiently obtain important background information such as the participant's age, gender, ethnicity or national origin, highest degree level obtained, subjects and grade levels which they teach, and number of years in public education.

As discussed previously, after the first student focus-group interview and two teacher interviews, I became aware that the AVID program at EECHS was school-wide, or as one AVID teacher stated, EECHS was “AVIDized” (Mrs. Arnold, PI 2). For this reason, I included several questions regarding AVID on the faculty data questionnaire. Also, students in focus-group interviews often mentioned teachers being supportive of them in different ways, such as allowing them to eat lunch in their classroom. Faculty responses to AVID questions and student comments about having lunch in teachers' classrooms were congruent.

(d) Faculty Interview Questions. Faculty interview questions are based on the research questions for this study, with some extension and elaboration.

RQ No. 1 asks: *“What are the lived experiences of EECHS faculty in this high-achieving early college high school?”* I extended and elaborated this question to elicit further descriptions of faculty perceptions and experiences at EECHS by adding the following questions:

1. What motivated you to become a teacher or faculty member at EECHS?
2. What's it like to be a teacher or faculty member at EECHS?
3. What are some of your most favorite things about being a teacher or faculty member at EECHS?
4. What are some of your least favorite things about being a teacher or faculty member at EECHS?

RQ No. 2 asks: *“What motivates these high-achieving teachers and faculty to overcome challenges at EECHS?”* I extended and elaborated this question to elicit further descriptions of faculty perceptions and experiences at EECHS by adding the following questions:

5. What are some of the challenges that you have experienced at EECHS? These might include student challenges, administration challenges, time management challenges, or other kinds of challenges.
6. How have you approached solving some of these challenges at EECHS?
7. How do you go about monitoring students' academic progress at EECHS, TCC, and TVU?
8. What kinds of support do you give to students academically, socially, and emotionally?

RQ No. 4 asks: *“What motivates these high-achieving early college high school teachers*

to challenge their students with the expectations and rigor required of college-level work?" I extended and elaborated this question to elicit further descriptions of faculty experiences at EECHS by adding the following questions:

9. Are there any particular challenges that present themselves by grade level?
10. As a teacher or faculty member at EECHS, what are you most proud of?
11. As a teacher and faculty member at EECHS, is there anything that you wish that you might have done differently?
12. Do you believe that EECHS students are capable of doing college-level work?
13. How do you convey to students the idea that "If I work hard, I can accomplish this" rather than "I'm smart, I should just be able to accomplish this?"
14. How many clubs or organizations do you sponsor?
15. What do you do to help students get connected and become familiar with each other at EECHS?

(e) Faculty Interview Issues. Faculty interviews produced an enormous amount of data. By about the fifth interview I noticed that saturation of data had occurred, with teachers and faculty members contributing similar responses to particular interview questions. Another unanticipated occurrence was that teachers sometimes veered away from the interview protocol, even though often in informative ways. For example, one teacher recounted in detail her first experience with TCC and TVU professors, and how they had expressed low expectations of both high school teachers as well as students. Another teacher mentioned that although he preferred solitude during his lunch hour, he always allowed students to have their lunch in his classroom.

As I neared the eighth teacher interview, I began to understand the veracity of Miles and Huberman's statement that "Qualitative studies are chronically called 'labor intensive,' but the

details are rarely provided " (1994, p. 46). A voluminous amount of interview data was being collected, but I was invested in completing this study with both student and teacher perceptions of their experiences in the high-achieving phenomenon of EECHS.

Some adjustments needed to be made. First, I decided that one personal faculty interview was sufficient. Second, I decided that in Ch. IV Presentation of Data, I would use contextual teacher interviews of the counselors and AVID I, II, III, and IV teachers to help articulate and provide context to their roles in the school. Third, I would use a brief interview format for one English teacher and one Math teacher. Fourth, I would present largely verbatim both EECHS administrator interviews because of their knowledgeable and highly articulate descriptions of the inspiration, history, creation, and implementation of EECHS.

(f) Personal Interview Strengths and Weaknesses. A strength and advantage of in-person interviewing includes the possibility of exploring a topic in greater depth and with more detail. Johnson and Christensen also state that in the in-depth interview the researcher may wish to elicit even more information from a participant by using *probes* which they define as "...prompts [that are] used to obtain response clarity or additional information" (Johnson & Christensen, 2014, p. 255). Seidman states that one of the main benefits of in-depth interviewing is that it helps the researcher in "understanding the lived experience of other people and the meaning they make of that experience" (Seidman, 2019, p. 9).

A weakness of in-person interviewing is the amount of time investment from both the researcher and the participants' perspectives, and the great amount of data which can be generated from such interviews. As previously mentioned, Miles and Huberman reflect that qualitative interviewing is often described as "labor intensive" due to both the vast amounts of

information that is produced as well as the efforts on the part of the researcher to organize, manage, and make sense of the ensuing mountain of qualitative data (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

Part Three: Documents and Other Media Review

Documents. I examine and discuss the EECHS school yearbook as a document in terms of it being a “social fact” (Atkinson & Coffey, 1997) and a public record created by the school to benefit its students, faculty, and alumni. Additionally, I discuss how the yearbook contents are corroborated by student focus-group and faculty sponsor comments.

I decided to focus on EECHS Yearbooks for two main reasons. First, student comments during focus-group interviews illustrated how important clubs and extracurricular organizations were to them. Since the seniors' AVID IV teacher is also their Yearbook Club sponsor and has a collection of EECHS yearbooks, I asked and was permitted to peruse her library. From her collection, I examined recent yearbooks dating from 2017-2020 and could view a full representation of EECHS's students, teachers, administrators, clubs, extracurricular activities, and student life. From these yearbooks, I also obtained the names of nineteen clubs and extracurricular activities, which were then incorporated into the revised student data questionnaire that all 35 focus-group students completed at the end of their participation in this study.

Second, EECHS's first principal, Mrs. Sutter, loaned me the first five yearbooks from 2008-2009 to 2012-2013. I found that EECHS's first yearbook (2008-2009) set the style for the yearbooks to follow because of its presentation style and inclusion of certain topics and themes that would recur in each of the succeeding yearbooks. A total of ten yearbooks were scanned, saved, and examined. The first four yearbooks were examined and are discussed further in Ch. IV, Presentation of Data.

Other Media. Other Media consisted of a variety of sources which I examined. These included observations I made on the EECHS campus of school and club announcements, viewing of EECHS's Blue Ribbon Award, examination of the school's website, and examination of senior and other student pictures placed prominently throughout the school. I also examined documents and other artifacts displayed within the AVID, English, and Mathematics classrooms of teachers whom I interviewed at EECHS, examined EECHS's 2018-2019 school report card, and examined the 2022 and 2023 EECHS Commencement Programs.

Data Analysis Procedures

The primary data collected in this study were obtained from student focus-group interviews and faculty and administrator personal interviews. Data obtained was analyzed using an iterative and multiphase process, with the first reading providing an overall sense of familiarity with the meaning of the data from the beginning to the end of the interview. Second and third readings were then conducted, looking for patterns in the data that might suggest emergent meanings, codes, or themes. I primarily employed the thematic analysis procedures presented by Braun and Clarke (2006) and Nowell et al. (2017).

Each focus-group was examined using this method, highlighting key ideas or themes that became apparent in response to focus-group questions. As data accumulated and focus-group interviews were completed, I compared the data from all the focus-groups to detect if recurring patterns were occurring and assigned codes to key themes as appropriate.

Because each of the 13 focus-group questions had additional sub-questions and seven focus-group interviews were conducted, I found the qualitative analysis software program MAXQDA helpful in organizing student focus-group data. I first identified and coded student responses as discussed previously and then imported them into MAXQDA. Using MAXQDA, I

monitored student responses to each focus-group question and could see the relative numerical frequency of each sub-theme which students discussed.

For example, question number one asked: "What are some of the reasons that you decided to enroll at EECHS?" The most common responses from focus-group interviews were 1-1. Earn an Associate's Degree, 1-2. Financial Savings, 1-3. Other Family Members had Attended, 1-4. Small School Size, and 1-5. Parent's Decision. Using MAXQDA, I could readily see how many instances of each sub-theme were mentioned by students in all focus-groups. For inclusion in Ch. IV and V, I decided that a sub-theme would need to be mentioned in at least four of the seven focus-groups. Using this criterion, I used MAXQDA to organize all student focus-group responses and then selected the most frequent sub-themes for presentation and discussion in Ch. IV and V.

Trustworthiness

Much has been written in qualitative research concerning the validation and reliability of research findings. Scholars and researchers take great care in defining what validation is, choosing vocabulary unique to the various types of validation used in qualitative research, and identifying specific techniques that operationalize the various types of validation typically used in qualitative research (Creswell, 2013).

In their seminal book, *Naturalistic Inquiry*, Lincoln and Guba (1985) coined the term *trustworthiness* to represent the quality criteria and terms that qualitative researchers might use to describe credibility or truth value. In this sense, trustworthiness and credibility might be considered two sides of the same coin that both indicate truth value. These authors add that there are three activities that, when operationalized, increase the likelihood that the findings of a study

will demonstrate trustworthiness and, therefore, credibility. These three activities are *prolonged engagement, persistent observation, and triangulation* (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 302).

The prolonged engagement that Lincoln and Guba discuss permits the researcher to not only absorb the minute details of events occurring but also describe the contexts of the observed phenomenon. At the same time, prolonged engagement in the field also allows the researcher to become aware of preconceptions, misinformation, or distortions that might "creep" into their interpretations of the data (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 302). This study's prolonged engagement and persistence naturally occurred due to the time spent conducting this study, which began in the spring of 2022 and finished in the spring of 2023. During both spring semesters, I spent time every week on the EECHS campus on either Monday or Wednesday mornings, conducting focus-group interviews, follow-up meetings, teacher interviews, and teacher follow-up meetings.

My engagement increased significantly when I inferred correctly that the AVID program was used with fidelity on the EECHS campus. This inspired me to conduct further research for Ch. II Historical Background and Context as well as conduct additional personal interviews with the AVID I, II, III, and IV teachers.

Data triangulation was achieved by analyzing and comparing data collected through multiple data sources, including student and faculty online data questionnaires, focus-group interviews, teacher interviews, follow-up meetings with students and faculty, and examination of documents and other media.

Lincoln and Guba state that member-checking or follow-up meetings are "...the most crucial technique for establishing credibility" (1985, p. 314). Data obtained from student focus-group interviews and teacher interviews was verified in follow-up meetings by providing each

participant with a temporary copy of the transcript and reading through each response line-by-line for clarification and accuracy (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Guest et al., 2013).

Relatability

While "Transferability" or the ability to apply a particular study's results to a broad number of similar cases in qualitative research is often used (Geertz, 1973; Lincoln & Guba, 1985), I prefer to use the term "Relatability" in discussing this study's findings with the intention that it resonates with others in the same area of interest.

This study shows that the high-achieving early college high school at present is an exception rather than the rule regarding academic achievement. Through examination of this study, it is hoped that other early college high schools might relate to and benefit from its findings in improving their own academic achievement.

Dependability and Confirmability

Another aspect of trustworthiness that Lincoln and Guba (1985) discuss is *dependability* and *confirmability*. In this study, dependability was achieved by creating a detailed record of all the research steps taken from the very beginning of the study to the development and summarization of the findings in the final chapter. Lincoln and Guba (1985) suggest that an outside observer should be able to reconstruct a highly detailed qualitative study using an inquiry audit similar in a metaphorical sense to the same way that a financial accountant might be able to achieve identical results using a fiscal audit (p. 318).

Limitations of the Study

1. The phenomena in this descriptive case study of a high-achieving early college high school was viewed from the perspective of a single researcher. As a result, the findings may not generalize to other populations of early college high schools.

2. The focus-group interviews of ECHS 12th grade students may not be reflective of other ECHS 12th grade students in this district or in other school districts in the United States.
3. The personal interviews of teachers, faculty, and administrators in this early college high school may not be reflective of the majority of these same types of personnel in the district of this study.
4. The researcher is employed as a teacher in the school district in which this study took place.

Delimitations of the Study

1. This study was limited to the amount of time that was scheduled for focus-group student interviews, teacher, faculty, and administrator interviews, follow-up meetings, and other data collection.
2. This study was limited to one high-achieving early college high school along the Texas-Mexico border that has consistently shown high academic achievement since its first graduating class in 2012 to the present day as measured by the Texas Education Agency Accountability Rating System.
3. This particular high-achieving early college high school was chosen because of its high academic achievement despite its students' low socioeconomic status.

Assumptions

1. The researcher was impartial in data collection and data analysis.
2. The interpretation of the data is reflective of the research purposes of this descriptive case study.

3. Focus-group student interview participants, teachers, faculty members, administrators, and follow-up meeting participants shared information with this researcher truthfully and willingly.

Summary

This chapter presented an overview with research questions, rationale for qualitative research, a rationale for the use of the case study method, research design, and instrumentation. Also included were the processes of site selection, gaining access, and participant selection. The researcher as the primary instrument of data collection was discussed.

Data collection was presented as occurring in three parts including Part One: Students, Part Two: Faculty, and Part Three: Documents and Other Media Review. Data analysis was discussed, issues of trustworthiness were then discussed, followed by a presentation of the limitations, delimitations, and assumptions in this study.

In Ch. IV Presentation of Data, data will be presented from Part One: Students, Part Two: Faculty, and Part Three: Documents and Other Media Review. In Part One, Student Data Questionnaire results will be displayed, and Focus-Group Interview Questions will be presented. In Part Two, Faculty Data Questionnaire results will be displayed, and Counselor, AVID, English, Mathematics, and Administrator interviews will be presented. In Part Three, EECHS's Yearbooks are examined as documents. Other Media examined include its Blue Ribbon Schools Award, 2018-2019 school report card, Senior pictures, AVID, English, and Mathematics student artifacts, EECHS website, and 2022 and 2023 Commencement programs.

CHAPTER IV
PRESENTATION OF DATA

Overview

The purpose of this descriptive case study was to explore student and faculty experiences as members of a high-achieving early college high school. An in-depth inquiry was conducted which examined the lived experiences of students, teachers, and administrators in one high-achieving early college high school. A central goal of this study was to discover possible reasons and factors which help contribute to this school's consistently high academic achievement as assessed by the Texas Education Agency's annual school report card (TEA, 2019).

The four research questions which guided this study are as follows:

RQ 1. What are the lived experiences of students, teachers, and faculty in this high achieving early college high school?

RQ 2. What motivates students to overcome obstacles and persist to degree completion?

RQ 3. What factors or elements contribute to these students' success?

RQ 4. What motivates these early college high school teachers to challenge their students with the expectations and rigor required of college-level work?

This study began in spring 2022 and concluded in spring 2023. Ch. IV is presented in three parts. *Part One: Students* consists of the Student Data Questionnaire and 12th grade student focus-group questions. *Part Two: Faculty* consists of an introduction to the EECHS faculty, the Faculty Data Questionnaire, Counselor Support contextual interviews, AVID, and AVID teacher

contextual interviews, English and Mathematics teacher interviews, and two Rio Independent School District administrator interviews. *Part Three: Documents and Other Media Review* consists of an examination of EECHS yearbooks, its 2016 Blue Ribbon School Award, the school's website, and senior and other student pictures placed prominently throughout the school. Also examined were documents and other artifacts displayed within classrooms of teachers I interviewed at EECHS, the school's 2018-2019 state report card, and Commencement Programs from Spring 2022 and 2023.

Part One: Students

All 12th grade seniors attended a research study presentation and were invited to participate in this study by completing permission forms including an assent form for students under age 18, an informed consent form for students 18 and over, and a parental consent form for students of all ages. A translation of the purpose, requirements, benefits, and possible risks or discomforts of the study was also provided in Spanish for parents whose primary language was Spanish.

In the fall of 2022, 15 students volunteered and were then grouped into three, five-member focus-groups. In the fall of 2023, the research study presentation was repeated, and 20 students who volunteered were grouped into four, five-member focus-groups. All students attended and participated in focus-groups and follow-up interviews in spring of 2022, and spring of 2023, respectively.

All 35 students participated in a focus-group interview, follow-up interview, and completed a student data questionnaire at the conclusion of their focus-group interview. Following review of the focus-group transcripts, I used critical-case purposeful sampling (Onwuegbuzie & Collins, 2007) to interview 9 students who had volunteered to share more

about their experiences in a one-hour, personal interview. These student interviews were used primarily to supplement, clarify, and triangulate focus-group responses and other comments that students made and were not presented in their entirety in this study.

Part Two: Faculty

15 faculty including 11 teachers, 2 counselors, and 2 administrators were emailed a personal invitation to participate in this study. All 15 participants replied and agreed to meet either on the EECHS campus or in a Zoom interview at a time convenient for both the participant and the researcher.

After I conducted the personal interview transcript analysis, a follow-up meeting with the participant was conducted to ensure accuracy. After the completion of their follow-up meeting, each participant was then emailed a link where they then completed the Faculty Data Questionnaire.

After about the fifth interview, it became apparent that redundancy and satiation of data had occurred. In addition, it seemed that teachers often veered away from the interview protocol questions, even though in relevant ways. From some teachers' spontaneous comments, I also inferred that the school's college readiness program AVID seemed to play an important role in student academic achievement as well as shaping the schools' climate.

I also learned from teacher recommendations of two earlier administrators influential in the creation, design, and implementation of EECHS. It was at that point that I realized that there were a number of things that needed to be done that were not part of my original research plan.

First, I researched the AVID and college readiness literature and made additions to Ch. II, Historical Background and Context. Second, I asked all four AVID teachers for additional interviews so I could learn more about their experiences with the AVID program and how it is

used at EECHS. Third, I decided to include and frame all four AVID teachers' interviews in context with their particular AVID level taught. Fourth, I decided to focus primarily on the English and Mathematics teachers for personal interview data as both areas are critical in establishing college readiness in Texas. Fifth, from personal interviews with EECHS counselors, I decided to contextualize their interviews in terms of the Counselor Support services they provide at EECHS. Sixth, I submitted an IRB modification to receive permission to interview the two administrators influential in the creation, design, and implementation of EECHS.

Part Three: Documents and Other Media Review

The documents referred to here are data gathered from personal examination of EECHS yearbooks beginning from 2008 to the present day. EECHS yearbooks were provided by both the AVID IV teacher as well as EECHS's first principal, Mrs. Sutter. Other Media refers to a variety of sources including the Blue-Ribbon Award received from the U.S. Department of Education in 2016, examination of the school website, personal observations made on the EECHS campus as I viewed senior and underclassmen pictures on display throughout the school hallways, inspection of documents and artifacts displayed within the AVID, English, and Mathematics classrooms of teachers whom I had personally interviewed, and examination of the 2022 and 2023 Commencement programs.

In the following section, Chapter IV continues with Step 1 of the Data Analysis, the Epoché. Part One: Students is then presented beginning with an overview and then a presentation of student responses to the demographic survey, followed by student focus-group interview comments.

The Epoché

In qualitative research, the researcher is a contributing part of the study, because they represent a human variable that influences data formulation, collection, and interpretation. The researcher brings to their study a tacit assumption of the world or a paradigm that may, without their conscious awareness, influence or skew their perceptions and presentations of the data collected in a study. While I was cognizant of my own experiences as a teacher in the early college high schools in this district, I strived to remain centered on participants' comments and viewpoints and letting their experiences remain in the forefront of the EECHS story as it unfolded.

According to Moustakas, one of the essential requirements of the Epoché is for the researcher to view the data "as if for the first time" (1994, p. 85). Viewing the early college high school and early college high school students "as if for the first time" was challenging for me because I had taught dual-enrollment classes in five of the comprehensive early college high schools in the Rio Independent School District prior to beginning the present study.

All five of these early college high schools are examples of the School-within-a-school model consisting of a larger population of more than 2,000 students with a smaller group or "cohort" of early college high school students contained within. As this study of EECHS proceeded, I reflected on my past experiences in these School-within-a-school ECHSs. I realized that there were two out of the five early college high schools where students completed their assignments, received higher grades, and demonstrated higher college readiness levels. Based on what I have discovered about EECHS, these two higher-performing early college high schools possibly provided more faculty and counseling support to their cohort students regarding the importance of high grades.

While previously I had approached the Epoché and bracketing as a kind of partition where my previous experiences as a dual-enrollment instructor were placed in the background, I began to see that bracketing did not imply discounting my previous experiences but rather involved recognizing their existence as a separate reality which might be of relevance in the present study.

Moustakas stated: "In the Epoché, the everyday understandings, judgments, and knowings are set aside, and phenomena are revisited, freshly, naively, in a wide open sense, from the vantage point of a pure or transcendental ego" (Moustakas, 1994, p. 85). As an aid to increase my own objectivity, I carried a personal notepad to record my thoughts and observations about EECHS which I made throughout the day. These researcher notes helped me to remain centered and responsive to the participants and their own unique stories and experiences at EECHS.

Part One: Students

As previously described in Ch. III Methodology, I proceeded with Creswell's (2013) suggestion that surveys and questionnaires can often be used as a preliminary or exploratory step to identify themes or patterns, which might be explored further using other data collection methods such as interviews. However, the results and data from the first focus-group required me to revise the Student Data Questionnaire considerably. For example, during the first focus-group interview, one of the students casually remarked about the clubs they belonged to. Upon further probing, within a few seconds, the entire discussion had turned toward the students' involvement and enjoyment of the many clubs and extracurricular activities offered at EECHS. Following this first focus-group interview, I looked through five previous years of EECHS student yearbooks and noted the names of the numerous clubs and extracurricular organizations at EECHS. These

club names and extracurricular organizations were then incorporated into the revised Student Data Questionnaire and then readministered to the first focus-group.

The Student Data Questionnaire (Appendix J) was completed by all thirty-five EECHS seniors, with focus-groups one through three finishing in spring 2022 and focus-groups four through seven finishing in the spring of 2023. Survey results suggest that while EECHS seniors had many things in common, more than a few differences became apparent after closer examination and comparison of the data.

Student Data Questionnaire

1. What is your age? The average age of EECHS seniors is 18 years old. 20 seniors (57.14%) indicated their age as 18; 14 seniors (40%) stated that they were 17 years old; and 1 student (2.86%) indicated that they were 19 years old. Student Age Frequencies and Percentages is displayed in Table 3.

Table 3: Student Age Frequencies and Percentages

Student Age	<i>n</i>	Percentage of Total
17 years old	14	40
18 years old	20	57.14
19 years old	1	2.86
Total	35	100

2. What is your gender? Fourteen students (40%) were male, twenty students (57.14%) were female, and one student (2.86%) identified as non-binary/third gender. Student Gender Frequencies and Percentages is displayed in Table 4.

Table 4: Student Gender Frequencies and Percentages

Student Gender	<i>n</i>	Percentage of Total
Male	14	40
Female	20	57.14
Non-binary/third gender	1	2.86
Total	35	100

3. What is your ethnicity? Twenty-eight students (80%) indicated their ethnicity as Hispanic, one student (2.86%) indicated their ethnicity as Black or African American, one student (2.86%) indicated their ethnicity as Asian and five students (14.29%) listed their ethnicity as Other. Ethnicity Frequencies and Percentages is displayed in Table 5.

Table 5: Ethnicity Frequencies and Percentages

Ethnicity	<i>n</i>	Percentage of Total
White	0	0
Hispanic	28	80
Black or African American	1	2.86
Asian	1	2.86
Other	5	14.29
Total	13	100

4. What language is spoken primarily at your home? Sixteen seniors (45.71%) indicated that they spoke Spanish exclusively at home, six (17.14%) spoke English only at home, twelve (34.29%) indicated that they spoke both Spanish and English at home, and one senior (2.86%) indicated that they spoke an Asian language at home. Primary Languages Spoken at Home Frequencies and Frequencies is displayed in Table 6.

Table 6: Primary Languages Spoken at Home Frequency and Percentages

Primary Language Spoken at Home	<i>n</i>	Percentage of Total
Spanish	16	45.71
English	6	17.14
Spanish and English	12	34.29
Other (Asian language)	1	2.86
Total	35	100

5. What is the highest educational level of your father? The targeted population of the early college high school are first-generation students, or those whose parents list the high school diploma as their highest degree obtained (Blueprint, 2020). Four students (11.43%) indicated that their father did not graduate from high school, while fourteen (40%) indicated that their father

had graduated. Six students (17.14%) indicated that their father had attended some college without graduating, while one (2.86%) indicated that their father had received an associate’s degree. Three students (8.57%) indicated their father had received a bachelor’s degree, while one student (2.86%) indicated that their father had received a master’s degree. Two students (5.71%) indicated that their father had received a doctorate degree, while four students (11.43%) were unsure about the educational achievement of their parents. Father's Education Level Frequencies and Percentages is displayed in Table 7.

Table 7: Father's Education Level Frequencies and Percentages

Education Level: Father	<i>n</i>	Percentage of Total
Less than a High School Diploma	4	11.43
High School Diploma	14	40
Some college but no degree	6	17.14
Associate's degree (2-year)	1	2.86
Bachelor's degree (4-year)	3	8.57
Master’s Degree	1	2.86
Doctorate Degree	2	5.71
Unsure	4	11.43
Total	35	100.00

6. What is the highest educational level of your mother? Six students (17.14%) indicated that their mother did not graduate from high school, while five (14.29%) indicated that their mother had graduated. Six students (17.14%) indicated that their mother had attended some college without graduating, while four (11.43%) indicated that their mother had received an associate’s degree. Eleven students (31.43%) indicated their mother had received a bachelor’s degree, while two students (5.71%) indicated that their mother had received a master’s degree. No students (0%) indicated that their mother had received a doctorate degree, while one student (2.86%) was unsure about the educational achievement of their mother. Mother’s Education Level Frequencies and Percentages is displayed in Table 8.

Table 8: Mother's Education Level Frequencies and Percentages

Education Level: Mother	<i>n</i>	Percentage of Total
Less than a High School Diploma	6	17.14
High School Diploma	5	14.29
Some college but no degree	6	17.14
Associate's degree (2-year)	4	11.43
Bachelor's degree (4-year)	11	31.43
Master's degree	2	5.71
Doctorate degree	0	0
Unsure	1	2.86
Total	35	100

7. How did you first learn about EECHS? Students learn about EECHS in a variety of ways. Eighteen students (51.43%) learned about EECHS from a counselor presentation on their middle school campus. Five students (14.29%) decided to attend based on the recommendation of a parent or guardian. Seven students (20%) decided to attend based on the recommendation of a sibling or family member who had attended EECHS. One student (2.86%) enrolled based on an internet search. Four students (11.43%) selected Other to describe how they learned about EECHS.

Of the students who selected Other, one student (2.86%) stated they had a friend in middle school who recommended EECHS. Another student (2.86%) chose to attend based on the recommendation of their seventh-grade middle school teacher. One student (2.86%) learned about EECHS from a teacher friend of the family, while another (2.86%) chose to attend because their friend also planned to attend. EECHS Recruitment Methods Frequencies and Percentages is displayed in Table 9.

Table 9: EECHS Recruitment Methods Frequencies and Percentages

EECHS Recruitment Methods	<i>n</i>	Percentage of total
Attended a middle school presentation	18	51.43
Parent or Guardian Informed Me	5	14.29

Table 9: cont.

EECHS Recruitment Methods	<i>n</i>	Percentage of total
Family Member Also Went To EECHS	7	20
Through An Internet Search	1	2.86
Friend In Middle School Recommendation	1	2.86
Middle School Teacher Recommendation	1	2.86
Teacher Family Friend Recommendation	1	2.86
Friend Planning to Attend Recommendation	1	2.86
Total	35	100.00

8. How many close friends would you say that you have at EECHS? Three students (8.57%) stated they had two close friends, while two (5.71%) said they had three close friends. Six students (17.14%) stated they had four close friends, while nine (25.71%) stated they had five close friends. Three students (8.57%) stated that they had six close friends, while three students (8.57%) said that they had seven close friends. Nine students (25.71%) indicated that they had eight (or more) close friends. Close Friends at School Frequencies and Percentages is displayed in Table 10.

Table 10: Close Friends at School Frequencies and Percentages

Close Friends at School	<i>n</i>	Percentage of Total
0	0	0
1	0	0
2	3	8.57
3	2	5.71
4	6	17.14
5	9	25.71
6	3	8.57
7	3	8.57
8 (or more)	9	25.71
Total	35	100

9. How many favorite teachers would you say that you have at EECHS? Only one student (2.86%) stated that they had no favorite teachers, while five students (14.29%) stated that they had one favorite teacher. Four students (11.43%) stated that they had two favorite teachers,

while eleven students (31.43%) stated that they had three favorite teachers. Three students (8.57%) stated that they had four favorite teachers, while seven students (20%) stated that they have five favorite teachers. Two students (5.71%) stated that they had six favorite teachers, and two students (5.71%) stated that they had eight or more favorite teachers. Favorite Teachers at EECHS Frequencies and Percentages is displayed in Table 11.

Table 11: Favorite Teachers at EECHS Frequencies and Percentages

Favorite Teachers at EECHS	<i>n</i>	Percentage of Total
0	1	2.86
1	5	14.29
2	4	11.43
3	11	31.43
4	3	8.57
5	7	20
6	2	5.71
7	0	0
8 (or more)	2	5.71
Total	35	100

10. How many favorite adults would you say that you have at EECHS? These might include counselors, principals, librarians, the dean of instruction, the secretary, or others.

Other adults besides teachers are important enough to be considered favorite adults in the lives of EECHS students. Six students (17.14%) indicated they had one favorite adult at school, while eight (22.86%) indicated they had two favorite adults at school. Four students (11.43%) indicated they had three favorite adults at school, while five (14.29%) indicated that they had four favorite adults at school. Seven students (20%) indicated they had five favorite adults at school, while one (2.86%) indicated they had six favorite adults at school. Two students (5.71%) indicated they had seven favorite adults at school, while two (5.71%) indicated they had eight (or more) favorite adults at school.

One senior stated about the school custodian: *“He said right now in the morning he's like ‘¡Si, si! You were able to, you know, finish your first graduation year!’ And oh my God, I'm going to miss him so much. Well, he's like my grandpa!”* (Iris, FG 3). More than one student spoke favorably about the school’s counselors, but one in particular referred to them affectionately as: *“Our counselor sweethearts”* (Natalie, FG 2). One student commented about the school principal: *“She was essentially my teacher, even though I had like nine teachers. She was my mentor!”* (Jacob, FG 3). Other Favorite Adults at School Frequencies and Percentages is displayed in Table 12.

Table 12: Other Favorite Adults at School Frequencies and Percentages

Other Favorite Adults at School	<i>n</i>	Percentage of Total
0	0	0
1	6	17.14
2	8	22.86
3	4	11.43
4	5	14.29
5	7	20.00
6	1	2.86
7	2	5.71
8 (or more)	2	5.71
Total	35	100

11. How many clubs or extracurricular activities do you participate in? Only two students (5.71%) chose not to participate in any clubs or extracurricular activities. Nine students (25.71%) participated in one club or extracurricular activity, while six (17.14%) participated in two clubs or extracurricular activities. Twelve students (34.29%) participated in three clubs or extracurricular activities, while six (11.43%) participated in four clubs or extracurricular activities. Nine students (25.71%) participated in five clubs or extracurricular organizations, while four (11.43%) participated in six clubs or extracurricular organizations. One student

(2.86%) participated in seven clubs or extracurricular organizations, while three (8.57%) participated in eight clubs or extracurricular organizations.

Of note is that since some students participated in numerous Clubs and Extracurricular activities, the total exceeds one hundred. Their participation is provided here to illustrate the importance of these clubs and extracurricular activities to the students. Extracurricular Activities Frequencies and Percentages is displayed in Table 13.

Table 13: Extracurricular Activities Frequencies and Percentages

Clubs and Extracurricular Activities	<i>n</i>	Percentage of Total
0 Clubs	2	5.71
1 Club	9	25.71
2 Clubs	6	17.14
3 Clubs	12	34.29
4 Clubs	6	17.14
5 Clubs	9	25.71
6 Clubs	4	11.43
7 Clubs	1	2.86
8 Clubs (or more)	3	8.57
Total	Not applicable	Not applicable

12. What are your plans following graduation from EECHS? Following the spring 2022 and spring 2023 graduation, EECHS student plans varied. Twenty students (57.14%) planned to continue their studies and earn a bachelor’s degree at TVU, while thirteen (37.14%) planned to go to another university for their bachelor’s degree. Only one student (2.86%) planned to take time off from college, while another (2.86%) was unsure about their future college plans. Thirteen students (37.14%) planned to attend another university besides TVU. Graduation Plans Frequencies and Percentages is displayed in Table 14.

Table 14: Graduation Plans Frequencies and Percentages

Graduation Plans	<i>n</i>	Percentage of Total
Continue their studies at TVU	20	57.14
Change to another university	13	37.14

Table 14 cont.

Graduation Plans	<i>n</i>	Percentage of Total
Take time off from college	1	2.86
Unsure about future college plans	1	2.86
Total	35	100

13. If you plan to continue in college and earn an undergraduate degree, what area will you major in? Graduating seniors from the class of 2022 and 2023 who planned to continue their college education indicated a variety of undergraduate majors leading to possible careers. Four students (11.43%) planned to major in business, while seven (20%) planned to major in medicine. Two students (5.71%) planned to major in Science, while two others (5.71%) planned to major in Technology. One student (2.86%) planned to major in counseling, while four (11.43%) planned to major in Education. Fifteen students (42.86%) indicated Other and, while planning to attend college, had not yet decided upon a college major and possible career. College Degree Plans Frequencies and Percentages is displayed in Table 15.

Table 15: College Degree Plans Frequencies and Percentages

College Major	<i>n</i>	Percentage of Total
Business	4	11.43
Medicine	7	20
Science	2	5.71
Technology	2	5.71
Counseling	1	2.86
Education	4	11.43
Other (Undecided)	15	42.86
Total	35	100

14. Please select either 'True' or 'False' in regard to the following statement: I will be the first in my family to obtain a college degree (such as an associate's degree). In answer to this question, sixteen students (45.71%) responded *True*. In contrast, seventeen students

(48.57%) responded *False*. Two students (5.71%) indicated that they were *Unsure*. First-Generation Frequencies and Percentages is displayed in Table 16.

Table 16: First-Generation Frequencies and Percentages

First in my family to obtain a college degree	<i>n</i>	Percentage of Total
True	16	45.71
False	17	48.57
Unsure	2	5.71
Total	35	100

Focus-Group Interview Overview and Schedule

A total of seven focus-group interviews were conducted. Three focus-group interviews were conducted in the spring semester of 2022, and the remaining four were completed in the spring semester of 2023. For scheduling, I contacted the counselor for available times in both the spring semester of 2022 and the spring semester of 2023. In the spring semester of 2022, focus-group interviews were conducted on Wednesday mornings from 9 to 10:45 a.m. in the school library.

Focus-Groups 1, 2, and 3. Focus-Group 1 met on Wednesday, February 9. Focus-Group 2 met on Wednesday, February 23. Focus-Group 3 met on Wednesday, May 9, and again on Wednesday, May 16, due to a technical issue. Each focus-group interview was conducted in the school library which was reserved solely for our focus-group interviews. The library was quiet, free from distractions, and ideal for audio-recording. The follow-up meeting occurred one week after the focus-group interview. Focus-Group 1, 2, 3 Participants and Attendance, by Gender is displayed in Table 17.

Table 17: Focus-Group 1, 2, 3 Participants and Attendance, by Gender

Spring 2022	Focus Group 1		Focus Group 2		Focus Group 3	
Gender	Expected	Attended	Expected	Attended	Expected	Attended
Men	1	1	0	0	2	2

Table 17: cont.

Spring 2022	Focus Group 1		Focus Group 2		Focus Group 3	
Gender	Expected	Attended	Expected	Attended	Expected	Attended
Women	4	4	5	5	3	3
Total	5	5	5	5	5	5

Focus-Groups 4, 5, 6, and 7. In spring 2023, the four remaining Focus-Group interviews were also conducted in the school library. However, seniors’ class schedules differed from the previous spring semester, so they were conducted on Mondays from 9 to 10:45 a.m. Focus-Group 4 met on Monday, February 13. Focus-Group 5 met on Monday, February 27. Focus-Group 6 met on Monday, March 3, and Focus-Group 7 met on Monday, April 3. Each of these four focus-groups was conducted in the school library, which was reserved solely for our interviews, quiet, free from distractions, and ideal for audio-recording.

The follow-up meeting occurred one week after the focus-group interview. The number of seniors expected, those who attended, and their genders is displayed in Table 18, Focus-Group 4, 5, 6, and 7 Participants and Attendance, By Gender.

Table 18: Focus-Group 4, 5, 6, and 7 Participants and Attendance, by Gender

Spring 2023	Focus-Group 4		Focus-Group 5		Focus-Group 6		Focus-Group 7	
Gender	Expected	Attended	Expected	Attended	Expected	Attended	Expected	Attended
Men	3	3	4	4	3	3	1	1
Women	2	2	1	1	2	2	4	4
Total	5	5	5	5	5	5	5	5

Participant Pseudonyms in Focus-Groups 1, 2, and 3

The confidentiality and protection of the participants' identities was an important aspect of the research design and each of the participants was assigned a pseudonym to help ensure their confidentiality. Participant Pseudonyms in Focus-Groups 1, 2, and 3 are displayed in Table 19.

Table 19: Participant Pseudonyms in Focus-Groups 1, 2, and 3

Focus-Group 1	Focus-Group 2	Focus-Group 3
Marta	Alexa	Mia
Kendra	Natalie	Julie
Joseph	Beatriz	Lizette
Geneviene	Alicia	Jacob
Paulette	Valentina	Peter

Participant Pseudonyms in Focus-Groups 4, 5, 6, and 7

Participant pseudonyms in Focus Groups 4, 5, 6, and 7 are displayed in Table 20.

Table 20: Participant Pseudonyms in Focus-Groups 4, 5, 6, and 7

Focus-Group 4	Focus-Group 5	Focus-Group 6	Focus-Group 7
Susan	Jennifer	Eleanor	Allison
Juliette	George	Charlotte	Michelle
Eliot	Charles	Gabriel	Joshua
Samuel	Abel	Matthew	Evelyn
Jacob	Richard	Julian	Priscilla

Introduction to Focus-Group Interviews

Following a brief introduction about my background and motivation for conducting this study, I discussed the need for confidentiality. I informed students that out of respect for each

other's privacy, focus-group comments should not be discussed outside of our meetings. I stated that all focus-group and follow-up interviews would be recorded and transcribed word-for-word and that a pseudonym would be used for each student to ensure confidentiality. I assured students that they were not required to answer any question that made them feel uncomfortable. I also mentioned that if they had any comments that they would rather share privately, they could call me, send me an email, or text me to set up a personal interview.

The focus-group interview then began in an informal manner by having each student in turn give their name and share some of the things that they enjoyed doing when not in school. After each student had responded, the interview then began with Focus Group Question No. 1.

Focus-Group Questions

Focus-Group Question No. 1

In question No. 1, I asked students: "What are some of the reasons that you decided to enroll at EECHS?" Answering this question was not as simple as it first appeared, with students sometimes providing multiple reasons for their decision to attend EECHS. Common senior experiences and themes discussed included: Earn An Associate's Degree, Financial Savings, Other Family Members Had Attended, Small School Size, and Parents' Decision.

1-1. Earn An Associate's Degree. Seniors stated that graduating high school with their associate's degree would save them time and accelerate their academic career by allowing them to graduate earlier than other students from the university. Natalie declared: "*The fact that we will graduate with a bachelor's degree faster than they will because if everything goes as planned, I should graduate with my bachelor's degree at 19*" (Natalie, Focus Group (FG 2).

1-2. Financial Savings. Attending college is expensive, yet studies show that obtaining a college degree or additional training and certification beyond high school is increasingly

necessary for individuals to be competitive in the job market and earn a living wage. The opportunity to earn an associate's degree while saving money on college tuition was a common reason for choosing to attend EECHS, with seventeen students including this as one of their main motivations. Lizette stated that her mother called the financial savings *"the double opportunity"* and that *"...she started telling me the benefits of the school and with the associate's degree and how you can save a ton of money for it"* (Lizette, FG 3).

1-3. Other Family Members Had Attended. Twelve students mentioned that one of the reasons that they decided to attend EECHS was because other family members were attending or had already attended. Paulette stated: *"Well, I decided to come because my siblings came here, and I saw that they were able to take college classes their junior year, and I thought it was pretty cool. So, it was like I might as well come here and then my parents don't have to pay too much when I go to college because I don't have to do my basics"* (Paulette, FG 1).

1-4. Small School Size. Another reason that several students mentioned for choosing to attend EECHS was because of its small school size. The current enrollment of approximately 400 students is almost evenly divided, with one-hundred students per grade level. One student stated: *"I enjoy getting to know almost everyone from different grades and I feel like the fact that it's a small school helps me meet everyone (Charles, FG 5).* Another student stated: *"I was scared of a big school because of having to make new friends and then losing them because I would get put in another class and then things like that. And then when I came here, because the school is so small, because the class is so small, I know everybody"* (Marta, FG 1).

1-5. Parents' Decision. Twelve seniors stated that it was their parents' decision that they attend EECHS. One senior stated: *"Honestly, I didn't really decide to come here. It was really my family's choice. They're like 'You're going here because of those two years we're not going to*

pay, and we don't want to pay them. So, you're going there" (Abel, FG 5). Another senior stated: *"My mom wanted me to enter a small high school because I came from a very small middle school, a charter school. So, she didn't want to surprise me with a big high school. So, she offered me this option. And she started telling me the benefits of the school and with the associate's degree and how you can save a ton of money for it"* (Beatriz, FG 2). A summary of Question No. 1 is displayed in Table 21.

Table 21: Question No. 1 Summary

Invariant Meaning Units	Descriptions of Experiences	Examples of Significant Statements
Earn an Associate's Degree	Advance academic career ahead of peers by obtaining an associate's degree while in high school.	"I'm already going to have my associate's and then my friends from other schools are going to try and barely get their associate's."
Financial Savings	Save money by earning the associate's degree tuition-free while in high school.	"The money saved would really help my parents. They don't have to pay for the associate's degree, college is expensive."
Other Family Members Attended	Siblings, cousins, or other family members were attending or had attended and were important influences.	"Well, my cousins came here and then my sister came here. So, they had like a big influence and they mentioned how good the school was. So, I saw what they were going through, so I realized that I did want to follow the same path."
Small School Size	A small school allowed for smaller class sizes, made it easier for students to make friends, and allowed more personal interactions with teachers.	"I think honestly, the biggest thing was that it was small and I didn't want to have to deal with like a thousand kids in my grade and having to walk all the way from one side of the school to the other."
Parents' Decision	A significant number of students stated that it was their parents' decision that they attend EECHS.	"I came here because my parents wanted me to come here for two to four years of college."

Focus-Group Question No. 2

In Question No. 2, I asked students: “Looking back to your freshman year at EECHS, what was it like for you?” Common experiences and themes discussed included: Freshmen Friendships, Middle School-High School Transition, and Grades Matter. One of the goals of this open-ended question was to elicit students’ memories of their emotions and experiences as freshmen during their first year at EECHS.

As successful and optimistic seniors with graduation just a few months away, seniors were quite emotionally and intellectually distant from where they started as freshmen. The question “Looking back to your freshmen year...” revealed strong emotions. After a few probing questions, one by one, they started providing more detail and elaboration about what they really meant beyond their first few terse answers of "stressful" and "difficult."

2-1. Freshmen Friendships. Seniors stated they began making new friends at EECHS even before fall classes started by participating in Summer Bridge. Usually offered in July preceding fall semester classes, Summer Bridge helps freshmen become oriented and familiar with EECHS's educational mission and vision and participate in "Icebreakers." Icebreakers are activities or games designed to help EECHS freshmen get to know each other, promote conversation, and create a comfortable and inclusive atmosphere. Icebreakers help break down initial awkwardness because they encourage students who might be shy to interact with other students in a fun, informal, and non-threatening manner.

One senior recalled his Summer Bridge experience: *"Looking back on my freshman year, it was better than I thought it would be. And mostly, that was because of Summer Bridge. The first day that it happened was kind of when I made my friend group. It was mostly because we had these little activities where they separated us in groups and stuff. And so, some of the people*

that were in my group, I became friends with them. And then another came in late, and we were like, 'You, you're going to be a friend!' 'Really?' 'Like, you're my friend now!' And so, after those morning activities, we kind of just went back to lunch and we made the little friend group table that kind of stayed that way, like 'till February" (Abel, FG 5).

As fall classes begin, EECHS presents new social challenges for freshmen because, as an open-enrollment campus, its student body consists of students from all over the city and outlying school districts. Students rarely find many students from their original campus at EECHS. As a result, everyone faces the same challenge of not knowing anyone and needing to develop new friendships. One senior stated: *"You really don't know anyone because so many people are coming from so many different schools... Maybe, maybe you're coming with one or two of your friends, maybe you're coming with no one!"* (Matthew, FG 6).

Freshmen friendships are positively influenced due to grouping and scheduling decisions made by the counselor. Before school begins, counselor Snow divides the incoming freshmen into two groups based on their middle school math backgrounds. One group consists of students who need to take College Algebra, while the other group consists of students who need to take Geometry. Because each group shares the same non-math class schedule, students get to know each other, and friendships are formed throughout the school year. One student stated: *"The people you meet here, like when you get here your freshman year, they stick you in with about twenty other kids in one class and that's your classmates for like the rest of the school year. I've had people for the same class, every class for four years. But you know, you get to know them. So, you get friendships out of it. It's real nice"* (Joseph, FG 1).

2-2. Middle School-High School Transition. Students frequently commented about how difficult EECHS seemed after middle school. Beatriz stated: *"I had times where I felt like*

dropping out especially during freshman year, you know. I was thinking to myself, usually coming from middle school, you're getting straight A's on your report card and you're showing your mom and dad like 'Look at this, straight A's!' To coming here, my first B and C. And it's like 'These people are too smart for me. I have to go!' Yeah. It was like 'I don't belong here. You know, these people are way too smart for me!'" (Beatriz, FG 2).

Besides getting accustomed to more difficult assignments, EECHS freshmen must also adapt to a different class schedule. One senior stated: *"EECHS implements a different schedule than our middle schools. So middle schools have eight periods, we have four. So, we get double the class time, we get less classes throughout the day. So, it's just a big, big adjustment period for us"* (Matthew, FG 6).

2-3. Grades Matter. At EECHS, grades are very important and contribute significantly to freshmen stress. Students must pass all their classes with a minimum of a C. Students who receive a D or lower are put on the first of three levels of probation and must retake the class (often in summer sessions) to raise their grades, regain credit, and remain enrolled at EECHS.

For some high-achieving students, receiving grades in the seventies was a shock. One senior recounted: *"For me, freshman year was a bit stressful because of the work that they were giving. I wasn't really used to it and I didn't really study for a test. And during middle school, I usually got like A's without studying. So, coming here was like, I got seventies my first progress report card and I was really upset about that!"* (Paulette, FG 1).

For one senior, remaining vigilant about her grades helped ensure that she had options in her choice of a particular university: *"Because then you blink and you're behind! You're in the twenties, you're down there. And if you want to do something like go to UT-Austin, you want to go somewhere like that, you have to do well"* (Julie, FG 3).

One student stated in her personal interview how pleased she was to make progress in her academics: *"I made Dean's list, and it made me super happy. So, then I started pushing myself more to get good grades again because I really liked that. And then I'm super bad at math and science. I like the arts better. But this last semester, I got an A in Statistics and I surprised myself!"* (Marta, PI 1).

Students who fail to improve their grades within their probationary period are returned to their originating home campus. One senior commented: *"A challenge was learning that your friends could just leave to a different school, sometimes, because they failed"* (Evelyn, FG 7). A summary of Question No. 2 is displayed in Table 22.

Table 22: Question No. 2 Summary

Invariant Meaning Units	Descriptions of Experiences	Examples of Significant Statements
Freshmen Friendships	Friendships are made beginning in Summer Bridge and continue throughout fall and spring semesters through class grouping and scheduling.	"I knew him from middle school but freshman year we got really close because like, I had him in every class. And yeah, we were friends because in that little class, we were always together so really it was 'might as well talk with each other.'"
Middle School-High School Transition	Freshmen also experience challenges in making the transition from middle school to high school.	"During middle school, I usually got like A's without studying. So coming here was like, I got seventies my first progress report card and I was really upset about that."
Grades Matter	Quality of academic work is crucial at EECHS and student grades should be at minimum a C.	"It's always like the internal sort of challenge to be better, the challenge to do better than yesterday, or to do better than my last grade."

Focus-Group Question No. 3

In Question No. 3, I asked students: “What is it like now as a senior here at EECHS? How have things changed for you?” Common senior experiences and themes discussed include Senior Schedule, Clubs Are Important, and Time Management.

3-1. Senior Schedule. Students spoke about how less stressful their senior year was and that their class schedule allowed them more time to do the things they enjoyed. One senior stated: *"This semester, I have two classes plus AVID. And it's just like, I don't know, it's like I have a lot more time to myself now. So, it kind of makes me feel like all of those years of work as a sophomore and freshman were worth it because now as a senior, I get to enjoy more aspects of high school, like hanging out with my friends and stuff"* (Mia, FG 3).

Mia's comment reflects the novel curriculum at EECHS, where the four-year high school curriculum is accelerated and compressed into just two years. Students face a daunting schedule during their freshmen and sophomore years as they attend classes all day at EECHS from 9 a.m. until 4 p.m. or even later for certain college classes. This fast-paced schedule allows them to complete their core Texas high school graduation requirements and begin taking certain community college classes to establish their Texas residency. These first two years represent the main challenges that students face as they take difficult classes while at the same time developing the college readiness skills necessary to pass the TSI test in their sophomore year. One senior stated: *"At EECHS, our most stressful years were the freshman and sophomore years"* (Beatriz, FG 2).

While many students stated that they were enjoying their senior year and had more time to do fun things like participate in clubs and socialize with their friends, some seniors had to

retake classes from their junior year that they had to drop because of poor grades. For this reason, junior year requires some explanation as it is critical to becoming a successful senior.

In their junior year, students take AVID III on the EECHS campus and take four classes each semester at the university. Provided they pass all their classes in their junior year, in their senior year, students take AVID IV on the EECHS campus and then usually take two classes each semester at the university, depending on their graduation plan. While the senior year generally has fewer classes, the type of academic experience seniors have is related to how well they manage the responsibilities of their junior year.

As juniors, students are entrusted with traveling independently to the university for their classes, setting up and maintaining their own study schedule, and regulating their behaviors as college students without supervision on the EECHS campus. Four college classes in the fall and four in the spring semester is a challenging schedule for juniors that demands self-discipline, focus, and self-regulation to do well. One senior stated that she had been warned about the difficulties of the junior year as a freshman during Summer Bridge: *"The seniors or juniors, the National Honor Society Members, they would come and help out. And they told us, 'Junior year is going to be the hardest. You guys better watch out! Be prepared for the course load and the stress!'"* (Alexa, FG 2).

Most juniors do well, but a few experience academic difficulties and fail a class, despite having their grades monitored by their AVID teacher and counselor. Those students are the ones that have to drop that particular college class so that it does not affect their GPA, repeat the class in the summer session, or take the class again in their senior year. However, most seniors stated that they have fewer classes and more free time to do what they enjoy. Other seniors recognized in retrospect how difficult their first two years at EECHS were. One senior described his relief

about having survived the frenzy of his freshman and sophomore years by stating: *"It's great to know that after the storm the calm comes"* (George, FG 5).

3-2. Clubs Are Important. Because of EECHS's academic focus, there are no district-funded fine arts programs. However, EECHS offers many clubs and extracurricular activities catering to diverse student interests and needs. In general, the total number of clubs and extracurricular activities at EECHS varies somewhat from year to year but falls into eight main categories of (a) Academic Clubs (Math Club, National Honor Society), (b) Art Clubs (Anime Club, Drama Club, Music Club), (c) Sports and Fitness Activities Clubs (Dancing Stars, Soccer Club, Volleyball Club), (d) Volunteer and Service Clubs (Interact Club, Resaca Rangers, Volunteer Income Tax Assistance or VITA), (e) Cultural and Diversity Clubs (Spanish Club), (f) Career-Oriented Clubs (Business Professionals of America, Destination Imagination, Multimedia Club), (g) Special Interest Clubs (AVID Club, Alliance Club, Chess Club, Transformers Club, Yearbook Club), and (h) Leadership and Governance Clubs (Mock Trial, Student Council).

The wide variety of clubs and extracurricular organizations is testimony to the dedicated teachers who volunteer their time as sponsors to benefit their students. While participation is not mandatory, student enrollment and participation are great whether clubs and organizations meet after school or throughout the day. Benefits of club membership often noted by students include developing leadership skills, helping others, discovering new interests, and meeting new friends through shared interests.

One senior stated about these clubs and groups: *"Some of them are after school, and others are during school. And I feel senior year is where you get most of the leadership in those clubs. You get to like, 'Oh, let me make a flier for this event' or 'You know, today there's a cluster event at the cafeteria,' and stuff like that. That's what I've really been enjoying about senior year*

is that now you're free to do fun stuff. Yeah, club things!" (Kendra, FG 1). Another senior stated: *"What I like are the clubs. I think every single teacher here is passionate about the clubs that they have"* (Marta, FG 1).

Records of clubs and extracurricular activities are amply documented in the school's yearbooks beginning in 2008 and continuing to the present day. With support from EECHS's first principal and the AVID IV teacher, I examined ten of EECHS's yearbooks, from their first yearbook published in spring of 2009, to their 2020-2021 yearbook. Student clubs and extracurricular organizations are featured throughout all of these yearbooks, with steady growth indicated in terms of the total number of clubs offered and increasing numbers of students participating.

Student Data Questionnaire responses support student involvement in clubs and extracurricular activities. Of the 35 focus-group interview students, only two (5.71%) chose not to participate in clubs or extracurricular activities, while nine (25.71%) stated that they belonged to one club. In contrast, four students (11.43%) stated that they participated in two clubs or extracurricular organizations. 12 students (34.29%) stated that they participated in three clubs or extracurricular organizations. One student (2.86%) said they participated in four clubs or extracurricular organizations. One student (2.86%) stated that they participated in five clubs or extracurricular organizations, two students (5.71%) stated that they participated in 6 clubs or extracurricular organizations, one student (2.86%) stated that they participated in seven clubs or extracurricular organizations, and three students (8.57%) stated that they participated in eight clubs or extracurricular organizations. That these students would devote the time to participate in these various clubs and extracurricular organizations after a regular school day with homework as well as personal responsibilities to attend to is noteworthy.

While certain clubs, such as the National Honor Society and Sociedad Honoraria, have specific membership qualifications and requirements, many clubs are open for students of all grade levels without restrictions. Within this setting, freshmen and sophomores often meet juniors and seniors since they are on campus for only one class period per day for their AVID III or AVID IV class. One senior stated: *“As far as student life at EECHS, I like the extracurriculars that I've joined. I've made a lot of friends with my fellow classmates and in my senior class, but also with some of the juniors and some of the freshmen that I get to meet through Mock Trial and the other clubs”* (Joshua, FG 7).

3-3. Time Management. Time management, specifically *procrastination*, was a recurring topic of discussion for seniors in all seven focus-group interviews. Seniors frequently mentioned their satisfaction and accomplishment in completing their homework and other assignments on time and not procrastinating like they did in their freshmen year. One senior stated: *“I think as a senior compared to a freshman, I'm much better at knowing when I need to do something and managing myself. I can set deadlines for myself and actually meet those deadlines instead of just reading past those deadlines. Yeah, time management is definitely better now”* (Marta, FG 1).

Another senior stated that time management was the most important factor in success at EECHS: *“I've definitely fixed my time management. I feel like that's the biggest thing here. Once you're able to fix that, a lot of things become easier for you. If you were to just get your work done and then do the fun, things will become easier”* (Matthew, FG 6).

EECHS students are often influenced and motivated to manage their time by successful friends. One senior stated: *“I feel having people around you that get their work done and are motivated to get their work done, pushes you. So, a lot of kids here at EECHS like to have fun,*

but they're going to get their work done first. So being friends with them pushed me to be like, 'Oh, well, they're getting the work done right now at 9 a.m. Well, let me get ready. Let me submit that assignment so I'm not up tonight doing it, you know?'" (Charlotte, FG 6). A summary of Question No. 3 is displayed in Table 23.

Table 23: Question No. 3 Summary

Invariant Meaning Units	Descriptions of Experiences	Examples of Significant Statements
Senior Schedule	The senior year requires fewer university classes and only one class, AVID IV, on the EECHS campus.	"I think as a senior, it's more relaxed because compared to junior year we had four classes a semester and it was harder. And now it's way more relaxed and you just get to do much more of what you want."
Clubs Are Important	Clubs and extracurricular organizations enrich students' educational experiences and foster friendships for both students and teachers through shared interests.	"I know a lot of people have a hard time making friends. And like me, one of the big reasons why I made friends was through clubs. So, I feel like that helps a lot."
Time Management	Students changed and grew from procrastinating in their freshmen year to becoming better time-managers by their senior year.	"I don't get here early, but I try submitting stuff on time, which is something that I learned here."

Focus-Group Question No. 4

In Question No. 4, I asked students: "What are some of the things that you like the most about being a student at EECHS?" Common topics and themes discussed include Close-Knit and Supportive Environment, Student-Teacher Connection, Open Campus, and Senior Planning.

4-1. Close-Knit and Supportive Environment. The school design of EECHS is that of a smaller, Standalone type of early college high school. While comprehensive high schools often have 2,000 or more students, Standalone early college high schools typically limit enrollment to about 400 students, with each grade level comprising about one hundred students. EECHS's smaller school size is a salient feature because it helps create a more personal, intimate campus

climate. One senior stated that what she liked most about EECHS was: *"The environment! Yeah. It's a close-knit environment. It's like your family. Everyone's always here to support you. And then also, you know everyone! Our class is so small, so we know all the students. So, you see everyone, and you get to talk to everyone, at least at this school, multiple times. So, I just feel everyone's there to support you"* (Alexa, FG 2).

After Alexa spoke, one of the other focus-group members turned and commented to her: *"When you said: 'It's like your family,' I remember in Summer Bridge when the seniors told us that. I was like, 'No, they're not!' But it turns out, we really are! And it's kind of weird being in a close-knit environment for the first time and having a good support system at school"* (Alicia, FG 2).

The seniors Alicia referred to are senior volunteers participating in freshmen induction and orientation activities during Summer Bridge. As members of the National Honor Society, Summer Bridge seniors share the culture and ethos of EECHS with incoming freshmen. Another senior stated: *"I think the school offers a lot. For me, the school is a resource, and the community is very small. And everybody knows each other. So, I guess the fact that everybody knows each other means you don't get lost. There's no sense of like, 'What am I doing here?' And you actually feel like you're part of the school. You feel like you're part of a family. And I think, basically, kind of like a smaller family"* (Jacob, FG 4).

Another contributing factor that helps students get to know each other and develop friendships is that each freshman class is assigned to specific class schedules. As a result of this intentional grouping by the counselor, students usually have the same classes with each other for the entire school year. One senior stated: *"And then you know the people you meet here, when you get here your freshman year, they stick you in with about twenty other kids in one class, and*

they're your classmates for the rest of the school year. I've had people for the same class, every class for four years! But you know, you get to know them. So, you get friendships out of it, so, real nice" (Joseph, FG 1).

Yet another influence that helps students develop friendships at EECHS is their involvement in clubs and extracurricular activities. One student who admitted to being somewhat shy shared her approach to making friends: *"Join clubs! I know a lot of people have a hard time making friends. And like me, one of the big reasons why I made friends was through clubs. So, I feel like that helps a lot"* (Alicia, FG 2). Another student stated that being involved in clubs helped him to become more outgoing. *"The friendships you make here, the clubs. What I like about EECHS here, I really came out of my shell. I wasn't really outgoing my freshman year in middle school, but once I got here, you know, I'm very outgoing now. When you're doing that, it's in the cafeteria, the Honor Society, like no one wants to talk on the mike. Give me the microphone, and I'll talk for you all! And they're trying to get the students in the cafeteria involved, right? And so, the prize is usually free candy, like a bag of candy"* (George, FG 5). *"I've made a lot of friends not only with my fellow classmates in my senior class, but also some of the juniors, and some of the freshmen that I get to meet through Mock Trial and the other clubs. I really like the aspect of EECHS where you get to meet a lot of students"* (Joshua, FG 7).

4-2. Student-Teacher Connection. At EECHS, a strong connection is created between students and teachers through a rigorous college preparatory program that condenses four years of high school into two years. The school's small size plays an important role in dealing successfully with this curriculum, but the quality and nature of the student and teacher connection are also important in supporting student success. The following student comments

serve as a vignette to describe and illustrate various aspects of the student-teacher connection they experience at EECHS.

One student stated what she liked most about EECHS: *"I like the size because the teachers know you, and they care. Like, I guess at other high schools, they do care. But here, you really feel it, and you know it, and they know your name. They know things about you, and they're always offering help and stuff. So that's what I like about being here because I always feel cared about by the teachers"* (Mia, FG 3).

Seniors mentioned that teachers sometimes provided guidance beyond academic subjects. One student stated: *"Because the teachers, they really do connect with you. They give you advice not only on school, but also in life. If they see that you're struggling and even if it's not school related, they'll sit you down and they'll talk to you, like, really talk to you. And they'll be like, 'What's the problem?' And I feel that's one of the things that really makes EECHS the thing, you know!"* (Marta, FG 1).

Students also compared their experiences with EECHS teachers with those they had in middle school: *"So once you get here, you start getting comfortable, and the teachers know you. I think that's pretty cool because, in middle school, I didn't have that relationship with teachers. I can go to a classroom and talk to them, right? So now you don't even have to talk to them about schoolwork. It could just be your personal life, and it's totally fine"* (Peter, FG 3). Another student appreciated that he could rely on his teacher for support and stated: *"I think an important thing about our school is that there's always someone behind you for support. I mean, like it's not always probably the counselor, right? Because sometimes you don't feel that comfortable, going to a counselor and talking. But it can always be whatever teacher from here"* (Samuel, FG 4).

One student recognized that the rapport with his teacher had grown throughout his tenure at EECHS and stated: *"You know, the relationship with the teachers here, you get along with them better now that you're a senior because you've been with them for four years. You can just go with them during the day and say, "I need help with this," and they'll help you out. They know us better now because we've been here all these years. So that's nice"* (Joseph, FG 1).

One student who had found an alternate place to study stated: *"And then the teachers, you can hang out in their classroom. They don't mind me being in the back of their class, just like chilling on my computer while they're conducting class"* (Marta, FG 1).

One student stated in her focus-group meeting that one of the reasons that she continued on a difficult project was *"...because the teacher came looking for me. And even when I was like, 'Oh, I don't want to do this anymore, I give up' they're like, 'No, you're already there. You're already close to it, so just keep on going!'"* (Julie, FG 3).

4-3. Open Campus. Throughout all focus-group interviews, seniors often commented about how, as juniors and seniors, they enjoyed EECHS's open campus. Being able to leave campus, go to the TVU campus for classes or socialize in the Student Union, stop over at Starbucks and have a coffee, or get lunch at What-A-Burger was something that students really appreciated. One senior stated: *"Well, junior and senior year, we had a lot more free time and a lot more freedom to do what we wanted to do. Most of us just stayed on campus or we left, but we came back. And other high schools don't have that"* (Evelyn, FG 7).

Unlike most early college high schools, where students remain on their high school campus and complete dual enrollment classes to obtain college credit and earn an associate's degree, EECHS has an open campus. A common pattern emerged from analyzing comments from seven focus groups: I discovered that the open campus resulted from a design feature

present since the school first opened in 2008. The school utilizes a community college and a university to provide an associate's degree and college core credits, so students must go off-campus to attend university classes and return to EECHS for their regularly scheduled AVID III and IV class. This is unusual for early college high schools, whose students typically attend either a community college or a university, but not both.

One senior enjoyed the experience of visiting the university campus and stated: *"And I like that we can kind of like walk around the college campus and get that experience. It kind of feels...for at least a couple of hours, it feels like you're a college student"* (Charlotte, FG 6).

Another senior recognized that being able to leave the EECHS campus and travel to the university for classes was unique and stated: *"The freedom that someone has mentioned.... We can go to the university and study there. And I don't think anyone can do that, just normally, you know, get off campus and take a break from this environment!"* (Priscilla, FG 7).

Another senior spoke about how the freedom to leave EECHS and travel to the university campus for classes empowered him and made him feel trustworthy. He stated: *"...You learn how to be an adult, but you start like, thinking differently. 'Oh, now I have to do this!' You care about yourself more now that you have all this freedom. Other high school students, they're going to do all this stuff and come back late. But for us, it's already into our minds that 'Oh, no. We do this!' And then if we have time, we plan it out even if it's a minute or a second, we have all these plans"* (George, FG 5).

4-4. Senior Planning. Seniors in AVID IV work all year on a college and scholarship project with real-world implications. As students collect college materials and meet application deadlines, the once dreaded bulky AVID Binder now proves its worth by keeping everything planned, organized, and accessible in anticipation of going to college. While intended to be

submitted as an AVID IV semester final project, the AVID Binder represents much more than a bookkeeping system to stay organized; it represents students' academic aspirations and dreams of a career.

The journey from high school to university presents seniors with a challenging transitional phase that demands academic and emotional resilience and a comprehensive understanding of the university application process. Securing scholarships, furthermore, is a critical facet in mitigating the financial strains inherent in higher education. In their AVID IV class's fall and spring semesters, seniors participated in the *Top-Ten University and Scholarship Project*. Here, they applied to ten universities and applied for various scholarships for which they qualified. From the ten universities, students then selected three schools from specific categories, including *Reach School*, *Match School*, and *Safety School*.

A Reach School signifies a highly coveted institution where admission may pose a challenge due to high demand, stringent academic standards, or financial limitations. Though acceptance rates may be limited, students are encouraged to aim high and pursue their aspirations even if acceptance is uncertain. A Match School is an institution aligned with students' academic achievements and financial capabilities. It represents a school where students stand a good chance of being admitted based on their academic qualifications and financial capabilities.

Lastly, a Safety School is an institution where students surpass the required academic criteria and are highly likely to gain admission. These schools, generally with higher acceptance rates, act as safety nets by ensuring that students will have a college to attend should they not secure admission into their Reach or Match schools.

While all students commented positively about the Top-Ten University and Scholarship Project, I felt more detail was needed. I asked for volunteers, and two students from Focus-

Group 7 agreed to meet online for a Zoom interview. Our interview lasted one and one-half hours, and numerous aspects of the Top-Ten Project were discussed.

The first question was: "What inspired you to select the universities you did for the Top-Ten University Project?" One student stated regarding his top three school selections: *"For my Reach, I wanted to choose a school that I thought was going to challenge me. In Texas, the most challenging university for me was going to be Rice. So, I applied to Rice as my Reach"* (Joshua, FG 7). Joshua's grade point average for his Match school automatically made him eligible for university admittance in Texas. He stated: *"We get automatically accepted if we were in the top 5%, so I chose UT-Austin as my Match"* (Joshua, FG 7). Joshua chose a school with a strong history program for his Safety school as this was his intended major. He stated: *"For my Safety, I chose Texas State University because I knew I was going to get in. But I also chose it because I heard that it had a really good history program. So even though it was my Safety, it was still going to be a good school for me, and that's why I chose that one"* (Joshua, FG 7).

Another student stated concerning her Reach School: *"So for me, my Reach had been MIT. I hadn't expected to get into that one, and I didn't. I didn't realize how difficult it was to get into that one!"* (Priscilla, FG 7). Like Joshua, Priscilla was also in the top 5% of her class, so her Match school was similar. However, her intended major presented another challenge: *"And then the Match is UT-Austin. Even though we get automatically admitted to that one, getting into the engineering program is like another gate that you have to go through"* (Priscilla, FG 7). Priscilla's Safety school was in Houston. She stated: *"I think my Safety had been the University of Houston. I put that one just because... No, real reason!"* (Priscilla, FG 7).

During our Zoom interview, both seniors described unanticipated discoveries in response to question number seven: "When you were researching your top ten universities, were there any

surprising discoveries or realizations about the universities or about your own academic career goals?" Joshua stated: *"Well, I think the first surprising discovery was that I applied to Rice as just my Reach. I'm just doing that for my AVID course. And I almost didn't apply, but then I did because I was like, 'No, let me do it. Like, let me do this correctly if I'm going to do it!' And I was actually just going to apply Regular Decision. But then I was researching the university and I saw that their grants were Need-Based.*

So, if I was under a certain income, they would provide the grant that would cover my room and board, as well as my tuition and most of my fees. And I mean, I was under that income range. So, it was like 'If I apply and I get accepted, I'm most likely going to get like a full ride.' And then I was looking at the acceptance rates for Early Decision and Regular Decision. After I figured that out, their acceptance rates for Early Decision was higher than it was for Regular Decision. So, I think I was two weeks before the deadline at that point for Early Decision. And I was like, 'I can do it within this time frame.' And so, I applied, and I got in!" (Joshua, FG 7).

Priscilla also had an unanticipated discovery: *"Even though I said that I was basically going to go to UT-Austin from the start, that was kind of more of my parents who decided that. And the whole year, I was just trying to convince them for that not to happen. Because due to our income, I wouldn't get any help for anything. So, when I applied to UT-Austin, I saw that they weren't going to give me anything. And when I saw how much it would cost for four years, I was like, 'This can't happen! No!' I was like, I can't... I do not want to live with that much money crushing me"* (Priscilla, FG 7).

While initially Priscilla had intended to stay at TVU, a special experience changed her mind: *"So I was trying to convince my parents to let me stay at TVU. But this is where the big discovery was. I went to the UT-Austin campus, and I got to see it up close and personal. And I*

realized I don't think I can see myself staying at TVU anymore. And it was a really difficult decision because I was selected to have a special scholarship. So, I'm like 'Do I throw away all this money, or do I go over there?' But I realized that my goals would not be met if I just stayed here" (Priscilla, FG 7).

When I asked her if she would need to take out college loans, she replied: "Yeah. I've gotten a scholarship from them since then, which was a huge surprise, because when I first got the financial aid back, it was zero. But then they very recently gave me one. It was very funny. I think this memory is going to stick with me forever. We were on a field trip at Chucky Cheese, when the UT-Austin adviser I had been speaking to called me and said 'I'm glad to inform you that you have been selected as a recipient for this scholarship.' And I burst into tears and Mrs. Johnson thought something bad happened. And then I told her that a great thing happened!" (Priscilla, FG 7). A summary of Question No. 5 is displayed in Table 24.

Table 24: Question No. 4 Summary

Invariant Meaning Units	Descriptions of Experiences	Examples of Significant Statements
Close-Knit and Supportive Environment	EECHS's small size makes it easier for students to get to know each other, develop friendships, and create a close-knit community.	"Because of its smaller size I was able to do so much more. I was able to connect with people like my classmates, with my teachers. And I feel like if I had gone to a big school, I wouldn't have this connection."
Student-Teacher Connection	During the two-year college preparatory program, students and teachers develop personal connections and relationships that help the students be more successful.	"They'll be like 'Hey, you Stay! You need work!' or 'Come during my free periods' or 'You're really behind -do this!' And they do that for a lot of people. And they also don't give up on you. Even when you already gave up on you, they don't."

Table 24: cont.

Invariant Meaning Units	Descriptions of Experiences	Examples of Significant Statements
Open Campus	During their junior and senior year, students take all their classes at the university except for one class, AVID, on the EECHS campus.	"Well, junior and senior year, we had a lot more free time and a lot more freedom to do what we wanted to do. Most of us just stayed on campus or we left, but we came back. And other high schools don't have that."
Senior Planning	Through well-planned and relevant AVID IV assignments, seniors were engaged all year long in applying to colleges and completing college scholarship applications.	"The AVID teacher we have is constantly pushing us towards different scholarships and telling us 'Oh, I think you could apply for this. I really do think that they would like seeing you apply for this.'"

Focus-Group Question No. 5

In Question No. 5, I asked students: "What are some of the things that have been challenging or difficult for you as a student at EECHS? Common topics and themes included Rigorous Coursework, and Junior Year.

5-1. Rigorous Coursework. The coursework at EECHS is particularly rigorous and demanding in terms of the quality of critical analysis required and the quantity of work expected. Compared to other classes, English I was often mentioned in focus groups as presenting the most rigorous and challenging coursework. When I asked students what specifically made English I so difficult, students would sometimes shake their heads and laughingly state in near unison: "*Book Talk!*"

Book Talk is a lengthy, multiple-part semester project which requires them to read an entire book, identify and connect themes across each of the different chapters, and provide their interpretations of the meaning of the text. Critical thinking is required as students infer meanings from the text and "read between the lines" in contrast with simpler assignments using lower-

order thinking skills that students may have been accustomed to in middle school and earlier grades.

A senior stated: *“So in 8th grade year and previous years, you would read the story and there would be like basic questions, like ‘What did this character do?’ and things like that. Just like, very basic questions. But the questions that we would get here, they were more in-depth, and you would have to really think of what you were reading, and how everything connected, and how the theme or the tone, or everything just like, tied in. And they were all open-ended questions. So, you had to write your own response and it wasn't like you could be like guessing like, ‘You know what? Maybe it's A or maybe it's B!’ It wasn't multiple-choice. It was all open ended!”* (Paulette, FG 1, PI 1).

Time-management was also a challenge for many students. Book Talk assignments typically had multiple parts, numerous due dates, and required much time and independent work outside of class. Despite being provided ample time to finish a Book Talk assignment, one senior stated: *“We had a long time to work on it. We had like a month and a half to work on it. And I don't know, because we had to read a book. But no one wanted to read it! And then you had to write journals about them, and then you had to make a visual. It could either be a poster board or something like 3-D. And everybody just put it off until the last minute!”* (Kendra, FG 1).

Another senior stated that the amount of homework she completed often kept her up at night: *“It was just like the kind of load of work was like a ton of bricks, honestly. Because I wasn't used to it. Literally, I lost a lot of sleep. It was like, I just lost sleep”* (Mia, FG 3).

5-2. Junior Year. After completing their freshmen and sophomore years, students experience open campus for the first time and travel independently to the university. There, they take four classes each semester for their junior year, returning to the EECHS campus once each

day for their AVID III class. The experience of being on a college campus and not being constantly monitored under the watchful eyes of EECHS teachers and administrators presents juniors with the newly found freedom of making independent decisions. Most juniors do well and suffer only from the normal difficulties of attending college classes with difficult subjects such as precalculus, biology, and English. One student remarked: *"For me, the junior year was the hardest year. I thought it was gonna be the sophomore year, but surprisingly it was the junior year because I feel like it was more of the classes that we took"* (Paulette, FG 1).

Other students felt that the freedom of their junior year was challenging because of time management: *"Honestly, I think that it's just learning how to manage your time because also with all the freedom that we get, sometimes you don't know how to take advantage of it. Sometimes you want to spend too much time not focusing on your schoolwork. So, you need to find that balance between spending time with friends and going out and just actually focusing on your studies to be able to be good academically"* (Charles, FG 5).

For a very few students, however, the freedom of their junior year proves to be a stumbling block. They sometimes procrastinate working on a term paper until the last minute, receive a failing grade on an assignment, or even fail the class in its entirety with the result that they are placed on academic probation and must retake the class during summer. Usually, however, students learn from their mistakes. One student stated: *"My junior year was jumping into all the freedom and fantastic at first, but I didn't have any time management skills, so everything was spent horribly. And my grade? I passed, but not how I wanted to. In my senior year, I was able to actually manage my time better. My freedom wasn't used for wasting time. I was more productive"* (Richard, FG 5). A summary of Question No. 5 is displayed in Table 25.

Table 25: Question No. 5 Summary

Invariant Meaning Units	Descriptions of Experiences	Examples of Significant Statements
Rigorous coursework	EECHS courses are rigorous intellectually and require more time to complete. English I and its semester project Book Talk epitomizes course rigor.	"It's the one class that puts you to the test. Like, if you can't pass that class, like it's kind of like you're kind of done for. If you ask me about it, like if you ask anyone about freshman year, they're going to be like 'Oh yeah! English! Book Talk! That's it.'"
Junior Year	Junior year represents a new level of freedom, responsibility, and time management as students take challenging university classes.	"So, we all just focus on one class or the subject, and you're like, 'Oh, like, I'm struggling with that one, too!' And the majority of us were struggling."

Focus-Group Question No. 6

In Question No. 6, I asked students: “What has helped motivate you to obtain high grades at EECHS?” Common discussion topics and themes include Class Rankings, College Choices and Scholarships, and Family Matters.

6-1. Class Rankings. Several students stated they were motivated to obtain high grades from “friendly” competition with their classmates. Seniors said that as freshmen and sophomores, one of the first things they did after every six-week grading period was to check their grade point average because of its use in determining class rankings. As soon as class rankings were determined, students would compare their rankings with that of other students. When asked what motivated her to obtain high grades, one senior stated: *"The people! Like the top five, top ten, the top 20 ranks. Yeah, because even though it's EECHS, there's a lot of friendly competition"* (Natalie, FG 2).

Another senior said that she wanted to maintain her high grades so she could stay within her social circle of friends who were also high-ranked students. She stated: *"We when we get our transcripts, the second we get them, it's like 'Hey, what's your rank?' I have a lot of friends at the*

top, and bottom. And that gets me really competitive because I don't want to be on the bottom, because it's embarrassing when all your friends are number one, number five, or seven, and then like, I mean, I'm number 17!" (Alicia, FG 3).

Students were often motivated to improve their grades and ranking because of other students' examples: *"I went to another high school the first year and I didn't really have to try to get good grades. And then when I came here, I got my first C and it was like, 'Oh my God!' And everybody had A's. And so, I had to try here, not really to beat other people, but it just kind of motivated me to be like, 'Oh, these kids are really staying up late to, like, study!' I need to remember!"* (Charlotte, FG 6).

6-2. College Choices and Scholarships. Students mentioned the importance of high grades on college acceptances and scholarship awards. One senior stated: *"If I don't get high grades, I'm probably not going to get accepted, or I'm not going to get as much scholarships that I applied for. By far, that's the biggest thing, getting the scholarships the colleges give out. And that's the one thing that I remind myself, you know, 'You need the money!'"* (Abel, FG 5).

As previously discussed in question number 4-4: *Senior Planning*, AVID IV and its Top-Ten University and Scholarship Project helps students navigate the college application and scholarship process. One student, Priscilla, had worked hard on her grades to earn a Top 5% ranking and got accepted to her Dream School, which she applied to as part of her AVID IV Top-Ten University and Scholarship Project (Priscilla, FG 7). Joshua, another Top 5% student, got accepted to his Reach School, which he applied to also as a part of the AVID IV Top-Ten University and Scholarship Project (Joshua, FG 7).

6-3. Family Matters. As students described some of their motivations for achieving high grades, one theme which immediately suggested itself was *Make My Family Proud*. However,

upon closer examination of all student statements, the broader title *Family Matters* was chosen as it could apply to several aspects of students' families simultaneously. Three different aspects of Family Matters will be discussed, including students who wanted to make their mom and dad proud of them, students who wanted to carry on a family tradition of academic achievement and graduation from EECHS, and students who realized they were the first-generation in their family to attend EECHS.

(1) Make mom and dad proud. One student stated: *"So the fact that we're actually going to walk on the stage and get our associate's degree. That has motivated me. Also, to make my family proud"* (Alexa, FG 2). Another student expressed a similar sentiment: *"Honestly, the real reason why I want to finish and graduate is that it's for my parents. I mean, it all goes back to our parents and we want to impress them and make them proud. So, I feel like that that's what influenced me. Yeah, they're my motivation, my mom and my dad. It all comes back to that for me!"* (Matthew, FG 6).

(2) Family tradition. Some students were following a brother, sister, or cousin's example by wanting to do well and achieve high grades at EECHS. One student stated that other family members influenced their academic achievement: *"My little brother started attending, my older sister attended. And after my little brother, my little sister is going to attend. It's just like all four of us!"* (Susan, FG 4).

A cousin influenced one student to enroll at EECHS, which motivated his little brother and other cousins to attend: *"My cousin came to EECHS and he talked about the opportunities that the school gave him. And I really liked that. And I think he started a pattern. And my younger brother started coming. And then my cousins came. The whole family's here now!"* (Jacob, FG 4). One student even felt a spirit of friendly competition with his older brother: *"So*

my brother did attend here, and I like to challenge myself. What he does sets the standard, so I want to beat him! So, we're very competitive" (Matthew, FG 6).

(3) First-generation student. One senior recognized how important it was for him to do well at EECHS: *"Because graduating from here, I'm going to be the first-generation to graduate with a degree. And they really pushed me, carrying that in my consciousness like that. I'm going to be that example for my brothers and for the generations ahead" (Jacob, FG 4).* Another student wanted to help her siblings if needed: *"I'm the oldest in my family. So, I'm experiencing everything first because I'm the first one here in America just to go through college, go to high school, everything, here in the education system. So, I like to do well so I can help my siblings if they need it!" (Jennifer, FG 5).* A summary of Question No. 6 is displayed in Table 26.

Table 26: Question No. 6 Summary

Invariant Meaning Units	Descriptions of Experiences	Examples of Significant Statements
Class Rankings	Where students are in terms of class ranking and GPA is important for practical reasons such as college acceptance, scholarship awards, and high school honors as well as social reasons for belonging.	"Like you see how your friends how smart they are, so I want to be as smart as them and get good grades."
College Choices and Scholarships	Students were motivated to get good grades because of their influence on college acceptance and scholarships.	"If I don't get high grades, I'm probably not going to get accepted, or I'm not going to get as much scholarships that I applied for. By far, that's the biggest thing, getting the scholarships the colleges give out. And that's the one thing that I remind myself, you know, 'You need the money!'"

Table 26: cont.

Invariant Meaning Units	Descriptions of Experiences	Examples of Significant Statements
Family Matters	Students were motivated to obtain high grades because it would make their parents proud, to carry on a family tradition, or to be the first in their family to go to college.	"Because graduating from here, I'm going to be the first-generation to graduate with a degree. And they really pushed me, carrying that in my consciousness like that. I'm going to be that example for my brothers and for the generations ahead."

Focus-Group Question No. 7

In Question No. 7, I asked students: "Were there any times that you considered dropping out of EECHS?" During seven focus group interviews, I was consistently surprised by the number of students who stated that they had seriously considered dropping out. Why so many students considered dropping out of EECHS but instead chose to remain and persist to graduation has relevance to the research question: "What motivates these students to persist in their studies, and graduate from a high achieving early college high school?"

Of the 35 students interviewed, 21 (60%) stated that they had considered dropping out, while 14 (40%) stated that they had never seriously considered dropping out. Students also provided a variety of explanations for why they considered dropping out, as well as various explanations for why dropping out was not something they seriously considered.

For clarity, I have phrased and formatted their responses in the following manner: 7-1. Yes, I considered dropping out of EECHS; 7-2. No, I never considered dropping out of EECHS; 7-3. The year(s) I considered dropping out of EECHS; 7-4. Why I considered dropping out of EECHS; and 7-5. The main reason(s) I chose to remain at EECHS.

7-1. Yes, I considered dropping out of EECHS. There were mixed reactions from students in almost every focus-group when I asked, "Were there any times that you considered

dropping out of EECHS?" Some students reacted with laughter, others smiled, and some just quietly nodded because it seemed as though the thought of dropping out of EECHS had indeed occurred to many of them. One student laughed as she stated: *"I feel like you're not an EECHS student if you don't have the urge to drop out!"* (Alicia, Focus Group 2). Another student replied emphatically: *"Freshman year! Yeah, like I said I didn't want to be here. I wanted to go to a different campus for band. That's where all my friends were going and that's where my cousins were going"* (Joseph, FG 1).

One student had difficulties her entire first three years at EECHS: *"I considered dropping out in my freshman, sophomore and junior years"* (Juliette, FG 4). Another senior stated that he missed his friends and activities at his previous school: *"I considered dropping out in the very beginning of freshman year because I missed my friends and the things at my original high school like the extracurriculars and whatnot that were not at EECHS"* (Abel, FG 5).

One senior asserted: *"Honestly, I kind of thought about it a few times, but the thing is, I realized that dropping EECHS would pretty much be lowering the bar for myself, you know!"* (Julian, FG 6). One student in the Top 5% missed music: *"I admit that I did think about it, but not because of the reason you would think, not because of grades. I wanted to go because of band. I missed it so much, and I was so upset over it freshman year!"* (Priscilla, FG 7).

7-2. No, I never considered dropping out of EECHS. For some students, dropping out of EECHS was not a consideration. One senior with a family tradition stated: *"Oh, I mean, honestly, for me, no. Just because I felt there was this small pressure of like, 'Oh, both of my siblings have graduated from here,' so I didn't want to drop out!"* (Paulette, FG 1).

One student who faced the TSI challenge stated: *"Dropping out of EECHS wasn't an option in my mind, although that was a possibility if I had not passed my TSI"* (Jacob, FG 4).

Another senior in the top 5% stated: *"I never really considered dropping out of EECHS because I didn't feel the need to. I was doing well in all my classes and felt safe at the school. Additionally, I had learned that when things got hard, that I shouldn't just quit, but rather try harder"* (Jennifer, FG 5).

One student was determined to finish his classes: *"I don't think I ever felt like dropping out of EECHS. I was also kind of like, 'I'm going to just power through!' Yeah! Let's just get it out of the way"* (Charles, FG 5). Yet another senior in the top 5% stated: *"I never considered dropping out of EECHS because I didn't really have a reason to, and the courses were challenging in a good way for me. Plus, I always looked on the bright side: I would be graduating with many honors, including an associate's degree!"* (Joshua, FG 7).

7-3. The year(s) I considered dropping out of EECHS. Seniors stated that their freshmen year, with its heavy dawn-to-dusk workload, caused them the most difficulty, followed by their sophomore year because of its mandatory TSI requirement, and then their junior year because of their taking university classes for the first time and having difficulties with time management.

One senior stated: *"Freshman year, I guess, was kind of like tough, and it kind of made me think of the decision to come to EECHS. Well, yeah, I remember when we got the Book Talk, I came home and I was crying"* (Geneviene, FG 1).

Another student stated that making the transition from middle school was difficult: *"I had times where I felt like dropping out, especially during freshman year. Coming from middle school, you're getting straight A's on your report card... to coming here, my first B and C"* (Beatriz, FG 2). Another student lost sleep completing her assignments: *"I think it was freshman year and I just remember having to stay up late and do a bunch of homework"* (Mia, FG 3).

One senior stated that her first three years were difficult: *"I considered dropping out in my freshman, sophomore, and junior years and was struggling a lot with the college classes, along with my mental health"* (Juliette, FG 4). One senior stated how the TSI in his sophomore year would determine his future at EECHS: *"That TSI thing also motivated me, but it was definitely a breaking point for me because I was like, 'Well, if I cannot pass this test, what is the point of me being here?'"* (George, FG 5).

Another senior stated that she had particular difficulties in her junior year: *"Junior year I almost dropped. I almost failed two classes. I was super close. I only skated by with like a 70!"* (Marta, FG 1). Because of a TSI testing date extension due to COVID, some students considered dropping out as late as their junior year: *"For me, it was junior year because of the TSI. I think I was at some point like, 'No, I'm not going to be able to do this.' So, I just started looking at options for where I was going to go. But at the end, I did manage to pass it, but it was in my junior year that I considered dropping out"* (Samuel, FG 4).

7-4. Why I considered dropping out of EECHS. Seniors gave several reasons for considering dropping out including (a) poor grades; (b) difficulty passing the TSI test by the end of their sophomore year; and (c) a desire for extracurricular activities like band and choir at their original campus.

(a) Poor grades. Low grades in the fall semester caused one student to have mixed feelings about staying: *"I thought about it, but I never really thought I'd go through with it. Freshman year, first semester, which I said was pretty hard on me because I thought I was a little behind. And I saw a bunch of people going out. So, I thought maybe I should get out of here, too"* (Julie, FG 3). Another student stated: *"I considered dropping out my sophomore and*

junior year because I was failing my classes and did not have many close friends that encouraged me to stay" (Susan, FG 4).

(b) Difficulty passing the TSI. One senior considered passing the TSI a breaking point: *"I'd like to add that TSI thing also motivated me, but it was definitely a breaking point for me because I was like, 'Well if I cannot pass this test, what is the point of me being here?'" (George, FG 5).* Because of COVID considerations, one student received a TSI extension: *"For me, it was junior year because of the TSI. I think at some point, I was like, 'I'm not going to be able to do this!' So, I just started looking at options for where I was going to go. But in the end, I did manage to pass it!" (Samuel, FG 4).*

(c) Extracurricular activities. One student particularly missed band at his original campus: *"I wanted to go to a different campus for band. That's where all my friends were going, and that's where my cousins were going" (Joseph, FG 1).* Another senior said she missed singing: *"So, I did want to drop out of EECHS. That was freshman year when I wanted to go to my regular high school. Yeah. But that was because of choir" (Kendra, FG 1).*

7-5. The main reason(s) I chose to remain at EECHS. Students gave more than a few reasons for their choice of remaining at EECHS. When asked why he chose to remain, one student said simply: *"My friends. The friends I made here. Yeah!" (Joseph, FG 1).* Another student with a family tradition wanted to show that she could graduate EECHS: *"I felt like there was this small pressure of both of my siblings having graduated from here, so I don't want to drop out" (Paulette, FG 1).* One senior who had toyed with the idea of dropping out chose instead to stay because of her investment: *"So for me, I guess I probably said it jokingly, but I don't think I ever meant it like to drop out of EECHS. Simply because I've gotten like through Book Talk and everything, and I'm not planning on throwing it into the trash, you know?" (Geneviene, FG 1).*

Many students had mentioned earlier that one of their main motivations for attending EECHS was to earn an associate's degree. One student reaffirmed her choice to avoid changing schools so she could get her associate's degree: *"But then I was thinking like Natalie did...making new friends, and then it's a bigger school over there. And I'm already so used to it here, the small school... I was like, 'I'm just gonna end up fighting for the associate's, you know, no matter what!'"* (Beatriz, FG 2). A summary of Question No. 7 is displayed in Table 27.

Table 27: Question No. 7 Summary

Invariant Meaning Units	Descriptions of Experiences	Examples of Significant Statements
7-1. Yes, I considered dropping out of EECHS.	Students are challenged by the curriculum at EECHS. While comparatively few students leave, more than the majority had thought about dropping out and returning to their original school.	"I considered dropping out in the very beginning of freshman year because I missed my friends and the things at my original high school like the extra-curriculars and whatnot that were not at EECHS."
7-2. No, I never considered dropping out of EECHS.	Some students were certain about their decision to attend EECHS and did not consider dropping out.	"I don't think I ever meant it like to drop out of EECHS. Simply because I've gotten through Book Talk and everything, and I'm not planning on throwing it into the trash, you know?"
7-3. The year(s) I considered dropping out of EECHS.	The freshmen year was a common year considered for dropping out, followed closely by the junior year.	"I had times where I felt like dropping out, especially during freshman year. Coming from middle school, you're getting straight A's on your report card... to coming here, my first B and C."
7-4. Why I considered dropping out of EECHS.	Reasons varied for wishing to drop out of EECHS but commonly included poor grades, and stress.	"I think it was freshman year and I just remember having to stay up late and do a bunch of homework."
7-5. The main reason(s) I chose to remain at EECHS.	Reasons varied for wanting to remain at EECHS but included personal investment, friends, and family tradition.	"So, for me, I guess I probably said it jokingly, but I don't think I ever meant it like to drop out of EECHS. Simply because I've gotten like through Book Talk and everything, and I'm not planning on throwing it into the trash, you know?"

Focus-Group Question No. 8

In Question No. 8, I asked students: “What are some of the things that you have done to overcome challenges at EECHS? Common experiences and themes included Friends Are Important, Self-Monitoring, and Study Groups.

8-1. Friends Are Important. Students frequently mentioned how they valued their friendships at EECHS, especially when having difficulties. One senior stated: *"Well, I guess for me, what I've done to overcome challenges is, be with my friends. You know, hang out with them! Talk to them, because maybe they would understand!"* (Abel, FG 5). Another student's friendships were related to having the same classes together: *"All of us got stuck together in whatever class they put us in. And we were friends because in that little class, we were always together, so really it was 'might as well talk with each other!' So, we all just got really close"* (Geneviene, FG 1).

One senior stated that she could rely on teachers and fellow students for support: *"I feel like some of the things that we've done to overcome challenges at EECHS is just talk to our friends and teachers"* (Beatriz, FG 2). Another senior also felt she could rely on teachers for support: *"I have this special appreciation for the teachers here because they have helped me and my family, in general, a lot. One with transitioning to Texas, but also if something is up with me, they will approach me and ask me, 'Hey, what's wrong? You look a little too depressed today. What's going on?' And they'll sit down with me, and they'll listen"* (Alicia, FG 2).

8-2. Self-Monitoring. Students stated that becoming more aware of their study habits helped them to overcome challenges and improve their grades. For example, regarding his cellphone use, one senior stated: *"So I know if I'm on my phone, I'm going to be on my phone for like an hour. I'll just leave my phone on the couch, and I'll go to my room, do my work, or I'll sit*

at the kitchen table now and do my work" (Joseph, FG 1). Similarly, another student stated how she limited her cellphone use when it was time to study: *"So, I had to learn to put my phone away and focus on my assignments"* (Paulette, FG 1).

One disorganized senior emulated his better-organized friends and stated: *"In every class, I had someone that I knew was more organized than I was, or I knew that they were already keeping up. And I would try to keep up with them and just be at their level kind of, because my organizational skills were bad!"* (Matthew, FG 6).

Another disorganized senior stated: *"I remember they told us in Summer Bridge to get a planner. And I thought, 'That's not going to help me!' And then it actually helped me! It helped me so much. And I was like, 'What the heck?' And every class the teachers would tell us to take out our planner. And it really helped me because I was writing things down, and checking them off, and it was very satisfying. It would motivate me to do my work so I could just check it off!"* (Mia, FG 3).

8-3. Study Groups. Study groups refer to two or more students meeting on their own initiative and are student-led and organized. One senior stated how a study group helped her solve some of her mathematics problems: *"I remember we took a math class with TCC. And I'm not the best at tests. And we had this one friend who understood the whole class and everything, and so we held little tutoring sessions in the library. And then everybody just started finding out like 'Oh, you guys are going to have tutoring in the library?' It's 'Yeah, yeah! Do you guys want to come?' And so, during lunch the library would just be full. And we'd have one of those papers, and she'd do the problems. And I'd be like 'Okay, people. How did you get that? This is where I'm struggling at.' And we all came together and helped each other out"* (Paulette, FG 1).

Another student stated that his freshmen AVID I class had a study group assignment requiring him to compare his academic strengths and weaknesses with that of other students in order to find a study buddy: *"I think in freshman year, it was an AVID assignment to get a list of different people. And you had to find your weakest subject and your strongest subject, and you kind of had to match yourself with different people who could help you out"* (Peter, FG 3).

This same assignment was also required in Peter's AVID II class in his sophomore year. For his junior and senior years, Peter stated: *"When it came to my junior and senior years, my 'study buddies' were just mostly my friends because we all had the same classes, anyways. And so, we would always just text each other. Sometimes we would even make Zoom calls, especially in our junior year, like during COVID. So, we would make Zoom calls before any big test and help each other study and ask each other questions"* (Peter, FG 3). A summary of Question No. 8 is displayed in Table 28.

Table 28: Question No. 8 Summary

Invariant Meaning Units	Descriptions of Experiences	Examples of Significant Statements
Friends Are Important	Peer-to-peer relationships and student-teacher relationships are valued at EECHS.	"Well, I guess for me, what I've done to overcome challenges is be with my friends. You know, hang out with them! Talk to them, because maybe they would understand!"
Self-Monitoring	An academic behavior where students become more aware of their own behaviors as learners.	"Knowing yourself and putting limits on the things you know that won't help you, so that you can succeed and do your best."
Study Groups	A study group is a student organized informal group which meets after class to help students learn the subject material better.	"We really do depend on each other to help each other. So, we really fill in gaps that others have. And I feel like if we find out a piece of important information, we share it!"

Focus-Group Question No. 9

In Question No. 9, I asked students: “Are there particular teachers, faculty, or staff at EECHS that you feel have made a difference or influenced your progress at EECHS?” Every student identified an EECHS teacher who had influenced them or whom they related to. Following the completion of the last focus-group, I noted that the entire EECHS faculty, including counselors and administrators, had been mentioned by students at least twice, with some being mentioned several times.

In certain respects, this particular question was anticipated by Ch. IV: Focus Group Question No. 4: "What are some of the things that you like the most about being a student at EECHS?" Students answered in 4-2 *Student-Teacher Connection* that they especially appreciated their unique relationships with their teachers. Based on their comments, I summarize in this next section some main themes about how teachers made a difference and influenced students' progress at EECHS. These themes include (a) personalized attention; (b) mentorship; (c) a caring culture; (d) constant support; (e) accountability; and (f) preparation for college and life.

(a) Personalized Attention. One of the most prominent themes discussed was how much students noticed and appreciated the personalized attention they received from their teachers. They feel recognized by their teachers as individuals with unique strengths, interests, and challenges. One senior stated: *“I like the size because the teachers know you, and they care. Like, I guess at other high schools, they do care. But here, you really feel it, and you know it, and they know your name. They know things about you, and they're always offering help and stuff. So that's what I like about being here because I always feel cared about by the teachers”* (Mia, FG 3).

(b) Mentorship. EECHS students see their teachers as providers of academic advice but also as mentors because they share life advice from their own experiences. A smaller school size facilitates this mentorship and the continuity of the student-teacher relationship, which gradually develops over four years. One senior stated: *"Because the teachers, they really do connect with you. They give you advice not only on school, but also in life. If they see that you're struggling and even if it's not school related, they'll sit you down and they'll talk to you, like, really talk to you. And they'll be like, 'What's the problem?' And I feel that's one of the things that really makes EECHS the thing, you know!"* (Marta, FG 1).

(c) A Caring Culture. Caring seems to be a part of the culture at EECHS. As discussed previously in Ch. II Nel Noddings's *Ethics of Care*, teachers demonstrate that they care about students' academic progress and extend their concern to their overall social and emotional well-being, enhancing students' sense of belonging at the school. One senior stated: *"I like the size because the teachers know you, and they care. Like, I guess at other high schools, they do care. But here, you really feel it, and you know it, and they know your name. They know things about you, and they're always offering help and stuff. So that's what I like about being here because I always feel cared about by the teachers"* (Mia, FG 3).

(d) Constant Support. Students also mentioned how their teachers were always willing to help them with their academic concerns. Teachers' ongoing assistance was offered to students through classroom access during lunch, free periods, and after school for tutorials. One senior stated: *"I think an important thing about our school is that there's always someone behind you for support. I mean, like it's not always probably the counselor, right? Because sometimes you don't feel that comfortable, going to a counselor and talking. But it can always be whatever teacher from here"* (Samuel, FG 4).

(e) Accountability. EECHS teachers take the initiative by insisting that students submit their assignments on time and in the manner specified. This level of teacher-student engagement implies a high level of trust and fosters a sense of responsibility and accountability among students. One senior stated that a teacher tracked her down to motivate her to persist: *"Because the teacher came looking for me. And even when I was like, 'Oh, I don't want to do this anymore, I give up.' They're like, 'No, you're already there. You're already close to it, so just keep on going!'"* (Julie, FG 3).

(f) Preparation for College and Life. Students mentioned how receiving help and guidance in the intricacies of applying to colleges, filling out financial aid forms, and completing scholarship applications gave them confidence in planning ahead for their college education and life. One senior was surprised to find out that one of her senior friends in another early college high school was having difficulty with college application and financial aid processes. She stated: *"...they're like, barely applying to their FAFSA. They still don't know what college they're going to, or they've only applied to one college, and they don't even know if they're going to get in!"* (Susan, FG 4). A summary of Question No. 9 is displayed in Table 29.

Table 29: Question No. 9 Summary

Invariant Meaning Units	Descriptions of Experiences	Examples of Significant Statements
Personalized Attention	Students are recognized as individuals and given personalized attention.	"...They know your name. They know things about you, and they're always offering help and stuff."
Mentorship	Teachers provide more than just academic help but life advice, as well.	"The teachers really do connect with you. They give you advice not only on school, but also in life."
A Culture of Care	Teachers care in visible ways that matter to students.	"If they see that you're struggling and even if it's not school related, they'll sit you down and they'll talk to you."

Table 29: cont.

Invariant Meaning Units	Descriptions of Experiences	Examples of Significant Statements
Constant Support	Teachers make themselves available to students.	"You can just go with them during the day and like 'I need help with this' and they'll help you out."
Accountability	Teachers provide words of encouragement to students as well as set high standards.	"When I was like 'I don't want to do this anymore. I give up!' They're like 'No you're already there. You're already close to it, so just keep on going!'"
Preparation for College and Life	Teachers and counselors help students with college opportunity knowledge.	"We have a lot of support here. The teachers and the counselors help us a lot with our college applications and everything that we need."

Focus-Group Question No. 10

In Question No. 10, I asked students: "Are there particular family members that you feel encouraged or supported your progress at EECHS?" Family members most often mentioned included mom, dad, sister, brother, grandmother, and grandfather.

10-1. Mom. Of the 35 students who answered this question, 20 students (57%) stated that their mother was their biggest fan and cheerleader and the one who gave them the most encouragement and support. One senior stated: *"She wasn't always able to help me in my homework because math has changed so much, right? So, she couldn't help me with my actual homework, but she would always tell me, 'I'm here if you need a break, anything!' But that just helped me. I knew I could get through it!"* (Mia, Focus Group 3).

Another student noted that her mother had always encouraged her academic efforts: *"For me it would be my mom because she always wanted to know what's happening, and everything. Because even in middle school she would stay close to me and say, 'Hey, how are you doing in your grades?' or, 'How is this particular class going?' and stuff like that. That's in high school, as well!"* (Jennifer, FG 5).

One senior stated that his mom encouraged and helped him solve problems when he was having difficulties: *"I think it's been my mom. She is kind of the one that keeps pushing me, and she is the one that always asked me 'How was your day? What did you do in school? What did you learn? How are you doing?' She'd say like, 'Oh, you're struggling with this! Okay, we can find a way to help you out. Let's go talk to your teachers or counselors. Who can we ask to get tutorials?' or stuff like that"* (Charles, FG 5).

Another senior stated that his mom had confidence in him and encouraged his decision-making: *"The only one who really helps me is my mom. She's the one that told me about EECHS. In general, she lets me pilot my grades, you know, take full control because she trusts that I will do good in my classes!"* (Jacob, FG 3).

10-2. Dad. Dads were also mentioned as being important sources of encouragement and support. Twelve students (34%) stated that their dads gave them much-needed encouragement and support. One senior also appreciated his stepfather's approval: *"For me, it would have to be both my parents, of course, but mainly my stepdad. He is not one to show emotions. So, when he shows that he's proud, it's like a huge thing for me! He's always been there to help me with my high school stuff and college and everything like that. So, he's been a huge motivation as well"* (Richard, FG 5).

One student appreciated her dad's long-term concern for her: *"He wants me to have as many opportunities as I can. And he believes that EECHS really is the place for it"* (Marta, FG 1). Another senior was happy that her dad was proud of her: *"I feel like my dad is my biggest supporter. He thinks really highly of EECHS because a bunch of his coworkers' daughters or their sons go here. So, I like hearing him talk about me being here. And then he goes, 'Yeah! My*

daughter goes to EECHS!" and it really warmed my heart. And it's like... I want him to talk good like that for the rest of his life" (Charlotte, FG 6).

10-3. Sister. Sisters were also mentioned as important sources of support and encouragement. One student's sister, who also attended EECHS, was an important resource: *"I'd say my sister simply because she's one grade below me right now. She's a junior. So, we kind of help each other out. Sometimes I'll be struggling with something, and maybe it's something that she knows. So, she comes over and helps me, and I help her with some of her classes, too, because I know the things she's covering" (Geneviene, FG 1).* One senior appreciated the career advice his sisters provided: *"I think for me it would be both my sisters. My sisters were the ones that influenced me because they told me all this stuff to do after you graduate to get the career you wanted" (George, FG 5).*

Another senior benefited from her sister's previous academic experience at EECHS: *"For me, it's been my sister because when I entered, she had just left EECHS the previous year and graduated. So, when she entered the university, we were both studying together. And sometimes it wasn't even that hard, but it was just having someone there to be like 'It's okay, it's fine, you'll get through it!'" (Paulette, FG 1).*

10-4. Brother. One senior always went to his brother for help: *"Well, for me, my brother helped me a lot. I don't know how, but whatever he learns he manages to remember. It stuck with him always. So, I go to him for math, for reading, for anything. So, I think throughout my years in high school, he was he was the one who helped me" (Samuel, FG 4).* Another student stated that her brother was the one who most understood her experiences at EECHS: *"I do ask him questions and he tries to help me as much as he can because he's really the only one that understands what kind of program this is" (Julie, Focus Group 3).*

10-5. Grandmother. One senior wanted to honor his grandmother: *"I think for me it was my grandma. Well, also my whole family, really. But my grandma because she was the one who told me 'Oh, you're going to help me when you grow up!' So, I was like, I want to do that. It made me feel good about myself, you know, being able to help my grandmother, my mom, or my whole family"* (Eliot, FG 4).

10-6. Grandfather. One student stated that her grandfather particularly influenced her: *"My grandpa! He's gone now, but he would always be there at all the stuff that I would do, all of my ceremonies, and all the stuff that I would win. He would always make sure to say 'Stay on track!' and 'Keep going!' and all that stuff. And so he would do that a lot because he would always tell me 'If you want to go for the life you want, you got to study for it!'"* (Michelle, FG 7).

A summary of Question No. 10 is displayed in Table 30.

Table 30: Question No. 10 Summary

Invariant Meaning Units	Descriptions of Experiences	Examples of Significant Statements
Mom	Moms were mentioned the most as those who made differences in students' progress at EECHS.	"She would always tell me, 'I'm here if you need a break, anything.' But that just helped me. I knew I could get through it."
Dad	Dads were mentioned almost as much as moms as those who made differences in students' progress at EECHS.	"He wants me to have as many opportunities as I can. And he believes that EECHS really is the place for it."
Sister	Sisters also were mentioned as being influential in students' progress.	"I'd say my sister simply because she's one grade below me right now, she's a junior. So, we kind of help each other out. Sometimes I'll be struggling with something and maybe it's something that she knows. So, she comes over and helps me, and I help her with some of her classes, too, because I know the things she's covering."

Table 30: cont.

Invariant Meaning Units	Descriptions of Experiences	Examples of Significant Statements
Brother	Brothers were also mentioned as being influential in students' progress.	"I do ask him questions and he tries to help me as much as he can because he's really the only one that understands what kind of program this is."
Grandmother	Grandmothers were also mentioned as being influential in students' progress.	"I think for me it was my grandma. Well, also my whole family, really. But my grandma because she was the one who told me 'Oh, you're going to help me when you grow up!' So I was like, I want to do that. It made me feel good about myself, you know, being able to help my grandmother, my mom, or my whole family."
Grandfather	Grandfathers were also mentioned as being influential in students' progress.	"My grandpa! He's gone now, but he would always be there at all the stuff that I would do, all of my ceremonies, and all the stuff that I would win. He would always make sure to say 'Stay on track!' and 'Keep going!' and all that stuff. And so he would do that a lot because he would always tell me 'If you want to go for the life you want, you got to study for it!'"

Focus-Group Question No. 11

In Question No. 11, I asked students: “Are there any particular classes at EECHS that you feel were helpful in preparing you for college classes?” Common topics and themes included English I and its semester project, Book Talk, and AVID.

11-1. English I and Book Talk. While several classes were mentioned, the one that all students seemed to most agree upon was “English I” and its semester project entitled *Book Talk*. As discussed previously in Ch. V: 5-1, Book Talk is an in-depth analysis of a book, a book report, and a group presentation of a literary classic such as Ray Bradbury’s *Fahrenheit 451* (Bradbury, 2012).

English I teacher Mrs. Nielsen stated that her syllabus and curriculum are based on Advanced Placement English and college English I Composition and designed to emulate what

students would experience in an actual college English class. Thus, her class gives students a close approximation of the rigor required in a college English I composition class.

In response to the question of what class prepared her for college, one senior stated: *“I would say maybe my English classes. Just in the way they were kind of demanding for due dates in the way that some professors can be. And strict in the way we had to write out assignments. So, it kind of got us in that mindset that you have to really follow all of the rules and all the due dates to pass, because even if you have a well-written essay, you still need to meet all the requirements and the rules to be able to pass the course”* (Mia, FG 3). Another student appreciated the broad emphasis on writing that the class provided and stated: *“The main lessons were how to cite authors correctly, how to analyze a book, and how to start writing better. She said the main idea was to get us college ready. It wasn't about studying for the STARR test. It was for us to be able to write!”* (Julie, FG 3).

Another senior stated that her freshmen English I class set a certain standard and prepared her well: *“But if you weren't able to get past Mrs. Nielsen's class, then it was kind of like you were going to have a hard time at TVU. So, I think her class really prepared us a lot for those college classes in both the writing part and the time management part”* (Marta, FG 1).

11-2. AVID. AVID is a class that students have no shortage of opinions about if asked. Students enjoyed discussing things that they liked and disliked about AVID. Because AVID is a required class for all four years, students must complete various assignments designed to help them become college ready. Students liked some assignments more than others, and certain assignments seemed like a burden. For example, as discussed previously, one of AVID's three "Non-Negotiables" is the AVID Binder. The AVID Binder is a very large three-ring binder into which all assignments are organized from each of their classes. As one might imagine, the AVID

Binder soon becomes bulky and unwieldy, which students do not enjoy carrying around all day. The AVID Binder, however, is the core 'inner' part of the Organizational aspect of AVID's instructional framework WICOR ('O') and is intended to develop students' study habit of being organized.

Some students embraced and then applied AVID concepts wholeheartedly. One top 5% senior stated: *"Yeah, I was doing everything pretty much the first year. And then I've just been using those same AVID principles for the whole four years"* (Peter, FG 3). Seniors also reflected on AVID assignments that they had in previous years. For example, several focus groups discussed the College Fair presentation at some length as a particularly useful AVID assignment. In their AVID II class, sophomores were tasked with creating presentations for a hypothetical College Fair. AVID II teacher Mrs. Strauss presented sophomores with a scenario whereby they would assume the role of College Enrollment Officers who would be given a substantial salary bonus for attracting more students and increasing enrollment at the college.

Sophomores working in groups of four developed their College Fair presentations, following a rubric provided by their AVID II teacher with higher-scoring presentations incorporated more rubric elements. The rubric included:

- (a) College admission requirements like SAT/ACT scores, minimum GPA, and whether the college accepts dual enrollment credits;
- (b) Information on degrees and programs offered, their duration, and details about undergraduate and graduate majors;
- (c) Tuition and fees, including cost per credit hour, semester, year, in-state, and out-of-state tuition;
- (d) Student demographics, exploring diversity, nationality, and gender balance;

- (e) Student life, including clubs, extracurricular organizations, and who can join them;
- (f) Sports, looking at what kinds are featured and the college's record of athletic achievements;
- (g) Financial assistance, detailing scholarships available and requirements for them;
- (h) Graduation rates, revealing the percentage of students who graduate and the average time it takes.

Lastly, sophomores were evaluated on the visual appeal of their presentation boards, their personal attire, and participation.

One focus group senior stated: *"The one I remember was when sophomore and freshman AVID classes interacted, and we did our College Fair Presentation. We had to present a college or a university to the freshmen. We would set up presentation boards and it was kind of like we were recruiting for the college or university. And then we had snacks and stuff that we would give them. And then depending on which booth freshmen liked the most, they would give us points, and the booth with the most points won"* (Marta, FG 1). A summary of Question No. 11 is displayed in Table 31.

Table 31: Question No. 11 Summary

Invariant Meaning Units	Descriptions of Experiences	Examples of Significant Statements
English I and Book Talk	Proficiency in reading and writing continue to be key college readiness indicators.	"I think her class really prepared us a lot for those college classes in both the writing part, but also like time management."
AVID	AVID is a required elective class for all four years at EECHS and teaches students specific college readiness skills.	"I've just been using those same AVID principles for the whole four years." (Top 5% student at EECHS)

Focus-Group Question No. 12

In Question No. 12, I asked students: “Looking back at your freshman year, what advice would you offer to an incoming EECHS freshman?” Common topics and themes included Don’t Procrastinate, Ask for Help, and Join a Club.

12-1. Don’t Procrastinate. The number one piece of advice mentioned in nearly every focus-group for Question No. 12 was Don’t Procrastinate. As a part of the broader set of non-academic skills mentioned earlier by Conley (2007; 2010) and previously discussed in Ch. IV: 3-3 *Time Management*, avoiding procrastination might better be phrased positively as being proactive. One student stated that she decided to follow her planning calendar and complete her assignments in a more business-like manner: *“Well, just turning things in on time and stop seeing things as “Oh, it’s really hard work, but it’s really hard.” I started seeing things more like ‘It’s just homework.’ Like, just get through it and just turn it in and just try to get the A!”* (Julie, FG 3).

Another student likened procrastinating to that of an impending avalanche: *“You can do whatever you want as long as you have everything else done. Because if you do everything whenever you want and you still have stuff to do, it’s like a giant snowball coming down from a mountain. It’s just waiting to overwhelm you with snow, you know what I mean? So, instead of letting that snowball become a giant thing, get rid of the snowball first! Then, you can mess around and do whatever you want”* (Michelle, FG 7).

12-2. Ask For Help. Seniors also suggested that freshmen should not be afraid to ask teachers for help whenever needed. One senior stated that teachers were sometimes very different than how they first appeared: *“I think for me, it’d be don’t be afraid of the teachers. I would be afraid to go and ask for help because I thought they were intimidating. But they really*

were there just to help us. I feel like the most intimidating ones were the ones that wanted us to succeed the most. They truly did" (Paulette, FG 1). Joseph took advantage of after-school tutorials and stated: "Don't be afraid to ask for help, because the teachers are there to help you. And Ms. Jacobs, she would stay till 5:30 for math tutorials, and whoever went, she would be there helping them. Every teacher is there to help you, and if you go ask for the help, they'll help you" (Joseph, FG 1). Another student said: "I remember one day in Mr. Smith's class, I asked a question, and I was super nervous, too. But I realized no one actually cares. And everyone wants you to ask the question because no one else knows the answer, either!" (Mia, FG 3).

12-3. Join a Club. Seniors also suggested that joining a club was important and something that freshmen should take advantage of. As previously discussed in Ch. IV: 3-2 *Clubs Are Important*, through club membership, students meet new friends and develop social skills and self-confidence while sharing experiences in a common area of interest. One senior said she particularly enjoyed the music club: "I really like music club. I've been in it four years. When I came here, it was totally different because I thought it was playing band instruments. But it was kind of like a rock type of band, and it was super cool. So, I got in it" (Kendra, FG 1). A summary of Question No. 12 is displayed in Table 32.

Table 32: Question No. 12 Summary

<i>Invariant Meaning Units</i>	<i>Descriptions of Experiences</i>	<i>Examples of Significant Statements</i>
<i>Don't Procrastinate</i>	<i>Getting things done on time and not procrastinating is a part of time management, an essential skill for success in college.</i>	<i>"Just because you have a project that's due in so-and-so much time, doesn't mean that the same class won't give you homework to do in between! So, you kind of have to work on both."</i>

Table 32: cont.

<i>Invariant Meaning Units</i>	<i>Descriptions of Experiences</i>	<i>Examples of Significant Statements</i>
<i>Ask Teachers for Help</i>	<i>Teachers are an important resource, but students need to take the initiative and ask for their help.</i>	<i>"Don't be afraid of the teachers, because I know I would be afraid to go and ask for help because I thought they were intimidating. But they really were there just to help us."</i>
<i>Join a Club</i>	<i>Participating in clubs helps students develop new interests and social skills.</i>	<i>"What I like are the clubs. I think every single teacher here is passionate about the clubs that they have."</i>

Focus-Group Question No. 13

In Question No. 13 I asked students: "Looking back on our discussion today, what in your opinion is most important? Are there other things that you would like to add? Have we missed anything?" Common topics and themes included The EECHS Community, and School Size Matters

13-1. The EECHS Community. Question No. 13 elicited quite a few responses that seniors thought were worth reiterating or were important but not discussed sufficiently in their focus-group. For example, one student stated that: *"EECHS is its own little community"* (Joseph, FG 1). Because EECHS is an open enrollment campus, incoming students originate from many different campuses both within and outside of the district. This mixture of students results in a school culture where students as a matter of course must step outside their regular circle of acquaintances to develop new friendships. Joseph also stated: *"I mean, when you get here, you're with your own little group of friends that you came with from middle school. But everybody here didn't come from a RISD school. Some people came from like, Guadalupe Regional, Raul Yzaguirre, and other schools"* (Joseph, FG 1).

13-2. School Size Matters. As a small school with no more than about 400 students, EECHS fits the model of the Standalone early college high school by providing students with more personalized instruction and interactions with teachers as well as other students. One student stated: *"I know I said this before, but I feel like really the most important thing about EECHS is that it's stronger because of its small size. Because of its smaller size I was able to do so much more. I was able to really connect with people like, my classmates, with my teachers. And I feel like if I had gone to a big school, I wouldn't have this connection. I wouldn't have gained the confidence that I have now. I wouldn't have gained like a lot of the stuff that I have now"* (Marta, FG 1). A summary of Question No. 13 is displayed in Table 33.

Table 33: Question No. 13 Summary

Invariant Meaning Units	Descriptions of Experiences	Examples of Significant Statements
The EECHS Community	Students come from a variety of middle schools and all contribute in their own way to the EECHS learning community.	"You get to meet all these different people that you probably wouldn't have met if you went to a regular high school."
School Size Matters	EECHS smaller school size facilitates more student-to-student and student-to-teacher interactions.	"The most important thing about EECHS is that it's stronger because of its small size."

Part Two: Faculty

Faculty Data Questionnaire

Similar in nature to the Student Data Questionnaire presented earlier, the Faculty Data Questionnaire was originally scheduled for presentation to faculty as a precursor to their initial personal interview. However, after interviewing several faculty members, I realized that there were questions about the role that AVID played in the EECHS curriculum that needed to be explored first through further personal interviews. I decided to implement the Faculty Data

Questionnaire as a summative measure at the conclusion of Part Two: Faculty, following the very last interview. For this reason, the Faculty Data Questionnaire asks questions about the AVID curriculum that would not normally be categorized as demographic information.

No. 1. What Is Your Age? Question No. 1 asked teachers how old they were. While no teachers indicated they were between 21 and 25 years old, one teacher (7.69%) indicated they were between 26 and 30. One teacher (7.69%) was between 31-35 years old, while two teachers (15.38%) indicated they were between 36-40 years old. Two teachers (15.38%) indicated they were between 41-45 years old, while four teachers (30.77%) indicated they were between 46-50 years old. Two teachers (15.38%) indicated they were between 51 and 55 years old, while one (7.69%) indicated they were 56 or older. The average age group of EECHS teachers is between 41-45 years of age. Teacher Age Frequencies and Percentages is displayed in Table 34.

Table 34: Teacher Age Frequencies and Percentages

Teacher Age	<i>n</i>	Percentage of Total
21-25 years old	0	0
26-30 years old	1	7.69
31-35 years old	1	7.69
36-40 years old	2	15.38
41-45 years old	2	15.38
46-50 years old	4	30.77
51-55 years old	2	15.38
56 years or older	1	7.69
Total	13	100

No. 2. Teacher Gender. Question No. 2 asked teachers what their gender was. Two teachers (15.38%) identified as male, while 11 (84.62%) identified as female. No teachers (0%) identified as non-binary/third gender. Teacher Gender Frequencies and Percentages is displayed in Table 35.

Table 35: Teacher Gender Frequencies and Percentages

Teacher Gender	<i>n</i>	Percentage of Total
Male	2	15.38
Female	11	84.62
Non-binary/third gender	0	0
Total	13	100

No. 3. Teacher Ethnicity. Question No. 3 asked teachers what their ethnicity was. One teacher (7.69%) indicated their ethnicity as White, while twelve teachers (92.31%) indicated their ethnicity as Hispanic. No teachers indicated their ethnicity as Black or African American, Native American or American Indian, Asian/Pacific Islander, or Other. Teacher Ethnicity Frequencies and Percentages is displayed in Table 36.

Table 36: Teacher Ethnicity Frequencies and Percentages

Ethnicity	<i>n</i>	Percentage of Total
White	1	7.69
Hispanic or Latino	12	92.31
Black or African American	0	0
Native American or American Indian	0	0
Asian/Pacific Islander	0	0
Other	0	0
Total	13	100

No. 4. Educational Background of Parents. Question No. 4 asked: What is the educational background and highest degree earned by either of your parents? One teacher (7.69%) indicated a parent had earned a community college degree or certificate, while four teachers (30.77%) indicated that a parent had earned a bachelor's degree. Eight teachers (61.54%) indicated that a parent had earned a master's degree, while no teachers indicated that a parent had earned a doctorate degree or other type of advanced degree. Parents' Educational Level Frequencies and Percentages is displayed in Table 37.

Table 37: Parents' Educational Level Frequencies and Percentages

Educational Background and Highest Degree Earned	<i>n</i>	Percentage of Total
Some High School or a G.E.D.	0	0
High School Diploma	0	0
Community College Degree or Certificate	1	7.69
Bachelor's Degree (4-year)	4	30.77
Master's Degree	8	61.54
Doctorate Degree	0	0
Other	0	0
Total	13	100

No. 5. How many years have you been in public education? Question No. 5 asked teachers how many years they have been involved in public education. Three teachers (23.08%) indicated 4-6 years, while one (7.69%) indicated 7-9 years. Three teachers (23.08%) indicated 13-15 years, while one (7.69%) indicated 16-18 years. Five teachers (38.46%) indicated 19 or more years. Years in Public Education Frequencies and Percentages is displayed in Table 38.

Table 38: Years in Public Education Frequencies and Percentages

Years in Public Education	<i>n</i>	Percentage of Total
1-3 years	0	0
4-6 years	3	23.08
7-9 years	1	7.69
10-12 years	0	0
13-15 years	3	23.08
16-18 years	1	7.69
19 or more years	5	38.46
Other	0	0
Total	13	100

No. 6. How many years have you taught at EECHS? Question No. 6 asked teachers how many years they had taught at EECHS. Four teachers (30.77%) stated that they had taught between 1-3 years at EECHS, while two teachers (15.38%) stated that they had taught between 4-6 years. Two teachers (15.38%) stated that they had taught between 7-9 years at EECHS, while no teachers (0%) stated that they had taught between 10-12 years. Five teachers (38.46%) stated they had taught between thirteen and fifteen years at EECHS. Number of Years Taught at EECHS Frequencies and Percentages is displayed in Table 39.

Table 39: Number of Years Taught at EECHS Frequencies and Percentages

Number of Years at EECHS	<i>n</i>	Percentage of total
1-3 Years	4	30.77
4-6 Years	2	15.38
7-9 Years	2	15.38
10-12 Years	0	0
13-15 Years	5	38.46
Teacher Total	13	100

No. 7. What is the highest academic degree that you have earned? Question No. 7 asked teachers what their highest academic degree was. Three teachers (23.08%) stated that they had a bachelor's degree, while ten teachers (76.92%) stated that they had a master's degree. No teachers (0%) indicated that they had a doctorate degree. Highest Academic Degree Earned Frequencies and Percentages is displayed in Table 40.

Table 40: Highest Academic Degree Earned Frequencies and Percentages

Highest Academic Degree Earned	<i>n</i>	Percentage of Total
Bachelor's Degree	3	23.08

Table 40: cont.

Highest Academic Degree Earned	<i>n</i>	Percentage of Total
Master's Degree	10	76.92
Doctorate Degree	0	0
Teacher Total	13	100

No. 8. Have you ever participated in an AVID Summer Institute? Question No. 8 asked teachers whether they had ever participated in an AVID Summer Institute. Ten teachers (76.92%) indicated they had participated in an AVID Summer Institute, while three (23.08%) indicated that they had not. AVID Summer Institute Participation Frequencies and Percentages is displayed in Table 41.

Table 41: AVID Summer Institute Participation Frequencies and Percentages

AVID Summer Institute Participation	<i>n</i>	Percentage of Total
Yes	10	76.92
No	3	23.08
Total	13	100

No. 9. When did you last participate in an AVID Summer Institute? Question No. 9 asked teachers when they last participated in an AVID Summer Institute. Two teachers (15.38%) indicated they had received AVID training one year ago, while no teachers indicated receiving AVID training two years ago. Two teachers (15.38%) indicated they had received AVID training three years ago, while four (30.77%) indicated they had received AVID training four years ago. No teachers indicated receiving AVID training five years ago, while two teachers (15.38%) indicated having received AVID training six or more years ago. Three teachers (23.08%)

indicated that they had not yet participated in the AVID Summer Institute. Last AVID Summer Institute Participation Frequencies and Percentages is displayed in Table 42.

Table 42: Last AVID Summer Institute Participation Frequencies and Percentages

Last AVID Summer Institute Participation	<i>n</i>	Percentage of Total
This year (2023)	0	0
One year ago	2	15.38
Two years ago	0	0
Three years ago	2	15.38
Four years ago	4	30.77
Five years ago	0	0
Six or more years ago	2	15.38
Have not yet participated	3	23.08
Total	13	100

No. 10. How would you rate the academic ability of most of the students in one of your typical classes? Question No. 10 asked teachers to rate the academic ability of most of the students in one of their typical classes. Teachers indicated Extremely High Academic Ability, Very High Academic Ability, High Academic Ability, Average Academic Ability, Below Average Academic Ability, and Does Not Apply. One teacher (7.69%) rated their students as Extremely High Academic Ability, while two teachers (15.38%) rated their students as Very High Academic Ability. Five teachers (38.46%) rated their students as High Academic Ability, while five teachers (38.46%) rated their students as Average Academic Ability. No teachers rated their students as Below Average Academic Ability, and no teachers indicated Does Not Apply. Student Academic Ability Rating Frequencies and Percentages is displayed in Table 43.

Table 43: Student Academic Ability Rating Frequencies and Percentages

Student Academic Ability	<i>n</i>	Percentage of Total
Extremely High Academic Ability	1	7.69
Very High Academic Ability	2	15.38
High Academic Ability	5	38.46
Average Academic Ability	5	38.46
Below Average Academic Ability	0	0
Does Not Apply	0	0
Total	13	100

No. 11. Select the best response to the following statement: AVID helps students develop the organizational skills necessary for my class. Question No. 11 asked teachers to rate students' AVID organizational skills in their class by indicating Agree Highly, Agree, Disagree, Disagree Highly, or Does Not Apply. Five teachers (38.46%) indicated Agree Highly, while seven (53.85%) indicated Agree. No teachers indicated Disagree, and no teachers indicated Disagree Highly. One teacher indicated Does Not Apply. Rating AVID Organizational Skills Frequencies and Percentages is displayed in Table 44.

Table 44: Rating AVID Organizational Skills Frequencies and Percentages

Rating AVID Organizational Skills	<i>n</i>	Percentage of Total
Agree Highly	5	38.46
Agree	7	53.85
Disagree	0	0

Table 44: cont.

Rating AVID Organizational Skills	<i>n</i>	Percentage of Total
Disagree Highly	0	0
Does Not Apply	1	7.69
Total	13	100

No. 12. Select the best response to the following statement: Students use AVID

Writing and Reading strategies in my class. Question No. 12 asked teachers to evaluate the degree to which students use AVID writing and reading strategies in their class by indicating either Agree Highly, Agree, Disagree, Disagree Highly, or Does Not Apply. Five teachers (38.46%) indicated Agree Highly, while six (46.15%) indicated Agree. One teacher (7.69%) indicated Disagree, and no teacher indicated Disagree Highly. One teacher (7.69%) indicated Does Not Apply. Use of AVID Writing and Reading Strategies Frequencies and Percentages is displayed in Table 45.

Table 45: Use of AVID Writing and Reading Strategies Frequencies and Percentages

Class use of AVID Writing and Reading Strategies	<i>n</i>	Percentage of Total
Agree Highly	5	38.46
Agree	6	46.15
Disagree	1	7.69
Disagree Highly	0	0
Does Not Apply	1	7.69
Total	13	100

No. 13. Select the best response to the following statement: Students use Inquiry and Collaboration to promote critical thinking in my class. Question No. 13 asked teachers to evaluate the degree to which students use inquiry and collaboration to promote critical thinking in their class by indicating either Agree Highly, Agree, Disagree, Disagree Highly, or Does Not Apply. Eight teachers (61.54%) indicated Agree Highly, while four (30.77%) indicated Agree. No teachers indicated Disagree, and no teachers indicated Disagree Highly. One teacher (7.69%) (perhaps a counselor) indicated Does Not Apply. Use of Inquiry and Collaboration Frequencies and Percentages is displayed in Table 46.

Table 46: Use of Inquiry and Collaboration Frequencies and Percentages

Use of Inquiry and Collaboration to Promote Critical Thinking	<i>n</i>	Percentage of Total
Agree Highly	8	61.54
Agree	4	30.77
Disagree	0	0
Disagree Highly	0	0
Does Not Apply	1	7.69
Total	13	100

No. 14. Select the best response for the following statement: Students use my classroom at lunchtime to eat and socialize. Question No. 14 asked teachers to indicate how many times a week students ate lunch in their classroom. Teachers selected from a range of frequencies including Almost Every Day, Several Times a Week, Sometimes, Rarely, Not At All, and Does Not Apply. Three teachers (23.08%) indicated that students had lunch in their classroom Almost Every Day, while two teachers (15.38%) stated that students had lunch in their

classrooms Several Times a Week. Six teachers (46.15%) indicated students Sometimes had lunch in their classrooms, while one teacher (7.69%) indicated Not At All for student lunch in their classroom. One teacher (7.69%) indicated Does Not Apply. Classroom Use at Lunchtime Frequencies and Percentages is displayed in Table 47.

Table 47: Classroom Use at Lunchtime Frequencies and Percentages

Classroom Use at Lunchtime	<i>n</i>	Percentage of Total
Almost Every Day	3	23.08
Several Times a Week	2	15.38
Sometimes	6	46.15
Rarely	0	0
Not At All	1	7.69
Does Not Apply	1	7.69
Total	13	100

No. 15. How many clubs or extracurricular organizations do you sponsor? Question

No. 15 asked teachers to indicate how many clubs or extracurricular organizations they sponsored by indicating One Club, Two Clubs, Three Clubs, Four Clubs, or Does Not Apply. One teacher sponsored one club (7.69%), while four teachers sponsored three clubs (30.77%). Four teachers sponsored two clubs (30.77%), while one teacher sponsored one club (7.69%). Three teachers selected Does Not Apply (23.08%) and did not sponsor a club. Sponsorship of Clubs or Extracurriculars Frequencies and Percentages is displayed in Table 48.

Table 48: Sponsorship of Clubs or Extracurriculars Frequencies and Percentages

Sponsorship of Clubs or Extracurriculars	<i>n</i>	Percentage of Total
4 Clubs or Extracurriculars	1	7.69
3 Clubs or Extracurriculars	4	30.77
2 Clubs or Extracurriculars	4	30.77
1 Clubs or Extracurriculars	1	7.69
Does Not Apply	3	23.08
Total	13	100

No. 16. How often does your club or extracurricular organization meet during the week? Question No. 16 asked teachers to indicate how often their club or extracurricular organization met during the week. Teachers indicated by selecting either Three Times a Week, Two Times a Week, Once a Week, or Does Not Apply. One teacher (7.69%) indicated Three Times a Week, while two teachers (15.38%) indicated Two Times a Week. One teacher (7.69%) indicated Once a Week, while five teachers (38.46%) indicated Does Not Apply. Of the five teachers that indicated Does Not Apply, an additional meeting time of once every two weeks was indicated, and one teacher did not sponsor a club. Club or Extracurricular Meetings Frequencies and Percentages is displayed in Table 49.

Table 49: Club or Extracurricular Meetings Frequencies and Percentages

Club or Extracurricular Meetings	<i>n</i>	Percentage of Total
Three Times a Week	1	7.69
Two Times a Week	2	15.38

Table 49: cont.

Club or Extracurricular Meetings	<i>n</i>	Percentage of Total
Once a Week	5	38.46
Does Not Apply	5	38.46
Total	13	100

No. 17. Select the best response for the following statement: I believe that the students who graduate from EECHS are ready for college. Question No. 17 asked teachers to rate their students' college readiness by indicating Agree Highly, Agree, Disagree, Disagree Highly, or selecting Other. Nine teachers (69.23%) indicated Agree Highly, while four (30.77%) indicated Agree. No teachers selected Disagree, Disagree Highly, or Other. EECHS Students' College Readiness Frequencies and Percentages is displayed in Table 50.

Table 50: EECHS Students' College Readiness Frequencies and Percentages

EECHS Students' College Readiness	<i>n</i>	Percentage of Total
Agree Highly	9	69.23
Agree	4	30.77
Disagree	0	0
Disagree Highly	0	0
Other	0	0
Total	13	100

Excelencia Early College High School Faculty and Students

EECHS is unique because for the first two years of instruction, freshmen and sophomores take all their classes on EECHS campus with RISD faculty as well as TCC adjunct faculty for their dual-enrollment classes. Students' class schedules are thus accelerated, resulting in their

high school coursework and graduation requirements being completed by the end of their sophomore year. Time is thereby freed up allowing them to take university classes in their junior and senior years as well as complete college and career preparation activities in their AVID IV class.

In their junior year, students officially begin classes on the TVU campus. Through the coordinated efforts of secondary education and two institutes of higher education, by the end of their senior year, most EECHS students are considered “core complete” having amassed a total of 42 credits of core classes or “basics” necessary for the 4-year bachelor’s degree in the state of Texas. As illustrated in Figure 6, EECHS is thus the nexus connecting secondary education to both institutes of higher education.

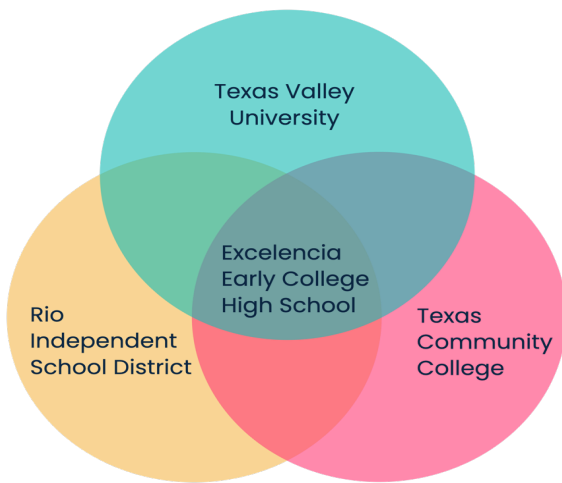


Figure 6: EECHS and Higher Education Nexus

With a total enrollment of approximately 400 students, the number of teachers employed at EECHS is equally distributed with eight teachers teaching freshman classes, and eight teachers teaching sophomore classes. Of these teachers and faculty, a total of thirteen participated in personal interviews including two from the counseling department, and eleven from the core and

elective teaching areas. Two administrators important in the creation and implementation of EECHS were also interviewed.

During analysis of faculty interviews, certain themes began to emerge and a relationship to what seniors had previously mentioned in their focus-group interviews gradually became apparent. A comment which a science teacher made during his personal interview prompted me to conceptualize EECHS as an interrelated system, or even as a type of organism where the functioning of the whole was interdependent and influenced by its many constituent parts.

If EECHS might be thought of as a type of organism, one thematic feature emerged as being central among all others: *support*. Many seemingly different types of support began to emerge in the first few faculty interviews. Upon closer examination it seemed that these might all be reduced to three main themes of academic support, social support, and counseling support. However, after more faculty interviews were conducted, it occurred that an additional theme, Administrative Support, also was important because it seemed to play an underlying, global part in influencing the academic, social, and counseling support themes.

For example, focus-group students mentioned that as a result of being scheduled with the same students for all their classes in their freshmen year, they got to know them better and friendships often developed. On one level their individual class schedule was an administrative decision, while yet on another level it resulted in the social benefit of them developing more friendships. It is for this reason that administrative support and social support are grouped together as one combined theme of "Administrative and Social Support."

Similarly, academic support and social support were combined into one theme of "Academic and Social Support." While EECHS students sometimes experienced challenges in their academics and received failing grades, a coordinated social response and intervention by

their academic core teacher, counselor, and AVID elective teacher occurred which helped redirect them back towards making satisfactory academic progress.

This coordinated social response to an academic concern occurs at EECHS routinely because the core teacher, counselor and the AVID elective teacher work cooperatively and continuously to monitor every student's grades during their entire four years at EECHS. As a result, a type of academic “safety-net” (Saenz, 2011) occurs enabling the core teacher, counselor, and AVID teacher to intervene and reach out to the student in a timely manner and help them recover their grades before it is too late.

With these different themes of Administrative and Social Support, Academic and Social Support, and Counseling Support in mind, I begin by discussing the important roles that the counselors play in supporting students’ development and well-being in these areas at EECHS. All three themes are illustrated below in Figure 7, Counselor Support. In the *Counselor Support* section that follows, I discuss each of these three themes in more detail.



Figure 7: Counselor Support

Counselor Support

A. Administrative and Social Support

A-1. Assist In New Student Admission and Selection Process. EECHS counselors play an important role in the recruitment of new students. EECHS is an open-enrollment school which means that it accepts students from both the Rio Independent School District (RISD) and from other neighboring ISDs in the Rio Grande Valley. EECHS is also a school of choice or school that provides an alternative for parents who do not wish to send their child to the local public school to which they might be assigned or zoned for (Forster, 2016).

To enroll at EECHS, students and parents must first complete and submit admission documents including a student intent essay, 7th and 8th grade report cards, attendance, and other items. The student enrollment process on the surface looks primarily like an administrative function of paperwork but in fact it also functions as an important introduction and point of social and emotional contact with the student and parent. Counselor Mrs. Gordon stated: *"If they meet the criteria, basically, you're looking at that, but we try to give everybody the opportunity"* (Mrs. Gordon, PI 1).

While the EECHS curriculum is designated by the Texas Education Agency (TEA) as college-preparatory, students are not required to have a high grade point average for admittance. In fact, the ECHS Blueprint published by TEA specifically targets students that are at-risk, typically underserved in higher education, students of color, low-socioeconomic level, English Language Learners (ELLs) and those students who have failed two or more classes during the school year (ECHS Blueprint, 2020).

An important part of student recruitment is middle school presentations to eighth grade students which EECHS counselors give in both fall and spring semesters. Mrs. Gordon

mentioned in regard to these presentations: *"I always tell the kids when we go recruit, we look at these kids and they say 'Well, I'm not EECHS because I'm not a straight-A student.' And I tell them that's not really important because a lot of straight-A students kind of get lazy. They kind of tend to say 'I got this.' And those students that struggle work a little harder. So, they're always going to be trying a little more. So, I tell the student, 'If you're willing to commit, if you're willing to put in the work there, you're going to get the support you need at EECHS to be successful. You can do it!'"* (Mrs. Gordon, PI 1). One can only imagine how Mrs. Gordon's vote of confidence and reassurance about the student's ability and likelihood of success affected the student's self-esteem and self-confidence. Figure 8 below illustrates A-1. Assist in New Student Selection and Admission Process.



Figure 8: A. Administrative and Social Support

A-2. Create School Master Schedule and Individual Student Schedules. One of the counselors' duties at EECHS is to create the school's master schedule. The master schedule is vital because it ensures that (a) all teachers are assigned the correct classes to teach with

balanced proportion of students in each class and (b) that all students are assigned to their appropriate classes to fulfill graduation requirements.

The task of creating the master schedule is made somewhat complex for various reasons. First, EECHS's class schedule intentionally emulates a college schedule because it is in an A/B format with classes meeting for 90 minutes two days of the week, and 45 minutes one day of the week. Mrs. Snow stated: *"I create the master schedule. Let me show you how I do it! Now this is my master schedule: here are my Mondays, Wednesdays - my four classes. My Tuesdays, Thursdays - my four classes. And Fridays - they have all eight classes"* (Mrs. Snow, PI 1).

Second, a critical task for sophomores requires passing the Texas Success Initiative Assessment (TSIA). Required by any student wishing to enroll in postsecondary education in Texas, the TSIA measures college readiness in English and Mathematics. EECHS students must pass the TSIA by the last semester of their sophomore year, or they will be exited from EECHS and returned to their home campus.

However, incoming freshmen are not all at the same level of mathematical proficiency and many need further study before they can take and pass the TSIA successfully. Mrs. Snow's solution is to divide the incoming freshmen class into two different math tracks based on their middle school math record. Group 1 is the college algebra group and these students are all scheduled to take college algebra and the same classes in the other subject areas for their entire freshmen year. Group 2 is the geometry group and similar to Group 1, these students are all scheduled to take geometry and the same classes in the other subject areas for their entire freshmen year.

The result is that the students grouped by Mrs. Snow into either a college algebra track or a geometry track are supported administratively and socially for two reasons. First, because they

all share a key mathematics class, they are able to work collaboratively and develop together with other students who have similar mathematics skills. Second, because each group or track shares the same non-math classes for the entire year, peer-to-peer relationships are fostered (Vygotsky, 1980) and friendships inevitably develop (Goguen et al., 2010). A senior in focus-group one stated: *"So, they throw you all into this class and it's like the same 10 or 15 kids for every class and you're probably going to be with them for the rest of your high school career. I have my friend, Victor, and I've had him for every class since freshman year"* (Joseph, FG 1).

Upperclassmens' schedules must be handled differently by the counselor. While juniors and seniors take their college classes on the TVU campus, they are only required to take one class on EECHS campus which is their AVID class. However, scheduling the AVID classes for juniors and seniors presents a challenge because the usual size for each class is close to 100 students. By being responsible for the master schedule, Mrs. Snow can reserve one large space (the school cafeteria) which is well suited for presentations as well as visits by college representatives. By ensuring that juniors and seniors in AVID have a central meeting time and place for their classes, Mrs. Snow supports both the AVID teachers as well as her own junior and senior presentations about upcoming events such as college presentations, FAFSA deadlines, AP testing, PSAT, SAT, and SAT testing. Figure 7 presented earlier illustrates A-2. Create School Master Schedule and Individual Student Schedules.

In the following section illustrated below by Figure 9: B. Academic and Social Support, I discuss four different but related aspects including: 3. Monitor Student Grades by TAC and Student Self-Reports via AVID teacher; 4. Monitor High School, College, and University Transcripts; 5. Schedule And Administer Student Testing Of TSIA, PSAT, SAT, ACT, and AP

Exams; and 6. Advise Failing Students, Contact Parents, Place on Academic Probation, provide Exit Interview As Needed.

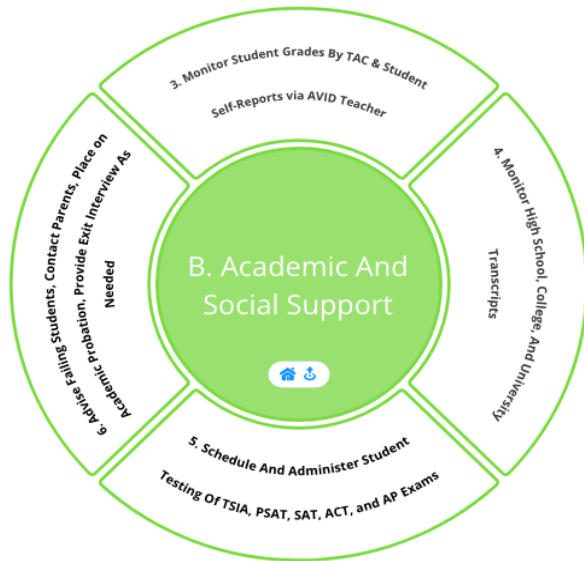


Figure 9: B. Academic and Social Support

B. Academic and Social Support

B-3. Monitor All Student Grades by TAC & Student Self-Reports via AVID

Teacher. The counselor monitors the grades of all EECHS students in a variety of ways depending upon their grade level and whether they are taking college classes. 9th and 10th grade students must complete their high school diploma during these same years by completing regular ISD classes. However, these students may also take certain college dual-enrollment classes as soon as their freshmen year, provided they meet the requirement of passing the Texas Success Initiative Assessment (TSIA) or at least attempting the TSIA for some types of dual-enrollment classes.

9th and 10th grade students taking dual-enrollment classes are required to self-report their grades every three weeks by taking a screenshot and submitting them as an assignment to their AVID teacher. The AVID teacher then forwards any failing student's grade report to the

counselor who calls the student in, contacts the parent, and places the student on academic probation. Most students respond positively to this intervention by working with their teachers and attending tutorials thus raising their grades to at least a passing 2.0 grade level and being removed from academic probation.

Mrs. Snow stated: *"Every three weeks, we need a screenshot of their grades. I mean, we have to because they're kids, right? Because the kids aren't going to tell their parents what they're up to. And only when I get a self-report that doesn't look very good, I'll scan it and I'll email it to the parent. And I'll say, 'Did you know? Please monitor your child'"* (Mrs. Snow, PI 1).

9th and 10th graders taking regular ISD classes are more easily monitored by the counselor because these same students are taking their classes on the EECHS campus. As a result, their grades are readily accessible online via the Teacher Access Center (TAC) which is the RISD grade reporting system for teachers. EECHS teachers regularly monitor and update counselors regarding any student whose work is not satisfactory by sending them campus emails or by personally contacting them.

Junior year is difficult for many EECHS students because they leave the safety and supervision of the EECHS campus and begin taking most of their classes on the TVU campus. Consequently, there is more freedom for them to choose to attend class or not, to complete assignments on time or not, and other examples of what Conley & French call "student ownership of learning" that are indicative of college readiness (Conley & French, 2013, p. 1020). Mrs. Snow remarked: *"But where they fall into trouble is when they get to 11th grade and they mess up that whole first semester at the university. Because at EECHS we can watch them like*

little hawks and the teachers are the teachers that are here. But I can't go to the professors at TVU and say 'Hey, who hasn't shown up? Who's failing?'" (Mrs. Snow, PI 1).

Like the grades for freshmen and sophomores taking dual-enrollment college classes, juniors' and seniors' grades are also monitored through student self-reports submitted to their AVID teacher who forwards them to the counselor if they are failing. Juniors and seniors are then advised and placed on academic probation by the counselor in the same manner as freshmen and sophomores who have failing grades. Figure 8 presented earlier illustrates B-3. Monitor Student Grades by TAC & Student Self-Reports via AVID Teacher.

B-4. Monitor High School, College, and University Transcripts. Graduating from EECHS with both a high school diploma and an associate's degree is an accomplishment recognized by family, friends, and community. Graduation is not only a moment of celebration, but also a rite of passage for both the student and the EECHS learning community. In this section I discuss the importance of the counselors' support in monitoring high school, community college, and university transcripts.

2015 marked a watershed year in both secondary and higher education because for the first time, both these traditionally separated sectors were required by President *Obama's Every Student Succeeds Act* (ESSA) to work cooperatively and align their curriculums for student postsecondary success. The ESSA "Requires—for the first time—that all students in America be taught to high academic standards that will prepare them to succeed in college and careers" (ESSA, 2015, p. 1). What this historic act requires from public high schools and higher education is that they collaborate to increase college and career readiness as well as provide educational opportunities for high school students to achieve a postsecondary degree (Cook-Harvey et al., 2016).

For the regular early college high school counselor, monitoring both high school as well as community college grades adds an increased amount of complexity. For the counselor at EECHS, this process has yet another added task because EECHS, unlike most regular early college high schools (ECHSs), collaborates with not just one but two institutes of higher education (IHE). This arrangement provides students with the opportunity to obtain both an Associate's Degree in General Studies from the community college as well as complete the core classes of 42 credits at the university (Mr. Reynolds, Personal Interview, 2023).

All students at EECHS are required to complete their regular RISD high school graduation requirements by the end of their sophomore year with a minimum gradepoint average of 2.0 to ensure eligibility for university studies beginning in their junior year at TVU. There are two different courses of study which EECHS freshmen may choose from: the *Foundation High School Program* which requires fewer credits in each subject area; and the *Distinguished Level of Achievement* which requires more credits in each subject area. All EECHS students are urged to complete the Distinguished Level of Achievement because students who do so qualify for the Top 10% Automatic Admission to Texas Public Universities as well as the Texas Grant which pays a significant amount of their college tuition every year (Graduation Toolkit, 2022).

Of critical importance is the counselor's academic and social support especially when students began taking dual-enrollment classes during their freshmen and sophomore years. While students pay no college tuition out-of-pocket, the state of Texas has set aside a fixed amount of financial aid to cover each early college high school student's college tuition based on 180 college credit hours. When students fail and must retake a class, it uses up their financial aid.

Since most high school students are unaware of the costs of their college tuition, part of Mrs. Snow's job besides monitoring her students' college grades and transcripts also includes

teaching them that college is expensive and that failing classes wastes both time and money.

Mrs. Snow stated: *"And the 9th and 10th graders... I'm always going into their classes and doing little presentations. I'm like, 'You got to keep a 2.0! You have to do that, you have to do this!' And then they're like, 'Mam, you're scaring me!' And I'm like, 'I'm not trying to scare you. I'm just trying to tell you the realities. You're in college, and this is college!'"* (Mrs. Snow, PI 1).

Mrs. Snow added: *"When students have to take classes over, all these hours are counting into their financial aid, they're eating up their financial aid. So, we have to be careful because they get 180 hours for financial aid. If they've had to repeat, repeat, repeat, they're chewing up...they have less hours available for their junior and senior year. Remember, they still have two years to go!"* (Mrs. Snow, PI-1).

Once students pass the TSIA and begin their junior year at the university, the counselor must provide even more support by careful monitoring and adjusting their college grades and transcripts as the semester progresses. While traditional credit count sheets are suitable for recording high school grades, because EECHS includes classes from the community college as well as classes from the university, a more detailed and articulated record keeping system is used. By necessity the counselor has designed Excel spreadsheets which are color coded to indicate whether a student has achieved credit for a class, whether they failed and need to repeat the class to maintain a minimum 2.0 grade point average, and what the credit value for the class is. While this system of monitoring and recording students' grades is exacting and time-consuming, it allows the counselor to support the student and help them graduate on time with the correct number of credits at the high school, college, and university levels with a minimum of errors.

When I asked Mrs. Snow what motivated her to develop her student grade and transcript record keeping system she replied: *"We don't have a choice. Because I don't want a parent to call and I'm in the dark like 'I don't know what your kid's doing!' Can you imagine? No, I can't even imagine. You have to have an eagle eye on every single kid. Because if you don't know about every single kid, then there's no way that you can help every single kid"* (Mrs. Snow, PI 2).

Figure 8 presented earlier illustrates B-4. Monitor High School, College, and University Transcripts.

B-5. Schedule and Administer Student Testing of TSIA, PSAT/NMSQT, SAT, ACT, and AP Exams. All EECHS students take required tests as well as other optional types of tests that determine their college readiness in areas of reading, writing and mathematics. The required and critical test is the Texas Success Initiative Assessment (TSIA). Other tests which are encouraged but not mandatory include the Practice Scholastic Aptitude Test/National Merit Scholarship Qualifying Test (PSAT/NMSQT); the Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT); the American College Test (ACT), and the Advanced Placement test (AP). In the following sections I will first focus on the TSIA, and then discuss the rationale and prevalence of the other optional tests and exams.

TSIA. The Texas Success Initiative Assessment (TSIA) is a required placement test in reading, writing, and mathematics which is used to determine students' college readiness in the state of Texas (TSIA2, n.d.). Students are encouraged to begin TSIA testing in their freshmen year so that they may begin taking dual-enrollment classes as soon as possible.

While EECHS students ultimately are required to pass all three sections by spring break of their sophomore year so that they may begin taking university classes in their junior year, in reality EECHS students begin studying and practicing for the TSIA immediately after they have

been admitted to EECHS. Newly admitted 9th graders receive emails, flyers, and personal calls from EECHS teachers several weeks prior to attending the annual two-week long Summer Bridge program held in July.

During Summer Bridge, new students participate in ice-breaking activities, meet EECHS teachers and faculty, and participate in a week-long TSIA "bootcamp" where they practice the different sections of the TSIA, identify their own weak and strong areas in the TSIA, and develop test taking skills and strategies. Mrs. Snow stated: *"So we give a TSIA bootcamp in Summer Bridge so that everybody for a whole week only does TSIA"* (Mrs. Snow, PI 1).

While there are some students who pass all three sections of the TSIA during Summer Bridge, other students need further study and more time before they finally pass all sections of the TSIA. Counselor Snow supports these students by registering them for TSIA testing dates, recording their TSIA scores as they pass each section, and reminding and encouraging them from their freshmen year to their sophomore year to study more and try again until they pass all three sections. Mrs. Snow stated: *"And when they're not making that test score, I always say: 'But you went up a point! You know, every time you take this test, you're improving. So eventually you're going to pass!'"* (Mrs. Snow, PI 1).

PSAT/NMSQT, SAT, ACT, and AP Exams. Optional tests which a majority of EECHS juniors and seniors take every year include the Preliminary Scholastic Aptitude/National Merit Scholarship Qualifying Test (PSAT/NMSQT), Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT), American College Test (ACT), and Advanced Placement (AP) Exam. The rationale for these tests and exams includes increasing students' college readiness as well as providing important information to universities about their academic accomplishments and suitability for that particular institution.

Tests such as the PSAT/NMSQT can also be used to determine merit scholarships, college eligibility, and institutional suitability or "match" for the student. AP Exams provide students with an opportunity to earn college credit or test out of certain college classes as well as increase their high school grade point average by taking the AP Exams.

Even though these standardized tests are not required as is the TSIA, because EECHS is an early college high school in Texas, it must adhere to the guidelines established in the Early College High School Blueprint by TEA which strongly encourages student participation in these standardized tests (Blueprint, 2021). The ECHS Blueprint articulates goals and objectives of early college high schools in Texas as well as describes how students and schools will be held accountable every year for their participation and academic achievement. The TEA Blueprint requires that early college high schools promote college readiness by encouraging student participation in standardized tests such as the PSAT/NMSQT, SAT, ACT, and AP Exams.

Yearly, all Texas early college high schools are evaluated based on the percentage of their students who participate in these various standardized tests and AP Exams. The ECHS Blueprint states:

The Early College High School (ECHS) Blueprint provides foundational principles and standards for innovative partnerships with colleges and universities. All Early College High Schools are required to meet all the design elements for each benchmark annually. Phase-in of the ECHS Blueprint will be complete upon the conclusion of the 2021-2022 school year.

All Texas Early College High Schools are required to meet Outcomes-Based Measures (OBMs) on student performance indicators related to access,

attainment, and achievement. The Texas Education Agency (TEA) provides technical assistance to promote implementation of the ECHS model with fidelity. (Outcomes Based, n.d.)

One of the contributing factors for EECHSs' consistently high academic performance as evaluated by TEA is that they in large part follow the guidelines and goals established by the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board's 60x30TX plan regarding college readiness assessments. The Texas Education Agency website states:

TEA supports and aligns with the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board in their 60x30TX goal, which states that at least 60 percent of Texans ages 25-34 will have a certificate or degree by 2030. By taking a college preparation assessment, such as the SAT, Texas students expand the number of postsecondary options available to them. (60x30TX, 2015)

In large part, Counselor Snow is responsible for planning and administering almost all of these tests on the EECHS campus throughout the year. Student participation tends to be quite high. In spring semester 2022, for example, 100% of the seniors took the Advanced Placement test. While not all of them received college credit, they all received an increase to their overall high school grade point average and boosted EECHS's TEA college readiness score as described in the ECHS Blueprint. Figure 8 presented earlier illustrates B-5. Schedule and Administer Student Testing of TSIA, PSAT/NMSQT, SAT, ACT, and AP Exams.

B-6. Advise Failing Students, Contact Parents, Place on Academic Probation, Provide Exit Interview as Needed. While every effort is made to ensure students are supported academically at EECHS, there is a small percentage of students who have difficulty maintaining a minimum of a 2.0 or C average, especially in their freshmen year. After receiving the student's

failing grade self-report from their AVID teacher, the counselor advises the student, contacts the parents to let them know that their son or daughter is failing a class and that they are now on probation, and that they must raise their grade to a minimum of a 2.0 by the end of the semester. Mrs. Snow stated: *"In 9th grade, we don't send anyone back. That is a choice the student makes. We keep them enrolled, failing or not, as much as we can. We have them make up credits in the summer if they need it!"* (Mrs. Snow, PI 2).

Besides freshmen year difficulties, juniors sometimes also have difficulty maintaining a minimum 2.0 GPA because as mentioned earlier, juniors take the majority of their classes on the TVU campus and are presented with more freedom of choice and decisions to make in regard to attending class and completing their assignments on time. As Mrs. Gordon stated: *"In 11th grade after their first semester of college at the university, if a student earns all F's in that first semester, then it is difficult the next semester because the classes are often sequential with English Composition II requiring English Composition I as a prerequisite, Physics requiring College Algebra as a prerequisite, etc. So, if they get all failing grades, they can't take the next required group of classes and can't earn the required high school credits for graduation. They would have to return to home campus to complete regular high school classes for credits"* (Mrs. Gordon, PI 1).

By junior year, students have formed bonds and friendships and have become part of the EECHS learning community. Poor grades in their junior year represents a return to their home campus if they do not address their issues and so juniors often are motivated to stay and retake classes. Similar to failing freshmen, counselor Snow advises juniors who have failed university classes to take summer classes and regain credit so they are eligible to stay and complete their senior year at EECHS. One student who had several failing grades in her junior year was advised

by Mrs. Snow: *"The way you fix it is this: You do this, this and this in the summer, and then it's going to repair. But if you don't, you're done. And so, she was bawling and squalling 'But I'm not good at working on my own!' And I said, 'Well, you know, we're here. That's why we're here. We're going to help!'"* (Mrs. Snow, PI 2).

When asked what was one of her least favorite things about being a counselor at EECHS was, Mrs. Snow replied: *"My least favorite thing is telling a kid to return to home campus because they're not ready"* (Mrs. Snow, PI 1). When I asked her what she meant by the student 'not being ready,' she stated: *"That's the least favorite thing because they feel like failures, but they're not. They're just not ready. They're not... they don't have that maturity level to govern themselves because over there at the university they're very independent"* (Mrs. Snow, PI 1).

In this instance, not being ready indicates that the student's lack of maturity is preventing them from monitoring their own behavior, completing assignments on time, and demonstrating the various types of self-regulation behaviors that indicate college readiness (Conley, 2010). Although not what the student might like initially, the student is actually being supported academically by being redirected to their original campus where they can be more successful with a regular high school curriculum and graduate with their high school diploma.

Students who fail too many classes may have no other recourse but to be withdrawn from EECHS or suffer financial penalties later when they return to college. Mrs. Snow advised one student after they had received multiple F's on their report card *"Well, you know what? You've got three F's. I don't think we're going to allow you to destroy your college transcript any further, you know."* She then added: *"Because that would be unethical of me to let a kid go another semester and get suspended. Once you're suspended, you lose financial aid until your GPA is 2.0 again."* She further stated: *"I'm not going to let somebody get suspended in 11th*

grade, because then they won't ever go to college when they graduate because they'll be paying it out of pocket. Imagine how expensive that is? Who has ten-thousand dollars laying around to bring up your GPA, you know?" (Mrs. Snow, PI 1).

Mrs. Gordon asserted that after a student has been on probation but still has not improved their grades, priorities change and the focus is then directed towards having them complete their regular high school diploma. She stated: *"We would rather they go back to their original campus and finish because basically their high school diploma is now the priority. Whether we like it or not, that has to be the priority because they can always mature later and go on to college. It would be to their advantage to do it now. But the reality is we have to focus on the high school part first. That's the priority now, getting them to graduate!"* (Mrs. Gordon, PI 1). Figure 8 presented earlier illustrates B-6. Advise Failing Students, Contact Parents, Place on Academic Probation, Provide Exit Interview as Needed.

C. Counseling Support

Counselors are important members of the school community because they help guide and support students during their journey as early college high school students. While EECHS students are unique because of their focus on high academic achievement, they share many of the same concerns and issues that other high school students often have. Counseling topics and student concerns that Mrs. Snow and Mrs. Gordon often address fall into three main areas including C-7. Provide Group Presentations Throughout the School Year, C-8. Provide Personal Academic Advising, and C-9. Provide Personal Social and Emotional Counseling and are displayed in Figure 10: C. Counseling Support.

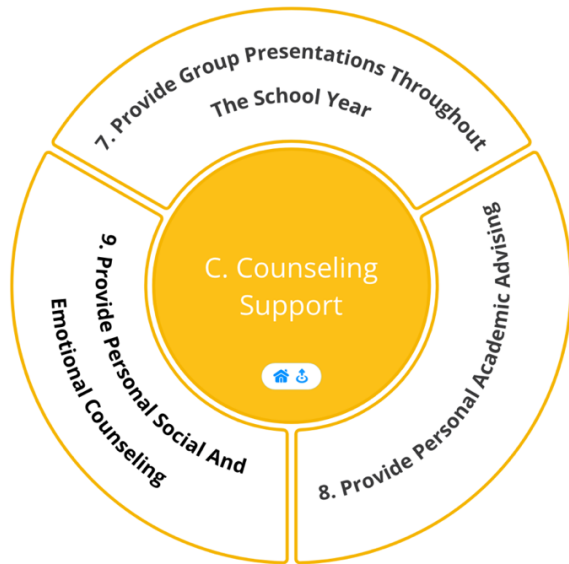


Figure 10: C. Counseling Support

C-7. Provide Group Presentations Throughout the School Year. Counselors provide group presentations to freshmen, sophomores, juniors, and seniors throughout the school year on varied topics such as: Summer Bridge; Cybersafety; College presentations; Anti-Vaping; Social and Emotional Learning; Teen Dating; and a host of other topics important for student health and social and emotional well-being. These presentations help set the tone and focus for what students should be aware of to ensure their continuing academic and personal progress and growth at EECHS.

C-8. Provide Personal Academic Advising. When students have questions or concerns about their academic progress and graduation plan, the counselor is the person who can best assist them. Usually, students take the initiative and stop by to talk to the counselor as the need arises. When I asked Mrs. Snow when she met with these students she replied: *"Whenever I can. If I'm just going over the graduation plan or academic plan, I can just do that in five minutes, because we already know the track they're on because we keep track of everything since the*

beginning. So, I just open up my spreadsheet. I look in there and I say, 'You need four classes''
(Mrs. Snow, PI No. 3).

C-9. Provide Personal Social and Emotional Counseling. The quest for achieving high grades is the most common stressor for students at EECHS. The rigor required for college level work requires that students must often spend more time reading, thinking analytically, and writing critically about their assignments than they are accustomed to. Performance anxiety and procrastination are common responses and when these occur, student grades often falter.

Since students are required to self-report their grades every three weeks as part of their AVID class, students who are failing are constantly reminded of this fact. Such students sometimes take the initiative and see their counselor to get help with these problems. Other times, students try to keep their problems hidden but give an "outcry" by such behaviors as avoiding class, crying, or failing to turn in any work whatsoever.

When asked about how she intervenes with students that are having difficulties, counselor Snow stated that for personal or emotional issues, students usually take the initiative and reach out to her for a counseling appointment. She stated: *"Now, emotional advising- that's based on the students-they have to come see me for that!"* (Mrs. Snow, PI 3).

While EECHS academic standards and grade requirements places necessary stress on students to be accountable and college-ready, EECHS students also encounter other kinds of personal difficulties such as: *"..substance abuse, mental health, and family and school violence,"* and *"suicide, divorce, pregnancy, poverty, and homelessness"* as well as *"the additional concerns of marginalized students including immigrants; lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and questioning youth; and students subjected to cyberbullying"* (Wilder, 2018).

Counselor Gordon criticized a common misperception that EECHS attracts only the top students with high grade point averages and few personal problems. She stated that nothing could be further from the truth and said: *"You'd be surprised, you know. And people say 'Oh no, EECHS? You don't have to worry about anything.'* Mrs. Gordon then explained: *"You don't know how many kids we send to summer school. You don't know how many kids are being visited by Tropical Health. You don't know how many kids are self-cutting, how many kids are depressed... Stress!"* (Mrs. Gordon, PI 1).

During the COVID-19 pandemic and even now in 2023 in its aftermath, the school counselor continues to be the most important mental health professional on campus which students and the school community can rely upon for meeting their emotional needs and helping them solve problems (ASCA, 2022; Donohue et al., 2016). While student academic success at EECHS is validation enough, occasionally students do express their gratitude personally to their counselors. In one interview Mrs. Snow mentioned: *"I had one kid today who came and told me 'Oh! Thank you for speaking to me the other day. It helped me a lot! I just wanna let you know'"* (Mrs. Snow, PI 3).

The AVID Elective Class

Origin and Purpose of AVID

Created in 1980 by California English teacher Mary Catherine Swanson to help her students succeed in college, AVID was designed to increase college readiness through a curriculum that emphasizes inquiry, critical thinking skills, collaboration, problem solving skills, and organizational skills (Mathews, 2015).

AVID is intentionally designed for students who are in the academic middle of from 2.0 to 3.5 G.P.A., first-generation college students, English Language Learners, low socioeconomic

status, and those who historically have been underrepresented in higher education or who are challenged by obstacles or other barriers to academic achievement (Bernhardt, 2013; Swanson, 2000). Both Bernhardt's and Swanson's definition aptly applies to EECHS students as well as many of the students enrolled in schools throughout the lower Rio-Grande Valley near the Texas-Mexico border.

AVID Rationale and Learning Philosophy

AVID founder Mary Swanson states that AVID is founded on a philosophy of "access to rigor with support and hard work" (Swanson et al., 2000, p. 26). What this means at EECHS is that while teachers have high expectations of students and require academic rigor, students are supported in their efforts to achieve the higher levels of understanding that characterize rigor. Swanson further states that "rigor without support is a prescription for failure and that support without rigor is a tragic waste of potential" (Swanson et al., 2000, p. 26).

AVID at Excelencia Early College High School

The AVID program at EECHS differs in several respects from AVID programs in other early college high schools in Texas. While indicated as an elective in the course catalog, from its beginning in 2008 the AVID program at EECHS has always been a required elective course which all students must take every year. In contrast, in many early college high schools AVID is an elective taken by early college cohort students but not necessarily all early college high school students.

Mr. Reynolds, AVID administrator for RISD and author of the grant proposal which helped create the partnership between RISD, TCC, and TVU wrote in the original EECHS 2008 grant proposal: "...Advancement via Individual Determination (AVID) will be an additional course that the students will take all four years at the EECHS" (Reynolds, 2008, p. 27). For this

reason, four different AVID teachers are employed full time respectively to teach AVID I, AVID II, AVID III, and AVID IV. AVID at EECHS is thus a college readiness class that all students have in common for all four years regardless of their early college high school degree pathway or intended college major.

All EECHS faculty including teachers, counselors, and administrators receive AVID training regularly both as professional development and also to fulfill on-going requirements for yearly certification from the AVID organization. The EECHS AVID program also benefits from having a nucleus or "backbone" cadre of teachers many of whom have been with the school since EECHS first began in 2008 and who are especially well-versed in AVID teaching techniques and methodologies.

AVID I Contextual Interview: Mr. Fields

AVID I is the first of a four-year sequence of college preparatory classes designed to help students think critically and acquire essential study habits for college success. AVID I teacher Mr. Fields spends a considerable amount of time developing relational capacity with his first-year students by frequently having class discussions about relevant educational topics. For example, students sometimes enroll at EECHS because of what their parents decided and not because of their personal preferences. As one senior stated: *"I came here because my parents wanted me to come here for two to four years of college"* (Joseph, FG 1). Another student stated: *"Well, actually, my dad told me about EECHS, and he said, 'Yeah, they're going to give you an associate's degree. You'll get college credit hours and then at the end in your senior year, you would get your associate's degree'"* (Allison, FG 7).

Mr. Fields stated: *"First of all, often they're not here because they want to be here. They're here because their parents made them come here. You know, why should they be here*

when they can go to another school where it can be a little bit easier for them and they don't have to do too much homework? Maybe they can have more friends or go to a game or whatever. You know, it's just...this age is very social! They want to be at the most popular high school or playing sports or a regular school or whatever. This is not what they want, you know!" (Mr. Fields, PI 3).

EECHS students are adolescents and quite active in establishing their emerging identities and discovering their roles and purposes in life (Erikson, 1993). While they might initially obey their parents out of respect by going to EECHS for at least their first year, an important question emerges: Why, after their freshman year, do most students choose to remain at EECHS rather than change to some other high school with less demanding academics and more social activities?

Since the development of student agency is one of the essential goals of AVID I, Mr. Fields acknowledges his students' doubts about EECHS and perhaps even education in general. He stated: *"So how do you get them to buy into this program and to their future? And why does it even matter what it is? Why should they care?"* (Mr. Fields, PI 3). Through his personal style of Socratic dialogue beginning the first day of class in AVID I, Mr. Fields models the art of *Inquiry* to his students, one of the critical-thinking skills central to AVID's learning framework of Writing, Inquiry, Collaboration, Organization, and Reading (WICOR). By choosing topics that engage student interest, students in Mr. Fields's class learn critical thinking skills inductively through class discussions and debates.

For example, he stated that he sometimes invites students to discuss their reasons for going to school and asks them: *"Why is it that you come to school? What is the whole reason behind it and what is the purpose? Well, to learn. Obviously, to learn. But does it matter? I*

mean, to learn? Yeah. To learn... To learn what? Who cares? Yeah, you go to learn. We understand that. But what's the purpose of learning? What's the reasoning behind it? What, why should you care? Why should you try harder? Why should you go to college? Why should you give more effort? Just for learning for the sake of learning? I mean, I love learning, but just for that?" Mr. Fields added: *"It's very Socratic, asking questions and asking questions. We always just ask a lot of questions. It's a process that I have to be building from day one, you know, to try to get them to see"* (Mr. Fields, PI 3).

The above discussion topics are typical of what students encounter in Mr. Fields's class and reflect the AVID I Curriculum Framework's focus on Inquiry and Critical Thinking Skills (AVID 9th Grade Standards, 2023). AVID's learning framework positions Inquiry and its requisite critical thinking skills as primary college-readiness indicators. Mr. Fields invites student inquiry using an open, discursive, and philosophical approach. Former president of Harvard University Derek Bok states:

The ability to think critically—to ask pertinent questions, recognize and define problems, identify the arguments on all sides of an issue, search for and use relevant data, and arrive in the end at carefully reasoned judgments—is the indispensable means of making effective use of information and knowledge whether for practical or purely speculative purposes." (Bok, 2009, p. 109)

AVID I scaffolds instruction in Inquiry-based learning by introducing students to Arthur Costa's *Three Levels of Questioning* as well as Benjamin Bloom's Taxonomy of Learning (Bendall et al., 2015, p. 197). While educators might be more familiar with Bloom's Taxonomy, AVID uses Costa's Three Levels of Questioning for its conciseness and ease of classroom use. By introducing and comparing and contrasting Costa's and Bloom's concepts of lower and

higher-order thinking skills in AVID I, students begin developing problem-solving abilities through inquiry and critical reasoning (see Appendix R, Costa's and Bloom's Level of Thinking: Comparison Chart).

Elder and Paul state: "Thinking is not driven by answers but by questions" (Elder & Paul, 1998, p. 297). Mr. Fields often drives his students' attention toward Inquiry and critical reasoning by emphasizing the "why" rather than the "what" in the critical thinking process. He stated: *"It's not about having the answers. It's about how to arrive at the answers. Think of it like history. We know history is not about learning dates. History is not knowing that it happened. We know that it happened! It's about asking questions like 'Why did it happen?' or, 'Can it happen again?' or, 'What can we do differently?'"* (Mr. Fields, PI 3).

Regarding student agency, Mr. Fields added: *"I'm trying to get that process going, that self-motivation, to own it, to want to do it on their own, to be the ones doing it. I try to focus more on creating that 'buy-in' of the learning. And you know, kids always push back because they don't see the importance of the reason, and that's what I try to explain it to them. And by the time they go to AVID II, they already know what to do, and how to do it"* (Mr. Fields, PI 3).

In his book *Question Everything*, Mathews discusses the 3 Non-Negotiables of AVID: the AVID Binder, Cornell Notes, and the AVID Tutorial (2015, p. 107) These pedagogical practices have been a mainstay of AVID since its inception in 1980, empowering generations of AVID students to become better organized, read their textbooks more critically, and collaborate with others to solve problems.

However, the unanticipated arrival of COVID-19 disrupted these traditional AVID practices as student safety became the priority. As COVID-19 spread and endangered the health of students, teachers, and people throughout the world, educational concerns became displaced

by health concerns even as schools adapted quickly to remote instruction (Kamenetz, 2022; Sun et al., 2020; UNICEF, 2020; United Nations, 2020).

After more than 118,000 cases in 114 countries worldwide and 4,291 fatalities, on March 11, 2020, the World Health Organization (WHO) declared COVID-19 a pandemic (CDC COVID-19 Timeline, 2022). Out of an abundance of caution, by March 15, 2020, public schools in the United States began closing to prevent the spread of COVID-19.

Due to negligent and lackluster governmental intervention as well as massive failures of judgment and inaction in mitigating COVID-19 (Firey, 2020; Wallach & Myers, 2020), by April 10, 2020, the United States had become an incubator for the virus with the most reported incidences of COVID-19 cases and fatalities. With over 500,000 cases and 18,600 confirmed deaths of COVID-19 in less than four months, the United States had become gripped by a fatal pandemic (C.D.C. Museum COVID-19 Timeline, 2022).

Following Spring Break in March 2020, EECHS, all schools throughout the Rio Independent School District as well as its administrative offices closed entirely. To continue providing instruction and meet the educational needs of its students, the district organized and managed online-instruction for all students in the district. EECHS 9th and 10th-grade students attended classes from home using Zoom and other video-conferencing technologies. Similarly, 11th and 12th-grade students attended college and university classes using Zoom and other video-conferencing technologies. Teachers and administrators also worked from home, using these same types of video-conferencing technologies. For the remainder of spring 2020, teachers and students taught and learned online remotely.

In the fall of 2020 and spring of 2021, instruction continued entirely online for public schools, colleges, and universities throughout the United States. As the COVID-Pandemic spread

and claimed thousands of lives throughout the United States and the world, the White House launched *Operation Warp Speed*, an initiative providing funding for the creation and production of vaccines that might combat the COVID-19 virus (C.D.C. Museum COVID-19 Timeline, 2022).

Operation Warp Speed successfully located and funded six promising vaccine candidates to preview the efficacy of their proposed vaccines via clinical trials (C.D.C. Museum COVID-19 Timeline, 2022). On December 11, 2020, the C.D.C.'s Advisory Committee on Immunization Practices (A.C.I.P.) recommended the Pfizer-BioNTech COVID-19 for all people ages 16 years or older to prevent COVID-19.

On December 19, 2020, the A.C.I.P. recommended that the Moderna COVID-19 vaccine be used in all people aged 18 years or older to prevent COVID-19. In March 2021, the Biden administration directed that all states prioritize vaccinating all Pre-K-12 teachers, school staff, and childcare workers using the Pfizer-BioNTech, Moderna, or Johnson & Johnson COVID-19 vaccines (C.D.C. Museum COVID-19 Timeline, 2022).

Through an alternating A/B schedule, student attendance for on-campus instruction was organized and managed so that social distancing could be maintained. With COVID precautions, students and teachers were gradually allowed back on the EECHS campus for face-to-face instruction and use of the school's online technology to access university classes. Social distancing became the norm as COVID vaccines became available and staff and students became vaccinated. Students again began carrying their AVID Binders from class-to-class and meeting face-to-face for AVID Tutorials.

Prescient in their comments about the organizational aspect of WICOR and AVID Binders in particular, Bendall, Bollhoefer, and Koilpillai stated: "...organization is not just about

the ability to organize and manage 'stuff,' it is also the ability to organize and manage learning and self" (2015, p. 2015). Because of the extreme disruption and upheaval of the COVID-19 pandemic, EECHS students and teachers by necessity adapted, organized, and managed their learning through new organizational approaches.

AVID II Contextual Interview: Mrs. Strauss

AVID II continues and extends the previous year's AVID I class while also presenting new concepts, cognitive challenges, and academic goals. AVID II teacher Mrs. Strauss emphasizes that her sophomores should keep their AVID Binders organized and up-to-date, complete assigned class readings, write Cornell Notes, and participate in weekly AVID Ten-Step Tutorials during their AVID class. Additionally, she requires that her AVID II students focus on studying the three subject areas of Reading, Writing, and Mathematics for Texas's college readiness test, the Texas Success Initiative Assessment (TSIA, 2021).

As mentioned earlier, Mathews (2015) describes AVID's 3 Non-Negotiables as consisting of AVID Binders, Cornell Notes, and AVID Tutorials. AVID II teacher Mrs. Strauss concurs and states: *"There must be Binders and organization, like Binders and Portfolios. There must be writing activities like Cornell Notes or Focus Notes. There must be a tutorial day like AVID Tutorials. So, without these components, then it wouldn't be AVID!"* (Mrs. Strauss, PI 3).

AVID Binder. The AVID Binder is one of the cornerstones of AVID and offers a common sense and practical solution for managing multiple classes and assignments. Since EECHS students are enrolled in eight classes each semester during their freshman and sophomore years, developing the habit of being organized, completing assignments on time, and avoiding wasting time is crucial to their success. AVID II teacher Mrs. Arnold stated:

"Everything for all the classes should be in the binder so they don't lose anything" (Mrs. Arnold, PI 1).

The AVID Binder contains each student's class syllabi, assignments, papers, Cornell notes, monthly planner, weekly planner, grade reports, and self-reports of college grades. The AVID Binder is the student's constant companion in each of their eight classes throughout the school day and can become quite bulky and unwieldy by mid-semester.

Every two weeks, students submit their AVID Binders for inspection to their AVID teacher and AVID tutors, who grade them for completeness. Mrs. Strauss stated: *"It's like every other week when we check binders, we check notes, and we check the planner, the tabs if they're organized with tabs. The notebook has its own rubric, so we go over the rubric"* (Mrs. Strauss, PI 3).

Cornell Notes. In describing how writing and note-taking in AVID II differ from AVID I, AVID II teacher Mrs. Strauss stated: *"One of the things that we cover in AVID is obviously writing. And within writing you have Cornell Notes, and now you have Focus Notes, and you include Quick Writes and things like that but very, very specific"* (Mrs. Strauss, PI 1).

AVID Tutorials. AVID Tutorials are collaborative and integral to AVID's WICOR instructional framework. These tutorials occur twice weekly in AVID I, II, III, and IV classes. However, they become especially important during AVID II because of the urgency of sophomores passing the Texas Success Initiative Assessment (TSIA, 2021) test by the spring deadline. The TSIA measures academic skills in Reading, Writing, and Mathematics, and students must pass all three sections to enroll in college classes in Texas as well as remain enrolled at EECHS.

While students begin working on passing the TSIA as early as Summer Bridge, they still may have difficulty passing certain sections of the test, particularly the math section. AVID II teacher Mrs. Strauss's solution is to collaborate with the math teacher by allowing the struggling student to spend part of their AVID period in her math class for extra help. Mrs. Strauss stated: *"One of the things they struggle the most with is math. So, in this case I get together with Mrs. Jacobs for whatever she needs and if she requests 'You know what, send me this kid!' then I will send her the kid. Why? Because I know they have to pass that test in order for them to take next year's classes and stay here"* (Mrs. Strauss, PI 1).

All EECHS teachers participate in professional development through AVID Summer Institutes. Teachers' first Summer Institute covers the AVID basics of Writing, Inquiry, Questioning, Organization, and Reading (WICOR) in core areas of English, Mathematics, History, and Science. In the second Summer Institute, all AVID teachers attend a 16-hour workshop entitled *Tutorology*. Mrs. Strauss explained: *"You have the introduction to AVID which includes WICOR and a little bit of everything here and there. The second year you attend the Summer Institute and are put into 'Tutorology.' It's called Tutorology, but it's actually a 16-hour workshop! And every tutor that wants to be an AVID Tutor must go to the 16-hour workshop"* (Mrs. Strauss, PI 3).

The AVID Ten-Step Tutorial or AVID Tutorial has, as its name suggests, ten distinct parts. These parts are grouped into three main sections which include: Before the Tutorial (Pre-Work Inquiry); During the Tutorial; and After the Tutorial. In Before the Tutorial, each student completes a Tutorial Referral Form which must include one question called the *Point of Confusion* from one of their core academic classes of English, Mathematics, History, or Science. The Point of Confusion is the specific part of their assignment that they don't understand or are

struggling with. By identifying the Point of Confusion, students engage in metacognition, which Costa describes as "...knowing what we know and don't know" (2001, p. 82).

Students take turns presenting their particular Point of Confusion problem to the other members in their tutorial group who listen and ask the student further questions about their Point of Confusion. Mrs. Strauss stated of the AVID Tutorial: *"It's very systematic. And in order for it to work well, you have to follow the 10-Step Tutorial process from AVID. So, they actually started in ninth grade doing all these processes"* (Mrs. Strauss, PI 1).

Washington Post journalist Jay Mathews describes the AVID Tutorial as "...the most radical and powerful part of Swanson's program" (2015, p. 71). What makes the AVID Tutorial at once both radical and powerful? What is radical about the AVID Tutorial is that the student has a real problem to solve in one of their academic classes so their motivation to learn is greater. What is powerful about the AVID Tutorial is that the student's peers become a part of the problem-solving process by interacting with them and asking questions in Socratic style without providing the answer.

AVID II teacher Mrs. Strauss stated: *"But everybody's asking them questions now. Well, one by one, what questions until they solve the problem? They cannot give them the answer. Even if someone found the answer to that question, they cannot give them the answer. They need to ask them questions to lead them to the answers so they can get the 'Aha!'"* (Mrs. Strauss, PI 3).

The radical and powerful effects of the AVID Tutorial have to do with adolescent psychology and the need to belong to a peer group. In high school, college, and throughout life, peer groups are important as evidenced in the financial success of Meta, WhatsApp, Twitter, and many other social media organizations. In high school, students will often work with greater

enthusiasm and commitment when in the company of their peers than they might in a 'regular' teacher-centered classroom where they are assigned to work by themselves to answer questions. By collaborating with their peers in solving a genuine academic challenge, students in the AVID Tutorial gain both socially and academically.

AVID III Contextual Interview: Mrs. Arnold

The AVID III Elective course is the first component of a two-year course sequence at EECHS occurring at the same time that juniors begin their first university classes. It is designed to improve juniors' writing and critical thinking skills to meet the expectations of first-year college students. Along with an emphasis on academics, AVID III also incorporates various college-related activities, career planning approaches, and assignments that must be completed during the junior year to assist students in their application process for four-year universities and solidify their postsecondary plans.

AVID Binder and ePortfolio. AVID III builds upon the previous year's AVID II class while juniors develop new skills and meet additional challenges. Students keep organized using their AVID Binder and weekly planner but are afforded more latitude regarding what type of AVID Binder to use. Because of COVID, online learning due to school closures, and the experience gained from their freshman and sophomore year, some juniors choose to dispense with the traditional bulky three-ring AVID Binder and instead opt to keep their class materials in a virtual e-Binder or ePortfolio. Mrs. Arnold states: *“Well, usually the Binder looks like this big thing, but now, because these are juniors, I'm being very flexible with them because they're going to college, you know. A lot of online work. So, we are modifying a lot so it's less strict”* (Mrs. Arnold, PI 3).

Cornell Notes and Focus Notes. While juniors continue to take notes and submit them for grading via their AVID Binder or ePortfolio every other week, other note-taking styles besides Cornell Notes are presented in AVID III and encouraged. Reading for understanding is emphasized rather than adherence to only one particular note-taking method. AVID's Focus Notes with its Five Phases of Taking Notes, Processing Notes, Connecting Thinking, Summarizing and Reflecting on Learning, and Applying Learning, are introduced. Mrs. Arnold stated: *“The most targeted at the very beginning was Cornell Notes. They move on to Focus Notes now because it’s a little broader and not just staying on Cornell notes”* (Mrs. Arnold, PI 3). Juniors are also encouraged to investigate other types of note-taking styles to see what advantages they might have to offer.

Junior Year Challenges. While AVID III continues and extends many of the concepts and methods presented in AVID II, the junior year imposes additional challenges, including the university class location, increased rigor in university classes, and time management. Juniors are expected to demonstrate metacognition, self-management, and independent decision-making and strategizing in regard to completing their college coursework and classes successfully.

University classes. Students attend all classes on the EECHS campus during their freshman and sophomore years. As juniors, however, they take most of their classes off-campus at TVU and attend only one class, AVID III, on the EECHS campus. Juniors are required to take more responsibility for their own learning by attending university classes, completing homework assignments, and maintaining passing grades without the same level of supervision and support that they are accustomed to at the high school level.

At EECHS, student attendance, academic progress, and monitoring of students by teachers and counselors are facilitated by being in the same building. Mrs. Snow explained:

"Students have to govern themselves because over there, they're very independent. I can't call the professor up and say, 'Is Johnny doing his work?' When they're here at EECHS, we can watch them like little hawks and talk to the teachers that are here about their grades" (Mrs. Snow, PI 1).

Increased rigor. Even though classes at EECHS for the first two years are rigorous, classes at the university are even more rigorous. Course content is typically more complex, requiring more time and effort for assignment completion. The pace of instruction is often faster, and students are expected to master difficult concepts and engage in critical thinking and analysis independently. In addition, university professors tend to lecture more than high school teachers and provide less guidance and individual feedback. Obtaining high grades is also more difficult because tests and exams tend to be fewer while carrying more weight toward the semester grade at the university.

Time management. Time management is a critical skill needed for success in college. However, with the increased rigor of university coursework and multiple assignments due throughout the semester, and absence of the familiar high school class routine, juniors can fall behind because of a lack of prioritizing, maintaining a schedule, and procrastination. One senior stated: *"But junior year was also difficult because I thought, 'Well, I have all this free time! I can do this thing later.' But then 'later' became 'now!' So that was a problem to deal with"* (Michelle, FG 7).

When seniors were asked Focus Group question No. 5: "What have been some of the things that have been a challenge or difficult for you at EECHS?" a majority of them answered "time management." One senior stated: *"I think that it's just like learning how to manage your time because with all the freedom that we get, sometimes you don't know how to take advantage*

of it. Sometimes you want to spend too much time not focusing on your schoolwork. So, you need to find that balance between spending time with friends and going out and actually focusing on your studies to be good academically” (Charles, FG 5).

AVID III teacher Mrs. Arnold stated: *“The junior year is very hard because it's their first year at the university. And the hard part for us is that we don't get to see their grades because only the professor and the student gets to see their grade, not their parents, not us. That's why we ask them to self-report. They have to put their grades in their AVID Binder and then they have to get it signed by their parents so the parents are also aware of how they're doing at the university” (Mrs. Arnold, PI 3).*

What added to the increased difficulty and rigor of university classes was that, for many, their junior year coincided with the COVID-19 pandemic. For these students, their first year of college classes occurred entirely online using Zoom or some other distance-learning technology. Many EECHS students voiced their disappointment with online learning and felt that their education had suffered because of the COVID-19 pandemic.

PSAT, SAT, and ACT. As part of the two-year AVID college preparation course sequence, juniors prepare for college admission by taking standardized tests such as the PSAT, SAT, and ACT. These tests evaluate students' academic readiness and potential for success and are commonly used by colleges and universities to evaluate student applicants. Designed to familiarize students with the format and content of the SAT, students usually take the PSAT in October or the fall of their junior year. In the spring semester, students take the SAT, which measures reading, math, and writing skills, and the ACT, which measures English, math, reading, and science.

To prepare for these standardized tests, AVID III students take practice PSAT, SAT, and ACT tests, attend review sessions, work on test problems in AVID Tutorials, and use online resources such as Khan Academy. Mrs. Snow stated: *"The PSAT is in October of their junior year, and they all take it. In the spring, they take the ACT and the SAT. Once they take the PSAT, they can link it to their Khan Academy account, and the Khan Academy will tailor their tutorials on their weaknesses. Because in Khan Academy, if a student practices, they have drawings where they give five-hundred dollar scholarships. Then, if they practice and they follow and they do every step that goes from the PSAT all the way to senior year, they're in the running for a \$40,000 scholarship. So, you know, we're trying to get every dollar for every kid, right? So, we want them to do everything"* (Mrs. Snow, PI 1).

Importantly, no matter what their initial PSAT, SAT, or ACT scores are, their scores improve as students take practice tests. Mrs. Snow stated: *"Statistically, they'll score 100 points higher when they take it a second time. Statistically.* (Mrs. Snow, PI 1).

AVID IV Contextual Interview: Mrs. Johnson

During the first week of instruction in AVID IV, Mrs. Johnson discusses class expectations, learning outcomes, a fall and spring timeline with college deadlines, and the year-long Top-Ten University and Scholarship Project. Students listen with rapt attention as she describes the agenda and activities for their senior year. She stated: *"I go over in the first week of school what's expected of them in the fall semester. And I tell them that one of their major assignments for AVID IV is applying to schools. Another major assignment they have is applying for scholarships. So, their number one job is applying to universities, and their number two job is applying for scholarships"* (Mrs. Johnson, PI 3).

These two major assignments are part of the *Opportunity Knowledge* as previously discussed in AVID's College and Career Readiness Framework (AVID Framework Overview, 2022). By providing explicit step-by-step instruction in the college application process and college scholarship application process, seniors develop their personal college and career plans in a guided and supportive classroom setting.

While students are sometimes bewildered by the intricacies of college and career planning in the first week of school, as students begin their senior year, the mood in the AVID IV classroom suddenly changes as they realize their dreams about going to college have become a reality. While as freshmen, sophomores, or juniors they may have noticed seniors getting ready to graduate, they suddenly realize that it is now their turn to graduate and go to college. Some have difficulty initially in moving forward from disbelief to acceptance. Mrs. Johnson stated: *"Why? Because they've seen it. They've seen it in the past. So, I think sometimes a lot of them kind of look forward to graduation and college. But I think they also kind of feel overwhelmed about it once they see me, and that I'm kind of covering it. But it's expected!"* (Mrs. Johnson, PI 3).

The Top-Ten University and Scholarship Project has two main parts: Part 1, in which seniors submit applications to ten different universities and colleges with programs of interest; and Part 2, where they submit scholarship applications to universities and colleges in areas of their intended college major and interest.

In Part 1, students select seven schools within the state of Texas, with three other schools of their choice entitled Dream School, Reach School, and Safety School. The Dream School is a college or university such as UT-Austin, Baylor, Rice, or some other highly regarded school where enrollment is difficult to achieve because of demand and limited space. The Reach School

is where the EECHS senior's academic credentials, grade-point average, ACT, or other scores might be below the Dream School's previous year's cohort of students. The Safety School is where their entrance requirements and the EECHS student's academic credentials match, indicating a strong, almost guaranteed likelihood of being admitted.

Counselor Snow described these differing schools: *"The Dream School is like where, if you could dream it and where you'd want to be, apply there! Harvard is somebody's dream school, or the University of Pennsylvania is somebody's Dream School. The Reach School is where you can go that they might take you because maybe you had 1400 on the SAT, and maybe they're going to look at your grade-point average. The Safety School is your TVU. You're definitely going in! Definitely, there's going to be no problem. For sure, you're in. That's your Safety School!"* (Mrs. Snow, PI 3).

The Top-Ten University and Scholarship Project aims to help seniors make a good match between what they want to do for a career and selecting the college or university that can best help them achieve their goals. Seniors use *Apply Texas* to complete and submit their college applications to expedite the college application process. Apply Texas is a centralized web portal service that helps prospective students in Texas and other states complete one application and then submit it to multiple colleges and universities in Texas.

However, universities usually have specialized requirements for the student essay part, so students must often customize their essays to fit that particular school. To accomplish this, AVID IV students use editing and grammatical help from either of the two English teachers at EECHS. Mrs. Johnson stated: *"They use Apply Texas to apply to universities, but each university will customize and will say: 'Additional Questions for UT Austin' or 'Additional Questions for Texas A & M,' if they have extra questions, and sometimes also depending on their mission or the*

department that they're going to apply to. Actually, I read for content, but I have the English teachers help us with their grammar and so forth" (Mrs. Johnson, PI 3).

In the Top-Ten University and Scholarship Project Part 2, students apply for scholarships at universities they are interested in attending. Scholarships are essential for seniors because they help defray and minimize the cost of college and prevent them from going into debt through the accumulation of college loans. Because the target student population of the early college high school includes first-generation, low-socioeconomic, and students of color, students and their families often have no prior experience in financing a college education (Nodine, 2009). Since almost 66% of first-time bachelor's degree students end up borrowing money to finance their college education (Curry & Milsom, 2022), *What Students Need*, according to the AVID College and Career Readiness Framework, is *Opportunity Knowledge* as it applies to understanding the financial aspects of funding their college education (AVID Framework, 2022).

In AVID IV, Mrs. Johnson, in an intentional and step-by-step manner, teaches seniors about financial aid, parental income, FAFSA, what a grant is, what a merit scholarship is, what Tuition Advantage is, the importance of obtaining high scores on the PSAT, ACT, and SAT for obtaining college scholarships, interest rates on loans, as well as a whole host of other financial terms and concepts. Counselor Snow remarked: *"Well, we want to see that they get offered a lot of scholarships and that they are not going to have a student loan when they finish their bachelor's degree" (Mrs. Snow, PI 1).*

Wall of Fame. As seniors' university applications begin to be accepted and their scholarships are awarded, Mrs. Johnson begins placing each student's senior portrait, university acceptances, and scholarship awards on posters along the main entrance hallway of EECHS. Seniors take notice of her activities in the hall, and often stop what they're doing and follow

along commenting to her about their portrait, college acceptances, and awards. Mrs. Johnson stated: *"I'm putting up all the pictures and they're just following me, and they're like, 'Ma'am, I can't believe this is us already! I can't believe it!'"* Mrs. Johnson added: *"You know, I remember when they were freshmen! They've done their college applications, they've done their scholarship applications. Now they're up on the senior Wall of Fame, and it's just... it's all coming around. It's like a Rite of Passage because it's their turn!"* (Mrs. Johnson, PI 3).

Faculty Interviews

Mrs. Nielsen Personal Interview

At EECHS, Mrs. Nielsen teaches students to believe in themselves, and that they can be successful in mastering the skills in her class to become college ready. As she stated, she "remolds" students' belief systems so that they feel empowered to be successful. She is rigorous in her teaching, and starting from an Advanced Placement curriculum, constructed her class specifically to teach students the skills necessary to do well in college. She provides her students with a challenging and rigorous curriculum but scaffolds her instruction and supports them as they master each level successfully. She has a master's degree and knows how to use her training to create challenging and engaging lessons that meet and even go beyond the state of Texas's expectations for her subject area.

EECHS is designated as an "open-enrollment" school meaning that it accepts students within as well as outside the school district in which EECHS is located. Since school districts vary in their quality, students from other districts sometimes vary greatly in their basic academic skill levels and competencies. EECHS teachers notice these differing levels of preparation and strive to get students caught up and back on track academically. According to the Texas Early College High School Blueprint (2020), the target population for the school are students in a C

and B grade range, low socioeconomic level, students of color, first-generation, and students who are generally underserved by higher education.

Mrs. Nielsen told me in her personal interview how annoyed she became recently in one of the school district's professional development meetings. During the meeting, she was describing to a group of teachers some of the advanced projects that EECHS students were successfully completing. One of the teachers responded by stating: *"Oh, that's because you teach at EECHS!"* The implication that the teacher was making is that EECHS receives all the best and brightest students in the school district and that explains why they're doing well. However, as previously mentioned, EECHS's demographics are representative of the school district as a whole with low socioeconomic levels, 98% Hispanic, first-generation, and students generally underserved in higher education.

The particular teacher's comment about EECHS's success being due to selective enrollment of only bright students with high academic achievement might reflect her own belief that students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds cannot achieve high levels of success. By attributing EECHS's success to the "smartness" of its students, the teacher is able to minimize cognitive dissonance and maintain her existing beliefs that students with low socioeconomic backgrounds are incapable of high academic achievement.

Exasperated with this, as well as other teachers' attributing EECHS's success as a result of having selective enrollment of only the "best and brightest students" students, Mrs. Nielsen stated: *"So how does it explain my Special Education kids doing well? How does it explain my Autistic kids doing this? How about my 504's? My English as A Second Language students? So, something is working, right? I tell my kids, 'You're doing this, this, this and that' when I give an assignment. I tell them, 'This is what you're going to do. You can do it. Look, we've done this*

before. You can do it. Don't be scared. You can do it. We've done this before!' And when they're done, I said, 'Congratulations, you've just done Master's work!' They say 'What?' 'Yeah,' I said. 'People who are doing their Master's have done this.' And then the students say 'What?' 'Yeah,' I said, 'So, you'll be fine.' And at the ninth-grade level, you know, you just kind of build them, and build them, and build them. So, I just kind of like, shake them up a little bit. I remold. I say 'I just remold you.' Remold your perceptions, remold your thinking. And before you know it, you are also like, 'Yep, I did it!'"

The term *Mindset* was used repeatedly by Mrs. Nielsen in our interview. The "remolding" that Mrs. Nielsen engages in with students encompasses more than Mrs. Nielsen simply encouraging students by stating "You can do it!" when faced with a challenge. Mindset is a term closely associated with the work of psychologist Carol Dweck whose book *Mindset: The New Psychology of Success* discusses the term and its many implications (2007). Mindset might simply be defined as a set of beliefs, attitudes, or mental states that shape and influence our perceptions and actions. Mindset serves as a mental framework or lens through which we view the world, interpret situations, and make decisions.

According to Dweck, there are two main mindsets: fixed mindset, and growth mindset. Someone with a fixed mindset believes that their intelligence and talents are predetermined at birth and static traits. Individuals with a fixed mindset often believe that these traits are unchangeable, viewing failure as a reflection of their innate abilities. This can result in them avoiding challenges and giving up rather than persisting, for fear of appearing less intelligent or competent.

In contrast, someone with a growth mindset believes that their abilities and intelligence can be developed over time through effort, learning, and persistence. Individuals with a growth

mindset view challenges as opportunities to learn and grow and see failure as a catalyst for growth rather than a reflection of their worth. This leads to resilience in the face of difficulties and often results in intensifying their desire to be successful. Mindset, growth mindset, and fixed mindset are understood and taught by EECHS teachers because Dweck's works are an integral part of the AVID curriculum (Bendall et al., 2015).

It became apparent to me over the course of teacher and administrator interviews that EECHS teachers and administrators unanimously believe that their students are capable of doing college level work. One of the questions on the Faculty Data Questionnaire was: "Do you believe that EECHS students are capable of doing college-level work?" All teachers and administrators answered in the affirmative, with more than a few stating something to the effect of "Of course they are!" Mrs. Nielsen added: *"Well, teacher efficacy affects student efficacy. So, if the teacher is not in it, and the teachers are not invested, then the students are not going to be invested, because it trickles down, and it becomes a Domino effect."*

EECHS students vary in age from fourteen to eighteen years, with a few students a little older. In response to an interview question about challenges that she experienced at EECHS, Mrs. Nielsen replied: *"So, the student challenges would be more a lack of maturity, if that makes any sense. There aren't any behavior issues because we don't allow for it to happen. We nip it in the bud as soon as it happens."*

When I mentioned to Mrs. Nielsen that the school looked nice and well-kept, and that I did not see any evidence of graffiti as is so common, she stated: *"You won't see it, either. The hierarchy, the upperclassmen teach the kids below them how to behave. The freshmen will start to misbehave, and the upperclassmen will set them straight within six weeks. They say 'No, we don't do that here! You're no longer at whatever school you were at. This is EECHS! Respect,*

respect. It's all respect, respect for your learning, respect for your environment!' And the culture has always been the seniors, juniors, and the sophomores. They all do their part." Mrs. Nielsen stated that when freshmen misbehave, upperclassmen correct them by stating *"We don't do that here. That's not the kind of school that you're in!"* She further added regarding freshmen misbehavior: *"It changes in about six weeks. It takes six weeks, max!"* Mrs. Nielsen stated: *"There's a culture here, a culture of established respect and academics. That's what it's all about, and that's our culture. I don't know how else to explain it!"*

Mrs. Jacobs Personal Interview

As an experienced teacher who has been at EECHS for many years, Mrs. Jacobs teaches a subject that is part of the Texas Success Initiative (TSIA), a required test for all EECHS sophomores. Sophomores must pass both the English as well as the mathematics section of the TSIA by the end of their sophomore year to be eligible to take university classes in their junior year. Since students who do not pass both of these areas will be returned to their original campus, focus on assessing freshmen students' prior academic achievement is critical and student motivation is keen.

When asked what some of the challenges were that she experiences at EECHS, her response was related to uneven freshmen academic achievement. Mrs. Jacobs stated: *"Academic gaps due to middle school variation. Gaps, because we as a campus receive a variety of all the middle schools and not all of them are the same. So, there are a number of challenges. Like in another school, you know they sometimes go as a cluster."* Mrs. Jacobs is referring to the fact that as an open enrollment school, EECHS admits students from other school districts who often have differences in academic achievement for the TSIA subject areas of English and Mathematics.

Since one of Mrs. Jacobs's priorities is closing the gaps so that they can successfully take this test, she investigates their math grades from their elementary and middle school years to determine their strengths and weaknesses. She stated: *"Because even when I was at my previous school, I used to go and check on data and see their background. Yes. That was usually the first thing that I did asking, 'Okay, where you at right now? Okay, where did you start struggling. Okay, did you start struggling when you were an elementary student or a middle school student? So where did you get off the path on this subject?' These are the students that I usually check on in summer to see where they're at."*

By checking their past academic background, Mrs. Jacobs can anticipate and plan for covering areas that will need extra work for students to successfully pass the TSIA. Mrs. Jacobs is also concerned about their overall comprehension of the subject as this is evaluated at the high school level in the End-Of-Course exams near the end of the semester. She stated about her record for End-of-Course exams: *"And then for five years straight, I have perfect scores...And I said, 'It's not my effort. It's your effort, my effort, and the whole community effort!' Because if not, I would never get good grades."*

One of the things that Mrs. Jacobs discusses with her freshmen in the first week of class is how learning and doing well in school requires everyone's contribution, not just the student's contribution, and not just the teacher's contribution. She stated: *"I noticed that the majority of these kids want to pursue a degree. So, my first motivation is to add my little effort, so I can help them! I say to them, 'My contribution is only like 25%, yours is another 25%, and your parents is another 25%. And then, the bus driver, is also 25%.' It's not just isolated Mrs. Jacobs, isolated Science, or isolated English. I think it's the whole community. Because if the bus driver is not*

there, then the kid is not here. If the food's not there, then my kids are going to be hungry, and he or she is not going to be ready to learn."

To further reinforce to students that learning and grades are a group effort, Mrs. Jacobs teaches students how to collaborate with each other by modeling it to them during class. She stated: *"What I do is this. You know, they are in groups of four. So, let's say one of the students asks me a question. What I do is ask their neighbor, 'Do you know his question?' And he doesn't know. And I say, 'Well, you haven't collaborated yet. So, I'll come back later.'"* Students then turn towards each other and listen to each other's questions and begin the process of collaborating with each other. Mrs. Jacobs added: *"They're not used to this, because they're used to the teacher being their main resource for answers."*

By modeling this behavior in class, Mrs. Jacobs begins preparing her freshmen students for collaborating in college. She added: *"But I say, that's the only way that you can learn to collaborate by the time when you are juniors and seniors, it's the only way. I'm not going to be the main resource. It's going to be your colleagues. It's going to be your classmates. It's going to be the Internet. It's going to be a tutor. It's going to be another person, and not just a teacher. And I said, 'You know, I understand you have been trained that way since day one, since elementary, junior high, and now high school.' It took me awhile as a student to learn 'Well, my teacher is no longer here. So now, what do I do?'"* Mrs. Jacobs's students learn not only the content in her class, but also begin the process of learning how to work in a group to achieve success through collaboration.

Mrs. Jacobs humorously refers to mathematics as the *Patito Feo*, or the ugly duckling because students often have difficulty with it and lose self-confidence at an early age. While as an academic discipline its pedagogy and sequence of instruction is well-planned, if students fall

behind in a particular area, or miss some crucial concept, subsequent areas often become difficult to understand. Instead of achieving gradual mastery and understanding, the subject then becomes unruly and an "ugly duckling" undermining their self-esteem and self-efficacy.

Self-esteem and self-efficacy are intertwined in students' appraisal of their own ability and talents in Mrs. Jacobs's subject area. While the meaning of self-esteem is well-known, the term "self-efficacy" was first used by the noted American psychologist Albert Bandura in his *Self-efficacy: Toward a unifying theory of behavioral change* (Bandura, 1977). Self-efficacy refers to an individual's belief in their ability to execute specific tasks or achieve a particular goal successfully. Bandura states that self-efficacy is a crucial element in understanding human behavior because a person's sense of self-efficacy influences their motivation, learning processes, and self-esteem.

While Bandura provides several explanations about how self-efficacy may be acquired, the one that pertains to Mrs. Jacobs class is *mastery experiences*. Mastery experiences refer to an individual's accomplishment of a specific goal or task. Since Mrs. Jacobs has already identified students who have had difficulty with mathematics in elementary and middle school, she carefully sequences and scaffolds her presentation of the material. Incrementally, students take one successful step at a time, and accumulate mastery experiences thus bolstering their sense of self-efficacy.

As I reviewed Mrs. Jacobs's interview transcript, I was struck by the fact that she used the word "believe" in various contexts 48 times during our first interview together. She stated: *"Always think high! I say to them, 'Always think high and that you can do it. Even though you don't believe in yourself, I believe in you! So, you can do it.' That's my logo. I also help them a lot to believe in themselves about our subject. Because you know, it's called the ugly duck or*

'Patito Feo.' It's a Patito Feo because they don't believe that they can do it. Sometimes they've been struggling with this subject since fifth or sixth grade!"

Mrs. Jacobs also teaches her subject to a high and rigorous standard and is not shy about encouraging her students to come in for extra work and attend tutorials. She stated: *"I will help them to understand that my standards are high. And I'm the one of the teachers that will be looking for them to attend tutorials! And I tell them, 'You know what? I know that you're struggling. Every single one of us, we're going to struggle for something. For me, maybe it's English, maybe math, maybe PE, we don't know. But you need to put your effort into it. And say: You know what? I'm not going to put a 100% into it, I'm going to put a 110% into it!' Because you're going to come and you're going to learn. And usually, I motivate them to say: 'I'm going to pass my TSIA!' Yes!"*

Besides the challenge of teaching students to believe in themselves, Mrs. Jacobs is also sensitive to the power of language in shaping self-concept and influencing outcomes. As a result, certain words are not permitted in her classroom, while other words are constantly used and referred to. For example, she stated: *"In my classroom, I have a rule that they will never call themselves stupid. They will not call anybody else stupid. And if you're going to say something to a classmate, it's going to be saying like an expression of 'A-ha!'"* Students routinely 'police' themselves and inform her if a student disparages themselves or someone else by using this term.

In contrast, words that are highly favored include persistent and consistent. Mrs. Jacobs stated: *"Just be persistent and consistent. Those are my two words. Be persistent at whatever you do and be consistent. I know that sometimes it is going to be hard to wake up, and do it again, but just be consistent. Try it again! Try it again! Try it again! Yes!"*

Mr. Reynolds Personal Interview

Mr. Reynolds was the Rio Independent School District's administrator responsible for the idea and grant funding proposal for the Excelencia Early College High School in 2007. With many years of service to the district as an English teacher, Dean of Instruction, and administrator of Advanced Academics which later became known as College, Career, and Military Readiness, Mr. Reynolds volunteered to participate in this study to help provide important background information about the circumstances which led to the creation and development of EECHS.

EECHS's Beginnings. The first question I asked Mr. Reynolds was "Could you please share some background on the decision to establish EECHS?" Mr. Reynolds replied: *"I was invited to attend a Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board meeting in Austin with the lady who was in charge of doing dual-enrollment with Texas Valley University. And at that meeting, there was a presentation about early college high schools and that they were opening the application process and that there was grant funding, so you could write a grant. And so, when we had a break, I called my boss, Dr. Jones, and I said, 'I think we should do this!' And he said, 'Well, it's your baby, then, if we're going to do it!' In other words, I would be the one that's going to write the grant. And he said: 'You're the one that's going to do all the meetings and all that stuff.' And I said, 'Well, I was willing to do that.' I attended multiple, many, many, many meetings. And so that's basically how it got started. And I made some connections at the state level and wrote the grant that was for the initial funding of the early college high school, and we got funded that way."*

EECHS's Standalone Early College High School Model. When I asked Mr. Reynolds about why the Standalone early college high school model was chosen for EECHS he replied: *"At that time, that was the only early college high school model that they were allowing to take*

place at the state level. They weren't accepting any other model than the Standalone model. And the reason behind that is they had some Standalones and they had some School-within-a-schools, and the School-within-a-school models never worked. So, they said 'If you're going to do this, it has to be a Standalone.' So that's the reason EECHS is a Standalone."

Motivation for EECHS. Because of the difficulty of writing a successful grant proposal, I asked Mr. Reynolds what motivated him to write the grant proposal for EECHS. He replied: *"Well, my biggest reason for wanting to pursue it was, you know, the low socioeconomic conditions the majority of our students are in. And the fact that the vast majority of them would be first-generation college-going students. And so, I thought we had a tremendous need for it. And I thought it would be an opportunity, especially when you have an early college high school, you're not supposed to be recruiting the brains at the campus. You're supposed to be recruiting those middle of the road kids who might not have ever thought of going to college as an option for them! So, I thought that was a fantastic model for us to be pushing in our district because almost all of our students fell into that criteria. They didn't have the push or maybe they didn't have the parents at home thinking that it was important. They didn't have the idea, like I said, that they could even go to college or that that was even an option for them."*

Two Institutes of Higher Education. One of EECHS's unusual features is that it coordinates two institutes of higher education including a two-year community college as well as a four-year university in providing early college high school students with an Associate's Degree in General Studies as well as 42 core university credits. Regarding this unusual arrangement Mr. Reynolds stated: *"Well, that came out about because back in 2008, Texas Community College was part of the university, as opposed to being a community college. Also at that time, the state really didn't want students going into dual-enrollment until they were juniors in high school. So*

now, that has totally changed and that's no longer the case. But at that point, that was basically the model that we had to follow."

EECHS's Accelerated Curriculum. At EECHS, freshmen and sophomores complete a rigorous two-year program earning both an associate's degree as well as their high school diploma. When asked about this, Mr. Reynolds stated: *"Well, the theory behind it is the teachers at the early college high school campus that are teaching the freshmen and sophomores are supposed to be teaching them at a level that's going to prepare them to be successful when they do go to the college courses."*

I then followed up by asking him: "So how does this two-part curriculum enhance the students' learning experience and prospects going down the road?" Mr. Reynolds replied: *"Well, I think since EECHS has been open, the majority of the kids have graduated with an associate's degree. So that's, you know, a large group of students graduating already with a college degree that probably never would have done it before. So that in itself is an impetus for them to continue their education and work towards the bachelor's degree. And they are!"*

Early College High School and Higher Education Coordination. When I asked Mr. Reynolds about the working relationship between EECHS, the community college, and the university, he replied: *"So, you know, when the early college high school is connected already with a university, that's a very smooth movement for them from the high school and college courses that they've been in for four years right into the university itself."* To this Mr. Reynolds added: *"Plus, I think this is an example of your Higher Education partners working with you. I think they give the majority of those kids scholarships so that their next two years are basically free for them, if they go to TVU."*

Higher Education Choices, Challenges, and Perceptions. When I asked Mr. Reynolds why the local community college and university were chosen to partner with EECHS he replied: *"Well, basically, that comes with the rules that we have to follow from the state level. They basically said that you have to do dual-enrollment with the colleges and universities that service your community. So, I mean, that's state-wide. That's not just us. It's everywhere. Basically, they said you have to have an agreement with your local Higher Education entities in order to do this. So, a major part of getting going, getting it off the ground, was getting financed from the university."*

Besides the financial difficulties associated with opening EECHS, there were other challenges that had to do with community college and university faculty perceptions about high school student ability. Mr. Reynolds stated: *"So, then the rest of it was bringing the university on board, which was a very difficult part of it, because to be very honest with you, the majority of the faculty members that were on the committee representing the university were against it. They just didn't think the kids had the academic background to be successful in college level courses. Because their whole thing was, 'If they're going to get college credit, they have to be taught the same curriculum that is taught in the college courses' -which is exactly what we wanted! And we were agreeing to that, too. And they just didn't think that the majority of the kids, especially the kind of kids that you're supposed to recruit for the early college high school, were going to be anywhere near prepared to be successful in a college curriculum."*

And it all changed when we had one meeting where the president of the university attended. And the first thing she said was, 'We are going to do this with the Rio Independent School District!' So, after she said that, everybody's attitude changed! It was a total attitude change from the college side of the board. I mean, we had been discussing this with them, trying

to get them to get on our side as far as the benefits and how it's going to benefit the community and not just the students, but the community at large, and not really making much headway. When the president of the university said 'You're going to do this!' it just went from night to day. We went from barely getting anything from them to basically having them as a full partner. So that's the beginnings of how EECHS got started, really."

AVID at EECHS. When I first began conducting student focus-group interviews at EECHS, I gradually became aware that AVID was campus-wide. Based on students' comments, I realized that even though students did not refer to AVID by name except for general topics such as Cornell Notes or the AVID Binder, AVID was very much an organizing feature of students' study habits and daily life at EECHS.

When I asked Mr. Reynolds about AVID at EECHS, he replied that back when EECHS began in 2008, early college high schools were required by TEA in their Early College High School Blueprint to have a college readiness program like AVID. He stated: *"If you're an early college high school campus, you have to have a program like AVID. It is a requirement of the Blueprint. So, it wasn't an option. It wasn't something that we just came up with out of the blue. You have to have some kind of support and some kind of curriculum that is, in its nature, supportive of students."*

Mr. Reynolds' experience with AVID dates back to his earlier years as Dean of Instruction at one of the district's high schools. He stated: *"And the reason I pushed for AVID is because back when I was the Dean of Instruction at our high school, our principal found out about it and sent me to a meeting in Region 1 where AVID people were presenting it and, you know, introducing it to us. And as soon as I heard about it, I thought, 'Well, this would be great to have at our high school!'"*

When I asked him about the benefits of AVID being used in the rest of the school district, he replied: *"Basically, our district has had a love-hate relationship with AVID over the years. We have tried to get it implemented and again, it's a very expensive program to implement and we just didn't have the funds and everything. Well, then I got us a grant to implement AVID, and this happened after I went to Advanced Academics. I got us a grant to implement AVID at all of our high schools that paid for it for the first year, or maybe first two or three years. I don't remember. But anyway, it paid for it. So, we had AVID going, we had all the campuses going. I spent basically that entire school year getting buy-in from the high school principals because you have to send a team of people to AVID training for the Summer Institute so that it can be implemented correctly. When you come back, then you have to recruit the kids and all that stuff.*

And so, what always happens at our district happened that year. I spent the whole year getting buy-in from all the principals. And then right in the school year, they start moving principals around. So, half the principals I was working with were new and knew nothing about AVID because they hadn't attended any of the meetings. And there was that hesitancy on their part and I said, 'Look, this is a grant, you've got to do it!' And so basically that's how AVID came into the district. Now, with EECHS, like I said, the Early College High School Blueprint, it is a requirement to have something like AVID as a support curriculum for the students. And since I was familiar with AVID and everything, then I pushed for that and that's how it got adopted at EECHS."

While in the original Early College High School Blueprint back in the late 2000's there may have been a requirement for some type of college readiness program, in the Early College High School Blueprint 2020 no specific support curriculum by name is indicated. In examining the Blueprint's Benchmark No. 4, I noticed that end goals were emphasized, rather than

particular college readiness programs such as AVID. The Early College High School Blueprint Benchmark 4 states:

Benchmark 4: Curriculum and Support

The Early College High School shall provide a rigorous course of study that enables a participating student to receive a high school diploma and complete the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board's (THECB) core curriculum (as defined by Title 19 of the Texas Administrative Code (TAC) §4.28), obtain certifications, or earn an associate degree, or earn at least 60 credit hours toward a baccalaureate degree during grades 9-12. *The ECHS shall provide students with academic, social, and emotional support in their course of study.* [emphasis mine] (ECHS Blueprint, 2020, p. 9)

While the latitude in TEA's ECHS Blueprint (2020) regarding particular academic, social, and emotional supports for early college high school students is laudable, guidance is always useful on how to create effective college preparatory programs customized to meet particular districts' needs.

Mrs. Sutter Personal Interview

EECHS's Beginning. Mrs. Sutter, EECHS's first principal, was influential in getting EECHS off to a strong start. When our interview began, she mentioned how the opportunity to be a principal at EECHS presented her with an opportunity to continue her professional growth but that it also came about somewhat unexpectedly. She stated: *"I got into it kind of crazy because I had just been told by the superintendent that if I really wanted to be in curriculum in a meaningful way, I would need to have some two or three years of principalship experience. Yes. And when this came up of course, having helped write some of the pieces, it was like, 'Oh, this*

sounds really interesting!' So, I did apply and I was grateful to be the successful applicant for it. But it was an interesting ride, definitely, starting up an early college high school!"

Researching the ECHS. As an established and successful grant writer for the district, it was not uncommon for Mrs. Sutter to investigate a subject fully to better understand its complexities. I asked her: "What did you think about the early college high school and its impact on the students? I know that you dove into the research aspect to find out more about it!" She replied: *"The early college high school movement was started as an attempt on the East Coast to really see what kids could do. Because just because you're in poverty, or you're a minority, doesn't make you stupid. And there was a group that decided, almost like a charter school started, I suppose, in the early, early days that wanted to take a group of kids who came from poverty, first-generation, and see what would happen if these kids were exposed to basically an accelerated academy to get them actually into college early instead of later.*

And they were very successful at it. On the other hand, I had the opportunity to actually visit the location, which actually was just in a large old home where the classrooms are little bedrooms and living room areas and such, both associated there with the university. But by that time, we were already sold on it. We're already actually up and running somewhat with EECHS by then, I guess because I came from pretty much a first-generation college family. I knew what a challenge it had been myself."

EECHS's Student Target Population. Mrs. Sutter's experience in the school district and community, and familiarity with the students and their challenges influenced her commitment to be EECHS's first principal. She was also intrigued by the ECHS ethos of enrolling the "kids in the middle" as far as grade-point average was concerned. She stated: *"And seeing the struggles for our students that could definitely benefit from these things. Again, because of my work with*

Gifted Education, I knew that we had some very bright kids in our community. I'd seen all sorts of evidence of that, so it was a matter of thinking about it that way.

But the additional piece to the early college was they weren't looking necessarily for identified gifted children. It was for primarily minority, poverty, first-generation students. So that was a little more of a context that I had to consider. I knew it would benefit the GT type of child and certainly, of course, the Honors type of child. But in thinking about students that were struggling learners... And then this little light flipped on fairly early in the process! Wait a minute. You're talking about the really... The non-performers!

They're very bright, but they have no desire to be identified as Honors or GT kids. This is the kid that blows off school and gets behind in school and could definitely benefit from accelerating themselves out of middle school and then right on through into college. And once that light bulb came on, it was just like, 'Well, of course I know what kind of student I'm looking for. These are kids that are capable, but they're just not performing!' And so they met with the other three very objective criteria."

The other three objective criteria to which Mrs. Sutter was referring to are the characteristics of the population that the Early College is targeted towards: low socioeconomic status, students of color, and first-generation students typically underserved by higher education. The additional, last characteristic was their potential for academic success which needed a spark, an incentive, or a catalyst such as a school like EECHS might provide. She added: *"And of course, these are not the kids that want to apply for anything! So, they want to do this. How do you entice these kids to jump through enough paperwork to have some sort of documentation to make a selection to? Because originally, it was going to be a selection process. But at the same*

time, if you got sufficient numbers, you went to a lottery process, right? So, it wasn't a matter of ranking the kids. And we were always very clear about that."

Early Challenges Starting Up EECHS. Because EECHS was to be a Standalone ECHS, district funding and plans were made to coordinate with the university and use one of their buildings as the new early college high school. However, upon closer inspection, structural problems with the building caused a halt to the new school's opening. Mrs. Sutter stated: *"So the original plan was to have the university donate on a long-term lease, property at what's now called the Business Center in the area that used to be a department store. A big, two-story store was going to be the early college high school. The district was going to put in several million dollars to have it renovated to become a high school, and the university was going to donate a long-term lease, put in some of their facilities and supports, and of course, provide electricity and all those other things to make it run. And then we're doing the investigation about what kind of structural work still needed to be done and discovered that just the roofing was going to be over \$1,000,000. So everybody was just like, 'Ooh! Put on the brakes!' But we have kids already selected and we've already committed to the grant, and we already wanted to get started."*

Alternative Location. When the new school year began, EECHS had been relocated to an unused elementary school in the district. Mrs. Sutter stated: *"So, Jones Elementary at that time was vacant, and they decided to use that for at least the first year to get us started while other options were pursued. They took a team of our maintenance staff in there and started cleaning it up and getting it painted and organized and ready to go. And of course, then we had a hurricane! Yes. Oh, in the middle of all that as well, I actually had not been hired yet, nor had any teachers. So, we're talking about July. I was hired July the 16th! School started a month*

later. We didn't have a facility, we didn't have teachers, we barely had students. They had gotten their acceptance letters, and that was about it!

Well, we did have electricity, more or less. But the lights didn't always come on because they needed to come in and do some work on them. So, in the middle of all that, we did multiple things. We just kept going forward. I had an office because I was working still as a Grants administrator at the time, even though I had been hired for EECHS. So, I had an office I could work out with a computer and such. And fortunately, our supervisor had already done a lot of the purchasing of stuff because she knew that that couldn't wait. So, the specialists there in Curriculum had ordered science, biology materials and books, the regular textbooks and all that stuff that was being brought in."

Hiring The Teachers. Three weeks before classes were scheduled to start at the new early college high school, teachers had yet to be hired. Furniture and classrooms were in disarray, being repurposed, and finally rearranged at Jones Elementary now to be known as the Excelencia Early College High School, the very first early college high school in Riverbend. While the maintenance staff was at work full-time, supervisors and colleagues volunteered to help prepare EECHS for its first freshmen class. Mrs. Sutter stated: *"We were very fortunate that my supervisor, Mrs. Daniels was physically present. And of course, Mr. Reynolds, as well, because his department kicked in and was helping to get stuff squared away. So, it was a huge team effort to get things going. The first real task they gave me was to hire the teachers, because Mrs. Daniels said if I was going to be principal, according to policy, principals hire the teachers and she wasn't going to overstep that. And so, I had to set up interviews and hire folks in a very short period of time. And then the principals didn't want to release them! We had some great applicants and after interviewing, there were some very standout applicants for some of the*

positions, but they were also top teachers at their high schools. And the principals didn't want to turn them loose two weeks before school started, maybe three. So, we had to get the superintendent to override their reluctance and allow us to hire them."

The quality of EECHS's first teachers was very important and each teacher candidate was evaluated on certain criteria. Mrs. Sutter stated: *"There were several things we looked at in those first teacher candidates, and I think that kept true to a lot of this. The first group of the very first seven had to be very vested in their belief that these students could do it, and had to be content experts, and have master's degrees if possible. It was helpful if they had master's because that way you knew that they were truly vested in college, or higher education. But whenever possible, they were minorities as well.*

We were looking for the Biliterate, if possible, teachers. Because we knew that it was going to be important to communicating with parents. We didn't have very many truly emergent Bilingual kids. Because again, remember, we were looking to the fact that these kids were going to be taking two years of English per year, basically to get ready to go to college, actually start. 'Yes, you are going to be at college!' And they were! For better or worse, or better. And we were willing to put in the work to try to get them there. So, I couldn't afford to have a teacher coming to me and saying 'So-and-so shouldn't be here at EECHS.' They all had to believe that the kids should be at EECHS. And I will give them credit for only having occasional lapses with a few of our kids.

So, of course the next year we had to double our teaching faculty. And by then, we knew a lot more about what we were doing, as well as realized how much less we knew about what we were doing! Right. It became the running joke from then on that one of the first questions we asked a teacher candidate was 'How flexible are you?' or, 'Can you be flexible?' even above

believing in the kids. We made a simple assumption initially in their application that to be an EECHS teacher that they understood that these kids could and would be successful. Obviously, it did get discussed during the interview, but the first question actually became 'How flexible are you?' because planning in a small group in an office setting and taking them over to the university every Friday and all sorts of things, it was just a totally abnormal schedule. They had to be willing to be flexible!

The other thing was after the first group was hired, we made sure that the committee had at least a couple of the EECHS teachers present during the interviews because they're the ones that would have to work so closely together. They had to be a component of it. I never interviewed somebody without them being a participant, and especially if it was replacing their partner because they have to work together."

The First EECHS Students. One would think that opening a new school to serve even more students would be a welcome event. However, in the first few years, district response was guarded. Mrs. Sutter stated: *"It wasn't like the whole district was in support, because they saw it as stealing top students! It wasn't until they really saw the first couple of years of students that they understood we were recruiting from their underperforming students, rather than from their top performing students. That's shifted somewhat now that it had a reputation and folks wanted to have their kids be a part of that. But, EECHS still has that same focus on some of these underperformers as a priority.*

And as we went through the process, yes, we realized that it's just like a lot of your other programs for emergent Bilinguals or even Special Ed. And we know that you don't want to isolate either end of your spectrums, because they need to have peers that are at different levels in order to associate. You did need a heterogeneous group, and I think it now has a much more

heterogeneous group of students there. Because our first four generations, that very first class was almost 100% first-generation. And some of them, I mean, their parents didn't know anything about going to college. They knew nothing about going to college. A few of us obviously knew, but the kids didn't. And so, they didn't have any peers for the first few years, two years or so, to even be able to talk to each other about going to college and being in a college until we actually had them in college! So that was an interesting piece."

AVID at EECHS. When I asked Mrs. Sutter about AVID at EECHS, she replied: *"We did start AVID the first year, but we didn't actually get our training until the next year. So, the first AVID was a little bit ragged. And of course, like I say, everything was '90 for nothing!" And then the second year, we went with a more even approach for the sophomores that was more true to the AVID model experience as part of what they were doing, and getting their test prep, and getting over there to the university. So, they kept going! I loaded up two grade levels of kids most Fridays to go to the university when we were still housed at Jones Elementary school."*

When I asked Mrs. Sutter how AVID had become such an integral feature of EECHS, she replied: *"It was something that was actually being promoted by some of the early college high schools already, either an AVID or an AVID-like program. So, it was actually written into the initial work. Actually, Mr. Reynolds and I had tried to get it in under a couple of different options to the high schools before, back in the days in various positions we'd held. I actually was involved with trying to get it in Middle Schools when I was the Grants Director for our Urban System project. And Mr. Reynolds had been trying to get it in when he was at his high school as Dean of Instruction, if I remember his story correctly. So, we had known about AVID and been believers in AVID even before EECHS."*

Because AVID's effectiveness depends to a large extent upon its fidelity of implementation, I asked Mrs. Sutter about how EECHS was used AVID. She stated: *"As far as AVID itself, one of the big things was it was campus-wide, every grade level. All the teachers were expected to support the AVID Notebook, and the AVID process in their classes. It was a non-negotiable. They had to agree to AVID as being important. And they didn't necessarily have to all do their Cornell notes exactly the same way, but they had to know, and the kids had to know, that at times they were going to take Cornell notes in every class, even the PE class! Yes. I think they've continued it."*

The New EECHS Building. There were several issues that were considered in creating the new EECHS including the school type, location, and the curriculum. First was the particular type of early college that had been decided for EECHS from the outset. Mrs. Sutter stated: *"Part of EECHS because of its model was that it would be on the university campus. There was a couple of other options that they could have designated some buildings there on the university, but what they ended up doing was they got a 99-year lease on a piece of property from Texas Community College and the district built her building there."* The school type then became clearly established because at that time, TEA required that all early college high schools be the Standalone variety. Mrs. Sutter stated: *"If you're going to do a Standalone on a university or college campus, you had to agree that the facility would only house about two years of your classes, because you had to have the kids at your Institute of Higher Education the other two years. It was supposed to be that kind of model."*

What complicated the operation of the new Standalone EECHS was that during this time, both the community college and the university were in a state of transition. Yet, despite the changes occurring at the community college and university levels, EECHS students continued on

with their classes. Mrs. Sutter stated: *"So the principalship was in transition, the university was in transition, but the teachers and the kids just kept 'right on truckin' through most of it!"*

Teacher and Student Challenges and Successes. While EECHS's accelerated and rigorous two-year high school curriculum challenges both students and teachers, the greater challenge falls on the students. Mrs. Sutter stated: *"You know, actual burnout among the teachers was not as big a challenge as burnout among the students. Well, it's a unique setting with unique students. And of course, after the first few years, they got the taste and they were vested in the campus, so that when somebody got tired, there would always be some kid or some peer that would say 'We can do it, come on, we can do it!'"*

They were still figuring it out when I was principal. But after that, more of the routines got established. And I did ask our graduating class several times to talk to some of the kids. It's like I said 'You all have a responsibility to EECHS. We got you successfully through and on to college. So now you've got to help us on this. If you believe in EECHS, then you need to take on the responsibility of helping your younger peers!' And in quite a few cases, there were younger brothers and sisters coming into the school by then. And so, they did take it very seriously. Now, ten additional years down the road, I'm sure that you have some very interesting stories from some of those."

Now in its 15th year, EECHS has distinguished itself among early college high schools in Texas for the high academic achievement of its graduates, their successful accomplishments and scholarships, and the large numbers of its students who go on to successfully complete undergraduate degrees. Building upon educational excellence from its beginning in 2008, EECHS has now become a family tradition with brothers, sisters, and other family members enrolling at EECHS and following in the same successful footsteps.

Part Three: Documents and Other Media Review

For Part Three: Documents and Other Media Review, I focused on EECHS Yearbooks for two reasons. First, focus-group interviews taught me how important clubs and extracurricular organizations were to EECHS students. Student and faculty involvement in clubs and extracurricular activities at EECHS is testimony to how common interests and shared passions can help students enlarge their horizons and persist in their studies.

Since AVID IV teacher Mrs. Johnson sponsors the EECHS yearbook club and has a collection of EECHS yearbooks, it seemed logical that the most direct way to learn about clubs and extracurricular activities was by perusing her yearbook library. From her collection, I obtained the names of many clubs and extracurricular activities, which were then incorporated into the revised Student Data Questionnaire that all 35 focus-group students submitted.

Second, EECHS's first principal, Mrs. Sutter, allowed me to borrow the first five yearbooks from her library. These yearbooks from 2008-2009 to 2012-2013 showed a steady growth and progression of student and faculty involvement at EECHS. I found that EECHS's first yearbook (2008-2009) set the style and tone for the yearbooks to follow because of its professional presentation with full-color pictures of students and faculty and portrayal of certain topics and themes that would recur in each of the succeeding yearbooks.

EECHS Yearbooks

2008-2009. Since it was the first year of a new school, the initial pages of volume one acknowledge the honor of being the first ECHS to open in the Rio Independent School District and how this new early college high school was making history. Pictures show the university president delivering a dedicatory speech about EECHS and how it represented a unique partnership with the school district, university, and stakeholders in the community. Other

pictures include the new principal, Mrs. Sutter, standing at the podium giving a speech to parents and community members, superintendent and school board members congratulating the students and parents, and a picture of Mr. Reynolds, the administrator who helped in the creation of EECHS through his proposals and grant writing skills.

On the pages that followed, traditional high school yearbook topics and themes were presented, starting with pages dedicated to the school's administrators and small first-year staff of only seven teachers, pages devoted to student sentiments and pictures, a section devoted to Clubs of which there were only six the first year. However, each club had an entire page devoted to students' and sponsors' activities. Following the Clubs section, a theme that will recur in succeeding yearbooks called Student Life was presented, with student sentiments about their favorite things, favorite sayings, and long-term goals. Other pictures in Student Life showed students taking a university tour, attending a distinguished speaker presentation, participating in the Science and the History Fair, participating in Holiday activities, and students engaged in Charro Days activities.

The class pictures are another theme that will recur in each of the yearbooks. In yearbook Volume 1, 2008-2009, there is only one class: the freshmen class of 99 students. Even so, within this first graduating class of 2012, five top 5% students and five top 10% students were honored, setting a tradition of academic achievement and recognition that is followed in later EECHS yearbooks.

While someone unfamiliar with the school or its students might make a casual comment such as "If you've seen one high school yearbook, you've seen them all," from an ethnographic standpoint, yearbooks contain a detailed record of a community's culture, norms, values, and identities at a specific moment in time and so are a rich resource (Geertz & Darnton, 2017). For

students, yearbooks serve as both a mirror and a prism. As a mirror, they reflect the present, showing students their current selves within the broader context of their school community. As a prism, yearbooks capture moments from earlier, only to refract them back at a later stage in life, often showcasing significant personal growth. The school yearbook's pages hold memories that, when viewed through the lens of time, allow students to see their growth from inexperienced freshmen to mature seniors.

2009-2010. In Yearbook Volume 2, growth can be seen in several additions. While classes continue at the Jones Elementary School location, the total number of teachers now numbers 13, and clubs and extracurricular organizations have added two new clubs for a total of 8. Summer Bridge is introduced, and students are seen engaged in various activities including attending an AVID Leadership conference. Two classes of students now comprise the student picture pages and include the top 5% and top 10% of sophomore students as well as the top 5% and top 10% of freshmen students. Many of the topics and themes from the first yearbook recur, including Student Life, World Happenings, 2009-2010 News, and student picture pages.

2010-2011. In Yearbook Volume 3, growth continues and can be seen in further additions. Classes continue at the Jones Elementary School location, but three classes are now in attendance, including the junior, sophomore, and freshman classes. Each class has two pages honoring the top 5% and top 10% of students for their academic achievement; three new clubs are added for a total of 11 clubs and extracurricular organizations, and another teacher is added for a total of 14 teachers. On the cover of this particular yearbook is the facade of the newly constructed Excelencia Early College High School. However, pictures within this volume were all taken at the Jones Elementary School location, indicating that the new building was probably completed mid-semester but not quite ready for classes.

2011-2012. In Yearbook Volume 4, classes now occur at the new Standalone EECHS school building. The yearbook's cover picture and pictures within are all reflective of the new school. Four classes of students are now attending, including freshmen, sophomores, juniors, and seniors. The top 5% and 10% of students in all classes are honored for their academic achievements. The first graduating class of seniors are dressed in their graduation regalia, including their graduation cap, gown, tassel, and diploma. Eight new clubs were added for a total of 19 clubs, and six more teachers were added, for a total of 20 teachers on staff. Within the yearbook, school spirit and pride can be seen. Student involvement in clubs and extracurricular activities suggests a commitment to engagement and learning that extends beyond the classroom. Student comments within the 2012 yearbook are telling. One student wrote: "You know you're from EECHS when..."

- It takes three hours to get home on the school bus.
- No one knows where your school is.
- You do the Book Talk the night before!
- You know the consequences of procrastination but continue to do it every week!
- You carry around a binder that is bigger than your laptop...and you actually carry around a laptop!
- Everyone helps each other out because, at the end of the day, we are all a family.

In these EECHS yearbooks, a snapshot of the lived history and experiences of EECHS has been created, capturing the people, places, and events that are all part of the EECHS success story and its history.

Other Media

Other Media included a variety of data sources including EECHS's 2016 Blue Ribbon Schools Award, the 2018-2019 School Report Card, Senior pictures, AVID, English, and Mathematics student artifacts, the school website, and the 2022 and 2023 Commencement programs.

Blue Ribbon Award. Of particular interest is EECHS's Blue Ribbon Schools Award displayed prominently in the school office which was awarded in 2016. The 2016 Blue Ribbon Schools award banner is displayed below in Figure 11.

A blue rectangular banner with white text that reads "2016 Blue Ribbon Schools award recipients honored".

2016 Blue Ribbon Schools award recipients honored

Figure 11: 2016 Blue Ribbon Schools Award Banner

EECHS received the U.S. Department of Education's Blue Ribbon Schools Award in 2016 and was honored with recognition on the TEA website as well. The TEA website's commentary praising EECHS is paraphrased below and states:

Rio Independent School District – Excelencia Early College High School

Excelencia Early College High School (EECHS) reflects the community's desire to increase the percentage of their population with a four-year college degree. College preparation is at the core of the school's design, resulting in college attainability for 100 percent of the school's students. The high expectations held for all attending students, through a rigorous curriculum, produces high performance results. Lifelong learning, leadership, and community involvement are the core values of this campus.

This bond is strengthened by the students' active involvement in the community through the many volunteer opportunities provided by school clubs. (TEA, 2016)

The National Blue Ribbon Schools Award is a prestigious award by the U.S. Department of Education which recognizes public and private elementary, middle, and high schools based on their overall academic excellence or their progress in closing achievement gaps among student subgroups. The program was established in 1982 by then Secretary of Education, Terrel H. Bell, the same author of *A Nation at Risk* (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983). The Texas Education Agency states:

Texas schools have been named Blue Ribbon award recipients 658 times since this program began in 1982. The 2016 honorees are exemplary high performing schools as measured by state assessments. Each school has an economically disadvantaged population of 22 percent or greater. The application process also considers many other topics such as the school's demographics, curriculum, graduation rates, school climate information and, at the high school level, its foreign language offerings. (TEA, 2016)

EECHS's 2018-2019 School Report Card. Other Media also included an examination of EECHS's past school report cards dating back to 2009 as available on the Texas Education Agency website. EECHS's more current school report card grade for 2018-2019 is illustrated in Figure 12. EECHS's overall grade for 2018-2019 is 98 and is a result of receiving 97 for *Student Achievement*, 97 for *School Progress*, and 100 for *Closing the Gaps*. This school report card format represents Texas's most recent effort at providing a clearer and easier to understand accounting of public school performance through their implementation of the A-F Accountability System introduced in 2017.

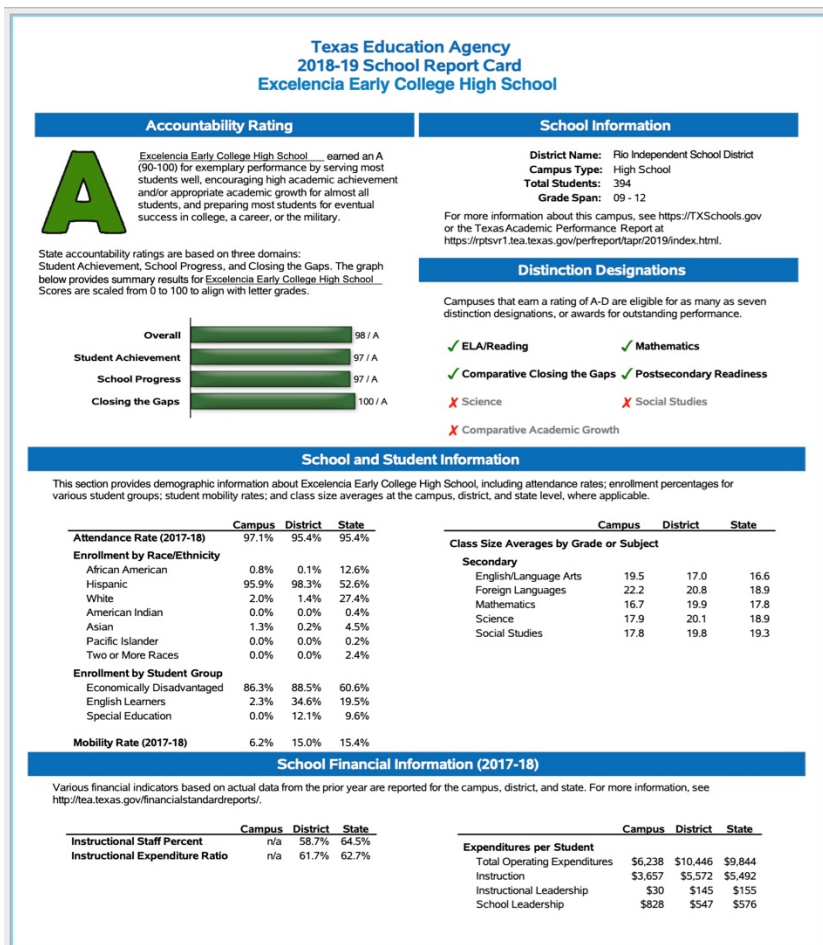


Figure 12: EECHS 2018-2019 School Report Card Grade

Senior Pictures. Midway through spring semester 2022 and 2023, AVID IV teacher Mrs. Johnson began displaying each graduating senior's picture and scholarship awards in the EECHS main entrance hallway. Seniors stopped and talked excitedly with Mrs. Johnson as they recognized their picture, paused and reflected on their accomplishments, and realized that they were officially on their way to graduation.

AVID Student Artifacts. AVID II teacher Mrs. Strauss showed me examples of model AVID Binders which students had donated to her AVID classroom to serve as exemplars of what well-designed AVID Binders might look like.

The AVID Binder I examined was well organized with notebook dividers for each class. Contained within were a variety of materials including an assignment record indicating the date, assignment, and grade received, returned student assignments including Cornell Notes, AVID Tutorial Forms, and English essays, a weekly and a monthly assignment planning calendar, a self-report grade form, and a rubric which gave AVID notebook grade requirements.

English Student Artifacts. English I teacher Mrs. Nielsen shared with me student contributions of their semester long project in English entitled *Book Talk*. She stated that Book Talk is an objective, summative assessment with multiple formative assessments at the end.

Displayed throughout her classroom were these formative assessments in the form of student drawings, pictures, collages, and other visual representations of impactful scenes in novels that students had chosen for their Book Talk project. Through these visual representations, students demonstrated awareness of what was important to the characters in their novel and how that affected the plot development of the story.

Mathematics Student Artifacts. One of Mathematics teacher Mrs. Dorst's techniques for engaging students uses the AVID program's Tutorial Request Form (TRF) to help them isolate and solve math problems that they might be having in her class. Her students obtain the TRF form from their AVID teacher, and then in Mrs. Dorst's class begin a step-by-step process of analyzing and writing a description of the particular math problem they are working on, what vocabulary is important, and what their Point-Of-Confusion is. The TRF form thus becomes a document and learning tool that students create to help them solve their math problems.

EECHS Website. Other Media also included an examination of EECHS's website. Following observations that I made in the well-attended July 2022 Summer Bridge, I became curious about how the school communicated to new students and those unfamiliar with the

school and its mission. The school's website was up to date, well-designed, and easy to navigate.

An announcement of Summer Bridge with its starting date and hours, purpose, and program of events was clearly posted. Pictures of students, faculty, and various school activities portrayed a school actively involved with learning. Obvious care and attention had been given to creating a school website which was informative as well as easy to use by students and parents.

Commencement Programs. Finally, Other Media also included an examination of EECHS's Commencement Programs from 2022 and 2023. The full-size color commencement program gave ample page space to each student's academic achievements, club and extracurricular involvement and awards, scholarship awards, college acceptance, and intended college major. Both Commencement programs at the TCC center were well attended and began with introductory remarks by the school principal, class valedictorian and salutatorian, followed by presentation of diplomas by the principal, superintendent, and counselors.

Summary

Ch. IV presented data from Part One: Students, Part Two: Faculty, and Part Three: Documents and Other Media Review. In Part One, Student Data Questionnaire results were presented, followed by Focus-Group Questions. In Part Two, Faculty Data Questionnaire results were presented, followed by presentations of Counselor Support and AVID contextual interviews and two English and Mathematics teacher interviews. Part Two concluded with personal interviews of two administrators important in creating and implementing EECHS. In Part Three: Documents and Other Media Review, I presented EECHS's yearbooks as a document and chronicle of the school's creation and history. Other Media presented included the school's Blue Ribbon Schools Award, its 2018-2019 school report card, Senior pictures, AVID, English, and

Mathematics student artifacts, the EECHS website, and its 2022 and 2023 Commencement programs.

In Ch. V, I analyze and discuss the significance of the findings from Ch. IV, Presentation of Data. I begin with Part One: Students, and discuss the Student Data Questionnaire, followed by an analysis of the Focus-Group Questions. I continue to Part Two: Faculty, and discuss the Faculty Data Questionnaire, followed by an analysis of AVID, English, Mathematics, and Administrator interviews. I then continue to Part Three: Documents and Other Media Review and discuss the significance of the EECHS yearbooks in providing context and corroboration of student and faculty statements. I then provide Recommendations for Practitioners, Implications for Further Research, and end with a Conclusion that includes a recapitulation of the study and key factors which contribute to Excelencia Early College High School's high academic achievement.

CHAPTER V
DISCUSSION, RECOMMENDATIONS, AND IMPLICATIONS

Overview

This descriptive case study explored student and faculty experiences as members of a high-achieving early college high school. As described in Chapters III and IV, I collected data from students and faculty in three different parts which included Part One: Students, Part Two: Faculty, and Part Three: Documents and Other Media Review.

In Part One, 35 students completed a Student Data Questionnaire and participated in a focus-group interview and follow-up meeting. In Part Two, eleven teachers, two counselors, and two administrators completed a Faculty Data Questionnaire and participated in a personal interview and follow-up interview. In Part Three, data was reviewed from a variety of sources including the school's yearbooks, Blue Ribbon Schools award, school report card, senior pictures, student artifacts from AVID, English, and Mathematics classes, the EECHS website, and the 2022 and 2023 Commencement programs.

In Chapter V, I discuss and interpret the findings from Chapter IV. Beginning with Part One: Students, I first discuss student responses to the questions asked in the Student Data Questionnaire, and then discuss and interpret student focus-group responses in relation to the research questions. In Part Two: Faculty, I first discuss faculty responses to the questions asked in the Faculty Data Questionnaire, and then discuss and interpret AVID, English, Mathematics, and Administrator personal interviews. In Part Three: Documents and Other Media Review, I

discuss and interpret the importance of these findings in providing context and corroborating student, faculty, and other data sources in this study.

I then present Recommendations for Practitioners, followed by Implications for Further Research. Ch. V ends with a conclusion, a recapitulation of the study, and key factors which contribute to EECHS's high academic achievement.

Part One: Students

Discussion of the Findings in Relation to the Research Questions

The following four research questions guided my study:

RQ1: What are the lived experiences of the students, teachers, and faculty in a high-achieving Early College High School?

RQ2. What motivates these high-achieving students to overcome obstacles and persist to degree completion?

RQ3. What factors or elements play a part in contributing to these students' success?

RQ4. What motivates these early college high school teachers to challenge their students with the expectations and rigor required of college-level work?

In the following sections, I discuss these research questions and related subquestions by analyzing data obtained from the Student Data Questionnaire and Student Focus-Group Interviews.

Student Data Questionnaire Analysis

1. What is your age. The average age of EECHS seniors is 18 years old. 20 seniors (57.14%) indicated their age as 18; 14 seniors (40%) stated that they were 17 years old; and one student (2.86%) indicated that they were 19 years old. The age distribution of the seniors provides insight into the typical age range within which students are navigating the pivotal

transition from high school to higher education or other post-secondary pursuits. The majority of the EECHS senior class or 57.14% are 18 years old. This aligns with the average age one might expect for high school seniors across the nation, emphasizing that despite its rigorous academic environment, EECHS is not pressuring students to accelerate their schooling at an unusual pace.

In addition, a significant 40% of these seniors are 17 years old, suggesting that a notable portion of students might have started their academic journey a bit earlier or have birthdays later in the school year. Lastly, a smaller subset, 2.86% or just one student, has reached 19 years of age. Overall, the age distribution at EECHS underscores the diversity in students' academic journeys, demonstrating that while many students follow a traditional path, each student's progression is unique, influenced by individual choices and circumstances.

2. What is your gender? 14 students (40%) were male, 20 (57.14%) were female, and one student (2.86%) identified as non-binary/third gender. The gender distribution among EECHS seniors paints a diverse picture of its student body. A majority of students, specifically 57.14%, identified as female, while a notable 40% identified as male. The difference between male and female representations, though not drastic, underscores a slightly higher female participation in this high-achieving early college high school. Additionally, it is notable that the school environment is inclusive enough for students to express their gender identity, as evidenced by 2.86% or one student identifying as non-binary/third gender.

The presence of a non-binary/third gender student in the demographic, albeit a small percentage, suggests that EECHS is fostering an atmosphere where students feel safe and supported in expressing their authentic selves. Such diversity and inclusivity can contribute to students' sense of well-being and belonging, resulting in increased social integration and persistence as discussed by Tinto (2012).

3. What is your ethnicity? 28 students (80%) indicated their ethnicity as Hispanic, one student (2.86%) indicated their ethnicity as Black or African American, one student (2.86%) indicated their ethnicity as Asian and five students (14.29%) listed their ethnicity as Other.

Given EECHS's location in South Texas's Rio Grande Valley, the student demographic reflects the broader ethnic landscape of the region. The dominant Hispanic representation at EECHS, with 80% of seniors identifying as such, is slightly below the school district's overall demographic, which stands at 95% Hispanic, and well below the community's 98% overall Hispanic population.

The presence of students who identify as Black or African American and Asian, albeit at 2.86% each, is noteworthy, given the broader context. Even within such a strongly Hispanic-majority population, there are pockets of ethnic diversity, which can add varied perspectives and experiences to classroom discussions and social interactions.

4. What language is spoken primarily at your home? One of the defining characteristics of student populations targeted for early college high school admission are English Language Learners (ELLs). Because the racial demographic at EECHS is predominantly Hispanic, it would be within reason to assume that Spanish would be the primary language spoken at home (TEA, 2021).

Nearly half of the seniors, representing 45.71%, converse solely in Spanish at home, illustrating the preservation of native linguistic ties. While this number is significant, it is juxtaposed by the 17.14% of seniors who communicate only in English at home. This segment of students may be indicative of the integration of Hispanic communities into broader English-speaking settings or might represent families that prioritize English due to its predominance in education and professional domains.

Further blending the linguistic borders, a substantial 34.29% of the seniors reported using both Spanish and English interchangeably in their households. This bilingual trend underscores the fluidity of cultural and linguistic transitions occurring in many modern homes. Such an environment can yield versatile students who can seamlessly switch between languages, offering them advantages both academically and socially.

5. What is the highest educational level of your father? This question asked about the educational background of students' fathers, shedding light on the generational progress and challenges faced within the student body of EECHS. The data reveals that a significant portion (40%) of students' fathers have achieved a high school diploma, aligning with the criteria of the early college high school blueprint which focuses on students from households where the high school diploma might be the highest educational attainment. Alongside this, 11.43% of the students disclosed that their fathers did not complete high school, underscoring the challenges many families face in their educational journeys.

Further progress in education is depicted by the 17.14% of students who mentioned their fathers had some college education but without a degree. Degrees like an associate's and bachelor's are held by 2.86% and 8.57% of the students' fathers respectively, showcasing a smaller but noteworthy percentage pushing beyond high school. The higher academic degrees, represented by a master's and doctorate, are attained by a limited segment, 2.86% and 5.71% respectively. These figures highlight the exceptional academic achievements that some of EECHS students' families have embarked upon.

6. What is the highest educational level of your mother? This question provides insight into the educational background of the students' mothers, offering yet another layer to understand the familial and academic backgrounds that influence and shape the EECHS

community. The data illustrates that a small but significant portion of 14.29% of mothers completed their high school education, which is slightly less than the corresponding data for the fathers. Furthermore, 17.14% of students stated that their mothers had not yet attained a high school diploma, underscoring the educational challenges and barriers faced by some family members.

When considering postsecondary education, an identical percentage of 17.14% stated that their mothers had attended college but did not earn a degree, showing similar trends of aspiration and potentially interrupted educational pursuits as seen with their fathers. Notably, a combined total of 42.86% of students indicated their mothers had earned an associate's, bachelor's, or master's degree. The prominence of bachelor's degrees (31.43%) is particularly noteworthy, suggesting a significant push towards higher education among the mothers as compared to their male counterparts.

While no students reported their mothers having doctoral degrees, this absence from the data underscores the rarity and privilege associated with such high academic pursuits, especially when considering gender dynamics and potential societal barriers.

7. How did you first learn about EECHS? EECHS is an open-enrollment early college high school which recruits students from the local school district and other districts nearby (TEA, 2021). A total of five different middle schools contributed to the graduating classes of 2022 and 2023. Three of these middle schools are situated within the school district, one middle school is from a neighboring school district, and one charter middle school is located within the city limits.

A majority (51.43%) of the students learned about EECHS through formal counselor presentations at their respective middle schools. This indicates that school-based outreach,

particularly through trusted educational figures like counselors, plays a crucial role in the school's recruitment strategy.

Personal recommendations also emerged as a key driver for enrollment. Approximately 20% of students decided to join EECHS on the recommendation of siblings or other family members who previously attended. This suggests a legacy of positive experiences, where former students' narratives influence the decisions of younger family members. Additionally, 14.29% of the students chose EECHS based on parental advice, underlining the significance of parents in the decision-making process.

Significantly, only one student (2.86%) discovered EECHS through an internet search, highlighting the importance of personal connections and word-of-mouth recommendations over impersonal, digital avenues for this specific community. The category labeled *Other* provides further nuanced understanding. Friends, both from school and outside, as well as educators, whether they were direct teachers or family acquaintances, play pivotal roles in influencing choices.

8. How many close friends would you say that you have at EECHS? Because EECHS is an open-enrollment early college high school with a student body drawn from five different middle schools, students can develop new friendships as well as maintain their previous friendships with friends who transferred from their middle school.

Seniors described a variety of friendships in their focus group interviews. However, for this study, a “close friend” seemed the most important type of friend to include in the Student Data Questionnaire because of how frequently “close friends” were mentioned. Students defined a close friend as someone “*who you talked to almost every day*” (Mariana, FG 1), someone who

is “*always there for you*” (Jacob, FG 2), and someone who “*really knows all about you*” (Angela, FG 3).

The distribution of close friendships among the senior class paints an encouraging picture. A significant portion, 25.71%, have formed five close friendships, while an equal percentage has eight or more close friends, suggesting that a majority of students have a robust social circle. Even those at the lower end of the spectrum, with two or three close friends, have formed profound connections that likely extend beyond the daily school experience.

At EECHS, the prominence of close friendships underscores a welcoming and inclusive environment. It reflects that despite the school's diverse origins, students find common ground and build meaningful relationships, highlighting the school's potential success in fostering not just academic but also social growth.

9. How many favorite teachers would you say that you have at EECHS? In focus-group interviews, seniors frequently talked about the classes they had taken at EECHS. Specific teachers were sometimes mentioned as being their “favorite” teachers. Students defined a favorite teacher as: “*They know things about you, and they’re always offering help and stuff*” (George, FG 1). Another student stated: “*Every teacher will mention you. Like, they will call you out*” (Lizette, FG 3). One student stated about one of her favorite teachers: “*I know she wants us to have a successful life. So that’s what I really like about her*” (Beatriz, FG 2).

These responses illustrate a heart-warming pattern: the majority of students have found, connected with, and counted as friends multiple favorite teachers during their tenure at EECHS. An impressive 31.43% of students mentioned having three favorite teachers, suggesting that this bond is not limited to one exceptional educator, but is a shared trait among several members of the EECHS teaching staff.

Furthermore, a combined 26.28% of students have between four to eight or more favorite teachers, which further solidifies the idea that EECHS promotes an environment of trust, support, and mutual respect between students and teachers. Only an isolated 2.86% of students felt they had no favorite teacher, a minimal percentage that does not diminish the overall positive trend.

Such strong connections between students and multiple teachers signify that while EECHS stresses academics and rigor, a nurturing environment exists where students are recognized, valued, and mentored by educators who genuinely care about their success and well-being. It is a testament to the school's ethos and the dedication of its educators.

10. How many favorite adults would you say that you have at EECHS? These might include counselors, principals, librarians, the dean of instruction, the secretary, or others.

This question illustrates the integral roles that various non-teaching staff play in EECHS students' lives. Their importance becomes even more evident when we examine the diversity of adults who students consider their "favorites." The statistics reflect the deep connections the students have made with multiple adults at school, further highlighting the school's community-driven environment.

A majority of the students have more than one favorite adult in the school, emphasizing how these relationships are built and nurtured over time. This data underscores the significance of every individual's role, from custodians to principals, in shaping the students' experience at EECHS.

One senior stated about the school custodian: *“He said right now in the morning he's like ‘¡Si, si! You were able to, you know, finish your first graduation year!’ And oh my God, I'm going to miss him so much. Well, he's like my grandpa!”* (Iris, FG 3). More than one student spoke favorably about the school's counselors, but one in particular referred to them

affectionately as: “*Our counselor sweethearts*” (Natalie, FG 2). One student commented about the school principal: “*She was essentially my teacher, even though I had like nine teachers. She was my mentor!*” (Jacob, FG 3).

11. How many clubs or extracurricular activities do you participate in? A variety of clubs and activities exist at EECHS, catering to a range of interests from Business and Technology to Drama and the Environment. This diversity ensures that students have ample opportunities to discover and nurture their passions, all while developing valuable soft skills, such as leadership, teamwork, and discipline.

A significant percentage of students (94.29%) participate in at least one club or extracurricular activity. This high participation rate reflects not only the wide range of options available but also the intrinsic motivation and enthusiasm of the student body. Additionally, many students are members of multiple clubs, illustrating their eagerness to explore various interests and the importance they place on extracurricular engagement.

Almost all EECHS teachers sponsor a club or extracurricular organization. As sponsors, they volunteer their time to meet with students after school, help organize and coordinate student projects and activities, and supervise fundraising activities for club expenses. Such commitment exemplifies the school's ethos in prioritizing holistic student development.

12. What are your plans following graduation from EECHS? Following the spring 2022 and 2023 graduation, EECHS student plans varied. 20 students (57.14%) planned to continue their studies and earn a bachelor’s degree at TVU, while 13 (37.14%) planned to go to another university for their bachelor’s degree. Only one student (2.86%) planned to take time off from college, while another (2.86%) was unsure about their future college plans.

Of the 13 students who planned to attend another university besides TVU, various reasons were given. These included being accepted into a top university, moving with their family to another city, wanting a change of pace which a different city might provide, and a desire to attend a school well known for the particular college major they were interested in.

13. If you plan to continue in college and earn an undergraduate degree, what area will you major in? The graduating seniors from the class of 2022 and 2023 exhibit a wide range of academic and future career interests. When looking at the choices these students have made in terms of their future college majors, several interpretations and implications arise.

For example, at EECHS a high percentage of students choose medicine (20%) and education (11.43%) indicating a possible inclination towards service-oriented careers that reflect a commitment to professions that directly impact and improve lives. This can have great impact on the local community as studies show that college graduates tend to remain in the same area as their degree attainment (Rothwell, 2015).

With only two students each (5.71%) selecting Science and Technology, a need might exist for the district and EECHS to emphasize these rapidly growing and essential fields. The business major, chosen by 11.43% of the students, remains a constant, reflecting its status as a versatile and popular field.

Undecided Yet Committed: A significant portion, 42.86%, remains undecided about their specific major. This can be interpreted in various ways. Positively, it shows a cohort open to exploration, ensuring they make informed choices based on their evolving college experiences rather than preconceived notions. On the other hand, while not at all unusual for adolescents to remain undecided about their future careers, it might indicate the need for more career

counseling or exposure to various fields during their time at EECHS (Brown et al., 1994; Marcia, 1980).

14. Please select either true or false to the following statement: I will be the first in my family to obtain a college degree (such as an associate's degree). That nearly half of the students (45.71%) will potentially be first-generation college students is significant. It illustrates EECHS's role in breaking educational barriers and paving the way for upward mobility. These students are likely forging new paths, not just for themselves but also setting precedents for their siblings and future generations.

The 48.57% of students who indicated "False" suggests that a substantial portion of EECHS students come from families with a history of higher education. These students might have different forms of family support and expectations compared to their first-generation peers, given the previous college experiences in their families.

The 5.71% who marked "Unsure" may not have complete knowledge of their family's educational history or might be interpreting the educational achievements of extended family members. This response indicates a potential area where EECHS could provide resources or discussions to help students explore and understand their family's educational backgrounds.

Overall, EECHS seems to serve a diverse set of students in terms of family educational backgrounds. This diversity can foster a rich environment where students learn from each other's experiences and narratives. The data underscores the importance of understanding and addressing the unique challenges and perspectives of first-generation students while also catering to the needs of those with a familial history of higher education.

Student Focus-Group Question Analysis

Focus-Group Question No. 1

In question No. 1, I asked students: “What are some of the reasons that you decided to enroll at EECHS?” Answering this question was not as simple as it first appeared, with students sometimes providing multiple reasons for their decision to attend EECHS. Common senior experiences and themes discussed included: Earn An Associate's Degree, Financial Savings, Other Family Members Had Attended, Small School Size, and Parents' Decision.

1-1. Earn An Associate's Degree. For most students, the possibility of earning an associate's degree was a strong incentive and was most frequently mentioned in focus group discussions. EECHS students are representative of the early college high school target population. They are predominantly first-generation, low socioeconomic level, minority, or students of color and are typically underrepresented in higher education. Graduating high school with an associate's degree represents a tremendous accomplishment. For these students, enrolling at EECHS was the first step in accelerating their academic career by becoming college ready, leading ultimately to their successful college graduation and eventual career. Students expressed satisfaction knowing they would be further ahead academically in both classes taken and tuition money saved for their parents because of early completion of their studies at EECHS.

1-2. Financial Savings. With college tuition ever increasing but family means modest in most cases, achieving a college education while at the same time benefiting from free tuition represents a *"double opportunity,"* as one senior's mother had commented to her. The double opportunity of earning college credits while still in high school significantly reduces the number of credits students need for their eventual four-year university degree. Additionally, the counselor remarked that having students graduate from EECHS with an associate's degree and

then graduate from college debt-free because of scholarships was a primary goal of EECHS's mission.

1-3. Other Family Members Had Attended. Another frequently stated reason for students enrolling at EECHS was because one of their siblings, a cousin, or some other family member had attended and spoken to them about its benefits and advantages. A strong endorsement from a trusted family member gives credence to the saying that nothing succeeds like success. By word-of-mouth recommendation from a trusted family member, the good news of someone else's success reassured the student that, in all likelihood, they would also be successful at EECHS.

1-4. Small School Size. Students stated that another main reason they wanted to attend EECHS was because of its small size. With no more than 400 students, focus group students stated that at EECHS, they interacted with students and teachers more, received more individual attention, and felt a stronger sense of community. In focus groups, I noticed that students often talked about their fellow students and teachers as if they were all part of one big family. One senior stated: *"This school is very small, and everybody knows each other. So, I guess the fact that everybody knows each other, means you don't get lost. There's no sense of like, 'What am I doing here?' Or, you actually feel like you're part of the school"* (Jacob, FG 4).

Jacob's comment that he feels like he is "part of the school" indicates that he experiences a sense of belonging at EECHS and is part of the EECHS community. Research indicates that students do better in small, supportive, family-like communities like those at EECHS (Bloom & Unterman, 2012; Cotton, 2001; Kuo, 2010). Research also links a sense of belonging to positive academic, social, and emotional outcomes and persistence to degree completion (O'Keeffe, 2013; Strayhorn, 2019; Tinto, 2012).

1-5. Parents' Decision. An unexpected reason that some students gave for enrolling at EECHS was *"because my parents made me!"* It would not be surprising if these students resented being forced to go to EECHS and failed to pursue their studies. Because one of the main growth stages in adolescence is developing a personal identity and exercising personal decision-making (Ericson, 1963), adolescents often resent being forced to comply with parental directives. However, rather than failing to thrive, quite the opposite appears to be the case. Students in focus group interviews often said that after their first semester, they had decided to "do their best" and continue at EECHS.

Focus-Group Question No. 2

In Question No. 2, I asked students: "Looking back to your freshman year at EECHS, what was it like for you?" Common experiences and themes discussed included: Freshmen Friendships, Middle School-High School Transition, and Grades Matter. One of the goals of this open-ended question was to elicit students' memories of their emotions and experiences as freshmen during their first year at EECHS.

2-1. Freshmen Friendships. According to Erikson, one of the main tasks that adolescents face is finding themselves and answering the questions of "Who am I?" and "What do I want to do with my life?" (Orenstein & Lewis, 2022). High school plays an important role in adolescents' social and emotional development because it occurs precisely at the same time they are leaving behind the comfortable familiarity of childhood and becoming young adults. New questions, directions, and imperatives present themselves, and a social self and sense of connectedness to others begin to emerge. According to Pfeiffer & Berkman, adolescents "... seek autonomy, particularly from parents, along with increased commitments to social aspects of identity and greater needs for connection with peers (2018, p. 159).

EECHS purposefully engineers peer-to-peer connections and social relationships even before the first day of school. Beginning with the Summer Bridge July orientation, students learn about EECHS and take the first steps in getting to know each other by participating in Icebreakers. While these might seem silly or even inconsequential in light of the serious nature of the school and its college-readiness mission, Icebreakers serve an important social role because they help students overcome their initial awkwardness and get to know each other. AVID II teacher Mrs. Strauss stated: *"Icebreakers are a key factor for them to be connected. We just need for them to find a connection, because as soon as the kids find a connection, they don't want to leave!"* (Mrs. Strauss, PI 1).

These Summer Bridge connections and the counselor's purposeful scheduling of the freshmen' fall class schedule help create a positive school climate by giving students a sense of belonging in the EECHS learning community (Osterman, 2000). Research shows that schools with positive campus climates promote students' learning abilities and improve their social and emotional well-being (Thapa et al., 2013). Additionally, a sense of belonging has been shown by Tinto and others to have a determining impact on persistence to degree completion (Kuh, 2008; Tinto, 1987).

As a result of their freshman-year friendships, students at EECHS have friendships they come to rely on in overcoming academic and personal difficulties. These friendships represent important investments that students value and help explain why they often cite the possible loss of their friendships as one of the main reasons they chose not to drop out of EECHS when academic studies and pressures seemed overwhelming.

2-2. Middle School-High School Transition. While EECHS's annual Summer Bridge orientation helps freshmen begin making the difficult middle school-high school transition,

seniors still stated they had difficulties adjusting to the academic rigor and the school schedule at EECHS in their freshman year.

The academic rigor at EECHS challenges freshmen to the point that some seriously consider dropping out. Students who had received A's and B's in middle school suddenly received C's or lower at EECHS. More than a few seniors mentioned how they experienced a "rude awakening" as freshmen upon receiving their first "70" on an assignment.

While it may be disheartening for students to experience failure, it is preferable that this occurs within the context of EECHS with its nurturing and supportive faculty and staff. In this context, receiving a low or failing grade represents a unique opportunity for growth because students can then receive support and help from their teachers, AVID Tutorials, teacher tutorials, and counselors in developing strategies for improvement.

In contrast, encountering academic failure for the first time when they are on their own as a college freshman might be overwhelming. College classes often have larger class sizes, limited teacher-student interaction or individualized attention, and increased academic rigor. Without the support provided at EECHS, college freshmen might struggle to address their academic setbacks effectively.

The school schedule at EECHS differs significantly from middle school. In middle school, the school day is divided into eight 45-minute class periods. In contrast, EECHS uses a college-type A/B alternating schedule whereby classes meet twice a week on alternating days for ninety-minutes, with all classes meeting on Fridays for 45 minutes.

Seniors consistently mentioned how they liked the schedule at EECHS, sometimes referring to it as different and cool. However, a ninety-minute class period presents certain time management challenges for freshmen, including maintaining focus and engagement for longer

periods, adjusting to a slower class pacing, and exercising self-discipline to maintain attention and productivity.

Most importantly, EECHS's A/B class schedule prepares students for typical college classes, with instructional days interspersed with research and homework days. Through this schedule, students become acclimated to an actual college class format and must learn self-regulation by utilizing time management tools and other strategies which their AVID class provides.

2-3. Grades Matter. EECHS has established a reputation as a high-achieving early college high school. Students know this before enrolling at EECHS, but the reality of what this means only presents itself when they receive their first low grade. Students suddenly realize that the effort required in middle school to maintain good grades is insufficient at EECHS. Most seniors commented about how they received poor grades and struggled academically as freshmen in adapting to the rigor and increased academic demands at EECHS.

Since most EECHS students plan to continue their studies at TVU, students must comply with TVU's minimum 2.0 grade requirement. Students who fail to maintain this minimum face academic probation at EECHS and can be returned to their original campus if they fail to improve. The importance of maintaining a passing grade thus puts pressure on students to improve their study habits, focus on their academics, and take personal responsibility for their grades. Yet, students sometimes fail to make these necessary improvements and find themselves in the stressful situation of exiting EECHS.

Grades matter and play an important role in preparing EECHS students for college. Yet beyond maintaining a minimum passing average to remain at EECHS and qualify for TVU admission, higher grades have far-reaching implications concerning students' future academic

and professional success. One of the most practical reasons for obtaining higher grades is their positive impact on college admission and scholarship decisions. Since college admission and scholarship award committees routinely use high school grades as a central indicator and criteria to determine likely candidates for college admission and scholarship awards, higher grades serve as reliable indicators of past academic achievement, as well as the likelihood of future academic achievement and college success (Adelman, 2006; Roderick et al., 2009).

Additionally, higher grades suggest that the student has met or exceeded the learning expectations of key content areas by successfully demonstrating an understanding of the material. Higher grades are thus indicative of student mastery of these content areas allowing them to engage with even more challenging material while at the same time eliminating the need for remedial courses (Conley, 2007). Moreover, students with a strong foundation and mastery of key content areas at EECHS are better prepared to tackle the rigorous coursework required in college, leading to higher levels of academic success and a greater likelihood of degree completion (Adelman, 2006; Edmunds et al., 2020; Vargas et al., 2017).

Furthermore, high grades often reflect strong work habits and effective time management techniques. These work habits of persistence, organization, and attention to detail are all part of the AVID curriculum. These are collectively called non-cognitive factors, essential to producing consistently high-quality work that meets or exceeds college academic expectations (Farrington et al., 2012). The AVID Binder, dividers, assignment calendar, and study schedule are all tools that help students learn to regulate themselves as they plan and complete their assignments (Bendall et al., 2015).

Most students' grades at EECHS are well above the minimum level, and as a result, help position this school at the forefront of high-achieving early college high schools. EECHS

students' high grades indicate their college readiness and the likelihood of future academic success without remediation (Conley, 2007; Remediation, 2012).

Focus-Group Question No. 3

In Question No. 3, I asked students: “What is it like now as a senior here at EECHS? How have things changed for you?” Common senior experiences and themes discussed include Senior Schedule, Clubs Are Important, and Time Management.

3-1. Senior Schedule. Students stated that their senior year at EECHS seemed easier compared to their freshmen and sophomore years, and, as a result, they had more free time to be involved in clubs and other activities. However, while it was true that their senior schedule had fewer classes compared to their first three years, several other factors are at play for their perception of "easiness" besides simply having fewer classes.

First, seniors' freshman and sophomore years were, in essence, a crucible type of transformative experience where they accomplished more than they thought they could because of teachers' high standards of academic rigor coupled with academic and social support (Pugh, 2011). Early on, students had to manage their time, avoid procrastination, and apply study techniques learned in AVID to their university classes. In particular, the intensity of their first two years of classes changed their concepts of what they thought was difficult and their ability to adapt and overcome those difficulties.

Second, while the general topic of discussion is Senior Schedule, seniors' class schedule was largely determined by the academic outcomes of their junior year. The junior year represented its special challenges with travel to the university, a full course load of four university classes each semester, and independent decision-making being tested for the first time without teachers' close supervision and support on the EECHS campus. Most juniors did well

with the result that their senior year was, indeed, "easier." However, a few juniors had difficulties, resulting in them having a fuller class schedule in their senior year, with university classes needing to be repeated.

Third, seniors' perception that their senior year was easier might be related to the changes they made in their behaviors as a student. From the benefit of experience, seniors began regulating their academic behaviors more by planning their study schedule, prioritizing long-term goals over short-term goals, and problem-solving more effectively. Costa describes these study and self-regulation behaviors as habits of mind which he defines as: "...a disposition toward behaving intelligently when confronted with problems" (Costa, 2001, p. 80).

Moreover, while some students described their senior year as having more time to do "fun" things, other seniors viewed their final year as a starting point for the next step in planning their academic and professional careers. One particularly high-achieving senior stated: *"Teachers would say in the past, 'Oh, when you're a senior, it's going to be so relaxing that you have all this time.' But while it's true that we do have the time, most of this year has been themed after college. We've had to make a lot of big decisions. And that's not something that's easy. So, this one has been a really rough ride"* (Priscilla, FG 7).

3-2. Clubs Are Important. Teachers volunteer their time to sponsor a wide variety of clubs and extracurricular organizations that meet throughout the week during lunch and after school. Research supports that student participation in clubs and extracurricular activities is important because of the variety of benefits they can provide. Some of these benefits include helping to create a (i) school community that creates a sense of belonging; (ii) assisting students in career exploration; (iii) integrating academic and social skills that may be useful for them later as college students; and (iv) developing positive student-teacher relationships. Research indicates

that students who participate in clubs and extracurricular activities report a higher level and sense of school belonging compared to their non-participating peers (Blomfield & Barber, 2010; Waters et al., 2010).

(i) School Community. When the final dismissal bell rings at most schools, students gather their belongings and perfunctorily leave for the day. At EECHS, this is not the case, where students instead stay behind and meet enthusiastically with other members of their club or extracurricular organization, often remaining until 6:45 p.m. or later until being gently reminded by the school custodian that the school will soon be closing for the day.

Exemplifying the intrinsic type of motivation which Daniel Pink (2011) describes in his book *Drive*, EECHS students receive no grade or credit for their efforts in most instances but instead participate because of enthusiasm for the subject, and shared, common interests. Whether meeting for Music Club in the school cafeteria, preparing for Mock Trial, participating in the Student Council, or working on a Robotics project, students collaborate and find common ground by sharing their passion with peers (Fredricks & Eccles, 2006). From these shared experiences, a collective sense of identity develops, fostering a sense of belonging, camaraderie, and school community (Gillen-O'Neel, 2021; Strayhorn, 2018).

(ii) Career Exploration. As a part of the adolescent quest for self-discovery and investigation of possible career and life paths, membership in clubs and extracurricular organizations also provides students with avenues and opportunities to delve deeper into existing interests, discover new ones, and evaluate their potential for possible future careers (Lent et al., 1994; Wang et al., 2022). Through participation in clubs and extracurricular organizations, students' experiential base is broadened and enriched, providing them with the types of

theoretical and practical skills they may draw from later during their college and work years (Mahoney et al., 2003; Marsh & Kleitman, 2009).

(iii) Academic and Social Integration. High school involvement in clubs and extracurricular organizations helps students establish social skills and work habits that can be a stepping-stone for future success in rigorous university courses and the world of work. Tinto's seminal research on student retention found that extracurricular involvement increases student integration into the school's academic and social life, thereby increasing persistence toward degree completion and decreasing the likelihood of dropping out (Tinto, 1993).

(iv) Developing positive student-teacher relationships. Teachers sponsor and oversee club and extracurricular activities at EECHS, which allows the teacher and student to interact in a more informal setting beyond the traditional classroom. Participating in clubs and extracurricular activities allows teachers to see their students in a new and different light. Conversely, students may perceive their teachers as mentors and facilitators rather than just as teachers or experts in a particular subject area. This reciprocal understanding can foster mutual respect and trust, crucial elements in establishing positive student-teacher relationships (Engaging Schools, 2003; Pianta et al., 2012).

3-3. Time-Management. While not an academic skill, time management is considered by the AVID program and several authors to be an essential college readiness skill that significantly impacts student academic outcomes (Conley, 2010; Farrington et al., 2012; Sedlacek, 2004). Despite students sometimes failing to manage their time well at EECHS, it is better that they experience these failures within the supportive and nurturing environment at EECHS rather than later in college, where poor time management could have disastrous consequences. For example, a lack of time management skills in college can lead to missed

deadlines, late penalties, incomplete assignments, failing grades, forfeiture of college tuition, and ultimately a lack of persistence to degree completion. The benefits of learning time management skills while still in a supportive high school environment results in students successfully managing their time later as college students.

As previously discussed in Ch. II Developmental and Conceptual Frameworks, EECHS students are adolescents engaged in self-regulation and time management as they make independent decisions while managing multiple responsibilities as college students. Zimmerman stated earlier that "Self-regulation is not a mental ability or an academic performance skill; rather, it is the self-directive process by which learners transform their mental abilities into academic skills" (Zimmerman, 2002, p. 65). But what does self-regulation look like? To answer this question, I present the following hypothetical scenario.

Suppose that an EECHS senior might have a research paper due on Monday morning but suddenly receives a call from friends on Saturday morning to go to the beach for the rest of the day. Of course, it would be tempting to go to the beach, but the consequence of not completing his research paper would result in a failing grade. According to Piaget's formal operational stage, our EECHS student would choose to stay home and complete their assignment rather than risk receiving a failing grade.

However, Steinberg (2014) proposes that this type of choice is made difficult because there is a time lag between the brain's prefrontal cortex and its role in executive decision-making and impulse control and the limbic system with its role in emotions and rewards. In describing this delay between the prefrontal cortex and the limbic system, Steinberg compares them by analogy to an over-active gas pedal and faulty brakes on a car. He states: "There is a time lag between the activation of brain systems that excite our emotions and impulses and the maturation

of brain systems that allow us to check these feelings and urges-it's like driving a car with a sensitive gas pedal and bad brakes" (Steinberg, 2014, p. 24).

For EECHS seniors, time management improvement occurs as a result of intentional training in AVID, as well as through natural biological processes as their brain matures and acquires the types of formal reasoning characteristics, self-regulation, and impulse control associated with adulthood.

In Steinberg's *The Age of Opportunity*, self-regulation is of central importance, with the term occurring no less than 143 times throughout its text. Regarding the importance of self-regulation, Steinberg states:

The capacity for self-regulation is probably the single most important contributor to achievement, mental health, and social success...This makes developing self-regulation the central task of adolescence, and the goal that we should be pursuing as parents, educators, and health care professionals.

(Steinberg, 2014, pp. 24, 25)

Focus-Group Question No. 4

In Question No. 4, I asked students: "What are some of the things that you like the most about being a student at EECHS?" Common topics and themes discussed include Close-Knit and Supportive Environment, Student-Teacher Connection, Open Campus, and Senior Planning.

4-1. Close-Knit and Supportive Environment. EECHS seniors' focus-group comments in this question strongly resonate with the literature on *school belonging*. As discussed previously in Ch. II Developmental and Conceptual Frameworks, the roots of school belonging can be traced back to Abraham Maslow's Hierarchy of Human Needs (Maslow, 1943). Student

comments here suggest that their safety needs have been met thus enabling further growth, development, and a sense of belonging to occur.

In Ch. IV, student comments in Focus-Group Question No. 4-1 Close-Knit and Supportive Community are reflective in a broad, general sense of Goodenow and Grady's previously mentioned definition of school belonging as: "...the extent to which students feel personally accepted, respected, included, and supported by others in the school social environment"(1993, p. 80). Below, these same student comments are measured ex post facto using Goodenow's (1993) Psychological Sense of School Membership (PSSM) as previously discussed. Close-Knit and Supportive Community and Student Belonging are displayed in Table 51.

Table 51: Close-Knit and Supportive Community and Student Belonging

Student Comments	Sentiments	PSSM Statements
<p>"The environment! Yeah. It's a close-knit environment. It's like your family. Everyone's always here to support you. And then also, you know everyone! Our class is so small, so we know all the students. So, you see everyone, and you get to talk to everyone, at least at this school, multiple times. So, I just feel everyone's there to support you" (Alexa, FG 2).</p>	<p>Intimate environment, Peer support, Culture of knowing everyone because of small class sizes.</p>	<p>1. "I feel like a real part of EECHS." 8. "People at this school are friendly to me." 13. "I can really be myself at this school." 18. "Other students here like me the way I am."</p>
<p>"Join clubs! I know a lot of people have a hard time making friends. And like me, one of the big reasons why I made friends was through clubs. So, I feel like that helps a lot" (Alicia, FG 2).</p>	<p>Peer support, Collective problem solving, Peer-assisted learning.</p>	<p>1. "I feel like a real part of EECHS." 8. "People at this school are friendly to me." 10. "I am included in lots of activities at EECHS." 13. "I can really be myself at this school." 18. Other students here like me the way I am."</p>

Table 51: cont.

Student Comments	Sentiments	PSSM Statements
<p>"The friendships you make here, the clubs. What I like about EECHS here, I really came out of my shell. I wasn't really outgoing my freshman year in middle school, but once I got here, you know, I'm very outgoing now. When you're doing that, it's in the cafeteria, the Honor Society, like no one wants to talk on the mike. Give me the microphone and I'll talk for you all! And they're trying to get the students in the cafeteria involved, right? And so, the prize is usually free candy, like a bag of candy" (George, FG 5).</p>	<p>Peer support, Student collaboration and cooperation, Collective problem solving.</p>	<p>1. "I feel like a real part of EECHS." 4. "Other students in this school take my opinions seriously." 10. "I am included in lots of activities at EECHS." 13. "I can really be myself at this school." 18. "Other students here like me the way I am."</p>

4-2. Student-Teacher Connection. Research supports the importance of positive student-teacher relationships in influencing student academic motivation and achievement, helping promote student social and emotional well-being, and fostering a positive school climate (Hattie, 2008; Roorda et al., 2011; Wentzel, 2012). At EECHS, teachers are not only content experts but instructional leaders that establish positive and supportive classroom climates that help students learn. In the following sections, Ch. IV Focus-Group Question No. 4-2 Student-Teacher Connection student comments are analyzed using three different interpretive "lenses" including Maslow's Hierarchy of Human Needs, the AVID program's Relational Capacity, and Nel Noddings's Ethics of Care.

Maslow's Hierarchy of Human Needs. As discussed previously in Ch. II Developmental and Conceptual Frameworks, Maslow's Hierarchy of Human Needs posits that human needs occur in a tiered hierarchy, with physiological needs placed lowest and the ultimate needs of self-actualization placed highest among possible levels. Placed second lowest, safety needs include security, stability, and an orderly world (Maslow, 1943). Safety needs encompass a broad spectrum of needs related to emotional and physical security, order, predictability, and

control. The student comments in Ch. IV Focus-Group Question No. 4-2 Student-Teacher Connection are provided below in summary form as well as verbatim in Table 52 to illustrate how some of Maslow's safety needs are being met in teachers' classrooms at EECHS.

Mia stated that her teachers knew her name, were always helpful to her and that she felt cared about. Her teacher's behaviors resulted in Mia experiencing a sense of emotional security and stability because she knew she could rely on her teachers for support and care (Table 52, a).

Marta said that her teachers connected with her, asked her how she was doing, and gave her advice not only about academics but about life in general. Her comments suggest that several of Maslow's safety needs were met, including emotional security, stability through life advice, and orderliness, by offering support beyond academics (Table 52, b).

Peter stated that, unlike middle school, it was easier for him to get to know teachers at EECHS and that he felt comfortable talking with them about various topics besides academics. His comment suggests that the safety needs of emotional security, comfort, and stability in relationships with teachers were being met (Table 52, c).

Samuel stated that there was always "someone behind you" or a teacher that could help at EECHS. This indicated that safety needs of stability and predictability in support systems were being met, as well as a personal sense of control over whom he could approach for help (Table 52, d).

Joseph (FG 1) stated that he appreciated his relationship with his teachers even more, having known them for four years. His comment suggests that safety needs of security, stability, and orderliness were being met (Table 52, e).

Marta expressed appreciation that she could "hang-out" with her teachers by visiting them during her free periods and completing assignments independently in the back of their

classrooms. Her comments indicate that physical safety needs, comfort needs, and social needs of acceptance were being met (Table 52, f).

Julie stated her surprise when teachers sought her out when she was having difficulties. Despite her self-doubts, the teacher encouraged her to persist and complete her assignments. The teachers' comments suggest that safety needs were being met through emotional control, order, and stability through the knowledge that she can rely on her teachers for encouragement and motivation (Table 52, g). Student-Teacher Connection and Maslow's Hierarchy of Human Needs are displayed in Table 52.

Table 52: Student-Teacher Connection and Maslow's Hierarchy of Human Needs

Student-Teacher Connection	Maslow's Hierarchy of Human Needs
(a) "I like the size because the teachers know you, and they care. Like, I guess at other high schools, they do care. But here you really feel it and you know it, and they know your name. They know things about you, and they're always offering help and stuff. So that's what I like about being here because I always feel cared about by the teachers" (Mia, FG 3).	Emotional security is fostered through the knowledge that teachers can be relied on for support and care.
(b) "Because the teachers, they really do connect with you. They give you advice not only on school, but also in life. If they see that you're struggling and even if it's not school related, they'll sit you down and they'll talk to you, like, really talk to you. And they'll be like, 'What's the problem?' And I feel that's one of the things that really makes EECHS the thing, you know!" (Marta, FG 1).	Emotional security, stability through life advice, and support beyond academics is offered.
(c) "So, once you get here, you start getting comfortable and the teachers know you. I think that's pretty cool because in middle school I didn't have that relationship with teachers. I can go to a classroom, and talk to them, right? So now you don't even have to talk to them about schoolwork. It could just be your personal life, and it's totally fine" (Peter, FG 3).	Comfort, and predictability in relationships with teachers fosters emotional security.

Table 52: cont.

Student-Teacher Connection	Maslow's Hierarchy of Human Needs
(d) "I think an important thing about our school is that there's always someone behind you for support. I mean, like it's not always probably the counselor, right? Because sometimes you don't feel that comfortable, going to a counselor and talking. But it can always be whatever teacher from here" (Samuel, FG 4).	A sense of control over who they can approach for help promotes stability and predictability.
(e) "You know, the relationship with the teachers here, you get along with them better now that you're a senior because you've been with them for four years. You can just go with them during the day and say, "I need help with this" and they'll help you out. They know us better now because we've been here all these years. So that's nice" (Joseph, FG 1).	Stability and predictability in relationships with teachers has increased over time.
(f) "And then the teachers, you can hang out in their classroom. They don't mind me being in the back of their class, just like chilling on my computer while they're conducting class" (Marta, FG 1).	Physical safety, sense of belonging, comfort, and acceptance in the school environment.
(g) "Because the teacher came looking for me. And even when I was like 'Oh, I don't want to do this anymore, I give up.' They're like 'No, you're already there, you're already close to it, so just keep on going!' (Julie, FG 3).	Emotional security, order, and control, knowing they can rely on teachers for encouragement and motivation.

Relational Capacity. As discussed previously in Ch. II Developmental and Conceptual Frameworks, Relational Capacity is foremost and occupies almost eighty pages of the AVID resource textbook's first chapter (Bendall et al., 2015). In Ch. IV: 4-2 Student-Teacher Connection, students described experiencing a strong sense of trust and safety with their teachers. A safe and comfortable environment has been created in EECHS classrooms over time, enabling students to connect and have meaningful relationships with their teachers and peers. In Bendall et al.'s resource text, group dynamics and team building are an integral part of the development of Relational Capacity. In Ch. 1 of this text, Bendall et al. present *Foundations of Building Relational Capacity* which provides specific Activities, Handouts, and Teacher

Resources for shaping and building Relational Capacity. The following Student-Teacher Connection comments bear witness to the application of Relational Capacity to the classroom.

Ch. IV: 4-2 Student-Teacher Connection and Relational Capacity (RC) Interpretation are presented below in text form and also displayed verbatim in Table 53, Student-Teacher Connection and Relational Capacity Interpretation.

Mia stated: *"I like the size because the teachers know you, and they care... They know your name... they're always offering help and stuff. So that's what I like about being here because I always feel cared about by the teachers"* (Mia, FG 3). RC: Mia describes a high-relational capacity classroom environment where teachers are attentive, know their students personally, and offer help regularly, creating a strong sense of care and 'mutual trust' between student and teacher (Table 53, a).

Marta stated: *"Because the teachers... really do connect with you. They give you advice not only on school, but also in life... they'll sit you down and they'll talk to you... And they'll be like, 'What's the problem?' And I feel that's one of the things that really makes EECHS the thing, you know!"* (Marta, FG 1). RC: Marta's sentiments demonstrate high relational capacity. Her teacher's willingness to provide advice beyond academics and address her other struggles points to a high degree of 'mutual trust' and a strong 'foundation of safety' (Table 53, b).

Peter stated: *"So once you get here, you start getting comfortable and the teachers know you... you don't even have to talk to them about schoolwork. It could just be your personal life, and it's totally fine"* (Peter, FG 3). RC: Peter's comfort in discussing personal matters with his teachers signifies high relational capacity. This level of openness, safety, and trust is distinct from his previous middle school experience (Table 53, c).

Samuel stated: *"I think an important thing about our school is that there's always someone behind you for support... But it can always be whatever teacher from here"* (Samuel, FG 4). RC: Samuel's comment illustrates the pervasive support across the staff at his school, which underlines the high relational capacity. The availability and approachability of teachers contribute to students feeling comfortable seeking help (Table 53, d).

Joseph stated: *"You know, the relationship with the teachers here, you get along with them better now that you're a senior because you've been with them for four years... They know us better now because we've been here all these years. So that's nice"* (Joseph, FG 1). RC: Joseph's statement highlights the deepening of relationships over time, indicative of growing relational capacity. The mutual understanding and 'mutual ownership' of the learning process have been cultivated over years of shared experience (Table 53, e).

Marta stated: *"And then the teachers, you can hang out in their classroom. They don't mind me being in the back of their class, just like chilling on my computer while they're conducting class"* (Marta, FG 1). RC: Marta's experience studying in a teacher's classroom, even while the teacher conducts class, shows the 'foundation of safety' and trust that characterizes a high relational capacity environment (Table 53, f).

Julie stated: *"Because the teacher came looking for me. And even when I was like 'Oh, I don't want to do this anymore, I give up!' They're like, 'No, you're already there. You're already close to it, so just keep on going!'"* (Julie, FG 3). RC: Julie's account shows teachers' dedication and commitment toward students' success, another hallmark of high relational capacity. Despite her initial wish to give up, the teachers' encouragement helps maintain her motivation, reflecting 'mutual trust' and a supportive 'community' (Table 53, g). Student-Teacher Connection and Relational Capacity Interpretation are displayed in Table 53.

Table 53: Student-Teacher Connection and Relational Capacity Interpretation

Ch. IV: 4-2 Student-Teacher Connection	Relational Capacity Interpretation
(a) "I like the size because the teachers know you, and they care... They know your name... they're always offering help and stuff. So that's what I like about being here because I always feel cared about by the teachers" (Mia, FG 3).	Mia is describing a high relational capacity environment, where teachers are attentive, know their students personally, and offer help regularly, creating a strong sense of care and 'mutual trust.'
(b) "Because the teachers... really do connect with you. They give you advice not only on school, but also in life... they'll sit you down and they'll talk to you... And they'll be like, 'What's the problem?' And I feel that's one of the things that really makes EECHS the thing, you know!" (Marta, FG 1).	Marta's sentiment demonstrates high relational capacity. Her teachers' willingness to provide advice beyond academic matters and their initiative to address other struggles that she might have points to a high degree of 'mutual trust' and a strong 'foundation of safety.'
(c) "So, once you get here, you start getting comfortable and the teachers know you... you don't even have to talk to them about schoolwork. It could just be your personal life, and it's totally fine" (Peter, FG 3).	Peter's comfort in discussing personal matters with his teachers signifies high relational capacity. This level of openness, safety, and trust is distinct from his previous middle school experience.
(d) "I think an important thing about our school is that there's always someone behind you for support... But it can always be whatever teacher from here" (Samuel, FG 4).	Samuel's comment illustrates the pervasive support across the staff at his school, which underlines the high relational capacity. The availability and approachability of teachers contribute to students feeling comfortable seeking help.
(e) "You know, the relationship with the teachers here, you get along with them better now that you're a senior because you've been with them for four years... They know us better now because we've been here all these years. So that's nice" (Joseph, FG 1).	Joseph's statement highlights the deepening of relationships over time, indicative of growing relational capacity. The mutual understanding and 'mutual ownership' of the learning process have been cultivated over years of shared experience.
(f) "And then the teachers, you can hang out in their classroom. They don't mind me being in the back of their class, just like chilling on my computer while they're conducting class" (Marta, FG 1).	Marta's experience of being able to study in a teacher's classroom even while the teacher is conducting class shows the 'foundation of safety' and trust that characterizes a high relational capacity environment.

Table 53: cont.

Ch. IV: 4-2 Student-Teacher Connection	Relational Capacity Interpretation
(g) "Because the teacher came looking for me. And even when I was like 'Oh, I don't want to do this anymore, I give up.' They're like 'No, you're already there, you're already close to it, so just keep on going!'" (Julie, FG 3).	Julie's account shows the level of dedication and commitment teachers have towards students' success, another hallmark of high relational capacity. Despite her initial wish to give up, the teachers' encouragement helps maintain her motivation, reflecting 'mutual trust' and a supportive 'community.'

Nel Noddings's Ethics of Care. The majority of the students' comments and sentiments expressed in Ch. IV: 4-2 Student-Teacher Connection seem to reflect some aspect of their feeling cared for by their teachers. Mia's (FG 3) sentiment that *"...they know your name, they know things about you, and they're always offering help and stuff...I always feel cared about by the teachers"* illustrates that her teachers cared for her; Peter's (FG 3) sentiment *"once you get here, you start getting comfortable and the teachers know you"* illustrates that teachers were open to talking with him about his personal things, not just academics indicates his being cared for by the teacher; Samuel's (FG 4) statement that *"...there's always someone behind you for support"* shows that Samuel noticed that teachers consistently cared for and helped students when needed.

In Noddings's concept of caring, caring is not just a feeling but an active and engaged process that is visible and, importantly, recognizable by the student. According to Noddings, caring involves paying attention to the needs of another, wanting the best for them, and taking steps to achieve it. With this in mind, student comments from Ch. IV: 4-2: Student-Teacher Connection are interpreted below using Noddings's Ethics of Care (EOC) concepts and vocabulary as well as displayed verbatim in Table 54, Student-Teacher Connection and Ethics of Care Interpretation.

Mia stated: *"I like the size because the teachers know you, and they care. Like, I guess at other high schools, they do care. But here you really feel it and you know it, and they know your name. They know things about you, and they're always offering help and stuff. So, that's what I like about being here because I always feel cared about by the teachers."* EOC interpretation: Mia's sentiments reflect the principles of engrossment and motivational displacement. Teachers show a deep understanding of their students (engrossment) and modify their behavior to meet students' needs (motivational displacement). This gives students a feeling of being truly cared for (Table 54, a).

Marta stated: *"Because the teachers, they really do connect with you. They give you advice not only on school, but also in life. If they see that you're struggling, and even if it's not school related, they'll sit you down, and they'll talk to you, like, really talk to you. And they'll be like, 'What's the problem?' And I feel that's one of the things that really makes EECHS the thing, you know!"* EOC interpretation: Marta experienced the dialogue Noddings emphasized as teachers engaged in deep, meaningful conversations with her. Teachers at EECHS exhibit both natural caring and ethical caring by offering support and advice in personal and academic matters (Table 54, b).

Peter stated: *"So, once you get here, you start getting comfortable, and the teachers know you. I think that's pretty cool because in middle school, I didn't have that relationship with teachers. I can go to a classroom and talk to them, right? So now you don't even have to talk to them about schoolwork. It could just be your personal life, and it's totally fine."* EOC interpretation: Peter's comment demonstrates teachers' engrossment and dialogue. EECHS teachers know their students well and engage in conversations beyond academics, encouraging a more personal relationship (Table 54, c).

Samuel stated: *"I think an important thing about our school is that there's always someone behind you for support. I mean, like it's not always probably the counselor, right? Because sometimes you don't feel that comfortable, going to a counselor and talking. But it can always be whatever teacher from here."* EOC interpretation: Samuel's sentiment implies the existence of a caring relation between teachers and students. Teachers act as a safety net, offering support and caring for students beyond their traditional teacher roles (Table 54, d).

Joseph stated: *"You know, the relationship with the teachers here, you get along with them better now that you're a senior because you've been with them for four years. You can just go with them during the day and say, "I need help with this," and they'll help you out. They know us better now because we've been here all these years. So that's nice."* EOC interpretation: Joseph's comment illustrates the ongoing dialogue and a strong, caring relation that develops over time, leading to deeper engrossment and more effective motivational displacement on the teacher's part (Table 54, e).

Marta stated: *"And then the teachers, you can hang out in their classroom. They don't mind me being in the back of their class, just like chilling on my computer while they're conducting class."* EOC interpretation: Marta's comment indicates an environment of comfort and acceptance created by the teachers. This can be seen as a form of ethical caring where the student can exist in a shared space without disturbing the educational process (Table 54, f).

Julie stated: *"Because the teacher came looking for me. And even when I was like 'Oh, I don't want to do this anymore, I give up.' They're like, 'No, you're already there, you're already close to it, so just keep on going!'"* EOC interpretation: Julie's experience shows a strong, caring relation where the teacher actively reaches out to a struggling student, embodying motivational

displacement. This encourages students to persevere through challenging tasks (Table 54, g).

Student-Teacher Connection and Ethics of Care Interpretation is displayed in Table 54.

Table 54: Student-Teacher Connection and Ethics of Care Interpretation

Ch. IV: 4-2. Student-Teacher Connection	Ethics of Care Interpretation
<p>(a) "I like the size because the teachers know you, and they care. Like, I guess at other high schools, they do care. But here you really feel it and you know it, and they know your name. They know things about you, and they're always offering help and stuff. So that's what I like about being here because I always feel cared about by the teachers" (Mia, FG 3).</p>	<p>Mia's sentiments reflect the principles of engrossment and motivational displacement. Teachers at EECHS show an understanding of the students (engrossment) and modify their behavior to meet student needs (motivational displacement). This gives students a feeling of being truly cared for.</p>
<p>(b) "Because the teachers, they really do connect with you. They give you advice not only on school, but also in life. If they see that you're struggling and even if it's not school related, they'll sit you down and they'll talk to you, like, really talk to you. And they'll be like, 'What's the problem?' And I feel that's one of the things that really makes EECHS the thing, you know!" (Marta, FG 1).</p>	<p>Marta experiences the dialogue Noddings emphasized, as teachers engage in deep, meaningful conversations with her. Teachers exhibit ethical caring by offering support and advice not just academically but also personally.</p>
<p>(c) "So, once you get here, you start getting comfortable and the teachers know you. I think that's pretty cool because in middle school I didn't have that relationship with teachers. I can go to a classroom, and talk to them, right? So now you don't even have to talk to them about schoolwork. It could just be your personal life, and it's totally fine" (Peter, FG 3).</p>	<p>Peter's comment demonstrates teachers' engrossment and dialogue. The teachers know their students well and engage in conversations that go beyond academics, encouraging a more personal relationship.</p>
<p>(d) "I think an important thing about our school is that there's always someone behind you for support. I mean, like it's not always probably the counselor, right? Because sometimes you don't feel that comfortable, going to a counselor and talking. But it can always be whatever teacher from here" (Samuel, FG 4).</p>	<p>Samuel's sentiment implies the existence of a caring relation between teachers and students. Teachers act as a safety net, offering support and caring for students beyond their traditional roles.</p>

Table 54: cont.

Ch. IV: 4-2. Student-Teacher Connection	Ethics of Care Interpretation
(e) "You know, the relationship with the teachers here, you get along with them better now that you're a senior because you've been with them for four years. You can just go with them during the day and say, "I need help with this" and they'll help you out. They know us better now because we've been here all these years. So that's nice" (Joseph, FG 1).	Joseph's comment illustrates the ongoing dialogue and a strong caring relation that develops over time, leading to deeper engrossment and more effective motivational displacement.
(f) "And then the teachers, you can hang out in their classroom. They don't mind me being in the back of their class, just like chilling on my computer while they're conducting class" (Marta, FG 1).	Marta's comment indicates an environment of comfort and acceptance created by the teachers. This can be seen as a form of ethical caring where the student is allowed to exist in a shared space without disturbing the educational process.
(g) "Because the teacher came looking for me. And even when I was like 'Oh, I don't want to do this anymore, I give up!' They're like 'No, you're already there, you're already close to it, so just keep on going!' (Julie, FG 3).	Julie's experience shows a strong caring relation where the teacher actively reaches out to a struggling student, embodying motivational displacement. This encourages the student to persevere through challenging tasks.

4-3. Open Campus. The open campus enjoyed by EECHS juniors and seniors results from decisions dating back to the school's original 2008 grant specifications (Mr. Reynolds, PI 1). However, the open campus concept can be traced even further back to the progenitor of the early college high school, the Middle College High School. The term Middle College was coined by Ernest Boyer, former president of the Carnegie Corporation for the Advancement of Teaching and former U.S. Commissioner of Education, to describe what he called a "hybrid" or combination of a high school situated on a college campus (Lieberman, 2004, p. 2).

As previously discussed in Ch. II Historical Background and Context, the Middle College High School is the brainchild of developmental psychologist Janet Lieberman. LaGuardia College chancellor Timothy Healey tasked Lieberman with finding a solution to the large

numbers of high school graduates failing and dropping out of New York City community colleges because of a lack of academic skills. Lieberman's solution was the Middle College High School, where at-risk high school students took college classes on the LaGuardia College campus beginning in the fall of 1974 (Wechsler, 2001).

Lieberman believed that exposing at-risk high school students to higher education and a challenging curriculum on an actual college campus would improve their outlook, discipline, and vision of what they thought was possible for themselves. She believed the college site had transformative powers on student beliefs and behaviors and called this effect the "power of the site." She stated:

The new educational entity, Middle College, uses the power of the site, the demands, and the ambiance of the higher education environment to shape students' behavior and influence their inspirations. The community college location makes some of the best-equipped inner-city educational spaces available to those most often written off by society. This location gives the high-risk student the message that they are worth the investment of rich resources. (Lieberman, 1989, p. 19)

According to EECHS's first principal Mrs. Sutter, EECHS's original location was adjacent to the university. However, this school proved unsuitable and was rejected when unanticipated repair costs exceeded the school district's budget. As a result, EECHS began in the fall of 2008 in an unused elementary school in another part of town, much further away from the university. Out of necessity, students for the first three years traveled by school bus to the university on Fridays for their college classes, escorted by EECHS teachers.

2011 marked the first year of open campus when a brand new, purpose-built school was created and named "EECHS." While not located on a college campus, as Lieberman suggested,

the school is a short walk from the community college and the university. Students embraced their newly built school and took advantage of the open campus for the first time in the fall of 2011. In EECHS's 2011-2012 yearbook, a student wrote:

- This year was the first year in which we had OPEN CAMPUS!!!

Many students loved the idea, although it was just on a probationary basis.

- Clubs such as BPA (Business Professionals of America), Student Council and AVID took advantage by selling goodies to students. (2011-2012, EECHS Yearbook, p. 74)

The probationary basis mentioned by the student in the above quote referred to establishing the rules and requirements of open campus as it began the first year. Students were advised by Mrs. Sutter that traveling on and off campus without adult supervision was a privilege that had responsibilities, student safety being chief among them. Mrs. Sutter stated that open campus was on a "probationary basis" for students, with the understanding that any student who behaved irresponsibly or acted in a way that endangered their own or another student's safety would lose their open campus privileges and be returned to their original campus (Mrs. Sutter, PI 1).

The open campus enjoyed by EECHS juniors and seniors serves an important educational purpose beyond mere enjoyment, as it provides students an opportunity to exercise good judgment, discipline, and time management as they take classes on an actual university campus and experience Janet Lieberman's "power of the site."

4-4. Senior Planning. The journey from high school to university presents students with a challenging transition phase that demands academic and emotional adaptation and an informed understanding of the university application process. Securing scholarships and loans,

furthermore, is a critical facet in mitigating the financial strains inherent in higher education. The Top-10 University and Scholarship Project (Top-Ten Project), introduced during students' senior year in AVID IV, is an innovative and practical strategy for fostering college readiness. This assignment's deliberate incorporation into the AVID IV curriculum is vital as it facilitates a more seamless bridge from high school to college by promoting the acquisition of essential skills, bolstering college readiness, and nurturing self-efficacy in career decision-making (AVID, 2023; Deci & Ryan, 2012; Garcia et al., 2018).

Moreover, this year-long endeavor provides the "opportunity knowledge" highlighted in the AVID College and Career Readiness Framework (AVID CCR Framework, 2022) as well as the "college knowledge" underscored in Conley's College and Career Ready (2010). Together these themes provide service and cultural capital of great value and benefit to EECHS students, who predominantly hail from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, are often first-generation college students, and students of color (Cahalan et al., 2021; Gable, 2022; Tym et al., 2004).

The Top-Ten Project also offers students a foundation for developing key life skills, such as time management, research, and critical thinking (Roderick et al., 2009). These capabilities aid in the university application and scholarship process and help students chart a path for their future success. Actively involving students in their career planning introduces them to a wealth of literature and resources that facilitate career exploration, decision-making, and the exploration of potential paths. Career exploration and planning benefits are immediate but can be particularly advantageous in the event of future career shifts (Lent et al., 1994; Garcia et al., 2018).

Across both semesters, students must demonstrate their time management skills as they research potential universities, demonstrate critical thinking in creating compelling personal essays, meet application deadlines, and apply for appropriate scholarships. These organizational

skills form a part of the WICOR strategy and are foundational to the AVID curriculum. Students in the Top-Ten Project meet the immediate demands of university and scholarship applications while developing the college readiness and life skills indispensable for their continued academic and professional journeys (Conley, 2010; Corwin & Tierney, 2007; Curry & Milsom, 2022).

Moreover, students gain an early grasp of the college application process, which encompasses understanding the various university prerequisites, crafting compelling personal essays, organizing necessary documents, completing forms, and successfully leveraging the internet to access these resources (Tierney & Venegas, 2009; Venegas, 2006). This exposure alleviates the anxiety often associated with the process and heightens their chances of successful university admission. Early exposure and immersion in the process also foster informed conversations about college plans with their families, counselors, and teachers (Epstein et al., 2018; Vargas et al., 2017).

As for financial preparedness, identifying and applying for scholarships provides students with a realistic outlook on higher education expenses. It underscores the role of scholarships and financial aid in alleviating tuition costs and empowers students with the requisite skills to procure additional financial aid as needed (Heller, 2006; Tanabe & Tanabe, 2022). Advance financial planning increases students' understanding of higher education expenses and the necessity of making wise decisions.

As a part of the AVID IV curriculum, the Top-Ten Project provides a framework that supports seniors in their college and career planning and readiness. As students research various universities and their respective course and degree offerings, they start to discern the educational pathways that align with different professions (Gottfredson, 2005). This research evokes

introspection about their interests and aspirations, aiding them in making better-informed decisions about their career trajectories (Garcia et al., 2018; Ivers et al., 2012).

AVID IV's Top-Ten Project significantly aids EECHS seniors in transitioning from high school to higher education and future careers. Through focused and goal-oriented tasks, most students had already committed to universities by the middle of the spring semester and had received substantial scholarships to assist with their college expenses. The intentionally embedded college and career planning activities in the AVID curriculum enable students to comprehend college application and scholarship processes, facilitate financial understanding, and help promote a better fit between students' dreams and aspirations and opportunities in higher education (AVID Handbook, 2022; Deci & Ryan, 2012; Reardon et al., 2017).

Focus-Group Question No. 5

In Question No. 5, I asked students: “What are some of the things that have been challenging or difficult for you as a student at EECHS? Common topics and themes included Rigorous Coursework, and Junior Year.

5-1. Rigorous Coursework. The rigorous coursework that freshmen experienced at EECHS was a common theme in all seven focus group interviews. While seniors discussed general types of difficulties they had with their classes at EECHS, much of the discussion centered around their freshmen English I class with its critical thinking, analysis, and time management challenges. Students in almost every focus group gave personal accounts of their "trial by fire" in this particular class as they strived to complete weekly readings, weekly journal assignments, and submit their semester Book Talk class project on time by the due date.

When asked about why her students felt so besieged by her class, Mrs. Nielsen stated that it was especially rigorous because it was based on the AP English and college English I

Composition curriculum. Students accustomed to answering simple multiple-choice, or true/false types of questions in middle-school suddenly found themselves in uncharted territory in her class with its requirements that they use critical thinking and higher-order thinking skills. Students used to simple multiple-choice or True/False questions had difficulty adjusting to the cognitive demands of her class. Procrastination and time mismanagement issues were common. Many seniors stated that they regularly lost sleep by having to stay up all night to submit their Book Talk assignment on time by the dreaded morning deadline.

Despite these rigorous and demanding challenges, EECHS students usually succeed in Mrs. Nielsen's class. But why are they successful? One answer to this question might be AVID founder Mary Catherine Swanson's adage: "Rigor without support is a prescription for failure and that support without rigor is a tragic waste of potential" (Swanson, 2000). Mrs. Nielsen has scaffolded and sequenced her semester project in such a way that students make connections and construct knowledge from their assignments and projects. Eccles and Roesser state that instruction that cultivates interest, is meaningful, and challenging invites deep cognitive, behavioral, and emotional engagement with the material (Eccles & Roeser, 2011). Despite formidable logistical and time management challenges in completing all the tasks involved in their Book Talk project, students are meaningfully engaged in reading Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451* because it is literature of high quality and most importantly, is relevant to them (Bradbury, 2012).

EECHS's teachers design challenging lessons that raise the bar and challenge students to work towards their potential but provide various supports and scaffolding so that students can meet these challenges. While students might initially struggle, they are supported in their efforts through their teacher's encouragement and guidance, AVID support structures such as the

elective class, Ten-Step Tutorials, and teaching methodologies such as WICOR. These types of instructional supports and scaffolding exemplify the essence of Swanson's AVID philosophy of rigor with support.

Another question presents itself regarding the level of rigor presented and mastered at EECHS. Might public teacher's expectations be too low? Are high school teachers in general underestimating what their students are capable of? Research supports that teacher expectations are among the most influential factors affecting student achievement (Boser et al., 2014; Hattie, 2008). Research also suggests that teachers' beliefs about their students' potential, instructional practices, and support systems all play important roles in helping their students achieve at high levels (Rubie-Davies et al., 2015).

The early college high school is a school reform measure which improves educational equity and outcomes for students underserved in higher education such as first-generation, low-income, and students of color. At EECHS, students are challenged by caring teachers with high expectations and rigorous coursework but are supported in their efforts at becoming college-ready (Berger et al., 2014; Hoffman et al., 2007; Swanson et al., 2000).

5-2. Junior Year. The junior year represents an academic "sea change" for students. To extend this analogy, the freshmen and sophomore years might be considered the preparation period when students were safely in the EECHS harbor with its steady waters and schedule, secured to a pier and timeline that was unmoving and resolute with its predictability, and with mental sails trimmed and maintained by boatkeepers who assisted with course corrections during the journey.

This pivotal year marks their first departure from the familiar EECHS campus to the "open sea" of the broader university environment, where they undertake a rigorous class

schedule. Juniors tackle challenging courses such as Precalculus, Biology, Statistics, and English Composition, which even older, more mature university students would find challenging.

Students spend the majority of their time away from the EECHS campus, returning only for their regularly scheduled AVID IV class.

Despite the rigorous nature of the university courses, most juniors rise to the challenge and succeed academically, often earning impressive grades. Their general success is indicative of the quality of their foundational academic training achieved during their first two years at EECHS. Freshmen and sophomores' academic preparation emphasizing critical thinking, problem solving, and communication is put to the test during students' junior year and in general meets with good results. However, some students struggle, not necessarily because of the cognitive complexity of the subjects but due to non-cognitive factors. Non-cognitive factors, as described by Conley (2010) and Tierney and Duncheon (2015) include time management, planning short and long-term research projects, maintaining motivation and self-efficacy, and balancing academic demands and social interactions.

At EECHS, a key pillar of support for students is the Advancement Via Individual Determination (AVID) program, a college-readiness program and a mandatory part of the curriculum throughout their high school years. The AVID III class, in particular, plays a significant role in assisting juniors during this demanding period. Beginning in the freshmen year and continuing until graduation, AVID introduces various essential elements of college readiness that emphasize non-cognitive factors such as study strategies, time management techniques, and the use of planners for short and long-term goal setting.

A key feature of junior's AVID III class is the requirement they self-report their college grades every three weeks to their AVID teacher, offering a "safety-net" for those who may be

faltering. If a student's grades slip, their AVID teacher quickly identifies the issue and coordinates with the counselor to intervene promptly, redirecting the student to help them improve their performance.

The junior year is a significant milestone in the students' academic journey at EECHS. At this juncture, students find themselves away from the watchful eyes of their early college high school teachers and are expected to conduct themselves as young adults as they travel back and forth independently to the university campus. The general success of these students suggests that EECHS is achieving its goals of preparing students who are college ready and well-prepared for postsecondary studies and successful careers.

Focus-Group Question No. 6

In Question No. 6, I asked students: "What has helped motivate you to obtain high grades at EECHS?" Common discussion topics and themes include Class Rankings, College Choices and Scholarships, and Family Matters.

6-1. Class Rankings. As soon as student grades and class rankings become available, students rush to find out what their grades and class ranking are and begin sharing them with other students. While student grades and grade point averages (GPAs) are confidential information, students apparently have no qualms about sharing their GPAs and class rankings with other students. Surprisingly, students refer to the "friendly competition" aspect of knowing each others' GPAs and rankings while at the same time collaborating later in study groups to help each other academically.

This phenomenon of "competitive collaboration" aligns with the educational philosophies of Dr. William Glasser (1986) and Dr. Uri Treisman (1985), both of whom stress the importance of group work and collaboration in academic success. As "thought leaders" in the AVID

educational literature, Glasser and Treisman's concepts of collaboration and group work are part of the course content embedded in the classes at EECHS (Bendall et al., 2015).

Glasser emphasizes that group learning addresses students' basic psychological needs, including belonging, power, freedom, and fun (Glasser, 1986). At EECHS, students form study groups, finding a sense of belonging and camaraderie within these clusters. The "friendly competition" they engage in can be seen as a means to gain a sense of power and achievement. They exercise freedom in choosing their study group partners and methods, and the spirit of "friendly competition" adds an element of fun to their academic pursuits, turning them into exciting challenges rather than mundane tasks.

Students' active and ongoing monitoring of each others' class ranks, sharing their academic experiences, and challenging each other reflects one of Glasser's theories that students often perform better for their peers than their teachers. Students have created an academic subculture, encouraging fellow EECHS students to participate in grade monitoring as well as academic activities.

Dr. Treisman's influence on AVID is seen in the collaborative study approach he developed after observing different achievement patterns in his Calculus class among different student groups at UC Berkeley. Alarmed by the high rate of failure in Calculus by his African-American students in contrast to the high rate of success in the same coursework by his Asian students, Treisman discovered that while the African-American students worked independently, the Asian students collaborated and critiqued each others' works (Bendall et al., 2015, p. x).

At EECHS, students have incorporated a similar collaborative learning approach, drawing a blurred line between their social and academic lives, much like the Asian students studying Calculus in Treisman's study (1986). EECHS students' friendly competition and class

rank comparisons are social activities that feed into their academic achievements. In contrast, their study groups and constant academic communication reflect the principle of working together to conquer coursework.

Students maximize their learning potential by creating an environment where they can compete and cooperate and turn the academic journey into a shared experience. Their class rankings serve as a motivational tool, sparking friendly rivalry while at the same time offering mutual assistance and support. The competitive-collaborative culture nurtured at EECHS is consistent with the AVID strategies influenced by Dr. Glasser and Dr. Treisman. Students have created a win-win scenario where "another student's success is my success."

6-2. College Choices and Scholarships. Seniors' comments about the influence of high grades on college acceptance and scholarship awards reflect their keen awareness of the real-world implications of academic achievement. High grades are more than just a mark of personal success for these students; they are a tangible key to unlocking future opportunities. This perspective is a powerful motivating factor in their pursuit of academic excellence.

In higher education, grades often act as the initial filter in the evaluation and acceptance process, particularly for selective colleges and scholarship providers. When students achieve high grades, they demonstrate academic achievement and discipline, dedication, and a capability to succeed in rigorous academic programs. As part of the target student population the early college high school is intended to serve, EECHS students are taught that maintaining high grades can be an essential means of gaining access to higher education opportunities that might otherwise be out of reach.

The AVID program is critical in helping students understand and navigate the higher education landscape. AVID helps students "fill in the gaps" that might otherwise limit their

college understanding and possibilities. By providing college information presentations and degree planning, AVID provides the social capital necessary for students who wish to enroll in college. AVID calls this type of college information "opportunity knowledge" (Bendall et al., 2015), while David Conley (2010) refers to it as "college knowledge."

The AVID IV Top-Ten University and Scholarship Project is a practical and engaging way to instill this knowledge. By applying to various universities (Reach, Match, and Safety schools), students understand how different institutions evaluate applicants and the various pathways to college acceptance. Additionally, the project encourages students to think strategically about their college applications and to stretch their ambitions, even when the chances of acceptance might be uncertain. While completing this project, students build a portfolio of university applications and potential scholarships in their AVID Binders and develop a sense of ownership over their educational journey. This approach fosters a deeper motivation as the students are not merely working for grades but are actively shaping their future opportunities.

The AVID program's focus on opportunity knowledge and the Top-Ten Project serves to amplify the motivating effect of high grades. The program helps translate abstract numbers on a report card into concrete paths toward future success, fostering a strong drive among students to achieve academically. The year-long Top-Ten Project underscores the power of aligning academic work with students' aspirations and the potential such alignment has in motivating and promoting college readiness and success.

Focus-Group Question No. 7

In Focus group question No. 7, I asked students: "Were there any times that you considered dropping out of EECHS?" Students responded in various nuanced ways to this

question beyond simply answering yes or no, as previously discussed in Ch. IV: 7-1, 7-2, 7-3, 7-4, and 7-5. During seven focus groups, I was often surprised by the number of students who stated that they had seriously considered dropping out of EECHS. Why did so many students consider dropping out but persist and graduate instead?

As I listened to seniors recounting their academic and personal struggles at EECHS, I realized that they sounded much older, more experienced, and more akin to college students rather than high school seniors. I began thinking of their personal and academic growth and what factors may have affected their transformation. I also began thinking of EECHS as more of a college and institution of higher education rather than a public early college high school. A paradigm shift had occurred, motivating me to revisit the research questions.

Research question number one asked: "What are the lived experiences of the students, teachers, and faculty in this high-achieving early college high school?" Research question number two asked: "What motivates these high-achieving students to overcome obstacles and persist to degree completion?" Through seven student focus groups, follow-up interviews, and nine personal student interviews, a clear image emerged about research question number one - students' lived experiences at EECHS, and research question number two - students' motivations to overcome obstacles and persist to degree completion.

Research question number three asked: "What factors or elements play a part in contributing to these students' success?" Student focus group interviews and personal interviews had shown that their study habits, evolving college-readiness mindset, and determination to succeed played a large role in their success at EECHS. But from an institutional standpoint, what part did EECHS as a school contribute to students' choosing to persist despite difficulties and

graduate from EECHS? I began researching the college dropout literature to answer this question and soon discovered Tinto's *Theory of Student Departure* (Tinto, 2012).

Dr. Vincent Tinto is a distinguished and widely recognized scholar in higher education whose work has significantly impacted theories of student retention and persistence in higher education. Over the past fifty years, Tinto's research has shaped educational policies and practices across higher education institutions globally. Tinto is best known for his *Student Integration Model*, which provides a framework for understanding why students persist until graduation, drop out, or depart from college (Tinto, 2012).

Tinto's Student Integration Model (Figure 13) proposes that students' decision to remain enrolled and persist until graduation is directly influenced by the academic and social integration they achieve within the institution. He asserts that academic integration includes students' formal and informal academic performance, formal and informal interactions with faculty and staff, and intellectual development. Social integration refers to students' formal and informal campus interactions, including involvement with extracurricular activities, peer group interactions, and identification with the university's norms and values. The following summarizes Tinto's Student Integration model as illustrated in Figure 13.

Pre-entry Attributes. Pre-entry attributes are factors that the student brings with them to the institution and include family background (such as socioeconomic status and parental education), skills and abilities (both academic and social), and prior school experiences (including the quality and type of schooling, and prior academic achievement).

Goals/Commitments. Goals/Commitments include the student's initial intentions and goals for attending college and their commitment to the institution. Goals/Commitments might also include a student's external commitments, such as work, family, or community obligations.

Institutional Experiences. The student's experiences within the institution occur in two main areas: the Academic System and the Social System. The Academic System includes formal academic experiences (including coursework, academic performance, and grades) and informal academic experiences (such as interactions with faculty and staff, mentoring, and advising). The Social System includes formal social experiences (including participation in extracurricular activities, clubs, and sports) and informal social experiences (interactions with peers, residence life, and campus culture).

Integration. Tinto emphasizes that the more students are integrated into an institution's academic and social systems, the more likely they will persist to graduation. Academic integration refers to the extent to which students feel they are part of the institution's academic life, perform at an acceptable level, and develop intellectually. Social Integration refers to the extent that a student feels a sense of belonging and that they are part of the social life of the institution and the extent that they experience supportive networks of peers and faculty.

Goals/Commitments. As students progress through college, they reevaluate their original intentions, educational goals, and commitment to the institution based on their academic and social experiences. External commitments can also play a role in this reevaluation.

Outcome. All the preceding factors contribute to a student's decision to persist or depart from an institution. If students achieve academic and social integration and their goals and commitments remain strong, they are more likely to persist. They are more likely to depart if their academic and social integration is weak or incomplete or if their goals and commitments are undetermined. Tinto's Student Integration Model is illustrated below in Figure 13.

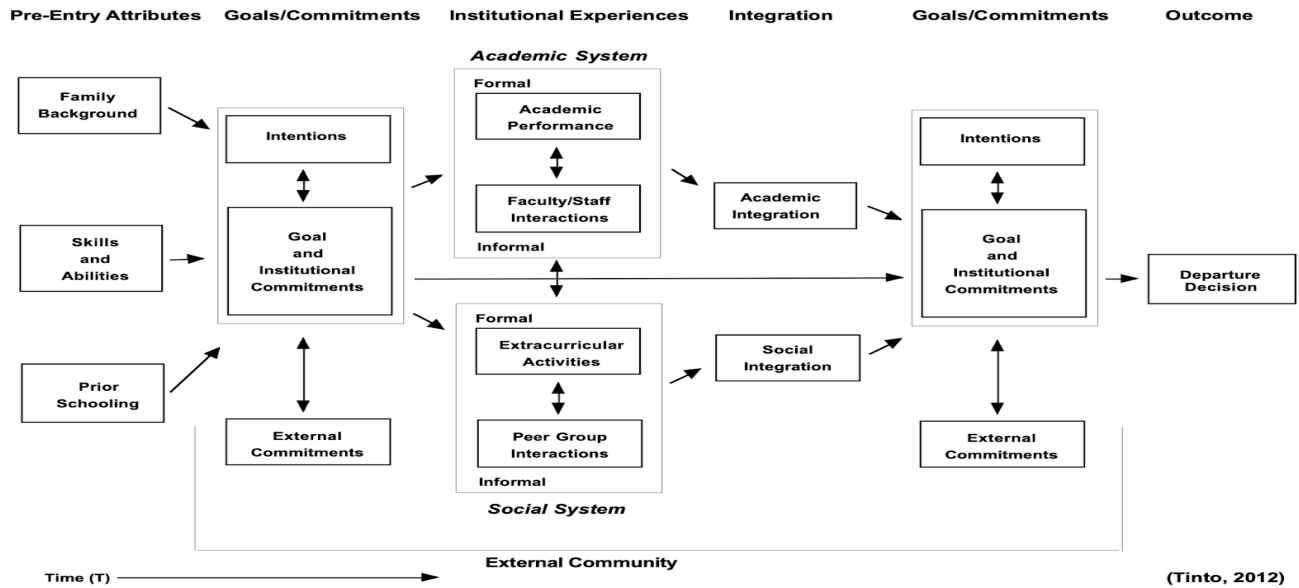


Figure 13: Tinto's Student Integration Model

Tinto's Student Integration Model and Student Persistence at EECHS

Tinto's Student Integration Model is useful for understanding the factors influencing student persistence or departure from an institution of higher learning. In the following section, I present Tinto's Student Integration Model with an explication of this model as it relates to student persistence at EECHS.

Tinto's model posits that student persistence to degree completion or departure is directly influenced by the degree of Academic and Social Integration students experience in a particular institution. Other factors such as Pre-entry attributes, Goals and Commitments, and Academic and Social Integration also play important roles and influence the outcome of either degree persistence or departure. The constituent elements of Tinto's Student Integration Model in Figure 13 are discussed below.

1. Pre-Entry Attributes. Pre-Entry attributes are the demographic factors and social capital that students bring to the university, including family background, skills and abilities, and prior schooling. These attributes affect their graduation goal and initial commitment to the

institution. Family background. EECHS students are representative of the student population that the early college high school is intended for lower socioeconomic level, Hispanic or students of color, first-generation, and students typically underserved by higher education.

Skills and abilities. Students typically have a C or B average per the Texas Early College High School Blueprint and AVID guidelines that students be in the "middle" regarding their grade-point average.

Prior schooling. EECHS is an open-enrollment campus with students' middle-school academic backgrounds and preparation varying widely.

2. Goals/Commitments. Goals/Commitments relate to students' focus and motivation in obtaining a college degree. Goals/Commitments also include external obligations such as work, family, or community involvement. Tinto states that strong goal clarity and institutional commitment positively impact students' academic and social integration within the institution and predict students' persistence or departure.

Intentions. EECHS students present clear goals and commitments towards completing their high school education, receiving their Associate's Degree in General Studies, and obtaining 42 core university credits. EECHS encourages goal and commitment clarity by informing students and parents about school policies, required grade point averages, and college class requirements with a mandatory signature page requiring both student and parent signatures. Students also sign an agreement indicating their understanding and acceptance of the requirements for participating in AVID, the school's mandatory college readiness program.

3. Institutional Experiences. Tinto states that the two key institutional elements influencing student persistence or departure are Academic Integration and Social Integration. Academic integration can be understood as the extent to which a student feels connected to an

institution's academic life. Social integration can be understood as the extent to which students feel a sense of belonging to the social communities of the institution (Tinto, 2012).

Formal: Academic Performance. EECHS students endeavor to meet the high academic standards expected of them. Teachers insist on rigor, with an emphasis placed on critical thinking and problem-solving. However, students are supported in their studies through collaborative learning experiences, teacher tutorials, study groups, AVID 10-Step Tutorials, and supplemental instruction via university tutorials during their junior and senior years. Their AVID teacher and counselor actively monitor student academic performance to ensure that academic difficulties can be addressed early.

Informal: Faculty/Staff Interactions. Students, teachers, and staff form a supportive learning community where everyone feels respected and valued.

Formal: Extracurricular Activities. Students participate in various formal extracurricular activities, including clubs, student groups, athletics, and other non-academic social activities. Tinto states that participation in extracurricular activities and clubs contributes significantly to students' sense of belonging at the institution (Tinto, 2012).

Informal: Peer group interactions. Beginning with Summer Bridge orientation preceding their freshmen year, students make new friends, meet their teachers, and become familiar with the school's culture. Each incoming class is grouped as a cohort and attends the same classes for the entire year. As a result, students report high levels of school belonging and positive social interactions with peers and faculty.

4. Integration. Tinto emphasizes that student persistence is influenced positively by the degree of Academic and Social Integration students experience at an institution.

Formal: Academic integration. Academic integration was a recurring theme in student focus group responses and personal interviews describing their academic experiences. In Ch. IV: 2-3. Grades Matter, students recalled how they were motivated to obtain high grades at EECHS. One senior stated that higher grades would help him have better choices of universities and scholarships: *"If I don't get high grades, I'm probably not gonna get accepted, or I'm not going to get as much scholarships that I applied for. By far, that's the biggest thing, getting the scholarships the colleges give out. And that's the one thing that I remind myself, you know. Like, 'You need the money!'"* (Abel, FG 5).

Another student who was proud of her academic accomplishments stated: *"I made Dean's list, and it made me super happy. So, then I started pushing myself more to get good grades again because I really liked that. And then I'm super bad at math and science. I like the arts better. But this last semester, I got an A in statistics, and I surprised myself!"* (Marta, PI 1).

Informal: Faculty/Staff Interactions. Students also stated that they felt supported by their teachers academically and personally. One senior stated: In Ch. IV Findings, 4-2: Student-teacher connection, a senior stated: *"Because the teachers, they really do connect with you. They give you advice not only on school but also in life. If they see that you're struggling, and even if it's not school related, they'll sit you down, and they'll talk to you, like, really talk to you. And they'll be like, 'What's the problem?'"* And I feel that's one of the things that really makes EECHS the thing, you know!" (Marta, FG 1).

Social Integration. Social Integration was also a recurring theme as students discussed their mutual enjoyment and good company they found in formal extracurricular activities, clubs, student groups, and athletics. In Ch. IV: 3-2. Clubs Are Important, seniors were almost unanimous in their involvement and participation in clubs and extracurricular activities.

Of 35 students interviewed, 33 (94%) stated that they participated in at least one club or extracurricular activity, while 12 (34%) said they belonged to three clubs or extracurricular activities. One senior stated: *"As far as student life at EECHS, I like the extracurriculars that I've joined. I've made a lot of friends with my fellow classmates and in my senior class, but also with some of the juniors and some of the freshmen that I get to meet through Mock Trial and the other clubs"* (Joshua, FG 7).

Students also remarked that participating in extracurricular organizations and clubs helped them become more outgoing and make new friends. One student stated: *"Join clubs! A lot of people have a hard time making friends. And me, one of the big reasons why I made friends was through clubs. So, I feel that helps a lot!"* (Alicia, FG 2).

Informal: Peer Group Interactions. Students also experienced social integration because of positive peer group interactions and the supportive school environment at EECHS. In Ch. IV Findings, 4-1: Close-knit and supportive environment, a senior stated: *"The environment! Yeah. It's a close-knit environment. It's like your family. Everyone's always here to support you. And then also, you know everyone! Our class is so small, so we know all the students. So, you see everyone, and you get to talk to everyone, at least at this school, multiple times. So, I just feel everyone's there to support you"* (Alexa, FG 2).

5. Goals/Commitments. In Tinto's Student Integration Model, as students progress through college, they continually reevaluate their personal and educational goals and commitments to the institution. In alignment with Tinto's model, students positively achieve academic and social integration at EECHS, as witnessed every year in the high percentage of students who persist and graduate with their high school diploma, Associate's Degree in General

Studies, 42 core university credits, acceptance into major universities, and generous scholarship awards.

Tinto proposes that one of the roles of higher education institutions is to create circumstances where students can achieve this academic and social integration. Then, when students reach the point in their academic careers where they are reevaluating their original goals and commitments, persistence with the ultimate goal of graduation seems like the most sensible course of action.

6. Outcome. Outcome refers to whether a student persists, graduates, or *departs* from the institution. Tinto uses the term depart or departure rather than "drops out" because departure encompasses a broader range of student experiences and reasons for leaving an institution before graduation. Additionally, the term "dropping out" negatively implies that the student has failed or given up. At the same time, departure is a more versatile term that can cover a variety of circumstances.

In *Outcome* of his Student Integration Model, Tinto asserts that students depart their institutions for many reasons. These reasons might include financial difficulties, family responsibilities, health issues, a decision to transfer to another institution, a change in career goals, or even dissatisfaction with the institution.

Moreover, the term departure aligns more closely with Tinto's Theory of Student Integration, which posits that a student's decision to leave an institution is often a complex process involving their academic and social integration into the institution and their personal and educational goals and commitments. The term "dropping out" does not convey this complexity.

Using departure to describe students' leaving before graduating also shifts some of the focus onto the institution. Instead of labeling the student as a "dropout" and implying individual

failure, "departure" suggests that the institution may also play a role in a student's decision to leave and thus may need to consider making changes to better support student persistence, retention, and completion.

Regarding institutional responsibility for student retention, persistence, and departure, Dr. Tinto states:

An institution's capacity to retain students is directly related to its ability to reach out and make contact with students and integrate them into the social and intellectual fabric of institutional life. It hinges on the establishment of a healthy, *caring* [emphasis mine] educational environment which enables all individuals, not just some, to find a niche in one or more of the many social and intellectual communities of the institution.

(Tinto, 2012, pp. 204-205)

Of relevance is Dr. Tinto's use of the term *caring* in conjunction with "educational environment." The implication is that schools should consider caring as an essential element contributing to student persistence.

Focus-Group Question No. 8

In Question No. 8, I asked students: "What are some of the things that you have done to overcome challenges at EECHS? Common experiences and themes included Friends Are Important, Self-Monitoring, and Study Groups.

8-1. Friends are important. A recurring theme in all focus-groups was how important friends and personal relationships were in overcoming challenges at EECHS. Students stated that what helped them the most was talking to their friends. Students described their peer-to-peer and student-teacher relationships positively and stated how important and beneficial these relationships were to their mental health.

Peer-to-peer relationships often form naturally, given that students frequently have the same classes and spend much time together due to cohort grouping. As a result, what starts as a simple statement of *"we might as well talk with each other"* over four years transforms into a strong support system. When struggling with a problem, students are not left by themselves. Their friends, who often have had similar experiences, are there to provide advice, empathy, or even just a listening ear.

These supportive relationships extend to the faculty and student-teacher relationships as well. At EECHS, teachers are more than just academic guides. They often act as mentors and support systems by genuinely caring about students' well-being. They create an environment where students feel comfortable sharing not just their academic struggles but their personal challenges as well. If a student acts like something is bothering them, teachers ask them how they are doing or what they can do to help. This level of support helps students feel recognized, valued, and understood, which can boost their confidence and resilience in overcoming obstacles.

The role of AVID at EECHS is integral to fostering this supportive culture which begins in each teacher's classroom. AVID emphasizes that relational capacity is something that teachers "do" and are responsible for and which can directly influence the emotional climate of the classroom. AVID defines relational capacity as: "...the degree of trust and level of safety between members of a group. In an educational context, this specifically refers to the established level of trust and safety between teachers and students, as well as directly between students (Bendall et al., 2015, p. 5).

Relational capacity is developed through a series of activities that occur in the first weeks of school, which are revisited and revised throughout the year as needed. Using concepts and

activities from the resource text *AVID Critical Thinking and Engagement: A Schoolwide Approach*, teachers in AVID create classroom cultures of trust and safety by involving the students in creating a Mission Statement, a Social Contract, and Establishing a Group Identity (Bendall et al., 2015, pp. 5-11). These, as well as other AVID activities, promote and develop relational capacity in the classroom.

AVID's unique approach to developing a positive classroom environment and student engagement based on trust and safety is heavily influenced by scholars William Glasser and Uri Treisman. As discussed previously, Glasser asserts that learning teams, or groups of students working collaboratively, are essential in satisfying students' psychological needs for belonging, power, freedom, and fun (Glasser, 1986). Moreover, Treisman discovered that students who work cooperatively performed better and understood their coursework more thoroughly than others who worked alone (Treisman, 1985). At EECHS, the collaborative learning model is employed schoolwide, with teachers trained to use AVID's WICOR teaching methodologies and techniques.

AVID's approach aligns well with Erik Erikson's developmental theories about adolescents. According to Erikson (1968), adolescents are at the "Identity versus Role Confusion" stage, where they discover their identities and decide their roles in life. By encouraging safe and supportive relationships among students and teachers, EECHS creates a social environment where students can explore their identities safely and form relationships that benefit them personally, academically, and professionally.

8-2. Self-Monitoring. Students at EECHS become adept at self-monitoring, which scholar David Conley describes as becoming cognizant of their own behaviors, habits, and thought processes concerning their academic performance. According to Conley, self-monitoring

is one of a broad range of study skills crucial for students in taking ownership of their actions and becoming more effective as learners (Conley, 2010).

Self-monitoring is also an aspect of metacognition, which in essence means developing the ability to "think about how one is thinking" (Flavell, 1979; Livingston, 2003). As students become metacognitive, they necessarily self-monitor, reflect upon what is working and what is not working in terms of their academic success, and adjust their study habits to increase their effectiveness.

Several students shared how they developed self-monitoring skills to manage their time more effectively, enhance their organizational skills, and improve their academic performance. For example, Joseph (FG 1) and Paulette (FG 1) realized that their cellphone use was a significant distraction that affected their study time. They consciously decided to put their cell phones away during study hours so that they could focus better on their assignments. This awareness and subsequent changes in their behavior are explicit examples of self-monitoring.

Matthew (FG 6) recognized that he lacked organizational skills. Rather than becoming overwhelmed, he took a constructive approach by observing and learning from his more organized peers. He used their organizational methods as a model for improving his own. Similarly, Mia (FG 3) found that using a planner, initially suggested during a summer program, was immensely helpful in keeping track of her assignments. This simple tool allowed her to keep track of her tasks and gave her a sense of satisfaction and motivation each time she checked off a completed assignment.

These student experiences demonstrate how self-monitoring contributed to students becoming more responsible and in control of their learning. Importantly, the AVID curriculum bolsters this self-monitoring learning process by emphasizing Organization, which is part of its

WICOR framework. In AVID's resource textbook *AVID Critical Thinking and Engagement: A Schoolwide Approach*, the authors summarize the broader meaning of organization. They state:

Organization is not just about the ability to organize and manage "stuff," it is also the ability to organize and manage learning and self. Teachers can teach organizational skills by helping students find systems for recording homework and organizing their materials in a binder, in their backpacks, and online. AVID's primary focus, however, is teaching the more implicit organizational skills that help students see how their brains work, how they make sense of and organize information, how they apply specific strategies and monitor their outcomes, and how they take control of their learning. (Bendall et al., 2015, p. xiv)

EECHS students develop self-monitoring skills through conscious efforts to observe and modify their study habits, guided by concepts learned in AVID I, II, III, and IV and reinforced by core content area teachers. Becoming better organized, keeping track of assignments, and managing oneself in respect to time are all part of what Conley (2010), Sedlacek (2004), and Tierney & Duncheon (2015) describe as non-cognitive factors. AVID's intentional focus on these non-cognitive factors helps prepare students for the organizational demands of college and gives them the tools necessary for further academic achievement.

8-3. Study Groups. EECHS students demonstrate a proactive, self-motivated approach toward academic success by creating and utilizing study groups. These study groups reveal not just the collective spirit that, in part, defines the school but also important personality traits that will equip these students for higher education and beyond. The formation of study groups illustrates a type of study skill identified by Conley (2010) as pivotal for college readiness, which involves productive collaboration, efficient communication, and shared learning experiences.

Study groups necessarily involve students working together or collaborating. EECHS teachers provide engaging classroom activities that require students to collaborate in learning their subject material and general college readiness techniques. For example, while academic subjects will differ, college readiness techniques of learning how to work with others, contribute individual ideas, and respect individual differences and opinions remain essential values in successful collaboration and college readiness. Through positive classroom experiences involving collaboration, students learn how to work together, exchange ideas, and problem-solve cooperatively, thereby building their academic and social skills (Bendall et al., 2015).

The groundwork for study groups is laid before students begin their first semester at EECHS. The Summer Bridge Orientation program discussed previously is instrumental in introducing EECHS students to each other and initiating the relationship-building process. This program familiarizes students with their new environment and academic routines and is designed to help them become comfortable with each other. Through *Ice-Breaker* activities, students learn each other's names, make connections, and pave the way for enduring friendships and productive academic relationships.

Cohort grouping, another integral strategy at EECHS, further strengthens students' social relationships. By ensuring that the same group of students take classes together throughout the school year, EECHS increases students' opportunities to get to know each other. This purposeful class scheduling aligns with Erik Erikson's developmental theory, which suggests that during this stage, adolescents grapple with the crisis of "identity versus role confusion" and seek environments where they can form meaningful and purposeful relationships with peers (Erikson, 1968). The school's cohort grouping thus increases students' sense of belonging and contributes to their security in developing genuine relationships with their peers.

Students demonstrate independence and initiative in forming their own study groups to overcome academic challenges. These groups are born out of a shared goal of overcoming challenges to achieve academic success. On their own, students organize their study groups, determine meeting times and places, and collaborate to solve complex problems. Their initiative speaks to their resourcefulness and development of problem-solving skills and is a testament to the school's emphasis on fostering independent thinking and decision-making.

Focus-Group Question No. 9

In Question No. 9, I asked students: “Are there particular teachers, faculty, or staff at EECHS that you feel have made a difference or influenced your progress at EECHS?” A picture of teachers emerged from students' comments, suggesting that they offered more than just academic help. As well as being content specialists, EECHS teachers offer support and guidance in multiple areas, including personalized attention, mentorship, a culture of care, constant support, accountability, and preparation for college and life beyond high school. In this question, I discuss these themes further and examine their immediate impact and potential long-term effects as students transition from high school to college.

Personalized Attention. Personalized attention in an educational context refers to customizing teaching and learning practices to meet individual student's needs and interests. This pedagogical approach acknowledges that each student is unique and can benefit from different teaching styles, strategies, and resources.

At EECHS, personalized attention seems to be a cornerstone of the educational experience, perhaps partly attributed to the small school size. As evidenced by student testimonials, the teachers are deeply familiar with each student and know their names, strengths, weaknesses, and aspirations. This intimate knowledge allows teachers to tailor their teaching

strategies and give each student the support they need to thrive (Yonezawa et al., 2012). One senior stated: *"I like the size because the teachers know you, and they care. Like, I guess at other high schools, they do care. But here, you really feel it, and you know it, and they know your name. They know things about you, and they're always offering help and stuff. So that's what I like about being here because I always feel cared about by the teachers"* (Mia, FG 3).

Personalized attention can significantly impact a student's learning experience. The quality of the student-teacher relationship matters, and personalized attention can positively influence students' sense of belonging. When teachers modify their teaching practices to meet individual learning styles and needs, students will likely be more engaged, comprehend the material more effectively, and exhibit improved academic performance (Eccles & Roeser, 2011).

Mentorship. In an educational context, mentorship often involves a trusted teacher, counselor, or other school staff who provides students guidance, support, and encouragement. Mentorship can be academic advising, career counseling, emotional support, or simply being a positive role model. Research supports that support and guidance from caring adults help adolescents become responsible adults (DuBois et al., 2011; Grossman & Tierney, 1998).

As reflected in students' comments, EECHS teachers often act as mentors. Through sharing personal stories and informal conversations, they develop rapport with students and can provide advice not just on school matters but also on life issues. They talk with students about their struggles and help them find solutions or coping strategies. One senior stated about a faculty member: *"She was essentially my teacher. She was my mentor. So much of her advice was really, really important to how I looked at my other classes. And I would say she was even a motivator!"* (Jacob, FG 3). While teacher-student mentor relationships extend beyond expected and traditional roles, they provide an example of how schools can foster a supportive and

enriching environment that helps students thrive academically, personally, and emotionally (Chan et al., 2013).

A Culture of Care. A culture of care in an educational context refers to an environment such as a school or community where students feel valued, understood, and respected by teachers, staff, and their peers. In this culture, students' social and emotional needs are equally important to their academic success (Noddings, 2005). As discussed previously, student testimonials and sentiments from focus groups and personal interviews indicate that EECHS has successfully established a culture of care. Teachers and staff go above and beyond to ensure students feel seen, heard, and cared for.

Teachers take the time to get to know their students personally and actively provide them with emotional support and academic guidance. One senior stated about EECHS's teachers: *"They really do connect with you. If they see that you're struggling and even if it's not school related, they'll sit you down and they'll talk to you"* (Marta, FG 1). Student sentiments indicate that they feel cared for, have a sense of belonging, and feel accepted at EECHS. Research supports that students who feel cared for and experience a sense of belonging at their school have improved social, emotional, and academic outcomes (McNeely et al., 2002; Osterman, 2000).

Constant Support. Constant support in an educational context refers to the ongoing assistance, encouragement, and resources that teachers and staff provide to students to help them succeed academically, emotionally, and socially. At EECHS, students are presented with academic rigor and challenges, but their teachers support them to help solve academic and personal challenges. They have a network of people invested in their growth and willing to step in when needed, fostering a sense of security and confidence in their capacity to overcome challenges (Eccles & Roeser, 2011; Whitlock, 2006).

Constant support appears to be an integral part of the EECHS educational experience. From students' comments, teachers can be counted on to provide help, whether in class, during lunch, during free periods, or after school during tutorials. One student appreciated her teacher's open-door policy: *"His classroom was always open. If you wanted to get something done or if you had to stay after school to complete something because you weren't going to get it done at home. He was always very welcoming. You need to print something? He'd help you print it. He'd help you with anything you needed!"* (Charlotte, FG 6).

Another student felt he could count on any EECHS teacher for support: *"I think an important thing about our school is that there's always someone behind you for support... But it can always be whatever teacher from here"* (Samuel, FG 4). This immediate and broad access to academic help might help students feel less overwhelmed by challenging tasks and likely encourage them to solve academic problems promptly and effectively.

Accountability. Accountability in an educational context occurs when teachers expect students to meet clearly defined learning objectives, actively participate in their classes and learning, and demonstrate progress in their academic achievements. Holding students accountable also begins the process of teaching them about metacognition, or "thinking about their thinking," because it requires students to be responsible for their learning processes (Flavell, 1979). Part of becoming college ready and thus accountable requires students to learn to identify what needs to be learned, set goals, choose appropriate resources and strategies, and make adjustments as necessary or "self-regulate" their learning behaviors in pursuit of the objective (Bandura, 1986).

At EECHS, teachers seem to instill a sense of accountability in students. One student stated that her teachers sometimes encouraged and pestered her to stay after class and get caught

up: "After class, they'll be like, 'Hey, you stay! You need work!' or 'Come during my lunchtime!' or 'Come during my free periods' or 'You're really behind, do this!'" (Julie, FG 3). This direct teacher involvement and commitment to student success encourage students to take responsibility for their own learning. Holding students accountable for their academic progress helps develop discipline, time-management skills, and personal responsibility, all of which are crucial for college readiness and future endeavors (Conley, 2010; Pauk & Owens, 2013).

Preparation for College and Life Beyond High School. A key component of students' preparation for college and life beyond high school at EECHS is the AVID program. The AVID program is integral to the school's curriculum, where students learn critical thinking skills, develop effective study habits, explore colleges, universities, and plan their future careers as part of AVID's *Opportunity Knowledge* theme. For these first-generation college students, this opportunity knowledge represents the type of cultural capital that even more affluent students whose parents are college-educated might not have experience with. While Conley (2010) refers to AVID's opportunity knowledge as "college knowledge," with either term, students learn about colleges, financial aid, scholarships, and career opportunities and futures which they may not even have imagined (AVID CCR Framework, 2022; Bendall et al., 2015; Curry & Milsom, 2022).

The AVID program's focus on providing students with knowledge about future opportunities is an important part of the preparation for postsecondary education and a critical element of empowering students to be proactive and informed about their education and career paths. As previously mentioned, in their senior year, students engage in a year-long AVID IV activity called the Top-Ten University and Scholarship Project. During this intensive project, students investigate and apply to ten different colleges and universities, widening their horizons

and understanding of post-secondary opportunities. This project also involves applying for various scholarships for which they qualify, aiding their financial readiness for post-secondary education. One senior stated in a conversation she had with a student from another early college high school: *"We have a lot of support here. The teachers and the counselors help us a lot with our college applications and everything that we need!"* (Alexa, FG 2).

The AVID program does not operate in isolation; it collaborates with the English department to refine students' personal college essays, a key component of many college applications. This task equips seniors with the practical skill of writing an engaging and persuasive essay and fosters introspection, self-expression, and personal narrative development.

The result of the Top-Ten Project is that students graduate with more than just a high school diploma; they graduate with a solid plan for their future, letters of college acceptance, details of financial aid granted, and scholarship awards all of which are secured even before their commencement ceremony. This degree of preparedness sets them up for success in their immediate post-secondary educational journey and imparts invaluable skills and attitudes that will serve them well beyond college (Corwin & Tierney, 2007; Curry & Milsom, 2022).

Focus-Group Question No. 10

Focus Group Question No. 10 asked students, "Are there particular family members you feel encouraged or supported your progress at EECHS?" Students commented about how particular family members, such as their moms, dads, sisters, brothers, grandmothers, and grandfathers had encouraged them and supported their efforts at EECHS.

Parents and family members of EECHS students play a critical role in their child's academic, social, and emotional success. Children, particularly during their teenage years, often rely on their families for guidance, encouragement, and support. Despite the common adolescent

behavior of seemingly dismissing parental opinions, the underlying reality is that parental approval and affirmation are deeply significant and important to them.

During adolescence, teenagers navigate what renowned psychologist Erik Erikson called the *Identity vs. Role Confusion* stage of psychosocial development (Erikson, 1968). Erikson's theory, which continues to influence our understanding of human development significantly, outlines life as a series of stages, each characterized by a particular psychological conflict contributing to a major aspect of personality and growth.

According to Erikson, the principal task for the adolescent is to discover who they are, distinct and apart from their family, and how they fit into the broader world. This stage is centered on developing a unique and individual identity, about confronting the question, "Who am I?" It is a time when children start forming strong preferences and establishing their own unique identities and individuality as they grow toward young adulthood. They begin forming a sense of self grounded in their unique values, beliefs, and goals. Role confusion, on the other hand, arises when adolescents, challenged by the task of identity development, have difficulty "finding themselves," which can lead to an absence of personal identity or even the adoption of a negative identity, which sometimes might conflict with societal expectations.

The role of parents and family members is pivotal during this stage. Their support and guidance can help their child navigate these challenges while fostering the formation of a robust and positive sense of self. By engaging with their son or daughter's academic pursuits, recognizing their accomplishments, and showing appreciation for their efforts, parents and family members can help provide a secure base from which students can explore, experiment, and, ultimately, establish their own identity.

Focus-Group Question No. 11

In Question No. 11, I asked students: “Are there any particular classes at EECHS that you feel were helpful in preparing you for college classes?” Common topics and themes included English I and Book Talk, and AVID.

11-1. English I and Book Talk. English I and Book Talk illustrate how a high school class can emulate the rigor of Advanced Placement English and College English Composition I. Mrs. Nielsen uses an innovative approach to teaching that draws heavily from these advanced curriculums, promoting critical thinking and higher-order thinking skills that parallel the complexity found in college-level English courses.

The semester-long Book Talk project emphasizes evaluation, synthesis, and the types of higher-order thinking skills often required in AP and college English classes. In Book Talk, students must analyze and synthesize complex texts, form interpretations, and communicate their ideas effectively. The Book Talk project integrated within English I is emblematic of this rigor, requiring students to engage deeply with a full-length book and perform an extensive analysis of its themes and the literary techniques employed by the author.

The structure and nature of Mrs. Nielsen's English I and Book Talk project also closely align with the tenets and suggestions in a chapter entitled *Key Principles of College and Career Readiness* by David Conley (2010, p. 104). From an analysis of what high-performing high schools were doing differently than other, less successful high schools, Conley formulated seven key principles that high-performing high schools have in common. Key Principle Number Five states: "Create Assignments and Grading Policies That More Closely Approximate College Expectations Each Successive Year of High School" (Conley, 2010, p. 121).

In this principle, Conley states: "One of the most traumatic experiences first-year college students encounter is the difference in instructor expectations on exams and papers between high school and college courses" (p. 121). Throughout this chapter, Conley emphasizes that the disparity between high school rigor and college rigor can be mitigated if students are exposed to academic rigor and critical thinking during their high school years.

Throughout English I and their Book Talk project, students are introduced to challenging intellectual concepts and learn to manage multiple due dates and rigorous coursework, all skills necessary for navigating the college experience. These skills and experiences help to smooth their transition into higher education and equip them with essential academic skills for the future.

Moreover, the requirement for timeliness and the high expectations in English I closely mirrors Conley's assertion that college coursework often involves fewer assignments, each with greater weight, strict guidelines regarding academic honesty, and the expectation of original and critical thinking. By designing her English I class using these principles, Mrs. Nielsen effectively replicates college academic expectations, thus preparing her students for the demands they will face in their future studies.

Finally, research shows that high school classes with high academic rigor, such as Mrs. Nielsen's English I and Book Talk, can positively impact students' postsecondary success (Berger et al., 2013; Edmunds, Unlu, et al., 2017). Students who experience this level of rigor in high school are more prepared for the demands of university education and are more likely to succeed. By providing students with opportunities to engage in in-depth, analytical discussions of complex texts and honing their critical thinking, writing, and time-management skills, EECHS is cultivating a new generation of college-ready students ready to excel in their postsecondary endeavors.

11-2. AVID. While AVID was created in 1980 by Mary Catherine Swanson, AVID's WICOR instructional framework continued to evolve throughout the decade and mirrored the emerging trends of constructivism and learner-centered instructional approaches. Promoted by educational scholars and theorists such as Jean Piaget, Jerome Bruner, and Lev Vygotsky, constructivism emphasizes that learners actively construct knowledge from their interactions with their environment. Constructivism rejects the notion of the "tabula rasa" or blank slate, underscoring that learners are not empty vessels to be filled with information but active participants in their learning process. Learners build or construct new knowledge based on what they already know, either by assimilating new information into their existing schema, or adjusting their mental models to accommodate unfamiliar ideas. This process of assimilation and accommodation is at the heart of constructivism, suggesting that learning is dynamic and interactive rather than passive.

AVID employs principles of constructivism throughout its WICOR framework. This framework encourages students to engage with materials and build their understanding actively. Students *Write* to express their thoughts, *Inquire* to explore new ideas, *Collaborate* to learn from others, *Organize* to manage their learning process, and *Read* to absorb knowledge. These activities help integrate and consolidate students' existing knowledge, resulting in meaningful, self-constructed learning experiences.

The College Fair presentation is a comprehensive assignment based on AVID's *Opportunity Knowledge* theme which encourages sophomores to fully engage with the WICOR framework. Mrs. Arnold's AVID II College Fair rubric outlines the elements students must investigate: college demographics, tuition costs, admission requirements, and notable programs and college majors of interest. To complete their presentations, students *Write* extensively to

develop their thoughts and findings, *Inquire* by asking pertinent questions and researching their chosen college, *Collaborate* by dividing tasks and integrating individual work into a cohesive presentation, *Organize* by structuring their findings and planning their presentation, and *Read* extensively to gather and comprehend information.

The College Fair project is an AVID activity firmly rooted in constructivist learning principles, involving sophomores and freshmen in active learning and knowledge construction. Sophomores learn through assimilating and presenting new information in a meaningful, purposeful activity with tangible implications for their college futures. Simultaneously, freshmen learn by observing and evaluating College Fair presentations, giving them a head start in preparing for their own future college endeavors.

Focus-Group Question No. 12

In Question No. 12, I asked students: “Looking back at your freshman year, what advice would you offer to an incoming EECHS freshman?” Common topics and themes included Don’t Procrastinate, Ask for Help, and Join a Club.

12-1. Don't Procrastinate. Seniors stated that "Don't Procrastinate" was the most important advice they might offer incoming freshmen. Seniors also acknowledged that they remember being warned by seniors in their junior year about not procrastinating, yet they still had difficulty in following this advice.

Procrastination is considered an aspect of time management, as previously discussed in Ch. V: 3-3. Time Management. To paraphrase renowned management consultant Peter Drucker, "One cannot manage time; one can only manage oneself with respect to time" (Drucker & Collins, 2017). BECH seniors have learned from their own experiences of poor time

management how it negatively affected the quality of their academic work, their grade point average, their relationships, and how their mental health and well-being suffered.

For example, Julie (FG 3) described her experience of procrastination as similar to a snowball rolling down a hill and gradually gathering size and an enormous momentum until it finally achieved an overwhelming mass. The rigor and intensity of the college academic environment require students to develop effective time management techniques to avoid procrastination and the "*snowball effect*" which Julie described.

Drucker's assertion that "one can only manage oneself with respect to time" is yet another way of describing self-regulation, the central topic in Steinberg's *The Age of Opportunity* (2014), previously discussed in Ch. V: 3-3 Time Management. Steinberg offers two recommendations regarding self-regulation: First, that self-regulation should be the primary goal for adolescents; Second, that self-regulation is an objective well worth pursuing by those involved with the growth and development of adolescents, including teachers, parents, and health professionals such as school counselors.

12-2. Ask for Help. Seniors mentioned how important asking for help was yet stated that asking for help was still difficult for them. *Ask for Help* was the second-most common suggestion students made, with *Don't Procrastinate* occupying first place as the most important advice for freshmen.

As discussed previously in Ch. IV: 4-2. Student-Teacher connection, student comments, and sentiments were interpreted through three different "lenses," including Maslow's Hierarchy of Human Needs, AVID's Relational Capacity, and Nel Noddings's Ethics of Care. Interpreting Ch. IV: 12-2. Ask For Help comments through Noddings's Ethics of Care is revealing in terms of

the implications of student comments. Table 55, Ch. IV: 12-2. illustrates Ask for Help comments and Noddings's Ethics of Care Interpretation.

Table 55: Ch. IV. 12-2. Ask for Help and Noddings's Ethics of Care Interpretation

Ch. IV: 12-2. Ask For Help	Nel Noddings's Ethics of Care Interpretation
<p>"Don't be afraid to ask for help, because the teachers are there to help you. And Ms. Jacobs, she would stay till 5:30 for math tutorials, and whoever went, she would be there helping them. Every teacher is there to help you, and if you go ask for the help, they'll help you" (Joseph, FG 1).</p>	<p>Here, Mrs. Jacobs demonstrates Engrossment in staying late to offer math tutorials. Her willingness to help also shows Motivational Displacement, putting students' needs before her own. It demonstrates both Ethical Caring (her duty as a teacher) and Natural Caring (her personal desire to see her students succeed).</p>
<p>"I remember one day in Mr. Smith's class I asked a question, and I was super nervous, too. But I realized, no one actually cares. And everyone wants you to ask the question because no one else knows the answer, either" (Mia, FG 3).</p>	<p>This experience reveals a nurturing Dialogue between Mr. Smith and his students, fostering an environment in which students feel safe to ask questions. This shows Engrossment as Mr. Smith creates a learning environment that caters to students' needs, and it may also suggest Motivational Displacement as he creates a comfortable environment for learning.</p>

What is most important about these students' sentiments is that in each case, teachers have intentionally shown that they care by directly responding to the individual student or by creating a safe and supportive classroom atmosphere where students are encouraged to ask questions. At EECHS, the student-teacher connection is strong through relationships and relationship capacity developed over time. However, this does not address a fundamental reason that I believe may play an important role in determining whether students feel at ease about asking for help in and outside the classroom.

As previously discussed, psychologist and researcher Carol Dweck, in her book *Mindset: The New Psychology of Success* (2007), proposes that people's thoughts, attitudes, and beliefs

about intelligence influence their motivation and persistence in learning. A student with a fixed mindset might believe that their ability, intelligence, and talent are fixed traits and, therefore, unalterable. In contrast, a student with a growth mindset might believe their abilities and intelligence are malleable and can be developed through dedication and hard work. Students with a growth mindset thus view intelligence and talent as starting points, not fixed endpoints, and that learning can be changed through effort. By implication, students hesitant to ask for help may have a fixed mindset about learning, which unknowingly influences their general behaviors and attitudes about learning and asking questions.

The question then arises, what can be done to address students' fixed mindset beliefs? Yeager and Walton found that small interventions can sometimes reap big returns. The types of interventions that Yeager and Walton discuss in *Social-Psychological Interventions in Education: They're Not Magic* (2011) do not teach students academic content per se, but rather target student psychology and belief structures such as what Dweck proposes.

Yeager and Walton provide background by discussing how in the medical field simple solutions can sometimes result in great benefits. Several years ago, a particular type of medical intervention was introduced in a study conducted in eight major hospitals worldwide by the World Health Organization. The intervention was remarkably simple but effective in greatly reducing patient mortality rates and medical complications. Before any surgery, doctors and nurses followed a one-page checklist which included introducing themselves to each other, following a detailed timeline for administering antiseptics, and other types of common procedures pertaining to surgery. As a result of this simple intervention, surgical complications were reduced by 36%, and deaths were reduced by 47% (Haynes et al., 2009). Medical

professionals and others in the field wondered and were perplexed at how a seemingly simple element, such as a checklist, could greatly affect patient outcomes.

Some pronounced the checklist as a "classic magic bullet" (Aaronovitch, 2010; others described it as "[not] Harry Potter's magic wand" (Szalavitz, 2009). The creator of the checklist (Gawande, 2009) argued that peoples' disbelief that such a simple solution could have such beneficial patient outcomes might be because many people may have preconceived notions that doctors already practice the procedures included in the checklist.

Gawande asserted that with a better understanding of why this simple checklist produced such beneficial results, the medical community might be empowered to codify this technique as a standard surgical operating protocol (Gawande, 2009, p. 159). In education, Yeager and Walton found similar phenomena occurring in studies where students were prepared in advance with what the authors called *Social-psychological interventions* (Yeager & Walton, 2011). Yeager and Walton describe these studies as brief exercises that do not teach academic content but instead focus on affecting students' thoughts, emotions, and beliefs.

In one of these social-psychological interventions, middle-school math students participated in an eight-week workshop where they learned that their brain was like a muscle and would grow with effort. These students displayed a marked increase in their math achievement for the remainder of the school year, in contrast with a control group who had learned about study skills in workshops and whose math scores showed no significant improvement (Blackwell et al., 2007). Yeager and Walton discuss several other social-psychological interventions which yielded similar increases in learning. This suggests that classroom time spent on social-psychological interventions, such as teaching students about the differences between a fixed-mindset and a growth-mindset, might increase their ease about asking for help in the classroom

and influence their attitude towards learning in general. Carol Dweck's fixed-mindset and growth-mindset are supported by the AVID curriculum and taught at EECHS (Bendall et al., 2015).

12-3. Join A Club. The third most important piece of advice seniors felt would be valuable for freshmen was Join a Club. Clubs and extracurricular organizations are very important at EECHS and were previously discussed in Ch. V: 3-2. Clubs Are Important.

Tinto's Student Integration Model was previously discussed in Ch. V: 7. Here, I will discuss student involvement in clubs and extracurricular organizations in relation to Tinto's Student Integration Model.

Tinto's Student Integration Model (Figure 13) posits that student persistence to graduation is strongly influenced by academic and social integration. Because EECHS's school mission is to ensure college readiness, fine arts are not supported by the district. However, teacher sponsorship and student participation in clubs and extracurricular activities are very high, as previously discussed in Ch. V: 3-2. Clubs Are Important.

Tinto asserts that Social Integration plays an important role in students' social and emotional well-being. In addition, he states that membership and participation in extracurricular organizations are vital to students' overall educational development. He also argues that students are more likely to persist and graduate when they feel a strong sense of belonging and engagement with their educational institution. Through committed teachers and enthusiastic and engaged students, the extensive extracurricular and club program at EECHS illustrates a tangible example of this theory in practice.

EECHS students are immersed in an environment where not only are they encouraged to pursue their academic aspirations, but they are also urged to engage in extracurricular activities.

According to Tinto, these activities are considered Formal because they are organized and supervised by a teacher and occur regularly on campus. Informal Peer Group interactions refer to students meeting in an informal social context, drawn together through a shared mutual interest.

Participation in extracurricular activities and clubs fosters community, friendship, and mutual respect among the students. Participation in these activities encourages students to feel more connected with their peers, thus enhancing their sense of belonging and social integration within the school. It also cultivates a sense of responsibility and commitment, ultimately contributing to their persistence toward graduation.

Informal Faculty/Staff Interactions, another crucial aspect of Tinto's theory, are also facilitated through these extracurricular activities and clubs. Teachers who sponsor these activities create opportunities to interact informally with students outside the regular classroom setting. These less structured interactions help create a more personalized, supportive, and inclusive school environment. As these bonds strengthen, students feel more attached to their school, likely influencing student persistence and graduation rates.

Teachers' commitment to sponsoring multiple clubs and extracurricular organizations is admirable. Their involvement and sponsorship demonstrate a dedication to providing a well-rounded educational experience, thus indirectly endorsing the school's mission of college readiness. EECHS actively promotes Social Integration by emphasizing clubs and extracurricular organizations, thus creating an environment where students are more likely to succeed and persist toward graduation. By fostering formal and informal interactions among students and between students and faculty, EECHS effectively aids students' persistence and graduation. This emphasis on social integration and a rigorous academic program helps to explain the high degree of student persistence and graduation at EECHS.

Focus-Group Question No. 13

In Question No. 13 I asked students: “Looking back on our discussion today, what in your opinion is most important? Are there other things that you would like to add? Have we missed anything?” Common topics and themes included The EECHS Community, and School Size Matters.

13-1. The EECHS Community. While there are many definitions of the term community, Noddings takes care to point out that a community is more than just a group of friendly people gathered in one place. To illustrate her point, she provides a quote by authors Robert Bellah and Richard Madsen:

...a community is a group of people who are socially interdependent, who participate together in discussion and decision making, and who share certain practices that both define the community and are nurtured by it. Such a community is not quickly formed. It almost always has a history and so is also a community of memory, defined in part by its past and its memory of its past. (Bellah & Madsen, 1985, p. 323)

EECHS students and teachers develop social relationships largely based on their experiences together in the classroom. Teachers purposefully take the time to involve students in class discussions, listen to them, and provide meaningful feedback and comments. As previously discussed, Relational Capacity, or the degree of safety and trust that is established between student and teacher, and teacher and student, is developed over time through meaningful experiences in the classroom (Bendall et al, 2015). These experiences are shared by students and teachers on the EECHS campus, thus helping to shape, define, and nurture the EECHS community.

Each year seniors thrill to see their portraits featured on the Wall of Fame long hallway entrance area to EECHS, where graduating seniors' school pictures, college choices, and scholarship awards are displayed. Of particular importance to seniors, underclassmen see in a tangible way what lies in their future. Memories are reflected on these walls, and then saved for the future in EECHS's annual yearbook. Following the annual commencement ceremony, yet another successful senior class graduates taking with them memories of the EECHS community.

13-2. School Size Matters. Seniors often mentioned how EECHS's small school size was a contributing factor in their decision to enroll. One student stated: *"Oh, the first reason is because my mom wanted me to enter a small high school because I come from a very small middle school, a charter school. So, she didn't want to surprise me with a big school"* (Beatriz, FG 2).

Other students stated that EECHS's small school size helps them to become familiar with everyone, develop friendships, and get to know their teachers better. One student stated: *"...Our class is so small, so we know all the students. So, you see everyone, and you get to talk to everyone, at least at this school, multiple times. So, I just feel everyone's there to support you"* (Alexa, FG 2).

Schools are much more than just classrooms and books; they present opportunities and environments where students can grow, bond, and discover who they are. In smaller schools like EECHS, students and teachers have the time get to know each other better. What this also means is that in the classroom context, teachers are more able to detect when a student seems lost in a lesson or doesn't comprehend a particular topic. In essence, in a smaller school, teachers have more time to ensure that students understand the material thoroughly and without being rushed. In a smaller school, teachers can "uncover" material, rather than just "cover" material.

An additional perk of a smaller school size is that there are more opportunities for students to take on leadership roles in clubs and extracurricular activities. Such experiences build confidence and social skills while they expand and develop their leadership experience. In essence, the close-knit nature of small schools like EECHS provides unique benefits that help students thrive both academically and personally.

Part Two: Faculty

Faculty Data Questionnaire Analysis

No. 1. What Is Your Age? Most teachers at EECHS are between the ages of 41-50. Specifically, the largest group of teachers is between 46-50. This makes the average age of teachers at EECHS a bit older than the national average, which is not surprising since EECHS encourages its teachers to have advanced degrees, which take more time. Generally, older teachers bring more experience and skills to the classroom, though effectiveness can vary.

No. 2. Teacher Gender. Most of the teachers at EECHS are female. In fact, there is a slightly higher percentage of female teachers at EECHS than the national average. Historically, more women have gone into teaching, but it is beneficial for students to see a variety of role models, perspectives, and equal representation of genders in the classroom.

No. 3. Teacher Ethnicity. Almost all the teachers at EECHS identify as Hispanic, which matches the local Rio Grande Valley demographics. However, having diverse schools can benefit students by preparing them for a multicultural world. Studies also show that students benefit from having teachers of the same gender and ethnicity as themselves.

No. 4. Educational Background of Parents. Survey data indicates a trend toward higher parental education among EECHS teachers. Specifically, over 60% reported a parent with a master's degree. This background reflects the established correlation between parental education

and children's academic outcomes. Given that well-educated parents often possess more academic and financial resources, it is likely these teachers benefited from a supportive learning environment. Such familial emphasis on education likely informs their teaching approach at EECHS, fostering high expectations and academic support for their students.

No. 5. How many years have you been in public education? Most EECHS teachers have a rich history in public education, with nearly 40% having dedicated 19 or more years. This deep-rooted commitment highlights the value these teachers place on public education as a means to uplift society. Those dedicating many years in the profession often see education as an equalizer, allowing students from varied backgrounds an opportunity to succeed. The dedication these teachers show emphasizes a belief in education as a catalyst for societal change.

No. 6. How many years have you taught at EECHS? The teaching experience at EECHS spans various durations, from newcomers to those who have been there since the school's early days. Notably, over a third of the teachers have been at EECHS for 13-15 years, making them foundational pillars, having witnessed the school's evolution and carrying its institutional memory. On the other end, the newest faculty members, those with 1-3 years of experience, introduce fresh perspectives and contemporary teaching methodologies. Teachers with a mid-range experience, from 4-9 years, bridge the gap between these two groups, ensuring an integration of EECHS's foundational ethos with modern pedagogical approaches.

No. 7. What is the highest academic degree that you have earned? The data reveals a high proportion of EECHS teachers with advanced degrees, which speaks to the school's culture of continued professional development. Such an environment not only amplifies academic achievement but also showcases the value of prolonged education and demonstrates the school's commitment to providing an enriched learning atmosphere. This commitment, stemming from

advanced pedagogical insights attained through higher academic degrees, serves as an example to students, emphasizing the tangible benefits of extended academic pursuits. Furthermore, with a significant majority of teachers holding Master's degrees, students are exposed to in-depth subject knowledge, enhanced teaching techniques, and an environment that champions continuous learning and reflective practice.

No. 8. Have you ever participated in an AVID Summer Institute? A majority of EECHS teachers have engaged in the AVID Summer Institute, highlighting the school's dedication to the AVID philosophy and methodology. This commitment ensures that students at EECHS receive a consistent instructional approach, aligning with the AVID strategies and tenets. Given that AVID Summer Institutes provide both an overview of AVID's core philosophy and subject-specific methodologies, teachers at EECHS are well-equipped to integrate AVID principles across various subjects, creating a comprehensive and consistent learning experience for students.

No. 9. When did you last participate in an AVID Summer Institute? The data provides insights into the timeline of AVID training among EECHS teachers. A continued engagement with the AVID Summer Institute across various years indicates that EECHS values consistent professional development within the AVID framework. Recent training for some teachers signifies the school's commitment to remain updated with the latest AVID strategies and techniques. While a bulk of teachers participated three to four years ago, suggesting a possible concentrated training effort during that period, those who attended six or more years ago might benefit from a refresher, ensuring they remain current with evolving AVID methodologies. EECHS's periodic emphasis on AVID training underscores its dedication to the program's

fidelity and highlights the school's commitment to ensuring a cohesive instructional approach rooted in the AVID philosophy.

No. 10. How would you rate the academic ability of most of the students in one of your typical classes? The results from Question No. 10 indicate a perception among EECHS teachers that a majority of their students possess either a high or average academic ability. This is significant, considering the demographic target of EECHS is "students in the middle" or "average" B and C students. The elevated perception of academic capability indicates a successful transition of these students, which might be attributed to several factors including an enabling environment which enhances student potential allowing them to outperform their initial academic categorization; diverse academic backgrounds drawn from multiple districts which offer varied perspectives and experiences; and the early college high school experience itself. Because EECHS provides an enriched and accelerated learning environment, students rise to new levels of academic and personal growth.

No. 11. Select the best response to the following statement: AVID helps students develop the organizational skills necessary for my class. Question No. 11 asked teachers to indicate the degree to which they agreed or disagreed with the question using a Likert-style format. A significant number of teachers (92.31%) either "Agree Highly" or "Agree" with the statement that AVID helps students develop necessary organizational skills for their classes. This feedback suggests that students' consistent four-year exposure to AVID results in observable improvement in student organizational abilities. Teachers' positive response also suggests that the financial and time investments EECHS makes in sending teachers for AVID training are visibly paying off and recognized by the majority of teachers. Additionally, AVID's benefits extend beyond academic skills. By enhancing students' non-cognitive skills such as organization

and time-management, EECHS is preparing its students for the challenges of higher education and the professional world.

No. 12. Select the best response to the following statement: Students use AVID Writing and Reading strategies in my class. Question No. 12 asked teachers to indicate the degree to which they agreed or disagreed with the question using a Likert-style format. A majority of teachers (84.61%) either "Agree Highly" or "Agree" that students actively employ AVID's writing and reading strategies in their classes. The high percentage of agreement showcases the success of AVID in ensuring students adopt and apply its strategies across different academic disciplines. The 7.69% who "Disagree" offer a potential area of improvement. EECHS can delve deeper into these cases to ensure AVID's methodologies are effective across all subject areas and resonate with all teaching styles.

The story of Mary Catherine Swanson, an English teacher and the creator of AVID, provides context. The emphasis on writing and reading strategies aligns with her original intent for AVID which was to provide support for rigorous content. This is reflected in the feedback from EECHS teachers, demonstrating the continued relevance and efficacy of Swanson's original vision.

No. 13. Select the best response to the following statement: Students use Inquiry and Collaboration to promote critical thinking in my class. In question No. 13, teachers were asked to reflect on the extent to which students in their classrooms use inquiry and collaboration as tools to foster critical thinking. The overwhelming majority of teachers responded positively. Specifically, 92.31% of the teachers indicated either "Agree Highly" or simply "Agree," confirming that they witness these methods effectively cultivating critical thinking skills in their students. This majority consensus underscores the emphasis EECHS places on collaborative

learning and inquiry-based approaches, both of which are instrumental in developing students' cognitive abilities. Notably, no teachers expressed any level of disagreement, highlighting a consistent perspective across respondents. However, one response, possibly from a counselor, was marked as "Does Not Apply." This is understandable given their role which may not directly involve overseeing typical classroom teaching methods. The findings from this question solidify the perception that EECHS is a school where collaboration and inquiry are foundational to the learning process.

No. 14. Select the best response for the following statement: Students use my classroom at lunchtime to eat and socialize. In response to question No. 14, teachers provided insights into how frequently students use their classrooms for lunch and socialization. A notable proportion, specifically 23.08%, shared their classrooms almost every day for this purpose. Another 15.38% of teachers reported this occurs several times a week. These figures not only underscore the fact that classrooms are an essential part of students' daily routines, but also speak to the caring nature of EECHS educators. By sharing their classrooms at lunch, they extend an unspoken gesture of trust and care, transforming these academic spaces into nurturing environments that support student interaction.

That the majority of teachers at EECHS allow students to eat lunch in their classrooms suggests that they are fostering strong student-teacher connections. This classroom sharing extends the classroom's function beyond a place of formal instruction into a more personal and social space. It can offer students a sense of security and belonging and can also provide an environment where students may feel more comfortable seeking help or advice.

Eating together is a universally recognized bonding activity that can contribute to creating a sense of community. By inviting students to share their lunchtime in the classroom,

teachers can foster informal interactions, leading to better rapport and a more profound understanding of their students. These informal interactions may offer opportunities to learn about students' interests, worries, aspirations, and challenges outside the formal context of classroom instruction. This additional context can help teachers tailor their teaching to better meet the students' needs and connect the curriculum with students' lives.

No. 15. How many clubs or extracurricular organizations do you sponsor? Question No. 15 asked teachers to indicate how many clubs or extracurricular organizations they sponsored by indicating One Club, Two Clubs, Three Clubs, Four Clubs, or Does Not Apply. Teacher responses reveal a notable commitment on their part to sponsor and support the school's clubs and extracurricular activities. The majority of teachers surveyed sponsor more than one club, which is a significant investment of their time and energy, especially considering that these are volunteer positions and receive no additional compensation.

Moreover, this high level of teacher participation through sponsorship suggests a deep commitment to fostering student engagement and Social Integration, aligning with Tinto's theory. It demonstrates that EECHS's teachers see value in contributing to the social fabric of the school, recognizing the importance of clubs and extracurricular activities in student development, engagement, and persistence to graduation.

No. 16. How often does your club or extracurricular organization meet during the week? Question No. 16 asked teachers to indicate how often their club or extracurricular organization met during the week. Teachers indicated by selecting either Three Times A Week, Twice A Week, Once A Week, or Does Not Apply. The fact that club meetings occur with different frequencies reflects the diversity of clubs and extracurricular activities offered at the school. While some clubs like Mock Trial and National Honor society require more intense

preparation and regular meetings, others may have fewer requirements, allowing for less frequent meetings. The voluntary nature of these clubs also plays a role in the frequency of meetings. Teachers and students who are passionate about a particular area or topic may choose to meet more frequently, while other clubs may not require or desire to meet as often.

In the small learning community at EECHS, clubs and extracurricular activities play a pivotal role in student development and enrichment. Notably, the school boasts more than nineteen different clubs and extracurricular activities, all of which thrive because of the commitment and dedication of the teachers who voluntarily contribute their skills and talents.

No. 17. Select the best response for the following statement: I believe that the students who graduate from EECHS are ready for college. Question No. 17 asked teachers to rate their students' college readiness by indicating Agree Highly, Agree, Disagree, Disagree Highly, or selecting Other. Nine teachers (69.23%) indicated Agree Highly, while four (30.77%) indicated Agree. No teachers selected Disagree, Disagree Highly, or Other. Teachers' unanimous belief in students' college readiness is affirmed yearly at the EECHS Commencement, where students receive their associate's degree, 42 core university credits, and congratulations as they continue forward on their higher education journey.

AVID Personal Interview Analysis

A major premise of AVID is that secondary students from lower socioeconomic levels, of color, and first-generation status are capable of meeting the challenges of rigorous college coursework if given adequate support. Several facets of this premise need further explanation.

First, teacher beliefs and high expectations of their students is imperative. While Rosenberg and Jacobson's *Pygmalion in the Classroom: Teacher Expectation and Pupil's Intellectual Development* (1968) has been criticized for methodological and other issues (Jussim,

1989; Thorndike, 1968), the results of their study indicating that teacher expectations influence student behavior and achievement is supported (Brophy and Good, 1972; Hattie, 2008; Rosenthal, 2002).

However, merely believing in students and having high expectations for them is no guarantee of college readiness. All four AVID teachers described not only their high expectations for their students, but also shared with me the specific topics such as WICOR as well as specific study habits and techniques that they teach as part of their particular AVID grade level. Their consistency of approach in teaching these techniques and methodologies school-wide is made visible by the success of their students who tend to excel in their college classes.

Second, the degree and quality of rigorous coursework presented to students is directly related to the educational level of the teachers employed. At EECHS, teachers must be, as EECHS first principal Mrs. Sutter stated, "content experts." As the teacher data questionnaire indicated, the majority of EECHS teachers have master's degrees which enables them to scaffold and leverage their instruction to improve student outcomes. That eleven teachers interviewed had master's degrees demonstrates their personal commitment to higher education and continuing personal development.

Finally, AVID teachers at EECHS all believe and adhere to the AVID philosophy that academic rigor and high expectations coupled with support equal student success. All four AVID teachers work collaboratively with core-area teachers to ensure that students attend extra tutorials in content areas, prepare for AVID Ten-Step Tutorials, and learn and apply the non-cognitive factors or "college knowledge" which Conley (2010) and Bendall et al. (2015) refer to such as time-management, organizational techniques, and goal-setting.

English and Mathematics Personal Interview Analysis

Mrs. Nielsen. Mrs. Nielsen exemplifies a teacher who believes that her students are capable of high academic achievement despite their low socioeconomic backgrounds and minority, often first-generation status. Exasperated by other teachers assuming that EECHS does well because it receives only the brightest students in the district, she stated: *"How does it explain my Special Education Students doing well? How does it explain my Autistic kids doing this? How about my 504's? My English as a Second Language students?"*

As the type of content expert Mrs. Sutter emphasized in her recruitment of EECHS teachers, Mrs. Nielsen uses her master's degree training to modify and adapt the curriculum to scaffold student learning. Mrs. Nielsen also voices high expectations and "remolds" students' belief systems and mindsets by providing them with step-by-step successful learning activities resulting in the types of mastery experiences Bandura emphasizes in his book *Self-Efficacy: The Exercise of Control* (1997). In describing her strong sense of self-efficacy and how it affects others, she stated: *"Teacher efficacy affects student efficacy. If the teacher is not in it and the teacher is not invested, the student is not going to be invested, because it trickles down, and it becomes a Domino effect!"* (Mrs. Nielsen, PI 1).

Mrs. Jacobs. Mathematics teacher Mrs. Jacobs shows due diligence in diagnosing student areas of mathematical deficiencies before her students even enter her classroom. Aware that freshmen often begin at EECHS with gaps in their math backgrounds, Mrs. Jacob conducts research on students' middle school grades prior to their first semester at EECHs so that she can plan ahead and formulate her lessons accordingly.

Mrs. Jacobs stated that one of the biggest challenges that students face when they begin studying with her is the negative experiences that they may have had previously with

mathematics and resulting loss of self-efficacy. She described how mathematics is sometimes referred to perjoratively as the "Patito Feo" or Ugly Duckling of academic subjects because of the difficulties that students often experience.

One of her most important roles, she stressed, was to build up student self-confidence through carefully guided mastery learning experiences. Mrs. Jacobs emphasizes Dweck's growth-mindset by assuring students that they can learn and master mathematics as long as they are persistent, and consistent (2007). She stated *"Always think high and that you can do it. Even though you don't believe in yourself, I believe in you!"* (Mrs. Jacobs, PI 1).

Administrator Personal Interview Analysis

Mr. Reynolds. Upon becoming acquainted with the early college high school, Mr. Reynolds saw that it could make a difference in the lives of the students in the Rio Independent School District. With this vision and through personal initiative working within district and state guidelines and requirements, Mr. Reynolds successfully wrote a grant that showed the need for and benefits of the early college high school in his district. As a result of the grant award, EECHS was created, and then further plans came into play for its creation and implementation.

Mr. Reynolds stated regarding his motivation for writing the grant: *"Well, my biggest reason for wanting to pursue it was, you know, the low socioeconomic conditions the majority of our students are in. And the fact that the vast majority of them would be first-generation college-going students. And so, I thought we had a tremendous need for it. And I thought it would be an opportunity, especially when you have an early college high school, you're not supposed to be recruiting the brains at the campus. You're supposed to be recruiting those middle of the road kids who might not have ever thought of going to college as an option for them! So, I thought that was a fantastic model for us to be pushing in our district because almost all of our students*

fell into that criteria. They didn't have the push or maybe they didn't have the parents at home thinking that it was important. They didn't have the idea, like I said, that they could even go to college or that that was even an option for them" (Mr. Reynolds, PI 1).

The initial resistance that many Texas Valley University and Texas Community College faculty displayed regarding the school district's creation of an early college high school is not uncommon. Their expectations that low-income, first-generation students of color would be unsuccessful in college continues the deficit thinking mindset that Valencia (1997; 2010), Dudley-Marling (2007; 2015), and others describe. What is notable is that once the university's president stated that the university definitely would support Excelencia Early College High School, university and community college faculty members complied.

Dudley-Marling in *The Resilience of Deficit Thinking* states: "Children living in poverty are not lacking in language or cognition. They are deficient, however, in opportunities for thoughtful, engaging learning" (2015, p. 10). Mrs. Sutter voiced much the same sentiment when she stated: "...*Just because you're in poverty, or you're a minority, doesn't make you stupid!*" Both Mr. Reynolds and Mrs. Sutter demonstrated an asset-minded, growth mindset that their district's lower-income students would be successful with the rigorous early college high school curriculum provided that they were supported in their efforts.

Mrs. Sutter. As EECHS's first principal and a late hire, Mrs. Sutter literally "began at the very beginning" and was involved in the entire process of selecting an initial school site, deciding upon an alternate school site after the initial site proved a liability, planning the school's curriculum, vetting and hiring teachers and staff, and opening the school all done rapidly in preparation for the incoming freshmen students in the fall of 2008.

A major responsibility of Rio Independent School District school principals involves the interviewing and selection of teachers and staff. Out of necessity, Mrs. Sutter established certain criteria for hiring potential EECHS teachers including: (a) all teachers had to believe that students would be successful with a rigorous college preparatory curriculum; (b) all teachers had to be experts in their content area; and (c) all teachers should have a master's degree or be in the process of obtaining one. Mrs. Sutter stated that EECHS teachers "*...had to be very vested in their belief that these students could do it, and had to be content experts, and have master's degrees if possible*" (Mrs. Sutter, PI 1).

The students at EECHS with a C or, at most, a B grade point average represent one of the other intended targets of the early college high school. AVID founder Mary Catherine Swanson calls this student population "the forgotten middle." She stated:

Who are these forgotten middle students? Generally, they're the silent majority- the kids who come to school regularly, sit in the back of the class, rarely say anything, don't cause trouble, and get by with C's. They are not failing, nor are they the math whiz or star pupil. They are nearly invisible. Their parents and teachers are content that they are making it through and no alarm bells are going off. They constitute a large part of the middle two quartiles of students. They'll graduate, but won't be prepared for college. And many of them will wander around for years in dead-end jobs. (Swanson, 2005, p. 2)

Mrs. Sutter, like Mr. Reynolds, was well acquainted with her district's student population and could see that the early college high school was a good match for empowering the district's underachieving students to excel and go to college. Regarding this fit, Mrs. Sutter stated: "*I knew it would benefit the Gifted and Talented type of child and certainly, of course, the Honors type of*

child. But in thinking about students that were struggling learners... And then this little light flipped on fairly early in the process! Wait a minute. You're talking about the really... The non-performers! They're very bright, but they have no desire to be identified as Honors or GT kids. This is the kid that blows off school and gets behind in school and could definitely benefit from accelerating themselves out of middle school and then right on through into college. And once that light bulb came on, it was just like, 'Well, of course I know what kind of student I'm looking for. These are kids that are capable, but they're just not performing!'" (Mrs. Sutter, PI 1).

Mrs. Sutters' description of the RISD student population and Mary Catherine Swansons's portrayal of "the forgotten middle students" indicate a strong match between the early college high school's targeted school population and the Rio Independent School District's demographics. Both Mrs. Sutter's and Mr. Reynold's assessment of the appropriateness of the early college high school for their district has been validated by the continuing success of Excelencia Early College High School students.

Part Three: Documents and Other Media Review

In this study, a stringent qualitative analysis of documents involving coding was not considered necessary, and so I prefer to use the term *Document and Other Media Review*. Document and Other Media Review involves an examination of the various documents and other media with a goal of providing context and corroboration of participant comments.

Documents and other media that might be included in a research study fulfill an important role as they can help illustrate in tangible forms various topics contained within the study. I initially underestimated the value of this category until I began closely examining EECHS's yearbooks. As I looked through more than ten years' worth of these historical documents, I witnessed and could gauge the growth and development of EECHS through the

pages that accumulated. Each year, yearbooks became more populated with additional students, faculty, clubs, extracurricular activities, pictures of student life, and contemporary trends and events of the day. I experienced EECHS's yearbooks as a time traveler, albeit from an etic perspective. Still, viewing these yearbooks gave me a rare, personal, and inside look into the culture, ethos, and psyche of the EECHS phenomenon.

Bowen (2009) asserts that there are five specific functions that document analysis or, in this instance, document review can help perform. These are:

1. Documents can provide data on the context within which research participants operate.
2. Information in documents can suggest some questions that need to be asked and situations that need to be observed as part of the research.
3. Documents can provide supplementary data.
4. Documents provide a means of tracking change and development.
5. Documents can be analyzed as a way to verify findings or corroborate evidence from other sources. (Bowen, 2009, pp. 29-30)

As for Bowen's first statement that documents help to provide context, the school's yearbooks illustrate in tangible form through text and pictures student focus-group comments regarding their club and extracurricular involvement and participation.

The second function he mentions is that documents might raise further questions or observations that might need to be made. Through examination of student artifacts in AVID, English, and Mathematics classes, I was prompted to ask teachers additional questions in their interviews which then helped inform my writing in these areas.

The third function Bowen mentions is that documents can provide supplementary data. An examination of EECHS's school report card data not only initiated this study but also led me

to take a closer look at the Texas Education Agency and its evolving A-F state accountability framework.

The fourth function he mentions is that documents provide a means of tracking change and development. EECHS's yearbooks show year-by-year evidence of the evolution, growth, and development of the school and its students and faculty.

The fifth function Bowen mentions is that documents can be used to verify findings and corroborate evidence from other sources. In this study, yearbooks were invaluable in corroborating student statements, documenting the school's growth from its very first year onward, and illustrating how a significant number of faculty remain at EECHS.

Recommendations for Practitioners

In this section I describe some of the programs and factors which contribute to EECHS's high academic achievement and which other early college high schools might consider in their own quest for achieving academic excellence. It is important to keep in mind that no singular program or factor is responsible for EECHS's high-academic achievement. Rather, a constellation of factors are at work synergistically enabling students and faculty to work together at higher capacities than normally experienced in most early college high schools.

Summer Bridge

Summer Bridge is a cornerstone in building the sense of strong social life and community that exists at EECHS. This intentional sculpting of a school community begins with EECHS presentations in middle schools by the counselor, proceeds to initial student experiences of EECHS through Summer Bridge, and culminates in students' recognition on the Wall of Fame in the main entryway at EECHS as they anticipate their next rite of passage: Commencement.

Based on students' and teachers' comments obtained from student focus-group interviews and teacher interviews, Summer Bridge is crucial in helping students prepare and become oriented to the school's academic program and school's culture. At the same time, Summer Bridge helps students at a sensitive period in their development form important and sustaining social connections with their classmates, which will prove invaluable during their tenure at EECHS.

In the summer of 2022, I attended Summer Bridge and witnessed new students' reactions as they were introduced to the people, programs, and culture of EECHS. There were distinct segments within the week where students attended introductory classes taught by the same teachers they would start their fall semester with, informal Icebreaker types of activities where they got to know each other in fun and almost silly types of games, and time spent in more serious study as they tackled the reading, writing, and math challenges in the TSIA test.

As Summer Bridge began, students were first grouped according to their original middle school home campus and then "redistributed" into a new group consisting entirely of students from different middle schools in the Rio Grande Valley. A EECHS teacher was then assigned to guide each student group as they engaged in different activities throughout the day on a rotation basis so that everyone was exposed to the different Summer Bridge activities at EECHS.

Of key importance to EECHS's Summer Bridge is the program's intentionality in helping students successfully experience the academic, organizational, social, and cultural aspects of what it means to be an EECHS student. Beginning with counselor middle-school presentations, middle-school teacher referrals of students, and word-of-mouth recommendations from EECHS graduates and family members, EECHS's enrollment has sustained itself and shown consistent growth year-to-year, even through the COVID Pandemic.

Also noteworthy was EECHS's internet presence and presentation of Summer Bridge on its website. The school website was well presented, current, and informative. As the publicly visible "face" of the school, it was obvious that a great deal of time and effort had been devoted to creating a professional appearance as well as friendly user interface. All of the essential information was easily accessible including who Summer Bridge was intended for, what the purpose of Summer Bridge was, when and where it was happening, and why Summer Bridge was so important that everyone's attendance was required. During Summer Bridge, I was impressed with how teachers, administration, and staff welcomed students and shared with them their enthusiasm, passion, and dedication to academic excellence which EECHS has become known for.

The importance of Summer Bridge as an induction program cannot be overemphasized due to several important factors. First, Summer Bridge provides a welcome, opening gesture to incoming students, the type of greeting and orientation which Purkey calls *intentionally inviting*. By proactively reaching out to students to let them know they are welcome as well as expected to attend Summer Bridge, students feel a sense of security and reassurance about their upcoming academic journey (Purkey, 1991).

Second, Summer Bridge sets the tone and academic stance of the school. From the very first moment they set foot on campus, students meet their teachers, familiarize themselves with the layout of the school, and begin working on the "TSIA Bootcamp" section where they learn about the reading, writing, and math components of the required sophomore year test. From the beginning, students focus on this critical test, which they must pass to qualify for university admission in Texas.

Third, students form important social connections with each other through Icebreakers or other fun, informal activities designed to help students overcome any initial social awkwardness and become fast friends. Vivid memories were revisited as seniors in every focus group recounted their Summer Bridge experiences and how it helped them make new friends, become oriented to the school, and ultimately, be more successful. As one EECHS teacher stated: *"Icebreakers are a key factor for them to be connected. We just need for them to find a connection, because as soon as the kids find a connection, they don't want to leave!"* (Mrs. Arnold, PI 2).

All schools would benefit from having a Summer Bridge program. Through Summer Bridge, students become familiar with the teachers and programs at the school and begin the process of learning about each other and making new friendships. While schools sometimes have a "meet the teacher" night scheduled the week before school starts, Summer Bridge serves quite a different purpose by being held during the day, lasting at least a week or more during summer, and employing a blend of academic activities and social activities such as Icebreakers to help students really get to know each other better. At EECHS, attention is paid to integrating the Texas Success Initiative Assessment (TSIA) into the week's activities. Since the TSIA is an academic requirement for college admission in Texas, it makes sense to present this test early when students are most receptive.

While Summer Bridge requires administrative planning, scheduling of staff, and creating meaningful learning activities, it is well worth consideration as part of a school's overall plan because of the potential return on this investment resulting in increased student academic achievement, social integration, college readiness, and success.

Clubs and Extracurricular Activities

In addition to the academic program and college-type of A/B class schedule offered, students were especially enthusiastic about the faculty presentations of clubs and extracurricular activities given during the last week of the Summer Bridge program. Here, students learned of the many clubs and extracurricular activities offered, what the requirements were, and when these groups met. Students learned that there were a wide variety of at least eight different types of groups that they could belong to, including Academic Clubs, Arts Clubs, Sports and Fitness Activities, Volunteer and Service Clubs, Culture and Diversity Clubs, Career-Oriented Clubs, Special Interest Clubs, and Leadership and Governance Clubs as discussed previously in Ch. IV, 3-2. Clubs Are Important.

A primary benefit of clubs and extracurricular activities is that they capture students' interests and participation thereby increasing their integration, sense of belonging, and being part of the social life of their campus. Even schools that already have band, choir, art, or other district sponsored activities might benefit from having students complete an internet survey asking them about what kind of additional clubs or extracurricular activities they might like to see at their school. Teachers, too, might be invited to participate in the survey to discover their preferences in sponsoring a club or extracurricular activity. Thinking "outside of the box" as suggested by Johnson, administrators might consider taking advantage of students' natural desire to socialize with others who share similar interests thus increasing student motivation and social integration at their school (Johnson, 2011; Pink, 2011; Tinto, 2012).

In addition to widening students' experience base by providing them with activities to explore outside the bounds of traditional academic subjects, students in clubs meet and socialize with others and often form friendships based on common areas of interest. Clubs and

extracurricular activities are very popular at EECHS in large part due to the talent and enthusiasm that EECHS teachers have for both their subject as well as the growth and development of their students. Through participation in clubs and extracurricular activities, students and teachers get to know each other at a deeper level and outside the normal confines of the classroom, adding yet another dimension and strengthening the bond of the student-teacher relationship.

Master Schedule

The master schedule plays a surprisingly important role in shaping the educational outcomes of EECHS students. EECHS employs a master schedule that is unique in several respects. First, it mirrors a college class schedule by adopting an A/B format. Students have long classes twice a week and a shorter one on the third day. To clarify, students attend four specific classes on Mondays and Wednesdays, another four on Tuesdays and Thursdays, and all eight on Fridays. By emulating a college A/B schedule, students become acclimated to the same type of schedule they will experience in college, requiring that they devote longer periods to explore topics more deeply and learn how to manage their time and attention effectively in longer classes.

Second, the TSIA is a major challenge for freshmen. Students must pass this test by the end of their sophomore year to remain at EECHS and qualify for university admission. However, not all freshmen are at the same math level. So, the master schedule is adjusted by the counselor to strategically place students into two different math groups based on their middle school math grades. Group 1, the college algebra group, studies college algebra and other general subjects throughout the year. Group 2, the geometry group, focuses on geometry and other general subjects throughout the year. The benefit of this math grouping is that students have common

math skill areas that they can work together on as a team while streamlining the process for teachers to monitor their academic progress.

Finally, students in each math group share the same class schedule in other areas. This helps lasting friendships form and increases students' sense of belonging. As noted by a senior: *"You're with the same students in each class. I've had classes with my friend Victor since freshman year."* Having a consistent group of classmates across different subject areas helps create a stable and predictable student environment, which is more conducive to learning.

College Readiness

When Clairemont High School English Department chairperson Mary Catherine Swanson began AVID in 1980, it was because she was faced with a challenge. Suddenly, her 98% white and middle-class high school was required by the California court to integrate 500 low-income, students of color, and first-generation students into the school. Clairemont teachers had low expectations and suggested remedial classes because they presumed that the academically unprepared newcomers would not be up to the task of handling Clairemont's advanced curriculum. However, Swanson felt that this was a mistake. She stated:

But I knew if we continued with remediation, they'd never get beyond it because there's no incentive. Why do you want to do better? In remediation, it makes no sense. It's kind of like I used to always say, like 'If they haven't learned their multiplication tables by the time they're in high school and they started in fourth grade, why do we think they're going to learn them now?' So, my theory was we needed to accelerate these students. We needed to put them in college preparatory courses but give them the assistance they needed to do well on those courses.

(Swanson, 2017)

Swanson's approach in her first AVID classroom of 32 students back in 1980 was to provide them with rigorous academic challenges but support their learning by teaching them about lower and higher order thinking skills, how to ask important questions, how to take notes, how to become organized, and other important study skills which Conley (2010) refers to as college knowledge (Mathews, 2015). *Rigor with support* is the central philosophy and strategy employed in Swanson's AVID. She states: "Rigor without support is a prescription for failure and that support without rigor is a tragic waste of potential" (Swanson et al., 2000, p. 4).

Swanson's acumen in creating a framework of instructional techniques that supports and scaffolds learning eventually became known as WICOR (Writing, Organization, Collaboration, Organization, and Reading). Through participation in the AVID program, students are exposed to and develop their critical thinking skills and ability to handle rigorous college coursework successfully through application of the concepts embodied in WICOR.

While AVID is a non-profit organization, teachers must pay workshop fees for AVID professional development which often occurs in three-day sessions known as Summer Institutes. AVID Summer Institutes are multi-day conferences designed for AVID site teams, encompassing elective teachers, subject area teachers, counselors, and administrators. This training emphasizes the WICOR strategy and offers a mixture of motivational sessions, hands-on workshops, and planning sessions. Teachers engage with peers and AVID professionals and share effective educational methods. In addition to Summer Institutes, AVID also provides ongoing training using digital resources like AVID DigitalXP, specialized workshops, and conferences or other meetings that gather educators for collaboration and best practice sharing.

Although AVID is a widely recognized college preparation program, not every school district can afford its associated costs. However, the goal of college readiness is critical, and

there are several alternative strategies and programs that school districts might consider. For example, a school might develop their own teacher training based on the principles similar to those of AVID. Veteran teachers, especially those with experience in college preparation, can lead these sessions. For college textbooks about college readiness as well as general college subject matter, Open Educational Resources (OER) are free, peer-reviewed, and widely available online. Many community colleges and universities are interested in outreach to improve college readiness and might offer training, dual enrollment courses, or mentoring for high school students.

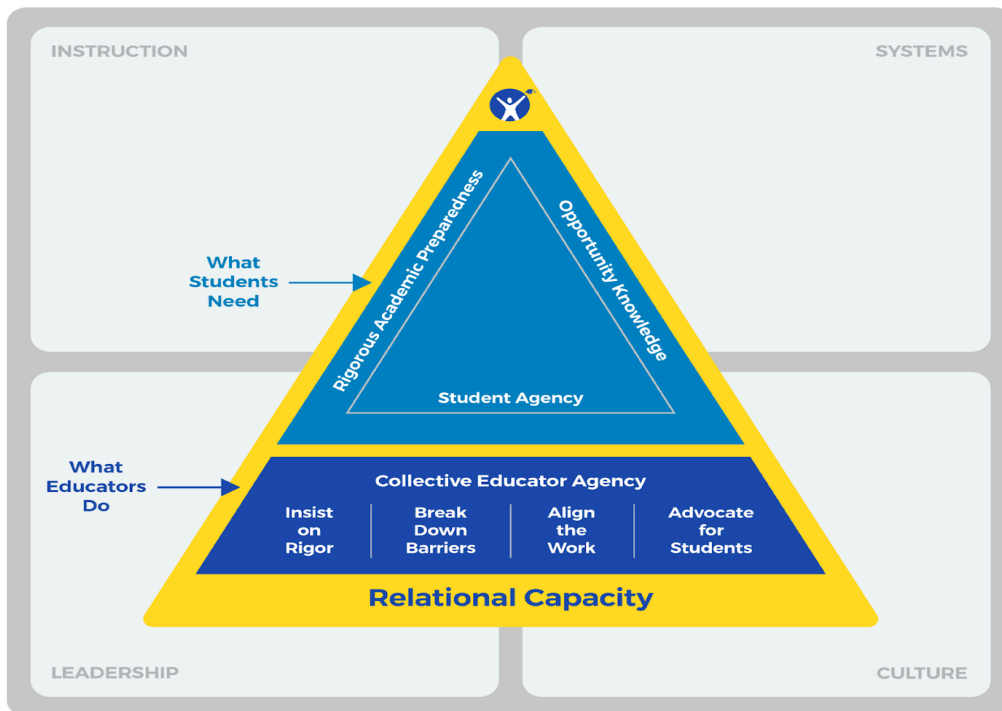
For budget-minded schools that choose to develop their own college preparatory materials, two important suggested primary sources are David Conley's *College and Career Ready: Helping All Students Succeed Beyond High School* (2010) and Bendall et al.'s *AVID Critical Thinking and Engagement: A Schoolwide Approach* (2015). Conley's book is an invaluable resource for all things related to college readiness and curriculum planning for college success. Bendall et al.'s book represents AVID principles and pedagogy with broad overviews as well as lesson specific guidelines for teaching relational capacity, higher-order thinking skills, WICOR, and other important study skills. While AVID provides a structured and well-recognized approach, with creativity and commitment schools can still ensure their students are college-ready at low or no-cost by employing some of the preceding suggestions.

Social and Emotional Learning and School Climate

In contrast to the emphasis on standardized testing common in Texas and other states, EECHS stands apart. While EECHS achieves high standardized test scores every year, the school seems to focus more on helping students to develop socially and emotionally, with an understanding that high academic achievement will be forthcoming. It is important to mention

that AVID places particular emphasis on teacher development of Relational Capacity. As illustrated in the AVID College and Career Readiness Framework in Figure 14, Relational Capacity is the foundation and base upon which the AVID college readiness pyramid is constructed; relational capacity is emphasized in the College and Career Readiness Framework as something that educators *Do* through *Insisting on Rigor*, *Breaking Down Barriers*, *Aligning the Work*, and *Advocating for Students*. Because teachers have taken the time to develop genuine interpersonal relationships with their students, students feel emboldened to do their best work

The AVID College and Career Readiness Framework



The intent of the AVID College and Career Readiness Framework is to provide educators, community members, parents, and students with a model of what is needed to develop college and career readiness schoolwide.

Figure 14: AVID College and Career Readiness Framework (AVID CCRF, 2022)

Because the student-teacher connection is strong and was mentioned so often in both focus group interviews as well as student personal interviews, I conclude that the EECHS

campus exemplifies the ideals of the AVID program in respect to its emphasis placed on Relational Capacity and its impact campus-wide at EECHS. Significantly, Nel Noddings's Ethics of Care find their voice in the student and teacher dialogues at EECHS with students often mentioning how teachers care and actively listen to them as individuals. Both ethical and natural caring as described by Noddings might be considered as other aspects of Relational Capacity.

EECHS has almost 100% participation in ACT and SAT preparation and testing, with the counselor and other staff members making arrangements to ensure students study and are in attendance on Saturday morning test dates. The same goes for End-of-Course (EOC) exams, for which some departments have achieved a 100% passing score for multiple years in a row. EECHS takes its standardized testing seriously, which shows in its state evaluation and Texas school report card every year.

However, by focusing on students' social and emotional needs as individuals rather than being preoccupied with high grades and test scores, EECHS paradoxically ends up with both high academic achievement and well-balanced college-ready young people. This holistic approach fosters academic excellence and cultivates a nurturing environment where students feel valued and supported, preparing them not only for college success but also for their future careers and life.

Grade Monitoring and Intervention

While seniors made little mention of this, AVID I, II, III, and IV teachers routinely monitor their grades every three weeks, even during students' junior and senior years when they are enrolled primarily in university classes. During freshmen and sophomore years, the school's grade-keeping program facilitates keeping track of students' academic progress. However, once students begin their college classes, their university academic progress is not accessible to

district teachers. So, students self-report their university grades by taking a screenshot of it and providing it to their AVID teacher as part of their AVID Binder checklist.

Monitoring students' grades is crucial because, at this point in their lives, they do not have the experience to understand how a low grade can affect their academic progress and overall grade point average. In addition, students are sometimes embarrassed about a poor grade, hesitant to communicate with their college instructor about their academic progress, or have not considered the option and merit of dropping a class rather than receiving a failing grade. These topics fall under what Conley (2010) calls "college knowledge," which students can learn best with the 'safety net' that grade monitoring and regular dialogue with caring teachers about their grades can provide.

While both TCC and TVU have an "Early Alert" system where college instructors indicate that a student is failing within the Blackboard or Canvas Learning Management System, by the time a student receives this "Early Alert" it is often too far into the semester for them to recover their grade, or for that matter, to drop the class without consequence. Frequent grade monitoring of the type conducted at EECHS is highly recommended. If a particular school does not employ the AVID program, then this crucial grade monitoring might be assigned to a counselor, the Dual-Enrollment liaison, or others on staff who are committed to student success.

Besides providing a strategic advantage by allowing early intervention, grade monitoring increases communication between student and teacher as well as models to the student the need for constant situational awareness of their progress as a student, or what Conley (2010) and others call metacognition.

Early College High School Implementation

The early college high school represents a school reform measure that works. For administrators and practitioners considering creating an early college high school in their school district, certain factors exert a major influence on the degree of success that might be achieved. Chief among these are district demographics, teacher beliefs and qualifications, and college readiness support systems.

District Demographics. As made clear by Mr. Reynolds and Mrs. Sutter in the Administrator Personal Interview Analysis section, understanding the school district's demographics is a key factor in choosing to create an early college high school. The target population of the early college high school should include low socioeconomic, first-generation students of color and those students otherwise underserved by higher education.

Another factor that plays a part in the school district's demographics is the cooperation and support of neighboring institutes of higher education such as the Texas Valley University and the Texas Community College discussed in this study. While implementing the Excelencia Early College High School, resistance was initially experienced because of the previously discussed deficiency mindset or deficit thinking that some faculty were exhibiting in both institutes of higher education.

Public school demographics can also demonstrate a deficiency mindset similar to what Mary Catherine Swanson experienced in her school district in 1980. When she first started the AVID program, faculty at her high school balked at admitting students of color from the surrounding low-income areas (Freedman, 2020; Mathews, 2015). Critically, both public schools and institutes of higher education should embrace an asset-minded rather than deficit-minded

philosophy toward the diversity that today's school demographics are increasingly trending towards.

Teacher Beliefs and Qualifications. As Mrs. Sutter discussed previously, prospective teachers foremost must believe in students' capability of being successful in completing rigorous college coursework while still in high school. Mrs. Sutter took great pains to ensure that teachers knew beforehand what Excelencia Early College High School represented and what challenges were likely to be encountered. While not having a suitable school building was a formidable challenge for the first few years at Excelencia Early College High School, I contend that a bigger obstacle might exist in those teachers who do not believe in students' innate intelligence and problem-solving ability with respect to college coursework.

Regarding teacher quality and qualifications, Mrs. Sutter stressed the importance of teachers having master's degrees or that they planned to pursue a master's degree. As Mrs. Nielsen stated in her interview, "*Teacher efficacy affects student efficacy*" (Mrs. Nielsen, PI 1). The implication is that teachers who invest in their growth and development through higher education serve as models and exemplars for students about the importance of higher education.

College Readiness Support Systems. The AVID college preparatory system represents a proven and time-tested effective academic program that increases students' college readiness. While a non-profit organization, AVID does represent a significant investment by school districts that must pay fees for AVID summer institutes and other types of professional development activities that AVID requires.

Fidelity is the key to effective AVID implementation. What is meant by fidelity is foremost that all faculty on the early college high school campus must have the same belief that students can and will be successful in completing rigorous college work while still enrolled in

high school, provided they are given adequate support. Secondly, fidelity implies that the AVID elective is part of the master schedule and attended by students throughout all four years of high school with AVID-trained teachers.

Implications for Further Research

Early College High School Comparisons

Texas has been at the forefront of the ECHS movement largely due to state support and the need to improve postsecondary outcomes for an increasingly diverse student population as previously discussed in chapters one and two. Following the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation launching of the early college high school initiative (ECHSI) in 2002, Texas was quick to open *Challenge Early College High School*, its very first ECHS, in 2003 (Challenge, 2019). Located in the Houston ISD, Challenge ECHS received a score of 99 on its 2018-2019 school report card, the last stable date that school accountability measures were conducted due to the COVID-19 pandemic (Delgado, 2021).

Because of COVID-19 and the disruption of yearly accountability ratings, Early College High School comparisons in the following sections will all rely upon Texas school report card data gathered from the 2018-2019 school year. From this year, a list was compiled of 212 ECHSs. 22 ECHSs were excluded as these schools were either unrated or did not meet a minimum student population necessary for consistency in this study, leaving a total of 190 active ECHSs that were considered for comparative purposes.

First created in 2009, the Early College High School Blueprint was designed with the goal of providing guidance, standardization, and structure to the increasing number of ECHSs in the state. Its subsequent redesign in 2016-2017 included Outcomes Based Measures (OBM) and other requirements to help ensure that ECHSs were fulfilling the promise of accelerating

academic achievement, ensuring college readiness, and providing robust student supports. While the ECHS Blueprint presents certain mandatory requirements that all schools must adhere to in order to achieve ECHS designation by the state, schools are also given much flexibility in ECHS design and implementation in order to best suit the needs of local communities. As a result, a wide variety of school designs and configurations exist in Texas. Nonetheless, the two most important ECHS types for comparative purposes are the School-within-a-school ECHS and the Standalone ECHS.

School-within-a-school ECHS. The School-within-a-school ECHS is often a converted comprehensive high school with a large enrollment of 1,000 students or more. The School-within-a-school ECHS serves two different student populations: a larger group consisting of general high school students, and a smaller group consisting of the ECHS cohort. While both the larger and smaller group complete the regular Texas high school curriculum, the smaller ECHS cohort group also completes the two-year associate's degree program. Because School-within-a-school ECHSs have a larger overall school enrollment, serve two different student populations, and have overlapping as well as differing curriculums, staffing is necessarily greater.

School-within-a-school ECHS cohort students may or may not have a compressed two-year high school curriculum followed by two final years of university classes as EECHS does in this study. Also, the larger group of regular high school students have the option of taking dual-enrollment classes for college credit and earning an associate's degree even if they are not part of the ECHS cohort. The School-within-a-school ECHS may or may not have a designated college-preparatory curriculum such as the AVID program utilized at EECHS.

While a total of 103 School-within-a-school ECHS report card grades for 2018-2019 were examined, 16 of these schools had enrollments which fell below the minimum of 1,000

students and so were not used in comparisons. A total of 87 School-within-a-school ECHS report card grades for 2018-2019 were examined with enrollments varying from 1,000 to 4,549 students.

These 87 School-within-a-school ECHS yearly report card grades ranged from a low of 72 to a high of 93. School-within-a-school grades were divided into three ranges with 10 schools (11.49%) achieving from 90 to a high of 93, 53 schools (60.92%) achieving from 80 to a high of 89, and 24 schools (27.59%) achieving from 72 to a high of 79. The average yearly school report card grade for School-within-a-school ECHSs was 83.

While the majority of School-within-a-school ECHS report card grades are in the 80's, there are 10 exceptions or "outlier" schools of 1,000 or more students with yearly state report card grades in the low 90's. These 10 School-within-a-school higher-achieving outlier schools represent an important source of information about what larger, higher-achieving ECHSs do to ensure that its students become college-ready. Further research might prove fruitful in determining what these higher-achieving School-within-a-school ECHSs are doing differently than their lower-achieving School-within-a-school ECHS counterparts to achieve higher grades.

However, another possible avenue of investigation might be considered: What do School-within-a-school higher-achieving outliers have in common with other School-within-a-school higher-achieving outliers? A comparative study might provide possible explanations for their high achievement and offer actionable items for administrators of School-within-a-school lower-achieving schools to adopt for school improvement.

Many questions suggest themselves in relation to school size, the School-within-a-school ECHS, and academic achievement. There appears to be no School-within-a-school ECHSs with report card grades higher than 93 in the academic year 2018-2019. The scope of this study does

not allow for exploration of this topic, but it invites further research. Does school size play a role in the academic achievement of the School-within-a-school ECHS? If a School-within-a-school ECHS with a large enrollment is higher achieving, then what did school administrators do to compensate for the inherent academic and social challenges of a large school? How did the administrators bridge the gap of accountability and instead infuse their school with the essential rigor and accountability of a small school to drive the academic achievement of their students upwards into the 90's?

Standalone ECHS. The Standalone ECHS typically takes place in a separate school building purposefully built or selected for a smaller student enrollment of approximately 400 students or can also take place on an institute of higher education in a dedicated area. Since the Standalone ECHS serves a smaller student population, staffing necessarily has fewer personnel. However, this will vary according to the type of curriculum being offered. While all students in the Standalone ECHS complete the regular Texas high school graduation plan, Standalone ECHSs may or may not employ an accelerated 2-year Texas high school program followed by university classes as does EECHS. Also, Standalone ECHSs may or may not offer a college preparatory program like the AVID program that is utilized at EECHS.

A total of 55 Standalone ECHS report card grades for 2018-2019 were examined with enrollments varying from between 350 to 616 students. Standalone ECHS report card grades were divided into three ranges with 46 schools (83.64 %) scoring as high-achieving from 90 to a high of 99, 6 schools (10.91%) scoring from 80 to a high of 89, and 3 schools (5.45 %) scoring from 70 to a high of 79. Of all Standalone ECHSs combined, the average yearly school report card grade for Standalone ECHSs is 95.

Achievement Gap. In comparing the School-within-a-school and Standalone ECHS yearly report card grades, there is a noticeable gap in academic achievement. Standalone ECHSs have a higher annual school report average grade of 95, while School-within-a-school ECHSs have a lower annual school report card average grade of 83. Moreover, within the same category, Standalone ECHSs have a majority of schools (83.64%) scoring 90 and above, while in the School-within-a-school ECHS, the majority of schools (60.92%) lie within the 80-89 range.

Through my research on the high-achieving ECHS, there appears to be no singular factor which explains the phenomenon of high achievement. Instead, high achievement seems to be a result of many small things done very well. Beginning at a very personal level, teachers who care about their students and take the time to develop genuine relationships with them within an educational context improve student outcomes. At an institutional level, high achievement is obtained through management of logistical components such as Summer Bridge induction activities, Master Scheduling, and Grade Monitoring.

Higher-achieving Standalone ECHSs merit further investigation. If we consider EECHS as representative of a higher-achieving early ECHS in the Standalone ECHS group, then its characteristics might prove useful as a point of reference and yardstick for evaluating the academic effectiveness of other Standalone ECHSs. Here, I will proceed with suggestions based upon what was previously discussed in *Recommendations for Practitioners*.

Does the high-achieving Standalone ECHS school have a Summer Bridge program? Summer Bridge has proven its value for improving academic and social and emotional outcomes for students. Tinto (2012) advocates social integration which Summer Bridge participation promotes. Strayhorn's study demonstrated that students' academic self-efficacy,

sense of belonging, and academic and social skills were all positively influenced by Summer Bridge (2011).

Does the Standalone ECHS have ample opportunities for students to explore similar interests with classmates and faculty outside the confines of regular academic contexts? Studies support how student involvement in clubs and extracurricular activities increases student belonging and improves their academic, social, and emotional outcomes (Astin, 1984; Kuh, 1995; Strapp & Farr, 2009).

What type of Master Schedule is employed and how is it used to improve student outcomes? Does it employ 45-minute classes or utilize the college A/B block schedule with longer classes on alternate days? Are freshmen evaluated prior to their first semester regarding their Mathematics middle school test scores? If they are identified as low-performing, what master scheduling actions are employed to improve their academic outcomes? Further research seems warranted on the effects that the master schedule has on student academic outcomes.

What type of college preparatory program does the school employ? While there are advantages to using AVID, the cost can be considerable. Other, low or no cost approaches can be employed but what is most important is that there is a school-wide, organized approach to teaching college readiness, and that all teachers support that particular approach.

From a brief inspection of high-achieving early college high school websites, I saw mention of AVID being employed at a number of different Standalone ECHSs. Also of interest were schools which did not mention AVID on their website such as the Standalone ECHS *Challenge*, Texas's very first ECHS which began in 2003. The school's website was well organized and quite informative. I saw no mention of AVID but did notice a program entitled

Emerge which appeared to provide college readiness guidance in many of the same areas as AVID.

Do teachers establish positive student-teacher relationships within their classrooms and develop relational capacity as advocated by AVID? Do students feel supported socially and emotionally as well as academically to do their best work? Further study in the ways in which teachers establish positive classroom climates to enhance successful student outcomes is warranted.

Are students' grades continuously monitored throughout the semester so that difficulties can be addressed and interventions made in a timely manner? With frequent feedback from teachers about their academic progress, students can choose more effective study behaviors as they become more independent and self-regulated college students. Further study concerning grade monitoring and self-regulatory behaviors seems warranted.

Conclusion

This study aimed to discover how one high-achieving early college high school along the Texas-Mexico border consistently achieves academic excellence, as reflected by its Texas school report card and other indicators. Students in this early college high school are drawn from the local independent school district and other adjacent districts in the lower Rio-Grande Valley and are predominantly Hispanic, of low socioeconomic status, and first-generation. Since 2008, Excelencia early college high school students have consistently exceeded expectations of what students of low socioeconomic means, color, and first-generation status are expected to accomplish. Discovering how the Excelencia early college high school achieves academic excellence is central to this study's purpose.

Through seven student focus-group interviews and fifteen personal interviews with faculty conducted over two years, the following research questions were answered:

RQ1: What are the lived experiences of the students, teachers, and faculty in this high-achieving early college high school?

RQ2: What motivates these high-achieving students to overcome obstacles and persist to degree completion?

RQ3: What factors or elements play a part in contributing to these students' success?

RQ4: What motivates these high-achieving early college high school teachers and faculty to challenge their students with the expectations and rigor required of college-level work?

Results indicate that the Excelencia early college high school achieves high academic achievement due to many factors. First, a highly skilled teaching staff with high academic expectations of students coupled with genuine caring and emotional and social support enables students to do their best work and thrive. Second, student sense of belonging is fostered through engagement in formal and informal clubs and extracurricular activities. Their involvement in these activities helps students overcome difficulties and persist to graduation, as described by Tinto in his *Student Integration Model* (2012).

A third factor is the school's use of the AVID college preparatory program. Four full-time AVID teachers meet with their respective grade levels throughout students' enrollment at EECHS. Through a well-designed and sequenced curriculum, students are introduced to various non-cognitive topics and skills, such as study habits, time management, and organization, all of which are essential and predictive of college readiness (Bendall et al., 2015; Conley, 2010).

An additional factor which plays an important role in EECHS's success is its reliance on school-wide systems or *safety-nets* (Saenz, 2013) to safeguard students' passage as they develop their college readiness skills. New student induction, for example, is facilitated by Summer Bridge, where students are introduced to the school and its mission and develop initial friendships and social connections that help them become acclimated and successful in their freshmen year. Yet another safety-net that increases student success is self-reporting of grades. Through consistent support from the AVID teacher and counselor, students with failing grades can be redirected and supported in their efforts to do quality work.

Nel Noddings's *Ethics of Care* lends credence to the saying: "Students don't care that you know, unless they know that you care!" While the preceding summary enumerates many of the factors and structural reasons for EECHS's academic achievement, teachers and faculty who genuinely care and can demonstrate their caring in visible ways to students appear to have the greatest impact in removing barriers and improving student outcomes.

The early college high school movement received its impetus from the 2002 *Early College High School Initiative* (ECHSI) begun by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation. The Gates's secondary school reform measure focused on equalizing academic performance gaps between differing racial groups through smaller schools targeting students typically underserved by higher education, such as low socioeconomic, minoritized, and first-generation students.

With a goal of acceleration rather than remediation, Texas has adopted the early college high school to help improve postsecondary outcomes for its citizens as well as comply with recent federal legislation such as the ESSA and its emphasis on college, career, and workforce readiness. Strongly influenced by Texas's first state demographer, the late Steve Murdock, Texas legislators embarked upon a transformation and integration of its secondary and higher

educational systems by adopting the early college high school as a model of secondary and postsecondary alignment. Through Closing the Gaps (2000-2015) and 60x30TX (2015), Texas has shown leadership in developing and promoting college readiness programs intended to improve its citizens' postsecondary outcomes and achievements.

As a representative of the Standalone early college high school, the Excelencia early college high school exemplifies what can be accomplished with a dedicated faculty, determined students, and a robust curriculum.

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APPENDICES

APPENDIX A

APPENDIX A
INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD
APPROVAL LETTER

Texas Valley University
Institutional Review Board

January 3, 2022

Kelly Stuart, Principal Investigator
Department: College of Education
Via Electronic Routing System

Dear Principal Investigator:

RE: APPROVAL FOR HUMAN SUBJECTS RESEARCH IRB-21-0462, "A Case Study_High Achieving ECHS"

The study referenced above has been reviewed and approved on 1/3/2022 through Expedited Review procedures under the following categories:

"Category 7: Individual or group behavior, surveys, interviews, oral histories"

Approved number of subjects to be enrolled: 36 participants.

This project is not subject to continuation review.

Recruitment and Informed Consent: You must follow the recruitment and consent procedures that were approved.

Modifications to the approved protocol: Modifications to the approved protocol (including recruitment methods, study procedures, survey/interview questions, personnel, consent form, or subject population), must be submitted to the IRB for approval. Changes should not be implemented until approved by the IRB.

Data retention: All research data and signed informed consent documents should be retained for a minimum of 3 years after completion of the study.

Closure of the Study: Please be sure to inform the IRB when you have completed your study, have graduated, and/or have left the university as an employee. A final report should be submitted for completed studies or studies that will be completed by their respective expiration date.

Cordially,

TVU Institutional Review Board
Office of Research Compliance

APPENDIX B

APPENDIX B

LETTER TO SUPERINTENDENT

January 4, 2022
Dr. Acevedo
Rio Independent School District
7492 Independence Rd
Riverbend, TX 76534

Dear Dr. Acevedo,

I am currently enrolled in the Texas Valley University Curriculum and Instruction Doctoral program and have completed all program requirements except for my dissertation. I am requesting your permission to conduct a research study in your school district. This research study will examine the Excelencia Early College High School, a high-achieving early college high school which has achieved numerous distinctions and awards for its academic achievements.

The title of this research study is: *A Case Study of Student and Faculty Experiences in a High-Achieving Early College High School Along the Texas-Mexico Border*. This research study will identify and provide an in-depth understanding of EECHS students and faculty's lived experiences and perceptions as members of the Excelencia Early College High School.

This study will have multiple data sources including an online data questionnaire, 12th grade student focus group interviews, faculty interviews, campus observations, PEIMS data, TEA data, and document and other media examination. Only EECHS students and faculty members who volunteer to be part of this study following a preliminary information presentation will be selected to participate.

All information collected from EECHS students and faculty will remain anonymous and confidential. The information obtained for this study will be analyzed solely by me and be securely stored in an environment accessible only to me. Statements obtained from interviews may be quoted partly or in their entirety for publication but participants' actual names will not be used and will be replaced with a pseudonym. Significant efforts will be made to ensure the confidentiality and anonymity of all research study participants.

This research proposal has been approved by the Texas Valley University Institutional Review Board. My faculty advisor is Dr. Josie Smith, Ph.D in the Department of Teaching and Learning at Texas Valley University. Her telephone number and email is: (957) 982-5734 and email: josie.smith@tvu.edu.

Thank you for taking the time to consider this request. If I may be of further assistance by providing additional information of any kind, please feel free to contact me at my personal cellphone number or university email.

Sincerely,

Kelly Stuart, M.M.
Doctoral Candidate
Curriculum and Instruction
Texas Valley University
email: kelly.stuart@tvu.edu
cell: (957) 456-2324

APPENDIX C

APPENDIX C
EECHS PRINCIPAL MEETING

January 11, 2022
Excelencia Early College High School
763 Goldendale Road
Riverbend, TX 76534

Dear Dr. Johnson,

I am currently enrolled in the Texas Valley University Curriculum and Instruction Doctoral program and have completed all program requirements except for my dissertation. I have been granted permission to conduct this study at your school by Dr. Acevedo, and look forward to meeting with you and learning more about the Excelencia Early College High School.

This research study will examine the Excelencia Early College High School, a high performing early college high school which has achieved numerous distinctions and awards for its high academic achievements. The title of this study is: *A Case Study of Student and Faculty Experiences in a High-Achieving Early College High School Along the Texas-Mexico Border*.

This study will identify and provide an in-depth understanding of EECHS students and faculty's lived experiences and motivations for achieving these academic distinctions which have consistently distinguished the Excelencia Early College High School from many others in the state of Texas.

This case study will have multiple data sources including an online data questionnaire, 12th grade student focus-group interviews, faculty interviews, campus observations, PEIMS data, TEA data, and document and other media examination. Only EECHS students and faculty

members who volunteer to be part of this study following a preliminary information presentation will be selected to participate.

I would like to meet with you in the next week or at your earliest convenience so that we can go over some of the details of this research study as well as schedule a time for an EECHS senior information presentation and introduction to this study.

Thank you for your assistance and I look forward to meeting you!

Sincerely,

Kelly Stuart, M.M.

Doctoral Candidate

Curriculum and Instruction

Texas Valley University

cell: (957) 456-2324

email: kelly.stuart@tvu.edu

APPENDIX D

APPENDIX D
RESEARCH STUDY PRESENTATION
FOR EECHS SENIORS

Research Study Title: *A Case Study of Student and Faculty Experiences in a High-Achieving Early College High School Along the Texas-Mexico Border.*

Dear Student,

You are invited to participate in a research study by Kelly Stuart in the Department of Teaching and Learning at the Texas Valley University. This research study is part of a doctoral dissertation that is being conducted under the supervision of Dr. Josie Smith, Ph.D.

What is a Research Study and Why Might I Participate in One?

- A research study is a way to go about learning something. Researchers study many different subjects the same way that you study many different subjects in school.
- There are several reasons that people might choose to participate in a research study. Sometimes people have curiosity about the study, sometimes people want to help the researcher, and sometimes people would like to make a particular program better.
- Please take the time that is necessary for you to decide about whether to participate in this study.
- Please feel free to ask questions at any time during this presentation.

What is the Purpose of this Research Study?

The purpose of this research study is to explore the perceptions and experiences of students and faculty at EECHS, a high-achieving early college high school. In order to conduct this research study, students who choose to participate will complete three research activities

including: (i) an online student data questionnaire; (ii) a focus-group interview and (iii) a follow-up meeting.

Research Study Activities

(a) Student Data Questionnaire. The online student data questionnaire will ask you about your age, grade level, gender, ethnicity or national origin, parent educational background, and college or career goals. The online data questionnaire should take no more than about fifteen minutes to complete.

(b) Focus-Group Interview. What is it like to be a student at EECHS? What are some of the things that you like the most about being a student at EECHS? These questions, as well as other questions, may best be answered through a special type of interview known as a *Focus-Group Interview*.

The focus-group interview is a small group of approximately four to six students where you and other students will respond to selected questions which I ask about your experiences as a student at EECHS. The focus-group interview will take about one and one-half hours to complete. Your counselor will schedule a time during the regular school day when we can all meet for your focus group interview.

(c) Follow-up meeting. A follow-up meeting is a second meeting where you verify that a summary that I have written about your focus-group interview is correct. Approximately one week after your focus-group interview, you will receive an email announcing the time and place of your follow-up meeting.

Research Study Guidelines

Confidentiality and Anonymity. Every effort and precaution will be taken to ensure the confidentiality of your participation in this research study. Your name will be assigned a pseudonym and only this rather than your actual name will appear on any written materials. The list that pairs your name with this pseudonym will be kept secure and apart from other research materials and will be available only to me.

Voluntary. Participation in this study is entirely up to you, strictly voluntary, and is not a requirement by EECHS, RISD, TCC, or TVU. Participating in this study will not result in a grade or academic credit. If you choose to participate in this study but later on decide not to, you may discontinue this study at any time. Additionally, you are not required to answer any questions that you do not feel comfortable answering.

Benefits. A gift of a \$20 Target gift card and a Letter of Appreciation will be provided for students who choose to participate in this study. Research activities in this study include: (i) a brief online student data questionnaire, (ii) a focus-group interview, and (iii) a follow-up meeting. The total amount of time necessary for these activities will be approximately three hours.

Student Rights. You are not required to answer any questions on the online student data questionnaire, focus-group interview questions, or follow-up meeting that make you feel uncomfortable. You are also free to withdraw and discontinue participating in the online student data questionnaire, the focus-group interview, or the follow-up meeting at any time. You have the right to discontinue participation in this study at any time, and for any reason with no consequence.

Risks or Hazards. There are no known risks, hazards, or inconveniences in this research study. Additionally, you are not required to answer any questions that you are not comfortable with.

Forms. Following the conclusion of this meeting you will receive all necessary documents and forms necessary to participate in this study. If you choose to participate in this study, please return all signed signature pages to your AVID IV counselor by this Friday, 4 p.m.

Student Selection Process. Following the collection of all research study signature forms on Friday, student names will be randomly drawn to participate in a focus-group interview. If you have submitted the necessary signature page forms and are selected in the drawing, you will be sent an email announcement of the date and time of your focus-group interview.

Students who have submitted the necessary signature page forms but are not selected in the random drawing will be sent a Letter of Appreciation via email for expressing a desire to participate. If you have any questions or concerns about this study, you may contact me at my cellphone: (957) 456-2324 or email me at: kelly.stuart@tvu.edu You may also contact my committee chairperson and advisor Dr. Josie Smith, Ph.D in the Department of Teaching and Learning at Texas Valley University. Her telephone number and email is: (957) 982-5734 and josie.smith@tvu.edu.

Publication of this research study

The written results of this study either whole or in part may be published in professional, educational journals, or scientific journals. However, no individual participants will be identified by name but instead will be assigned a pseudonym for the purpose of anonymity.

Why is this research study important?

The results from this research study may provide educational leaders and stakeholders in this district with broad insights into some of the elements that motivate students and faculty to pursue high academic achievement in an early college high school. This study may also serve as a guide or model illustrating how one school and one group of students consistently overcome numerous obstacles to enjoy the advantages of graduating high school while also obtaining a two-year associate's degree and 42 core university credits.

APPENDIX E

APPENDIX E
PARENT PERMISSION AND CONSENT FORM FOR PARTICIPATION
IN RESEARCH STUDY FOR ALL SENIORS
AGED 15-18 & OVER

Research Study Title: *A Case Study of Student and Faculty Experiences in a High-Achieving Early College High School Along the Texas-Mexico Border.*

Dear Parent(s) or Guardian(s),

Your child has been invited and expressed an interest in participating in a research project by Kelly Stuart, M.M. in the Department of Teaching and Learning at the Texas Valley University under the supervision of university professor Dr. Josie Smith, Ph.D.

Research Study Purpose

The purpose of this research study is to explore student and faculty perceptions and experiences of being a member of the Excelencia Early College High School, which is noted for its high academic achievement and awards.

To discover why Excelencia Early College High School (EECHS) students achieve such high grades and why EECHS consistently receives high grades as a school, I need to ask your son or daughter such questions as: What is it like for you to be a student at EECHS? What are some of the things that you like the most about being a student at EECHS? And, What are some of the things that have been a challenge for you in regard to being a student at EECHS?

To answer these questions, I am asking your son or daughter to participate in three different research activities which are completely safe and will take little more than three hours time. For participating in this research study, your son or daughter will receive a gift of a \$20.00 Target gift card and a Letter of Appreciation.

Research Activities

(a) Online Student Data Questionnaire. Your son or daughter's first research activity is to complete a brief, online student data questionnaire answering such questions as: their age, grade level, gender, ethnicity or nationality, and their college and career goals. This activity will take approximately fifteen minutes to complete.

(b) Focus-Group Interview. Your son or daughter will then participate in a focus-group interview with four other EECHS seniors. We will all meet in a conference room at EECHS and I will act as the guide asking general questions about their experiences as a member of EECHS as mentioned above. This activity will take approximately one and one-half hours to complete.

(c) Follow-Up Meeting. Approximately one week after the focus-group meeting, your son or daughter will then participate in a follow-up meeting on the EECHS campus during regular school hours. A follow-up meeting is where your son or daughter checks to see that a summary that I have written about their focus-group interview from the previous week is correct. The follow-up meeting will take approximately one-half hour to complete.

Research Guidelines

Confidentiality and Anonymity. All identifying information about your son or daughter in the focus-group interview will be kept confidential and anonymous. Your child's name will be assigned a pseudonym, and this fictitious name will be used on any written materials related to this study. The list that pairs your child's name with that pseudonym will be kept in a secure location and apart from other research materials and will be available only to me.

Voluntary. Participation in this study is strictly voluntary and not required by EECHS, RISD, TCC, or TVU. This study will not provide your son or daughter with a grade or academic credit. Your son or daughter may discontinue this study at any time with no consequence.

Benefits. A gift of a \$20 Target gift card and a Letter of Appreciation will be provided for your son or daughter if they choose to participate in this study. Research activities in this study include: (i) an online student data questionnaire, (ii) a focus-group interview, and (iii) a follow-up meeting. The amount of time necessary for these activities will be approximately three hours.

Student Rights. Your son or daughter is not required to answer any questions on the online student data questionnaire or focus-group interview questions that make them feel uncomfortable. Your son or daughter may also withdraw and discontinue participating in the

online student data questionnaire, the focus-group interview, or the follow-up meeting at any time. Your son or daughter has the right to discontinue participation in this study at any time, and for any reason with no consequences.

Possible Benefits. The results of your son or daughter participating in this research study may provide important insights about this high-achieving early college high school. Educational leaders and stakeholders in this district may benefit from these insights as a result. This study may also serve as a guide or model illustrating how one school and one group of students consistently overcome numerous obstacles to enjoy the advantages of graduating high school while also obtaining a two-year associate's degree and 42 core university credits.

Risks or Discomforts. There are no known risks or discomforts that are foreseeable in this research study.

Publication of this Research Study. The written results of this study either whole or in part may be published in professional publications, educational journals, or scientific journals. However, pseudonyms rather than actual student names will be used, and the identity of all participants will be kept strictly confidential and in a secure location at my residence.

PARENT PERMISSION AND CONSENT FORM FOR
PARTICIPATION IN RESEARCH STUDY
FOR ALL SENIORS 15-18 & OVER

(Signature pages 4, 5)

If you give permission and consent and agree to your child's participation in this research study, please indicate below by writing your initials next to the following research activities indicated:

- A. _____ Yes, my son/daughter has my permission to participate in this research study.
- B. _____ Yes, my son/daughter has my permission to participate in the student data questionnaire.
- C. _____ Yes, my son/daughter may participate in the audio-recorded focus group interview.
- D. _____ Yes, my son/daughter may participate in the follow-up activity.
- E. _____ Yes, I agree that some or all of the audio-recorded transcript of the focus group interview may be used in educational publications or presentations.*

*Note: No actual student names will be used, only pseudonyms will be used in any educational publications or presentations. All measures to preserve confidentiality and anonymity in this research study will be taken.

Student Research Participant Rights

1. I understand that parental consent and permission is required for all children and participants under the age of 18 who choose to participate in this research study.
2. All procedures in this research study have been explained satisfactorily and I have been given the opportunity to ask about any questions that I may have had.
3. Any discomforts or risks in this research study have been explained satisfactorily.
4. Any benefits that my son or daughter may experience have been explained satisfactorily.
5. I understand that if I have any further questions or concerns that I may contact the researcher by email: kelly.stuart@tvu.edu, or cellphone at: (957) 456-2324. I also understand that I may contact his advisor Dr. Josie Smith, Ph.D in the Department of Teaching and Learning at Texas Valley University. Her telephone number is: (957) 982-5734 and email is: josie.smith@tvu.edu.
6. I have been informed that my child may decide to discontinue participation in this research study at any time. I also understand that my child may refuse to answer any question asked of them during this research study with no consequence.
7. I understand that this research study is completely voluntary and not a requirement of EECHS, RISD, TCC, or TVU and that no academic credit will be given to my son or daughter from participating in this research study.
8. Any further questions regarding my child's rights as a research participant may be directed to the Texas Valley Institutional Review Board for Human Subjects Research Support office of: (957) 456-7890.
9. All information obtained throughout the duration of this research study will remain confidential and anonymous and all student names will be replaced with pseudonyms or fictitious names so that anonymity is guaranteed as far as possible within legal limits.

10. Information obtained from this research study will be accessible only to Kelly Stuart and Dr. Josie Smith, Ph.D.

11. The results of this research study in whole or in part may be provided to professional publications, educational research journals, and/or scientific journals for publication.

Name Of Your Child: _____

I agree and give my consent for my child to participate in this research project.

YES _____ NO _____

Signature of Parent or Legal Guardian: _____

Date: _____

Telephone Number: _____

APPENDIX F

APÉNDICE F

AUTORIZACIÓN PARENTAL Y FORMULARIO DE CONSENTIMIENTO PARA PARTICIPACIÓN EN UN ESTUDIO DE INVESTIGACIÓN PARA TODOS LOS ESTUDIANTES DE ÚLTIMO AÑO DE EECH

Título del estudio de investigación: *Un estudio de caso de las experiencias de estudiantes y profesores en una escuela secundaria de alto rendimiento universitario temprano a lo largo de la frontera entre Texas y México.*

Estimado(s) padre(s)/madre(s) o tutor(es) legal(es):

Hemos invitado a su hijo(a) a formar parte de un estudio de investigación educativo que vamos a llevar a cabo. La participación de su hijo(a) es voluntaria, lo cual significa que usted y él/ella pueden decidir si él/ella desea participar en este estudio. Aun si opta por permitirle participar, usted es libre de cancelar su participación en cualquier momento si cambia de opinión.

Propósito del estudio de investigación

El propósito de este estudio de investigación es explorar las percepciones y experiencias de los estudiantes y profesores al ser miembro de la Escuela Secundaria Excelencia Early College, que se destaca por sus altos logros académicos y premios.

Para descubrir por qué los estudiantes de EECHS obtienen calificaciones tan altas y por qué EECHS constantemente recibe calificaciones altas como escuela, necesito hacerle a su hijo o hija preguntas como: ¿Cómo es para usted ser estudiante en EECHS? ¿Cuáles son algunas de las cosas que más te gustan de ser estudiante en EECHS? Y, ¿Cuáles son algunas de las cosas que han sido un desafío para usted con respecto a ser estudiante en EECHS?

Para responder a estas preguntas, le pido a su hijo o hija que participe en tres actividades de investigación diferentes que son completamente seguras y tomarán poco más de tres horas. Por participar en este estudio de investigación, su hijo o hija recibirá como obsequio una tarjeta de regalo de Target de \$20.00 y una carta de agradecimiento.

Descripciones de las actividades de investigación

(a) Cuestionario en línea. Al optar por participar en este estudio, su hijo(a) completará un breve cuestionario en línea y responderá preguntas en cuanto a su edad, grado escolar, género, origen étnico o nacionalidad, antecedentes educativos de sus padres y metas universitarias y profesionales. Esta actividad le llevará unos quince minutos.

(b) Entrevista de grupo de opinión. Posteriormente, su hijo(a) participará en una entrevista de grupo de opinión con otros cinco o diez estudiantes de último año (grado 12) de EECHS, durante la cual responderá preguntas como estas: ¿Qué siente al ser estudiante de EECHS? ¿Cuáles son algunas de las cosas que más le gustan de ser estudiante de EECHS? ¿Cuáles son algunas de las cosas que han supuesto un desafío para él/ella como estudiante de EECHS?

Para esta entrevista nos reuniremos en una sala de juntas en EECHS durante el horario habitual de clases y yo fungiré como guía, realizando preguntas generales sobre las experiencias de su hijo(a) como estudiante de EECHS, tal como se mencionó anteriormente. La entrevista del grupo de opinión durará aproximadamente una hora y media y se audiograbará para garantizar su precisión.

Durante la entrevista del grupo de opinión o después de esta, a su hijo(a) se le podrían ocurrir otras cosas que le gustaría compartir acerca de sus experiencias en EECHS, pero quizás se sienta más cómodo(a) haciéndolo en una entrevista individual. Él/Ella puede programar una entrevista individual conmigo durante el horario habitual de clases en EECHS si así lo desea.

(c) Reunión de seguimiento. Aproximadamente una semana después de la reunión del grupo de opinión, su hijo(a) participará en una reunión de seguimiento en EECHS durante el horario habitual de clases. En dicha reunión, él/ella comprobará que el resumen que yo haya redactado sobre su entrevista del grupo de opinión de la semana anterior sea correcto. La reunión de seguimiento durará aproximadamente media hora.

Directrices de investigación

Riesgos o molestias. No hay riesgos ni molestias conocidos en este estudio de investigación. Además, su hijo(a) no está obligado a responder ninguna pregunta con la que no se sienta cómodo(a). Él/Ella puede dejar de participar en este estudio en cualquier momento sin ninguna consecuencia o pérdida de beneficios.

Confidencialidad. Se tomarán todas las medidas y precauciones necesarias para garantizar la confidencialidad de la participación de su hijo(a) en este estudio de investigación. Se le asignará un número de código que aparecerá en cualquier material escrito en lugar de su nombre verdadero. La lista que vincula el nombre de su hijo(a) con este código se mantendrá segura y separada de otros materiales de investigación en mi oficina y estará solo a mi disposición. Sin embargo, debido al vínculo existente entre dicho código y su identidad, no se puede garantizar la confidencialidad.

Además, se podría dar una falta de confidencialidad si algún participante comentara temas del grupo de opinión fuera de su entrevista. Por ello, antes de comenzar la entrevista del grupo de opinión anunciaré a todos los estudiantes que deben respetar la privacidad y confidencialidad de los demás y evitar hablar sobre esos temas fuera de su entrevista.

Beneficios. Si su hijo(a) opta por participar en este estudio, recibirá una tarjeta de regalo de Target de 20 dólares y una carta de agradecimiento. Las tarjetas de regalo para los participantes, que se financian de los fondos propios del investigador como muestra de agradecimiento, se consideran como ingresos a efectos fiscales y deben incluirse como tales en la declaración anual de impuestos del/de la cabeza de familia. Además, su hijo(a) podría beneficiarse personalmente del análisis y la reflexión sobre sus experiencias como estudiante de EECHS. La participación en este estudio podría promover su crecimiento personal y académico como estudiante y ayudarle a sobresalir aún más en EECHS.

Beneficios adicionales. Los resultados de este estudio de investigación podrían beneficiar tanto a los líderes educativos como a las partes interesadas en educación de este distrito, al proporcionar amplios conocimientos sobre algunos de los elementos que motivan al alumnado y profesorado a alcanzar un alto rendimiento académico en una preparatoria universitaria. Este estudio podría servir asimismo como una guía o modelo que ilustre cómo una escuela y un grupo de estudiantes superan de manera sistemática numerosos obstáculos para

disfrutar de las ventajas de graduarse de preparatoria y obtener a la vez una titulación técnica de dos años.

Preguntas adicionales. En caso de preguntas adicionales sobre este estudio de investigación o los derechos de su hijo(a) como participante en él, favor de ponerse en contacto conmigo mediante llamada al (957) 456-2324 o bien mensaje a kelly.stuart01@tvu.edu. También puede ponerse en contacto con mi supervisora y asesora de investigación, la Dra. Josie Smith, mediante llamada al (957) 982-5734 o bien mensaje a josie.smith@tvu.edu. Asimismo, puede ponerse en contacto con la Oficina de Apoyo de la Junta de Revisión Institucional para la Protección de Sujetos Humanos (IRB, por sus siglas en inglés) de la Universidad de Texas de El Valle mediante llamada al (957) 654-2203 o bien mensaje a irb@tvu.edu.

Participación voluntaria. La participación de su hijo(a) en este estudio es completamente voluntaria y no es un requisito de la Preparatoria Universitaria de Riverbend, del Distrito Escolar Independiente del Río (RISD, por sus siglas en inglés) o de la Universidad de Texas de El Valle. Su hijo(a) no recibirá una calificación ni crédito académico por participar en este estudio de investigación. Si inicialmente opta por permitir que su hijo(a) participe en este estudio, pero después cambia de opinión, él/ella podría dejar de participar en cualquier momento sin consecuencia o pérdida de beneficios alguna.

Su hijo(a) no está obligado(a) a responder ninguna pregunta que le incomode, ya sea del cuestionario en línea o bien durante la entrevista del grupo de opinión. También es libre de dejar de participar y abandonar en cualquier momento el cuestionario en línea, la entrevista del grupo de opinión, la entrevista individual o la reunión de seguimiento. Él/Ella tiene derecho a interrumpir su participación en este estudio en cualquier momento y por cualquier razón sin consecuencia ni pérdida de beneficios.

Publicación del estudio de investigación

Los resultados escritos de este estudio, ya sean totales o parciales, podrían divulgarse en publicaciones profesionales, revistas educativas o científicas. Sin embargo, no se identificará a ningún participante por su nombre, sino que se le asignará un seudónimo para ayudar a garantizar la confidencialidad.

Devolución de formularios

Favor de pedir a su hijo(a) que entregue las *páginas 7 y 8 (Firmas) del Apéndice G* de este documento una vez completadas y firmadas en la oficina de su asesor escolar a más tardar el día _____

Atentamente,

Kelly Stuart, MM

Candidato a doctorado

Currículo e Instrucción

Universidad del Valle de Texas

celular: (957) 456-2324

correo electrónico: kelly.stuart@tvu.edu

(Favor de guardar las páginas 1-6 para su archivo personal)

(Esta página se ha dejado en blanco intencionalmente)

APÉNDICE F

FIRMAS AUTORIZACIÓN PARENTAL Y FORMULARIO DE CONSENTIMIENTO

PARA PARTICIPACIÓN EN UN ESTUDIO DE INVESTIGACIÓN

PARA TODOS LOS ESTUDIANTES

DE ÚLTIMO AÑOS DE EECHS

Derechos de los participantes en investigación con estudiantes

1. Entiendo que el consentimiento y la autorización parentales son obligatorios para todos los menores y participantes que decidan formar parte de este estudio de investigación independientemente de su edad.
2. Se han explicado satisfactoriamente todos los procedimientos de este estudio de investigación y se me ha dado la oportunidad de aclarar cualquier duda que pudiera tener.
3. Se ha explicado satisfactoriamente cualquier riesgo o incomodidad de este estudio de investigación.
4. Se ha explicado satisfactoriamente cualquier beneficio que mi hijo(a) pudiera experimentar.
5. Entiendo que si tengo más preguntas o inquietudes, puedo comunicarme con el investigador por correo electrónico: kelly.stuart@tvu.edu, o llamarlo al: (957) 456-2324. También entiendo que puedo comunicarme con su asesora, la Dra. Josie Smith, en el Departamento de Enseñanza y Aprendizaje de la Universidad Texas Valley. Su número de teléfono y correo electrónico es: (957) 982-5734 y su correo electrónico es: josie.smith@tvu.edu.
6. Se me ha informado de que mi hijo(a) podría optar por dejar de participar en este estudio de investigación en cualquier momento sin consecuencias ni pérdida de beneficios. También entiendo que mi hijo(a) podría negarse a responder cualquier pregunta que se le haga durante este estudio de investigación sin consecuencias o pérdida de beneficios.
7. Las tarjetas de regalo de Target para los participantes, que se financian de los fondos propios del investigador como muestra de agradecimiento, se consideran como ingresos a efectos fiscales y deben incluirse como tales en la declaración anual de impuestos del/ de la cabeza de familia.

8. Entiendo que este estudio de investigación es completamente voluntario y no es un requisito de EECHS, RISD, TCC o TVU y que no se otorgará ningún crédito académico a mi hijo o hija por participar en este estudio de investigación.

9. Cualquier pregunta adicional sobre los derechos de mi hijo como participante de una investigación puede dirigirse a la oficina de Apoyo a la Investigación de Sujetos Humanos de la Junta de Revisión Institucional del Valle de Texas al: (957) 456-7890.

10. Entiendo que el investigador tomará todas las medidas y precauciones necesarias para garantizar la confidencialidad de la participación de mi hijo(a) en este estudio de investigación y que se utilizará un número de código en lugar de su nombre real, pero que debido al vínculo existente entre dicho número y su identidad no se puede garantizar la confidencialidad.

11. La información obtenida de este estudio de investigación será accesible únicamente para el único investigador de este estudio y la Dra. Josie Smith.

12. Los resultados totales o parciales de este estudio podrían compartirse para su publicación con publicaciones profesionales, revistas científicas o revistas de investigación educativa.

Nombre del/de la menor: _____

Acepto y doy mi consentimiento para que mi hijo(a) participe en este proyecto de investigación.

SÍ _____ NO _____

Firma del padre/de la madre o tutor(a) legal: _____

Fecha: _____

Número de teléfono: _____

APPENDIX G

APPENDIX G
ASSENT FORM FOR RESEARCH STUDY
PARTICIPATION FOR MINOR
STUDENTS AGES 15-17)

Research Study Title: *A Case Study of Student and Faculty Experiences in a High-Achieving Early College High School Along the Texas-Mexico Border.*

Dear Student,

You are invited and welcomed to participate in a research study by Kelly Stuart, M.M. in the Department of Teaching and Learning at the Texas Valley University. Your participation in this study is entirely voluntary. I will be discussing this study with your parents. Your parents are not allowed to have you participate in this study unless you also agree to participate in this study.

This research study is part of a doctoral dissertation that is being conducted under the supervision of Dr. Josie Smith, Ph.D.

What is a Research Study and Why Might I Participate in One?

- A research study is a way to go about learning something. Researchers study many different subjects the same way that you study many different subjects in school.
- There are several reasons that people might choose to participate in a research study. Sometimes people have curiosity about the study, sometimes people want to help the researcher, and sometimes people would like to make a particular program better.
- It is important for you to be aware of why you might say yes to participate in this research study!

- Please take the time that is necessary for you to decide about whether to participate in this study and please feel free to ask questions at any time.

What is the Purpose of this Research Study?

The purpose of this research study is to explore the perceptions and experiences of students and faculty at EECHS, a high-achieving early college high school along the Texas-Mexico border. Students who choose to participate in this study will complete three research activities including: (i) an online student data questionnaire; (ii) a focus-group interview and (iii) a follow-up meeting.

Research Activity Descriptions

(a) Online Student Data Questionnaire. The online student data questionnaire will ask you about your age, grade level, gender, ethnicity or national origin, parent educational background, and college or career goals. The online student data questionnaire should take no more than fifteen minutes to complete.

(b) Focus-Group Interview. What is it like to be a student at EECHS? What are some of the things that you like the most about being a student at EECHS? What are some of the things that have been a challenge for you at EECHS? These, as well as other similar types of questions may best be answered through a special type of interview known as a *Focus-Group Interview*.

A focus-group interview is a small group of approximately 4-6 students where you and other students will respond to questions which I ask about your experiences as a student at EECHS. The focus-group interview will take about one and one-half hours to complete and I will make an audio-recording to ensure accuracy. A time will be scheduled during regular school hours when we can all meet for your focus-group interview. Your focus-group meeting will meet either face-to-face on the EECHS campus or online using the Zoom technology application.

During or after your focus-group interview, you may think of some other things that you would like to share about your experiences at EECHS but would feel more comfortable doing so in an individual interview. We can arrange a time for us to meet face-to-face during regular school hours at EECHS or online using Zoom for an individual interview if you would prefer.

(c) Follow-Up Meeting. The follow-up meeting takes about thirty minutes and is a meeting where you check to see that a summary that I have written describing your focus-group interview from the previous week is correct. About one week following your focus-group

interview, we will meet either face-to-face during regular school hours at EECHS or online using the Zoom application.

Research Study Guidelines

Risks or Discomforts. There are no known risks or discomforts in this research study. Additionally, you are not required to answer any questions that you are not comfortable with. You may discontinue your participation in this study at any time with no consequence or loss of benefits.

Confidentiality. Every effort and precaution will be taken to ensure the confidentiality of your participation in this research study. Your name will be assigned a pseudonym or fictitious name and this, rather than your actual name, will appear on any written materials. The list that pairs your name with this pseudonym will be kept secure and apart from other research materials in my office and will be available only to me. However, because there will be a link between the pseudonym and your identity, confidentiality cannot be guaranteed.

In addition, a lack of confidentiality could occur if any participants discuss focus-group topics outside of their focus-group interview. For this reason, prior to beginning our focus-group interview, I will announce that all students should please respect others' privacy and confidentiality and avoid discussing topics outside of their focus-group interview.

Benefits. A \$20 Target gift card and a Letter of Appreciation will be provided for students who choose to participate in this study. The Target Gift Card is provided to participants in this study from the researcher's own funds as a token of appreciation. The Target Gift Card is considered income for tax purposes and should be included as such in the annual income tax filing of the head of the household.

As a participant in this study, you may also personally benefit from discussing and reflecting about your experiences as a student at EECHS. Participating in this study may further your personal and academic growth as a student and may assist you in making even more progress as a student at EECHS as well as enhance your academic resume.

Additional Benefits. The results from this research study may also benefit educational leaders and stakeholders in this district by providing them with broad insights into some of the elements that motivate students, teachers, and faculty to pursue high academic achievement in an early college high school. This study may also serve as a guide or model illustrating how one school and one group of students consistently overcome numerous obstacles to enjoy the

advantages of graduating high school while also obtaining a two-year associate's degree and 42 core university credits.

Additional Questions. If you have additional questions about this research study and/or your rights as a research participant, you may contact me at telephone: (957) 456-2324 or email: kelly.stuart@tvu.edu. You may also contact my committee chairperson and advisor Dr. Josie Smith, Ph.D at telephone: (957) 982-5734 or email: josie.smith@tvu.edu. You may also contact the Texas Valley University Institutional Review Board at: (957) 456-7890 or email: irb@tvu.edu.

Voluntary. Your participation in this study is entirely voluntary and is not a requirement of the Excelencia Early College High School, the Rio Independent School District, Texas Community College, or the Texas Valley University. This study will not provide you with a grade or academic credit. If you choose to participate in this study initially but later on change your mind, you may discontinue this study at any time with no consequence or loss of benefits.

You are not required to answer any questions on the online student data questionnaire or focus-group interview questions that make you feel uncomfortable. You are also free to withdraw and discontinue participating in the online student data questionnaire, the focus-group interview, or the follow-up meeting at any time without any loss of benefits. You have the right to discontinue participation in this study at any time, and for any reason.

Publication of this Research Study

The written results of this study either whole or in part may be published in professional publications, educational journals, or scientific journals. However, no individual participants will be identified by name but instead will be assigned a pseudonym to ensure confidentiality.

Returning Forms

When signed and completed, please return the Appendix E or F Parent Permission and Consent Form Signature Pages 7, 8 and the Appendix G Signature Pages 7, 8 to the AVID IV teacher by this Friday, 4 p.m.

Sincerely,

Kelly Stuart, M.M.
Doctoral Candidate
Curriculum and Instruction
Texas Valley University
cell: (957) 456-2324
email: kelly.stuart@tvu.edu

(Please keep pages 1-6 for your records)

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APPENDIX G
ASSENT FORM *SIGNATURE PAGES* FOR RESEARCH
STUDY PARTICIPATION (FOR MINOR
STUDENTS AGES 15-17)

Participant Rights

1. I understand that this Assent Form for Research Study is required of all minor students participating in this study.
2. I have been informed that I may refuse to answer questions or may discontinue my participation in this research study at any time before the completion of the study without loss of any benefits.
3. Any risks or hazards have been explained to me, as well as any real or potential benefits.
4. I understand that the researcher will take every effort and precaution to ensure confidentiality in this research study and that a pseudonym rather than my actual name will be used but because there will be a link between the pseudonym and my identity, confidentiality cannot be guaranteed.
5. I understand that if I have additional questions, I may contact the researcher at telephone (957) 456-2324 or email at kelly.stuart@tvu.edu. Additionally, I may also contact his supervisor Dr. Josie Smith, Ph.D. at telephone: (957) 982-5734 or email: josie.smith@tvu.edu.

6. Any questions that I might have concerning my rights as a research subject may also be directed toward the Texas Valley University Institutional Review Board at telephone: (957) 456-7890 or email: irb@tvu.edu.

Focus-Group Interview and Follow-Up Meeting Preference

Please indicate your preference below by indicating "Yes" to one of the options below.

- I prefer to meet face-to-face on the EECHS campus _____
- I prefer meeting on Zoom _____
- No preference. Either meeting face-to-face on the EECHS campus or meeting on Zoom are acceptable _____

Documentation of Research Participant Assent

I agree to participate in this research study entitled: *A Case Study of Student and Faculty Experiences in a High-Achieving Early College High School Along the Texas-Mexico Border.*

Printed Name of Minor Research Study Participant _____

Signature of Minor Research Study Participant _____

Date _____

APPENDIX H

APPENDIX H
INFORMED CONSENT FORM FOR RESEARCH STUDY
PARTICIPATION FOR STUDENTS
AGE 18 OR OLDER

Research Study Title: *A Case Study of Student and Faculty Experiences in a High-Achieving Early College High School Along the Texas-Mexico Border.*

Dear Student,

You are invited and welcomed to participate in a research study by Kelly Stuart, M.M. in the Department of Teaching and Learning at the Texas Valley University. This research study is part of a doctoral dissertation that is being conducted under the supervision of Dr. Josie Smith, Ph.D.

What is a Research Study and Why Might I Choose to Participate in One?

- A research study is a way to go about learning something. Researchers study many different subjects the same way that you might study many different subjects in school.

- There are several reasons that people might choose to participate in a research study.

Sometimes people have curiosity about the study, sometimes people want to help the researcher, and sometimes people would like to make a particular program better.

- It is important for you to be aware of why you might say "yes" to participate in this research study!

- Please take the time that is necessary for you to decide about whether to participate in this research study and please feel free to ask questions.

What is the Purpose of this Research Study?

The purpose of this research study is to explore the perceptions and experiences of students and faculty at EECHS, a high-achieving early college high school along the Texas-Mexico Border. Students who choose to participate in this study will complete three research activities including: (i) an online student data questionnaire; (ii) a focus-group interview and (iii) a follow-up meeting.

Research Activities Description

(a) Online Student Data Questionnaire. The online student data questionnaire will ask you about your age, grade level, gender, ethnicity or national origin, parent educational background, and college or career goals. The online student data questionnaire should take no more than about fifteen minutes to complete.

(b) Focus-Group Interview. What is it like to be a student at EECHS? What are some of the things that you like the most about being a student at EECHS? And, what are some of the things that have been a challenge for you being a student at EECHS? These, as well as other similar types of questions may best be answered through a special type of interview known as a Focus-Group Interview.

A focus-group interview is a small group of approximately 4 to 6 students where you and other students will respond to questions which I ask about your experiences as a student at EECHS. The focus-group interview will take about one and one-half hours to complete and I will make an audio-recording to ensure accuracy. A time will be scheduled during regular school hours when we can all meet for your focus-group interview. Your focus-group interview will be either face-to-face on the EECHS campus or online using the Zoom technology application.

During or after your focus-group interview, you may think of some other things that you would like to share about your experiences at EECHS but would feel more comfortable doing so in an individual interview. We can arrange a time for us to meet face-to-face during regular school hours at EECHS, or online using Zoom for an individual interview if you would like.

(c) Follow-Up Meeting. The follow-up meeting takes about thirty minutes and is a meeting where you check to see that a summary that I have written describing your focus-group interview from the previous week is correct. About one week following your focus-group interview, we will meet either face-to-face during regular school hours at EECHS, or online using the Zoom application.

Research Study Guidelines

Risks or Discomforts. There are no known risks or discomforts in this research study. Additionally, you are not required to answer any questions that you are not comfortable with. You may discontinue your participation in this study at any time with no consequence or loss of benefits.

Confidentiality. Every effort and precaution will be taken to ensure the confidentiality of your participation in this research study. Your name will be assigned a pseudonym and this, rather than your actual name, will appear on any written materials. The list that pairs your name with this pseudonym will be kept secure and apart from other research materials in my office and available only to me. However, because there will be a link between the pseudonym and your identity, confidentiality cannot be guaranteed.

In addition, a lack of confidentiality could occur if any participants discuss focus-group topics outside of their focus-group interview. For this reason, prior to beginning our focus-group interview I will announce that all students should please respect each others' privacy and confidentiality and avoid discussing topics outside of their focus-group interview.

Benefits. A \$20 Target gift card and a Letter of Appreciation will be provided for students who choose to participate in this study. The Target Gift Card is provided to participants in this study from the researcher's own funds as a token of appreciation. The Target Gift Card is considered income for tax purposes and should be included as such in the annual income tax filing of the head of the household.

As a participant in this study, you may also personally benefit from discussing and reflecting about your experiences as a student at EECHS. Participating in this study may further your personal and academic growth as a student and may assist you in making even more progress as a student at EECHS as well as enhance your academic resume.

Additional Benefits. The results from this research study may also benefit educational leaders and stakeholders in this district by providing broad insights into some of the elements that motivate students, teachers, and faculty to pursue high academic achievement in an early college high school. This study may also serve as a guide or model illustrating how one school and one group of students consistently overcome numerous obstacles to enjoy the advantages of graduating high school while also obtaining a two-year associate's degree and 42 core university credits.

Additional Questions. If you have additional questions about this research study and/or your rights as a research participant, you may contact me at telephone: (957) 456-2324 or email: kelly.stuart@tvu.edu. You may also contact my committee chairperson and advisor Dr. Josie Smith, Ph.D at telephone: (957) 982-5734 or email: josie.smith@tvu.edu. You may also contact The Texas Valley University Institutional Review Board at telephone: (957) 456-7890 or email: irb@tvu.edu.

Voluntary. Participation in this study is entirely voluntary and not a requirement by the Excelencia Early College High School, the Rio Independent School District, Texas Community College, or the Texas Valley University. This study will not provide you with a grade or academic credit. If you choose to participate in this study initially but later on change your mind, you may discontinue this study at any time with no consequence or loss of benefits.

You are not required to answer any questions on the online student data questionnaire or focus-group interview questions that make you feel uncomfortable. You are also free to withdraw and discontinue participating in the online student data questionnaire, the focus-group interview, or the follow-up meeting at any time without consequence or loss of benefits. You have the right to discontinue participation in this study at any time, and for any reason.

Publication of this Research Study

The written results of this study either whole or in part may be published in professional publications, educational journals, or scientific journals. However, no individual participants will be identified by name, but instead will be assigned a pseudonym to ensure confidentiality.

Returning Forms

When completed and signed, please return the *Appendix E or F Signature Pages 7, 8* and the *Appendix H Signature Pages 7, 8* to the AVID IV teacher by this Friday, 4 p.m.

Sincerely,

Kelly Stuart, M.M.
Doctoral Candidate
Curriculum and Instruction
Texas Valley University
cell: (957) 456-2324
email: kelly.stuart@tvu.edu

(Please keep pages 1-6 for your records)

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APPENDIX H
INFORMED CONSENT FORM *SIGNATURE PAGES*
FOR RESEARCH STUDY PARTICIPATION
(STUDENTS AGED 18 OR OLDER)

PARTICIPANT RIGHTS

1. I understand that this Informed Consent Form for Research Study Participation is required of all participants aged 18 or over in this study.
2. I have been informed that I may refuse to answer questions or may discontinue my participation in this research study at any time before the completion of the study without loss of benefits.
3. Any risks or discomforts have been explained to me, as well as any real and potential benefits.
4. The Target Gift Card is provided to participants in this study from the researcher's own funds as a token of appreciation. The Target Gift Card is considered income for tax purposes and should be included as such in the annual income tax filing of the head of the household.
5. I understand that the researcher will take every effort and precaution to ensure confidentiality in this research study and that a pseudonym rather than my actual name will be used but because there will be a link between the pseudonym and my identity, confidentiality cannot be guaranteed.
6. I understand that if I have additional questions, I may contact the researcher at telephone (957) 456-2324 or email at kelly.stuart@tvu.edu. Additionally, I may also contact Dr. Josie Smith, Ph.D. at telephone: (957) 982-5734 or email: josie.smith@tvu.edu.
7. Any questions that I might have concerning my rights as a research subject may also be directed towards the Texas Valley University Institutional Review Board at telephone (957) 456-7890 or email: irb@tvu.edu.

FOCUS GROUP INTERVIEW AND FOLLOW-UP MEETING PREFERENCES

Please indicate your preference by indicating "Yes" to one of the options below.

- I prefer to meet face-to-face on the EECHS campus _____.
- I prefer meeting on Zoom _____.
- No preference. Either meeting face-to-face on the EECHS campus or meeting on Zoom are acceptable _____.

SIGNATURE PAGE

I have read the contents of this Informed Consent Form for Research Study Participation and have been encouraged to ask questions. I have received satisfactory answers to any questions that I might have had. I understand that I may discontinue this study at any time for any reason and with no loss of benefits. I freely give my consent to participate in this research study and have been provided with a copy of this research study form for my own records in case I might have questions as this research study proceeds.

Participant Name (please print) _____

Participant Signature _____

Date: _____

APPENDIX I

APPENDIX I
LETTER OF APPRECIATION FOR EXPRESSING
INTEREST IN PARTICIPATING IN
A RESEARCH STUDY

Dear _____,

Thank you for expressing your interest and willingness to participate in this research study of a high-achieving early college high school. Unfortunately, your name was not chosen in the random drawing used to select participants in this study. Please continue to excel in your studies at EECHS, TCC, and TVU and become a member of the EECHS Graduating Class of 2022 or 2023!

Sincerely,
Kelly Stuart, M.M.
Doctoral Candidate
Curriculum and Instruction
Texas Valley University
cell: (957) 456-2324
email: kelly.stuart@tvu.edu

APPENDIX J

APPENDIX J
ONLINE STUDENT DATA
QUESTIONNAIRE

1. What is your age?
2. What is your gender?
3. What is your ethnicity?
4. What language is spoken primarily at your home?
6. What is the highest educational level of your father (or male guardian)?
7. What is the highest educational level of your mother (or female guardian)?
8. What middle school did you attend?
9. How did you first learn about the Excelencia Early College High School?
10. How many close friends would you say that you have at EECHS?
11. How many favorite teachers would you say that you have at EECHS?
12. How many favorite adults would you say that you have at EECHS?
13. Are there particular teachers or faculty at EECHS that you feel have helped you in your progress at EECHS?
14. Please select from the list below any clubs or extracurricular groups at EECHS that you have participated in.
15. Following graduation from EECHS, I plan to: (please select all that apply from below)
 - (a) Continue my college education at TVU and complete an undergraduate degree.
 - (b) Continue my college education at another university and complete an undergraduate degree.
 - (c) Take some time off from my studies.
 - (d) Unsure or haven't decided yet.

APPENDIX K

APPENDIX K
STUDENT FOCUS-GROUP INTERVIEW
PROTOCOL

RQ 1. What are the lived experiences of the students, teachers, and staff in this high-achieving early college high school?

1. What are some of the reasons that you decided to enroll at EECHS?
2. Looking back to your freshman year, what was it like for you?
3. What is it like now for you as a senior here at EECHS? How have things changed for you?
4. What are some of the things that you like the most about being a student at EECHS?
5. What are some of the things that have been challenging or difficult for you as a student at EECHS?

RQ 2. What motivates these students to overcome obstacles and persist to degree completion?

6. What has helped motivate you to obtain high grades at EECHS?
7. Were there any times that you considered dropping out of EECHS?

RQ 3. What factors or elements might contribute to these students' success?

8. What are some of the things that you have done to overcome challenges at EECHS?
9. Are there particular teachers, faculty, or staff at EECHS that you feel have made a difference or influenced your progress at EECHS?
10. Are there particular family members that you feel encouraged or supported your progress at EECHS?
11. Are there particular classes at EECHS that you feel were helpful in preparing you for college classes?
12. Looking back at your freshman year, what advice would you offer to an incoming EECHS freshman?
13. Looking back on our discussion today, what in your opinion is most important? Are there other things that you would like to add? Have we missed anything?

APPENDIX L

APPENDIX L
INTRODUCTION LETTER AND INFORMED CONSENT FORM
FOR RESEARCH STUDY PARTICIPATION FOR
EECHS FACULTY

Research Study Title: *A Case Study of Student and Faculty Experiences in a High-Achieving Early College High School Along the Texas-Mexico Border.*

Dear EECHS Faculty Member,

I am sending you this letter because your name was mentioned recently in a conversation that I had with EECHS seniors. During student interviews I asked the following question: "Are there teachers that you remember that helped you or made a difference or influenced your progress here at EECHS?"

Faculty viewpoints and perceptions about education and their experiences teaching and interacting with younger people are extremely important in educational research. It is my hope that you will find the possibility of participating in this research study both interesting and worthwhile. I am certain that your comments and insights will add to the quality and usefulness of this research study if you choose to be a participant.

The following sections will describe this research study's purpose, what its requirements are, what the research study guidelines are, discuss the benefits and potential benefits are, and discuss the next steps to take if you would like to participate in this study.

Sincerely,

Kelly Stuart, M.M.
Doctoral Candidate
Curriculum and Instruction
Texas Valley University
cell: (957) 456-2324
email: kelly.stuart@tvu.edu

Invitation

You are invited and welcomed to participate in a research study by Kelly Stuart, M.M. in the Department of Teaching and Learning at the Texas Valley University. This research study has been approved by the RISD superintendent and is part of a doctoral dissertation that is being conducted under the supervision of Dr. Josie Smith, Ph.D.

What is the Purpose of this Research Study and What is Required?

The purpose of this research study is to explore the perceptions and experiences of students and faculty at EECHS, a high-achieving early college high school. In order to conduct this research study, EECHS faculty who express an interest in participating may choose to complete three research activities including: (i) a brief online faculty data questionnaire; (ii) one personal interview and (iii) and one follow-up meeting.

(a) Online Faculty Data Questionnaire. The online faculty data questionnaire asks questions about your age, gender, ethnicity or national origin, highest degree obtained, degree area or specialty, number of years in public education, number of years of college teaching experience, and number of years in your current position. The online data questionnaire should take no more than about fifteen minutes to complete.

(b) Personal Interview. In your personal interview, we will meet for approximately one hour. If you are a teacher, I will ask questions about your experiences as a classroom teacher at EECHS. If you are a counselor, I will ask questions about your experiences as a counselor at EECHS. Finally, if you are an administrator, I will ask you some general questions about your experiences as an administrator at EECHS.

(c) Follow-Up Meeting. The follow-up meeting takes about thirty minutes and is a meeting where you check to see that a summary that I have written describing your personal interview from the previous week is correct.

Research Study Guidelines

Confidentiality. Every effort and precaution will be taken to ensure the confidentiality of your participation in this research study. Your name will be assigned a pseudonym and this pseudonym rather than your actual name will appear on all written materials in this study. The list that pairs your name with the pseudonym will be kept secure and apart from other research materials and will be available only me.

Voluntary. Participation in this study is strictly voluntary and is not required by EECHS, RISD, TCC, or TVU. Participation in this research study will not result in compensation in any form by EECHS, RISD, TCC, or TVU. If you choose to participate in this research study initially but change your mind later, you may discontinue this study at any time. Additionally, you are not required to answer any questions that you do not feel comfortable answering.

Benefits. A gift of a \$45 Target gift card and a Letter of Appreciation will be provided to all faculty participants in this study. This study includes three research activities as mentioned previously: (i) a brief online faculty data questionnaire, (ii) one personal interview, and (iii) one follow-up meeting. The total amount of time necessary for these activities will be approximately two and one-half hours.

Participant Rights. You are not required to answer any questions on the online faculty data questionnaire, during your personal interview, or during the follow-up meeting that make you feel uncomfortable. You are also free to withdraw and discontinue participating in the online faculty data questionnaire, the personal interview, or the follow-up meeting at any time. You have the right to discontinue participation in this study at any time, and for any reason.

Risks or Hazards. There are no known risks, hazards, or inconveniences in this research study. Additionally, you are not required to answer questions that you are not comfortable with.

Potential Benefits. The results from this research study may provide educational leaders and stakeholders in this district with broad insights into some of the elements that motivate students, teachers, counselors, and principals to pursue high academic achievement in an early college high school. This study may also serve as a guide or model illustrating how one school and one group of students consistently overcome numerous obstacles to enjoy the advantages of graduating high school while also obtaining a two-year associate's degree and 42 core university credits.

Publication of this Research Study

The written results of this study either whole or in part may be published in professional publications, educational journals, or scientific journals. However, no individual participants will be identified by name but instead will be assigned a pseudonym for the purpose of anonymity.

Participation Process

If you are interested in participating in this research study, please read and sign signature pages five and six of this document. Once completed, please return these pages to the AVID IV teacher. Alternatively, you may send a signed pdf document to me via my TVU email. Following my receipt of these signature pages, I will send you a link so that you may complete the online faculty data questionnaire. Additionally, I will call to ask you when we might be able to meet for your first personal interview.

Sincerely,

Kelly Stuart, M.M.

Doctoral Candidate

Curriculum and Instruction

Texas Valley University

cell: (957) 456-2324

email: kelly.stuart@tvu.edu

APPENDIX L
INFORMED CONSENT FORM FOR RESEARCH
STUDY PARTICIPATION FOR
EECHS FACULTY

Signature pages 5, 6

Research Study Title: *A Case Study of Student and Faculty Experiences in a High-Achieving Early College High School Along the Texas-Mexico Border.*

Consent and Permission for Audio-Recording of Personal Interview

If you consent and agree to participate in this research study, please indicate below by writing your initials next to the appropriate boxes.

- A. ____ Yes, I agree to participate in this research study.
- B. ____ Yes, I agree to participate in the online faculty data questionnaire
- C. ____ Yes, I agree to the use of audio-recording of the personal interview
- D. ____ Yes, I agree to participate in the follow-up meeting of my personal interview
- E. ____ Yes, I agree that some or all of audio-recording transcript may be used in publications or presentations

Participant Rights

1. I understand that this Letter of Informed Consent for Research Study is required of all participants aged 18 or over in this study.
2. I have been informed that I may refuse to answer questions or may discontinue my participation in this research study at any time before the completion of the study.
3. Any risks or hazards have been explained to me, as well as any benefits or potential benefits.
4. I understand that the researcher will take every effort and precaution to ensure my anonymity and confidentiality in this research study.

5. I understand that if I have additional questions, I may contact the researcher at telephone number (957) 456-2324 or email: kelly.stuart01@tvu.edu. Additionally, I may also contact Dr. Josie Smith, Ph.D. at telephone number: (957) 982-5734 or email: josie.smith@tvu.edu.

6. Any questions that I might have concerning my rights as a research subject may also be directed toward the Texas Valley University Institutional Review Board at email: irb@tvu.edu. or telephone number: (957) 456-7890.

SIGNATURE

I have read the contents of this Letter of Informed Consent Form for Research Study Participation and have been encouraged to ask questions. I have received satisfactory answers to any questions that I might have had. I understand that I may discontinue this study at any time for any reason and with no consequence. I freely give my consent to participate in this research study and have been provided with a copy of this research study form for my own records in case I might have questions as this research study proceeds.

Participant Name (please print) _____

Participant Signature _____

Participant Telephone Number: _____

Best Time to Call: _____

Best Time for Interviews: (please indicate) During school ___ After school ___ Saturday ___

Other _____

Participant School email: _____

Date: _____

I have read and discussed this form with the research participant and the research participant has read this form. An explanation of this research study was provided and questions from the research study participant were answered to the research participant's satisfaction. In my opinion, the research study participant has demonstrated an understanding and comprehension of this information.

Researcher Signature: _____

Date: _____

APPENDIX M

APPENDIX M
INTRODUCTION LETTER AND INFORMED CONSENT FORM
FOR RESEARCH STUDY PARTICIPATION FOR
EECHS ADMINISTRATORS

Research Study Title: *A Case Study of Student and Faculty Experiences in a High-Achieving Early College High School Along the Texas-Mexico Border.*

Dear Administrator,

I am sending you this letter because your name was mentioned recently in an interview that I had with EECHS teachers. During this interview I asked teachers the following question: "Are there administrators or staff members either past or present that you feel have made important contributions to EECHS?"

Administrator viewpoints and opinions about education and working with younger people are extremely important in educational research. It is my hope that you will find the possibility of participating in this research study both interesting and worthwhile. I am certain that your comments and insights will add to the quality and usefulness of this research study if you choose to become a participant.

The following sections will describe this research study's purpose, what its requirements are, what the research study guidelines are, what risks or discomforts might exist, what the benefits and potential benefits are, and discuss the next steps to take if you would like to participate.

Sincerely,

Kelly Stuart, M.M.
Doctoral Candidate
Curriculum and Instruction
Texas Valley University
cell: (957) 456-2324
email: kelly.stuart@tvu.edu

Invitation

You are invited and welcomed to participate in a research study by Kelly Stuart, M.M. in the Department of Teaching and Learning at Texas Valley University. This research study has been approved by RISD superintendent Dr. Acevedo and is part of a doctoral dissertation that is being conducted under the supervision and guidance of Texas Valley University professor Dr. Josie Smith, Ph.D.

What is the Purpose of this Research Study and What is Required?

The purpose of this research study is to explore the perceptions and experiences of students, faculty, and staff at EECHS, a high-achieving early college high school along the Texas-Mexico border. In order to conduct this research study, EECHS faculty, staff, and administrators who express an interest in participating may choose to complete three research activities including: (a) an online faculty data questionnaire; (b) one personal interview and (c) one follow-up meeting.

(a) Online Faculty Data Questionnaire. The online faculty data questionnaire asks questions such as: your age, gender, ethnicity or national origin, highest degree obtained, degree area or specialty, number of years in public education, number of years as an administrator, and number of years in your current position. The online faculty data questionnaire should take no more than ten to fifteen minutes to complete.

(b) Personal Interview. In your personal interview, we will meet for approximately ninety minutes either at the Riverbend Public Library at a time and date which is convenient for you, or using the Zoom technology at a time and date which is convenient for you. During your personal interview, I will ask you some general questions about your past experiences working with teachers, students, and staff at EECHS and RISD.

(c) Follow-Up Meeting. The follow-up meeting takes about thirty minutes and is a meeting where you check to see that a summary that I have written describing your personal interview from the week before is correct or provide further clarification as necessary. The follow-up meeting will be scheduled about one week after your personal interview either at the Riverbend Public Library at a time and date which is convenient for you, or using the Zoom technology at a time and date which is convenient for you.

Research Study Guidelines

Risks or Discomforts. There are no known risks or discomforts in this research study. Additionally, you are not required to answer any questions that you are not comfortable with. You may discontinue your participation in this study at any time with no consequence or loss of benefits.

Confidentiality. Every effort and precaution will be taken to ensure the confidentiality of your participation in this research study. Your name will be assigned a pseudonym and this will be used rather than your actual name on any written materials. The list that pairs your name with this pseudonym will be kept secure and apart from other research materials in my office and will be available only to me. However, because there will be a link between the pseudonym and your identity, confidentiality cannot be guaranteed.

Voluntary. Participation in this study is strictly voluntary and is not a requirement for employment by the Excelencia Early College High School, the Rio Independent School District, Texas Community College, or the Texas Valley University. Participation in this research study will not result in compensation in any form from the Excelencia Early College High School, the Rio Independent School District, Texas Community College, or the Texas Valley University.

If you choose to participate in this research study initially but later on decide not to, you may discontinue at any time with no loss of benefits. You are not required to answer any questions on the online faculty data questionnaire or during your personal interview that make you feel uncomfortable. You have the right to discontinue participation in this study at any time, and for any reason without loss of benefits.

Benefits. A \$45 Target gift card and a Letter of Appreciation will be provided for all EECHS faculty, staff, and administrators who choose to participate in this study. The Target Gift Card is provided to participants in this study from the researcher's own funds as a token of

appreciation. The Target Gift Card is considered income for tax purposes and should be included as such in the annual income tax filing of the head of the household.

As a participant you may also personally benefit from discussing and reflecting about some of your experiences as an administrator at EECHS and/or RISD. This study may stimulate personal growth by fostering reflection and integration of personal experiences as a member of the EECHS and RISD community of learners.

Potential Benefits. The results of this study may also benefit educational leaders and stakeholders in this district by providing broad insights into some of the elements that motivate students, teachers, and faculty to pursue high academic achievement in an early college high school. This study may also serve as a guide or model illustrating how one school and one group of students consistently overcome numerous obstacles to enjoy the advantages of graduating high school while also obtaining a two-year associate's degree and 42 core university credits.

Participant Rights. You are not required to answer any questions on the online faculty data questionnaire, during your personal interview, or during the follow-up meeting that make you feel uncomfortable. You are also free to withdraw and discontinue participating in the online faculty data questionnaire, the personal interview, or the follow-up meeting at any time without loss of benefits. You have the right to discontinue participation in this study at any time, and for any reason without loss of benefits.

Publication of this Research Study

The written results of this study either whole or in part may be published in professional publications, educational journals, or scientific journals. However, no individual participants will be identified by name but instead will be assigned a pseudonym to ensure confidentiality

Participation Process

If you are interested in participating in this research study, please read and sign page 7, 8 of this document. Once completed, please return these pages to my school email address of: klstuart@risd.us at your earliest convenience. Following the receipt of these pages I will send you an internet link so that you may complete the online faculty data questionnaire. Additionally, I will call to confirm your personal interview time, date, and place.

Sincerely,

Kelly Stuart, M.M.

Doctoral Candidate

Curriculum and Instruction

Texas Valley University

cell: (957) 456-2324

email: kelly.stuart@tvu.edu

(Please retain pages 1-6 for your records)

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APPENDIX M
INTRODUCTION AND INFORMED CONSENT FORM
FOR EECHS AND RISD ADMINISTRATOR
PARTICIPANT RIGHTS AND
SIGNATURE PAGE

Research Study Title: *A Case Study of Student and Faculty Experiences in a High-Achieving Early College High School Along the Texas-Mexico Border.*

Participant Rights

1. I understand that this Introduction and Informed Consent Form is required for all EECHS faculty, staff, and administrators who wish to participate in this study.
2. I have been informed that I may refuse to answer questions or may discontinue my participation in this research study at any time before the completion of the study without loss of benefits.
3. Any risks or hazards have been explained to me, as well as any benefits or potential benefits.
4. I understand that the researcher will take every effort and precaution to ensure confidentiality in this research study and that pseudonym rather than my actual name will be used. I also understand that because there will be a link between the pseudonym and my name, confidentiality cannot be guaranteed.
5. I understand that if I have additional questions I may contact the researcher at telephone: (957) 456-2324 or email: kelly.stuart@tvu.edu. Additionally, I may also contact the researcher's advisor Dr. Josie Smith, Ph.D. at telephone: (957) 982-5734 or email: josie.smith@tvu.edu.
6. I understand that any questions that I might have concerning my rights as a research participant may also be directed toward the Texas Valley University Institutional Review Board at telephone: (957) 456-7890 or email: irb@tvu.edu.

Signature Page

I have read the contents of this Introduction and Informed Consent Form and have been encouraged to ask questions. I have received satisfactory answers to any questions that I might have had. I understand that I may discontinue this study at any time for any reason and with no consequence. I freely give my consent to participate in this research study and have been provided with a copy of this research study form for my own records in case I might have questions as this research study proceeds.

Participant Name (please print) _____

Participant Signature _____

Participant Telephone Number: _____

Best time to call: _____

School email: _____

APPENDIX N

APPENDIX N
FACULTY DATA QUESTIONNAIRE

1. Name: _____
2. Age: _____
3. Gender: Male _____ Female _____ Non-binary/third gender _____
4. Ethnicity: _____
5. Highest Degree Obtained: Bachelor's ___ Master's ___ Doctorate ___ Other: ___
6. Degree Area or Specialty: _____
7. Years at EECHS: 1-3 years ___ 4-6 years ___ 7-9 years ___ 10-12 years ___ 13-15 years ___
16-or more years ___
8. Years in public education: 1-3 years ___ 4-6 years ___ 7-9 years ___ 10-12 years ___ 13-15
years ___ 16-or more years ___
9. Grade Level(s) Taught: 9th grade ___ 10th grade ___ 11th grade ___ 12th grade ___
10. What is the highest level of education your father achieved? _____
11. What is the highest level of education your mother achieved? _____
12. What is your EECHS campus assignment: Teacher ___ Counselor ___ Administrator ___
Other ___
13. Have you ever participated in an AVID Summer Institute? _____
14. When did you last participate in an AVID Summer Institute? _____

15. How would you rate the academic ability of most of the students in one of your typical classes?

16. Select the best response to the following statement: AVID helps students develop the organizational skills necessary for my class. (*Agree Highly, Agree, Disagree, Disagree Highly*)

17. Select the best response to the following statement: Students use AVID Writing and Reading strategies in my class. (*Agree Highly, Agree, Disagree, Disagree Highly*)

18. Select the best response to the following statement: Students use Inquiry and Collaboration to promote critical thinking in my class. (*Agree Highly, Agree, Disagree, Disagree Highly*)

19. Select the best response for the following statement: Students use my classroom at lunchtime to eat and socialize. (*Almost every day, several times a week, sometimes, rarely, never*)

20. How many clubs or extracurricular organizations do you sponsor? _____

21. How often does your club or extracurricular organization meet? _____

22. Select the best response for the following statement: I believe that the students who graduate from EECHS are ready for college. (*Agree Highly, Agree, Disagree, Disagree Highly*)

APPENDIX O

APPENDIX O
EECHS FACULTY INTERVIEW
PROTOCOL

RQ No. 1. What are the lived experiences of EECHS teachers and faculty in this high-achieving early college high school?

1. What motivated you to become a teacher or faculty member at EECHS?
2. What's it like to be a teacher or faculty member at EECHS?
3. What are some of your most favorite things about being a teacher or faculty member at EECHS?
4. What are some of your least favorite things about being a teacher or faculty member at EECHS?

RQ No. 2. What motivates these high-achieving teachers and faculty to overcome challenges at EECHS?

5. What are some of the challenges that you have experienced at EECHS? These might include student challenges, administration challenges, time management challenges, or other kinds of challenges.
6. How have you approached solving some of these challenges at EECHS?
7. How do you go about monitoring students' academic progress at EECHS, TCC, and TVU?

8. What kinds of support do you give to students academically, socially, and emotionally?

RQ No. 4. What motivates these high-achieving early college high school teachers to challenge their students with the expectations and rigor required of college-level work?

9. Are there any particular challenges that present themselves by grade level?

10. As a teacher or faculty member at EECHS, what are you most proud of?

11. As a teacher and faculty member at EECHS, is there anything that you wish that you might have done differently?

12. Do you believe that EECHS students are capable of doing college-level work?

13. How do you convey to students the idea that "If I work hard, I can accomplish this" rather than "I'm smart, I should just be able to accomplish this."

14. How many clubs or organizations do you sponsor?

15. What do you do to help students get connected and become familiar with each other at EECHS?

APPENDIX P

APPENDIX P
 OVERVIEW OF THE TEXAS 2019
 STATE ACCOUNTABILITY
 SYSTEM



Overview of the 2019 State Accountability System

Student Achievement	School Progress	Closing the Gaps
<p>All Students STAAR</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Combined over all subject areas evaluated (reading, mathematics, writing, science, and social studies) Credit awarded for Approaches Grade Level or above, Meets Grade Level or above, and Masters Grade Level on <ul style="list-style-type: none"> STAAR* (with and without accommodations) in grades 3–8 (including Spanish versions where applicable); EOC assessments (with and without accommodations); and STAAR Alternate 2 at Level II Satisfactory and Level III Accomplished standards. <p>College, Career, and Military Readiness</p> <p>Percentage of annual graduates that accomplish any one of the following:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Meet TSI criteria in ELA/reading and mathematics on assessments or college prep courses Meet AP/IB criteria Earn dual-course credits Enlist in the U.S. Armed Forces Earn an approved industry-based certification Earn an associate's degree while in high school Graduate with completed IEP and workforce readiness Earn a Level I or Level II certificate Complete an OnRamps dual-enrollment course Graduate under an advanced degree plan and be identified as a current special education student Complete CTE coherent sequence coursework and earn credit aligned with approved industry-based certifications (one-half point credit) <p>Graduation Rate</p> <p>Four-year, five-year, or six-year graduation rate (or annual dropout rate if no graduation rate)</p> <p>Domain Score</p> <p>For elementary and middle schools, the Student Achievement domain score is based solely on the STAAR component. For districts and high schools, the three components are weighted 40%-40%-20%, respectively.</p>	<p>All Students Part A: Academic Growth</p> <p>Credit awarded for students who improve performance year over year as measured by STAAR progress measures and performance levels on STAAR reading and mathematics.</p> <p>Part B: Relative Performance</p> <p>Credit awarded based on performance relative to similar districts or campuses.</p> <p>Domain Score</p> <p>The School Progress domain score is the better of Part A: Academic Growth or Part B: Relative Performance.</p>	<p>All Students and Disaggregated Student Groups</p> <p>Student performance disaggregated by the following:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> All students Race/ethnicity Economically disadvantaged status Current special education Former special education Current and monitored English learners Continuously enrolled Non-continuously enrolled <p>Components</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Academic Achievement Federal Graduation or Growth Status English Language Proficiency School Quality or Student Success <p>Domain Score</p> <p>Credit is awarded based on weighted performance of student groups against annual targets.</p> <p>The Closing the Gaps domain score is based on the four components weighted according to district or campus type.</p>
Better of either Student Achievement or School Progress domain = 70% of overall rating		30% of overall rating
<p>Distinction designations are awarded to campuses in ELA/reading, mathematics, science, social studies, Academic Growth, and Closing the Gaps. Distinction designations are awarded to campuses and districts in Postsecondary Readiness. Districts and campuses must be rated <i>A, B, C, or D</i> overall to be eligible for distinctions.</p>		

*STAAR results from EL students in their first year in U.S. schools are excluded from accountability calculations. STAAR results from EL students in their second year in U.S. schools are included via the EL performance measure. STAAR Alternate 2 results are included without regard to number of years in U.S. schools. For more information, see the [2019 Accountability Manual](#).

Figure 15: Accountability Overview, 2019 (TEA Accountability Overview, 2019)

APPENDIX Q

APPENDIX Q
EECHS SCHOOL REPORT CARD
2018-2019

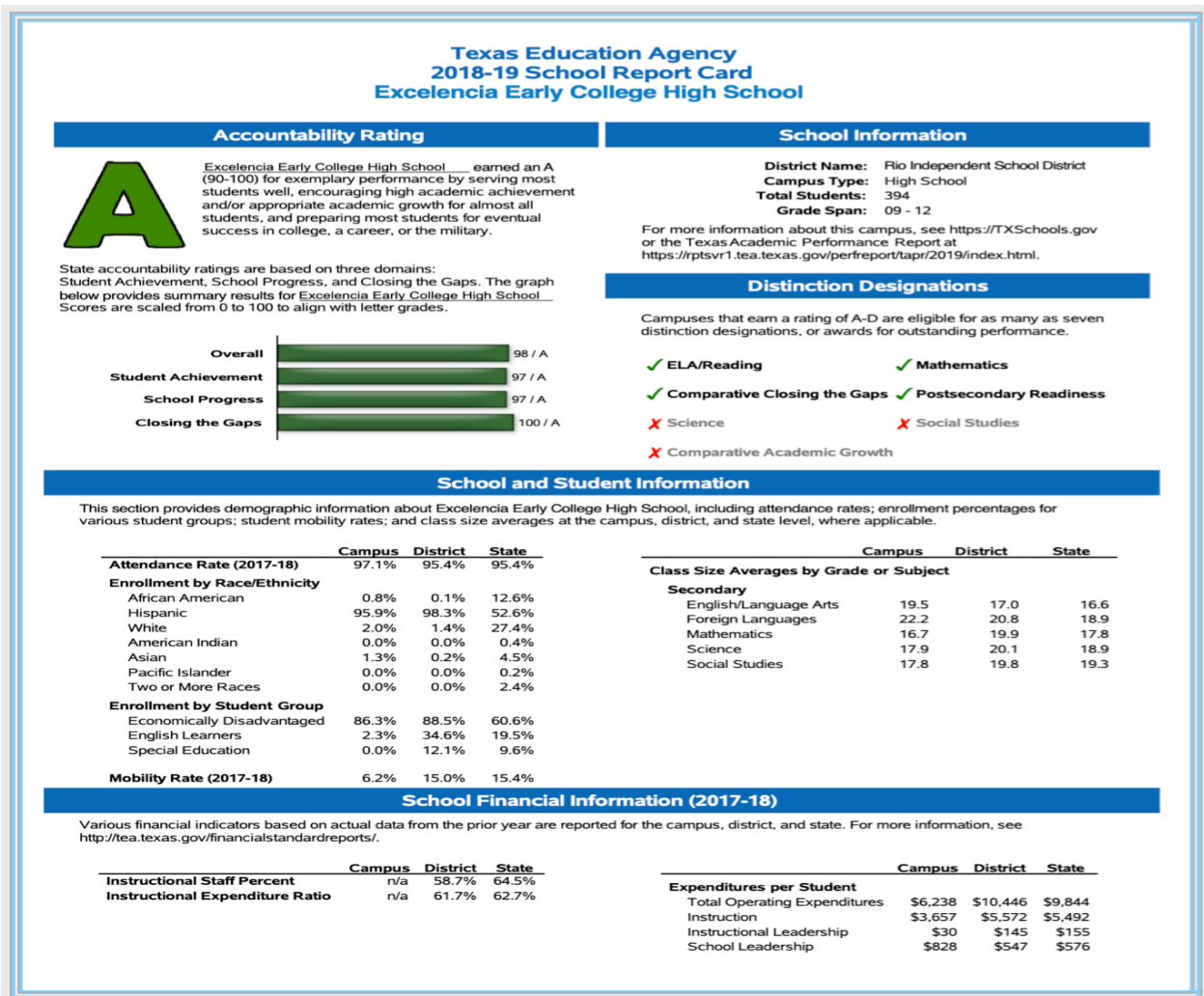


Figure 16: EECHS 2018-2019 School Report Card (TEA 2019)

APPENDIX R

APPENDIX R

COSTA'S AND BLOOM'S LEVELS OF THINKING: COMPARISON CHART



Costa's and Bloom's Levels of Thinking: Comparison Chart

LEVEL	COSTA'S	BLOOM'S	VOCABULARY WORDS LEVELS OF THINKING		
Higher-Order Thinking Skills HOTS	(OUTPUT) Applying Information: Applying and evaluating actions, solutions, and connections made in order to predict	Creating: Can the students: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Create/generate new ideas, products, or points of view • Combine ideas/thoughts to develop an innovative idea, solution, or way of thinking 	Assemble Build Construct Create Design	Develop Devise Formulate Imagine Invent	Make Plan Produce Write
		Evaluating: Can the students: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Justify a stand or decision • Judge the value of an idea, item, or technique by creating and applying standards/criteria 	Appraise Argue Check Critique Defend Detect	Forecast Generalize Hypothesize If/Then Judge Predict	Select Speculate Support Test Value Value
	(PROCESSING) Processing Information: Making sense out of information; processing the information gathered by making connections and creating relationships	Analyzing: Can the students: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Distinguish between the different parts • Explore and understand relationships between the components/parts 	Attribute Classify Compare Contrast Criticize Deconstruct Differentiate	Discriminate Distinguish Examine Experiment Explain Why Infer	Integrate Organize Outline Question Sort Structure
Lower-Order Thinking Skills LOTS	(INPUT) Gathering Information: Identifying and recalling information	Understanding: Can the students: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Explain ideas or concepts • Understand information provided 	Classify Complete Describe Discuss	Explain Identify Locate Paraphrase	Recognize Report Select Translate
		Remembering: Can the students: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Recall or remember the information • Recognize specific information 	Define Duplicate List	Memorize Recall Repeat	Reproduce State

Figure 17: Costa's and Bloom's Levels of Thinking: Comparison Chart (Costa and Bloom Comparison, 2022)

BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Kelly L. Stuart earned a Doctorate in Curriculum and Instruction with an emphasis in Higher Education in the Doctoral Program at the University of Texas Rio Grande Valley in December, 2023. He obtained a Master of Music Performance degree from the University of Arizona in Tucson, Arizona in 1996. He obtained a Bachelor of Music Performance degree from Lewis and Clark College in Portland, Oregon, in 1983.

For more than 27 years, Mr. Stuart taught high school students the fundamentals of voice and performance, emphasizing string instruments including the guitar, mandolin, bass, and violin. With advances made possible through music technology, Mr. Stuart transcribed and arranged music from Mexico and Latin America for student use and performance by his high school Mexican and Latin American Folkloric performance group.

In 2009, Mr. Stuart taught Music Appreciation 1306 at his high school when the district began offering Music Appreciation 1306 as part of its dual-enrollment course offerings. In 2019, Mr. Stuart became a full-time Music Appreciation adjunct faculty member employed by the Rio Independent School District and Texas Community College. In this position, he taught early college high school students in five of the seven early college high schools in Riverbend, Texas.

Currently employed as a music teacher at one of the elementary schools in his district, Mr. Stuart enjoys teaching music to PK-4, Kindergarten, and grades 1-5.

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