PERCEPTIONS OF ADVANCED PLACEMENT TEACHERS AND DUAL ENROLLMENT
TEACHERS ABOUT AVENUES OF COLLEGE READINESS IN RURAL NORTH
CAROLINA

by

Kelly Efird Simmons

An applied dissertation submitted to the faculty of
The University of North Carolina at Charlotte
in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of Doctor of Education in
Educational Leadership

Charlotte

2024

Approved by:

_____

Dr. Walter Hart

_____

Dr. Mark D'Amico

_____

Dr. Jamie Kudlats

_____

Dr. Sijia Zhang

_____

Dr. Heather Coffey

ABSTRACT

KELLY EFIRD SIMMONS. Perceptions of Advanced Placement Teachers and Dual Enrollment Teachers About Avenues of College Readiness in Rural North Carolina. (Under the direction of DR. WALTER HART and DR. MARK D'AMICO)

College readiness has been a primary focus of U.S. secondary education for over 40 years. Despite the continued focus on college readiness at the national, state, and local levels, researchers have claimed that educational reforms have resulted in little gains in students' college readiness, warranting continued emphasis and research. To advance college readiness, secondary and postsecondary institutions offer rigorous advanced courses with college competencies. While these courses may positively impact college readiness, research has shown gaps for students of color, students from economically disadvantaged backgrounds, and rural students. Despite much college-readiness research, the issue remains relevant; specifically, teacher perspectives still need to be studied. This gap in the literature warrants acknowledgment and further investigation.

This exploratory, multiple-case, qualitative study sought to bridge this gap by exploring Advanced Placement secondary teachers' and Dual Enrollment postsecondary instructors' perspectives of college readiness regarding advanced courses in a rural North Carolina setting. The results from two focus group interviews, an Advanced Placement focus group and a Dual Enrollment focus group, indicated that advanced-course teachers perceived college readiness as multifaceted, extending beyond knowledge and performance, and they perceived a rigorous program design enhances college readiness. However, they perceived differences between the two educational systems, leading to frustration for the secondary teachers. Implications reflect the dire need for better communication and curriculum alignment between the two systems and support recommendations for expanding the scope of qualitative research with continued quantitative methods.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I am deeply grateful to my dissertation committee, each of whom profoundly impacted my personal and professional growth. First, I thank my co-chairs, Dr. Walter Hart and Dr. Mark D'Amico, for their guidance throughout this journey. Their feedback was instrumental in helping me to dive deeper as I explored college readiness.

Specifically, Dr. Walter Hart's guidance was unmeasurable. His quick responses and detailed feedback always lessened my stress. He never failed to put things into a positive perspective. Likewise, Dr. Mark D'Amico's expertise and perspective on higher education were invaluable. His feedback molded how I think about college readiness and higher education. I am profoundly thankful for their thoughtfulness and dedication to my doctoral journey.

Next, I acknowledge my remaining committee members, Dr. Jamie Kudlats, Dr. Sijia Zhang, and Dr. Heather Coffey. Dr. Sijia Zhang's keen eye for detail on my methodology was helpful. Dr. Jamie Kudlats' feedback made me look at things in a deeper light, allowing me to enhance my explanations. Dr. Heather Coffey's editing eye and broad perspective were valuable. I am immensely thankful for their invaluable guidance and feedback.

Lastly, I express my heartfelt gratitude to my doctoral cohort, especially Julienne and Joy. Your camaraderie and support have made this journey manageable and enjoyable. Your humor and positivity have been a constant source of inspiration on challenging days.

DEDICATION

This dissertation is a testament to my family's unwavering support and love. I dedicate it to each of you for your belief in me and for always being there, cheering me on, and asking about my progress. You, along with me, sacrificed time for this project.

To my parents, Gerald and Gail Efird, your love, support, and guidance have been the bedrock of my life. You have always been there, not just to catch me when life knocked me down, but to lift and push me forward. Your unwavering support has been my foundation, and without you, my boys and I would not be able to live the lives we do. I am deeply grateful for your prayers and sacrifices for us. Your love and support have always empowered me to pursue my dreams and fulfill my goals. I Love you!

To my boys, Ian and Elliot, you are the driving force behind every decision I make. I hope my journey inspires you to believe in the power of perseverance and hard work, knowing you can conquer your dreams. I pray that you always feel the depth of my love for you. I pray happiness accompanies every step of your journey and boundless love and laughter fill your lives. I love you both more than words can express!

TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF TABLES

LIST OF FIGURES

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

ACT	American College Test
AVID	Advancement Via Individual Determination
AP	Advanced Placement
APA	American Psychological Association
CCP	Career and College Promise
CCSS	Common Core State Standards
CTE	Career and Technical Education
DE	Dual Enrollment
ESSA	Every Student Succeeds Act
GPA	Grade Point Average
MLA	Modern Language Association
NCLB	No Child Left Behind Act
OER	Open Educational Resources
RTT	Race to the Top
SAT	Scholastic Assessment Test
UGETC	University General Education Transfer Course

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

A simple web search of the purpose of high school education results in numerous viewpoints. To summarize, high school graduates should have the skills and knowledge to pursue their postsecondary goals, becoming productive members of society by adding to their community's economic and moral structure. More simply, a high school graduate should be college or career ready. The term college ready refers to a student who can succeed in introductory college classes without needing developmental coursework (Conley, 2005, 2012).

Since the release of the *A Nation at Risk* report in 1983, college readiness has become a primary focus of U.S. secondary education. Specifically, the report used international comparisons and scores on standardized achievement tests to assert that educational programming and standards were too low (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983). Therefore, over the last 40 years, many initiatives and policies have focused on improving high school students' college readiness. For example, in 2010, the Common Core State Standards attempted to address rigor in the high school curriculum at the state and national levels (Common Core State Standards, 2010). In 2015, the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) focused on preparing students for college- or career-ready aspirations by requiring high academic standards. Preparing college-ready high school students continues to dominate U.S. educational policy and reforms because it is vital to produce citizens who will benefit our democratic society and propel the U.S. forward into the ever-changing global economy.

Despite college readiness remaining a national and state issue, college readiness warrants continued research. According to the College Board (2022b), almost one-third of the Scholastic Assessment Test (SAT) test-takers failed to meet college-ready benchmarks on math and evidenced-based reading and writing. In addition, about one-fifth of students met the four college-ready benchmarks, math, English, science, and reading, on the American College Test

(ACT) in 2022 (ACT, 2022). Specifically, of North Carolina's 2019 high school graduates, almost one-half still needed to meet ACT college-readiness benchmarks (ACT, 2019). Although college readiness assessment data are relevant to the conversation, college readiness is more than a test score (Conley, 2012; Maruyama, 2012).

Today's jobs require more cognitive competencies associated with postsecondary education (Carnevale et al., 2021; Tieken, 2016). Students must be academically and emotionally prepared to enroll in and succeed in a postsecondary environment. A college-ready student should be qualified for and successful in entry-level college courses without needing prior remedial coursework (Conley, 2005, 2012).

An academically intense pre-college curriculum has positive college outcomes (Adelman, 1999). While a rigorous high school curriculum may include standard, honor, and career and technical courses, advanced courses with college competencies are becoming increasingly important and have shown positive college outcomes (Conley, 2013; Morgan et al., 2018; Showalter et al., 2019). For instance, Showalter et al. (2019) utilized data on advanced courses when analyzing how well rural districts prepared students for college. Specifically, the report examined the percentage of students taking Dual Enrollment courses and the percentage of students passing at least one Advanced Placement exam. The study ranked state rural education outcomes, noting that all states encountered difficulties delivering a high-quality education to all students (Showalter et al., 2019). The study found a need for more access to Advanced Placement courses, and rural students were less likely to earn college credit in Advanced Placement courses by 9.5% compared to all United States high school students. Additionally, rural students were more likely to complete Dual Enrollment courses for college credit than students nationally (Showalter et al., 2019).

Typical advanced-course routes for preparing high school students for postsecondary education by increasing academic intensity and providing an opportunity to earn college credit include Advanced Placement and Dual Enrollment courses (Bailey et al., 2002; Clayton, 2021; Conley, 2013; Taylor & Yan, 2018). The growth of the two programs over recent years demonstrates their popularity (College Board, 2020; National Center for Education Statistics, 2019; Speroni, 2011). Moreover, Showalter et al. (2019) claimed that college-readiness discussions must include rural access to Dual Enrollment and Advanced Placement courses.

Advanced Placement courses, which are taught in high schools by high school teachers, offer students access to rigorous coursework designed to prepare them for college. The College Board audits each course, ensuring it has met Advanced Placement standards (College Board, 2023). Students who have passed the end-of-course exam may earn college credit at their postsecondary college or university (College Board, 2021c). Recent data showed that over 2.5 million students participated in Advanced Placement courses, taking over 4.5 million exams (College Board, 2020).

Dual Enrollment classes offer another path toward college readiness for high school students. These classes are taught by college instructors on a college campus or online. They are college, entry-level classes. High school students receive high school and college credit for passing the course (Bailey et al., 2002; Mokher & McLendon, 2009). Based on the last longitudinal study of high schools, approximately one-third of high schoolers participated in Dual Enrollment courses (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2019).

Research has shown that Advanced Placement and Dual Enrollment courses positively impact college outcomes (Ackerman et al., 2013; Allen & Dadgar, 2012; An, 2013, 2015; Beard et al., 2019; Buckley et al., 2020; Chajewski et al., 2011; College Board, 2014; College Board,

2021c; Geiser & Santelices, 2004; Grubb et al., 2017; Karp et al., 2007; Lee et al., 2022; Scott et al., 2010). Most of these studies are quantitative, not focusing on the reasons for the positive outcomes. However, An (2015) found that students taking Advanced Placement and Dual Enrollment courses were more engaged and motivated. Lee et al. (2022) suggested that future research on the causal reasons and student perspectives may help determine why advanced courses have positive outcomes.

Other relevant college-readiness issues to be considered surround underrepresented groups, including students of color, students from economically disadvantaged backgrounds, and rural students. Research suggests that college-readiness gaps exist in these student groups (Iatarola et al., 2011; Gagnon & Mattingly, 2016; Moreno et al., 2021; Roberts & Grant, 2021; Showalter et al., 2019; Spencer & Maldonado, 2021; Sutton, 2017; Taylor & Yan, 2018; Xu et al., 2021). For example, students of color met college-readiness benchmarks significantly less than their White peers on both the SAT and ACT (College Board, 2022b; ACT, 2022). In addition, significantly fewer rural students across the nation took the SAT (College Board, 2022b). Compared to national percentages, North Carolina had a slightly larger percentage of rural students and higher socioeconomic students taking the SAT (College Board, 2022a). Additionally, North Carolina students of color were more likely to fall short of college-ready benchmarks (College Board, 2022a). The research suggests that North Carolina faces challenges in college readiness for traditionally underrepresented students (College Board, 2022a).

Although much research exists on college readiness, the issue remains relevant; specifically, teacher perspectives still need to be studied. This gap in the literature warrants acknowledgment and further investigation. Researchers have called for additional research on teachers' perspectives of college readiness (Duncheon & Muñoz, 2019; Hanson et al., 2015; Jo

& Milson, 2013; Reed & Justice, 2014; Williams et al., 2018). By giving voice to the perspectives of teachers most closely charged with creating college-ready graduates, it may be possible to better understand the struggle to prepare students for college and assist in informing policy and curriculum decisions. This study seeks to bridge this gap by describing Advanced Placement and Dual Enrollment teachers' perspectives of college readiness regarding advanced courses in a rural North Carolina setting.

Statement of the Problem

In recent years, political and educational leaders have pushed beyond preparing students to be college eligible to preparing them to be college ready. Conley (2017) suggested that college ready was much more than college eligible. He posited that college readiness moves beyond a list of courses, claiming college-ready students need fewer remedial classes and are likely to succeed beyond admission. For decades, the phenomenon of college readiness has been implicit in reforming education. For example, the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) of 2002, Race to the Top (RTT) of 2009, Common Core State Standards (CCSS) of 2010, and Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) of 2015 were a few of the policies and initiatives established during the last 20 years to guide the United States toward a career and college-ready graduate. College readiness moves beyond the necessary high school course requirements list toward focusing on curriculum rigor and multifaceted skills (Conley, 2017). A standard definition of college readiness is the preparation needed to enroll and succeed in entry-level college classes without remedial prerequisite courses (Conley, 2007, 2012).

Despite focusing on college readiness, Carnevale et al. (2021) claimed that decades of educational reform have produced relatively small gains in producing college-ready graduates. Additionally, current data showed that high school graduates are less likely to enroll in college,

even though employment and income are positively associated with degree attainment (Irwin et al., 2022). These are concerns because educational attainment relates to positive economic outcomes, and modern workforce expectations demand that students develop the skills needed for success in a global economy through postsecondary education (Carnevale et al., 2021; Irwin et al., 2022; Perna et al., 2014). Preparing college-ready graduates in high school is critical to their future success. Advanced Placement and Dual Enrollment courses are standard college and career readiness preparation routes.

Students who enroll in Advanced Placement or Dual Enrollment courses typically plan to continue their education after high school, and studies have shown positive college outcomes for students in these courses (Allen & Dadgar, 2012; Allen et al., 2019; Mann et al., 2017; Taylor & Yan, 2018). Aligning with Conley's (2007, 2012) definition of college readiness, students taking these courses were less likely to require remedial coursework and completed higher-level courses in college (Ackerman et al., 2013; Grubb et al., 2017). Mann et al. (2017) showed that students scoring a three or above on Advanced Placement exams have high college enrollment and retention. Taylor and Yan (2018) found that students who participated in Advanced Placement and Dual Enrollment courses had higher college enrollment and retention rates. Additionally, Allen and Dadgar (2012) found that participation in Dual Enrollment courses resulted in positive and substantial gains in earning more college credits and obtaining a higher first-semester grade point average. Similarly, taking Advanced Placement courses was related to a higher first-year college grade point average (Allen et al., 2019). Thus, rigorous course offerings are vital when readying students for college. Despite the essential nature of advanced courses to college readiness, research shows a need for more equitable access.

A notable concern with advanced course offerings is the low participation of students of color and students of economically disadvantaged backgrounds (Moreno et al., 2021; Spencer & Maldonado, 2021; Taylor & Yan, 2018). A conversation about advanced courses and college readiness must include the achievement and participation gaps of underrepresented students of color and students from economically disadvantaged backgrounds. This is particularly important because public school children are increasingly diverse, with approximately 22.6 million White, 2.7 million Asian, 7.4 million Black, 13.8 million Hispanic, 2.2 million two or more races, and 0.5 million other races in the fall of 2020 (Irwin et al., 2022). Additionally, students of color predominantly comprised the enrollment in high-poverty schools (Nowicki, 2018). However, Xu et al. (2021) found significant participation gaps for students of color in both Advanced Placement and Dual Enrollment, with Advanced Placement gaps more significant than Dual Enrollment. Specifically, the White student to Black student gap was 9.8% for Advanced Placement and 4.7% for Dual Enrollment (Xu et al., 2021). Additionally, they found that districts with higher poverty levels were more associated with participation gaps, which Nowicki (2018) associated with fewer advanced course offerings.

The research suggests that several factors may contribute to the participation gap. High-poverty and rural schools may have a lack of staffing, lack of funding, lack of resources, student reluctance to take rigorous courses, and logistical concerns (Clayton, 2021; Gagnon & Mattingly, 2015; Mokher et al., 2019; Roberts & Grant, 2021). Additionally, students of color have faced institutional and social barriers that may have led to gaps in access and participation, including teacher bias in recommendations to advanced courses, peer discouragement, perceived course rigor, under-preparation, and limited resources (Cates & Schaefle, 2011; Jeffries & Silvernail, 2017; Klopfenstein, 2004a; Loveless, 2016; Patrick et al., 2020; Yonezawa et al., 2002).

Additionally, students of color and students from economically disadvantaged backgrounds were less likely to reach college-ready benchmarks or achievement levels than their White peers on college readiness assessments (ACT, 2022; College Board, 2014, 2022a, 2022b). Students from economically disadvantaged backgrounds were significantly less likely to meet SAT college-ready benchmarks, with 17% of the lowest quintile of family income meeting both compared to 64% of the highest quintile of family income meeting both benchmarks (College board, 2022b). The disparities could be a result of lower academic preparedness due to less access and participation in rigorous courses (McNeish et al., 2016). Additionally, Klasik and Strayhorn (2018) claimed that college readiness assessments may vary in predicting college readiness based on student background and college choice, demonstrating a cultural bias. They found that the SAT and ACT college readiness rates were higher for students of color when controlling for race and college selectivity. As a result, many researchers have proposed adjustments to policies and selection processes (Lee et al., 2022; Moreno et al., 2021; Spencer & Maldonado, 2021; Xu et al., 2021). Students of color and students from economically disadvantaged backgrounds' experience with college readiness and rigor in advanced classes are vitally important to the college-readiness conversation.

The availability of these advanced courses varies based on school enrollment size, poverty level, and educational setting (Nowicki, 2018). Rural students encountered challenges unique to their educational setting (Gagnon & Mattingly, 2016; LeBeau et al., 2020; Roberts & Grant, 2021; Showalter et al., 2019). Mokher et al. (2019) noted challenges of classroom space, scheduling constraints, staff turnover, and difficulty increasing Advanced Placement enrollment. Schools in rural settings tend to have barriers to curriculum rigor and advanced course offerings, including funding, small staff, and logistics (Byun et al., 2012a; Gagnon & Mattingly, 2015;

LeBeau et al., 2020; Roberts & Grant, 2021; Showalter et al., 2019). Moreover, rural students are less likely to attend a university than their peers in other educational settings (Koricich et al., 2018; Wells et al., 2019). While rural students lead their urban and suburban peers in participation in dual enrollment, a need for more access to Advanced Placement courses exists (Burns & Leu, 2019; Kryst et al., 2018; LeBeau et al., 2020; National Center for Education Statistics, 2020; Showalter et al., 2019; Spencer & Maldonado, 2021). By utilizing community colleges, some school systems may perceive Dual Enrollment as a cost-effective alternative to Advanced Placement (Clayton, 2021; Hoffman et al., 2008; Kryst et al., 2018; Pretlow & Wathington, 2013). Thus, rural students have faced incessant college-readiness challenges; subsequently, in comparison to their non-rural peers, they have lower rates of college enrollment and lower rates of degree completion (Byun et al., 2012b; Koricich et al., 2018; Wells et al., 2019). Lower rates of parental educational attainment, lower family economic status, and lack of access to a rigorous curriculum may explain college enrollment gaps (Byun et al., 2012b; Gagnon & Mattingly, 2015; Koricich et al., 2018; Sutton, 2017; Wells et al., 2019).

Specifically, college readiness assessment research has shown that North Carolina needs to improve college readiness. In 2019, 18% of North Carolina graduates met all four ACT college readiness benchmarks of English, math, reading, and science, with 49% meeting zero (ACT, 2019). A high school student should earn an ACT composite score of 19 to meet the minimum admission requirements to the University of North Carolina System (The University of North Carolina System, 2023). In 2022, North Carolina grade 11 students' average composite was 18.2, and 15.8% of those students met all four benchmarks (North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, 2022b).

Showalter et al. (2019) reported that North Carolina was second among 50 states in the number of rural students, and this large number of rural students has contributed to limited college readiness in the state. The report placed North Carolina in the highest-priority quartile for college readiness, meaning an urgency exists to address the rural educational issues. Showalter et al. (2019) analyzed five college-readiness indicators: graduation rate, Dual Enrollment percentages for males and females, percentage of students passing at least one Advanced Placement exam, and percentage of students taking the ACT or SAT. In the report, North Carolina was at or below the national median in all five college-readiness indicators, showing a need for attention in this area. Preparing rural students for the rigor of higher education is essential to increasing access and participation in postsecondary institutions.

Over the years, many researchers have studied advanced courses, college readiness, and rural education. However, much of the data was quantitative, focusing on college outcomes (e.g., Adelman, 1999; Allen & Dadgar, 2012; An, 2013; Beard et al., 2019; Buckley et al., 2020; Chajewski et al., 2011; Liu et al., 2020; Taylor & Yan, 2018). Few studies took a qualitative approach to understanding the lived experiences and perspectives of educational stakeholders. Additionally, most qualitative studies focused on students' perspectives of college readiness or advanced courses. A gap exists in the literature on the perspectives of teachers toward college readiness (Duncheon & Muñoz, 2019; Hanson et al., 2015; Jo & Milson, 2013; Lindstrom et al., 2022; Reed & Justice, 2014; Williams et al., 2018).

Furthermore, a gap exists at the intersection of advanced courses, a rural setting, college readiness, and teachers' perspectives. Research is needed to examine how teachers understand college readiness in the era of educational reform and college readiness. Therefore, this study seeks to fill this gap by adding to the college readiness conversation through the teachers' lens.

This topic has practical importance because teachers are the gatekeepers between the high school classroom and the college experience. Understanding their voices and insights may help shape improved curriculum and policy, thus improving student learning and outcomes.

Purpose Statement

This exploratory, multiple-case, qualitative study explored perceptions of college readiness and curriculum rigor of Advanced Placement secondary teachers and Dual Enrollment postsecondary teachers in a rural North Carolina public school district. The insights gained through this study will add to the limited literature on this topic and inform practitioners and policymakers seeking to improve students' college readiness.

Research Questions

The following research questions guided this qualitative exploration:

1. How do secondary teachers of Advanced Placement courses in a diverse, rural school district perceive Advanced Placement and Dual Enrollment courses as avenues for college readiness?

2. How do postsecondary teachers of Dual Enrollment courses in a diverse, rural school district perceive Advanced Placement and Dual Enrollment courses as avenues for college readiness?

3. How do perceptions of Advanced Placement and Dual Enrollment teachers differ regarding Advanced Placement and Dual Enrollment courses as avenues for college readiness?

Theoretical Framework

David Conley's Four Keys to College and Career Readiness framework (Conley, 2012) informed the analysis of the data and findings of this study. Participants' responses were analyzed through the lens of the four keys to explore their perceptions of college readiness. Since

the 1990s, David Conley has completed extensive research in education policy, college readiness, college readiness assessment, founding organizations, and publishing articles and books (EdImagine, n.d.; University of Oregon, n.d.). Over the last two decades, he emerged as a national leader in college readiness (EdImagine, n.d.; Pearson Education, 2017; University of Oregon, n.d.). College readiness literature often references Conley's work. In 2003, David Conley published a report titled *Understanding University Success: A Report from Standards for Success*. These standards were developed by analyzing entry-level course content and faculty member input. They were among the first to address college readiness (Conley, 2003, 2017).

Conley's works have progressed from standards for success (Conley, 2003, 2005) to facets of college readiness (Conley, 2007a, 2008) to the four keys of college and career readiness (Conley, 2012, 2013) and finally to college readiness assessments and student profiles of college readiness (Conley, 2014, 2017). Klasik and Strayhorn (2018) claimed that Conley's framework comes close to describing all college-readiness characteristics. However, with the depth and detail of Conley's framework, it may be difficult to measure on a large scale (Klasik & Strayhorn, 2018). Baber et al. (2010) evaluated Illinois' state college and career readiness pilot program using Conley's multifaceted college readiness approach as an example of his model in action. Additionally, the Conley Readiness Index is a readiness index instrument available through Pearson Education, which illuminates student college readiness and goal gaps (Pearson Education, 2017).

Four Keys to College and Career Readiness

Conley based his model on his belief that only some students will integrate high school knowledge and succeed in college with a thorough academic program covering content and intellectual skills (Conley, 2005). Conley (2012) stated that students are ready for college if they

qualify and succeed in entry-level college courses without developmental coursework. However, he stated that not every student needs the same level of proficiency in all areas, as interests and aspirations influence readiness (Conley, 2012). More than a single college entry assessment is required; measuring college readiness requires a more holistic, specialized profile approach (Conley, 2012, 2014, 2017). Therefore, Conley's framework consists of four keys: (a) key content knowledge, (b) key cognitive strategies, (c) key learning skills and techniques, and (d) key transition knowledge and skills (Conley, 2012).

Key Content Knowledge. One of the four keys, key content knowledge, indicates what students know, demonstrating a need for foundational core knowledge in "English, math, science, social studies, world languages, and arts" (Conley, 2008, pp. 8 - 9), along with attitudes toward learning content and technical knowledge (Conley, 2012, 2017; Pearson Education, 2017). For this key, Conley (2012) included the "structure of knowledge, challenge level, value, attribution, and effort" (p. 3).

In English, college-ready students should "engage texts critically", creating well-organized and well-written papers (Conley, 2008, p. 8). In math, college-ready students should apply an understanding of basic algebraic concepts, solve problems, and interpret solutions (Conley, 2008). In science, college-ready students should apply scientific thinking and use the scientific method (Conley, 2008). In social studies, college-ready students should interpret sources and understand historical themes and events (Conley, 2007b). In world languages, college-ready students should "communicate effectively" in another language (Conley, 2008, p. 9). Lastly, college-ready students should understand and appreciate the various fields of the arts (Conley, 2008). Conley (2012) stated that college readiness is how students interact with, value, and expend effort toward content knowledge.

Key Cognitive Strategies. Another of the four keys, key cognitive strategies, indicates the thinking skills needed to learn and connect content knowledge (Conley, 2012). Conley (2012) included "problem formulation, research, interpretation, communication, and precision and accuracy" in this key (p. 3). College-ready students should hypothesize and strategize to solve routine and nonroutine complex problems (Conley, 2008, 2012). Also, college-ready students should identify and collect evidence to defend research findings, engaging in active inquiry about content and research questions (Conley, 2008, 2012). College-ready students should analyze, evaluate, organize, and construct well-reasoned arguments and explanations of topics or issues (Conley, 2008, 2012). Lastly, college-ready students should monitor and confirm, increasing precision and accuracy appropriately (Conley, 2008, 2012).

Key Learning Skills and Techniques. Another of the four keys, key learning skills and techniques, indicates how college-ready students act. Conley (2012) included ownership of learning and learning techniques in this key. College-ready students have ownership of their learning by demonstrating "goal setting, persistence, self-awareness, motivation, help-seeking, progress monitoring, and self-efficacy behaviors" (Conley, 2012, p. 3). Additionally, college-ready students utilize learning techniques such as "time management, test-taking skills, note-taking skills, memorization and recall, strategic reading, collaborative learning, and technology proficiency" (Conley, 2012, p. 3).

Key Transition Knowledge and Skills. The last of the four keys, key transition knowledge and skills, indicates how college-ready students transition and prepare to go to college. Conley (2012) included "postsecondary awareness, postsecondary costs, matriculation, career awareness, role and identity, and self-advocacy" in this key (p. 3). Information within this key is not always readily available to all students, especially underrepresented groups (Conley,

2012). This key includes knowing the required secondary courses to meet their goals, understanding financial aid, being aware of their goal and aspirations, understanding college norms and expectations, and understanding how to self-advocate within a postsecondary setting (Conley, 2012). Table 1 lists the components of Conley's Four Keys to College and Career Readiness, including each component and elements.

Table 1

David Conley's Four Keys to College and Career Readiness Framework

Key Content Knowledge	Key Cognitive Strategies	Key Learning Skills and Techniques	Key Transition Knowledge and Skills
- Structure of Knowledge • Key Terms • Factual Information • Linking Ideas • Organizing Concepts - Challenge Level - Value - Attribution - Effort	- Problem Formulation • Hypothesize • Strategize - Research • Identify • Collect - Interpretation • Analyze • Evaluate - Communication • Organize • Construct - Precision and Accuracy • Monitor • Confirm	- Ownership of Learning • Goal Setting • Persistence • Self-awareness • Motivation • Help-seeking • Progress Monitoring • Self-efficacy - Learning Techniques • Time Management • Test Taking Skills • Note Taking Skills • Memorization • Recall • Strategic Reading • Collaborative Learning • Technology Proficiency	- Postsecondary Awareness • Aspirations • Norms • Culture - Postsecondary Costs • Tuition • Financial Aid - Matriculation • Eligibility • Admissions • Program - Career Awareness • Requirements • Readiness - Role and Identity • Role Models - Self-Advocacy

Note. Table adapted from (Conley, 2012, p. 3).

Overview of Research Design

An exploratory, multiple-case study approach was the foundation of this qualitative study. Qualitative research seeks to understand how participants view and make meaning of their experiences (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). I aimed to understand how advanced-course teachers perceive their students' college readiness and how they perceive their respective course's rigor. A multiple-case study design was suitable for this study because it explored the experiences of two distinct groups of advanced-course teachers (Yin, 2018). Specifically, I conducted two focus groups: an Advanced Placement high school teacher focus group and a Dual Enrollment college faculty focus group. Yin (2018) claimed that the multiple-case study design helps conduct and report on individual case studies while also allowing for cross-case conclusions. I aimed to compare perceptions of each case study to draw cross-case conclusions about their perceptions of college readiness.

Site, Participants, Data Collection

I collected data from participants working in a school district in a low-wealth, rural county in North Carolina. I chose the site for location convenience. In addition, the site fit the qualifications of a rural educational setting with a community college that offers Dual Enrollment opportunities to the county's high school students.

I used purposive sampling of volunteer participants. Participants included five high school teachers with experience teaching Advanced Placement courses and six community college teachers with experience teaching Dual Enrollment courses to high school students. I conducted two focus groups, an Advanced Placement focus group and a Dual Enrollment focus group. Each focus group was comprised of five or six participants, with 11 combined participants for the study.

Focus group interviews consisted of open-ended semi-structured questions aligned to the research questions. Doing so allowed me to gather in-depth narratives about the participants' experiences with college readiness. Krueger and Casey (2015) claimed that focus groups promote feelings of respect and comfort, leading to self-disclosure and building upon group ideas. Triangulation of interview data occurred through document analysis of classroom documents, such as lesson plans and syllabi, and member checking of transcriptions.

Significance of the Study

The literature suggests that college readiness is an important educational issue. A study of teachers' perceptions regarding college readiness is vital to understanding the successful transitioning of students from secondary to postsecondary education. Teachers are consistently present in the classroom, guiding students to be academically and socially ready for college. However, limited literature examines their perceptions regarding college readiness. Therefore, this study adds to the existing literature and the current interpretation of college readiness. This study sought to bridge the gap between college readiness quantitative college outcome literature and the needed qualitative, lived experiences of those molding our students.

I intended that the findings of this study would contribute to educational research by adding to the field of college readiness in a couple of areas. First, this study may assist educators, policymakers, and curriculum decision-makers in making more informed decisions regarding advanced courses and curriculum rigor. Second, this study may catalyze professional development, helping to align the secondary and postsecondary educational environments toward the common goal of college readiness. Third, the study may inform educational leaders of the strengths and weaknesses of the current state of college readiness, leading to conversations around academic advising, academic course selection, support services, and curriculum planning. Lastly, this study may improve student learning and outcomes as secondary and postsecondary

faculty reflect on the insights gained, leading to more college and career-ready graduates and, ultimately, more postsecondary graduates.

Delimitations

Several delimitations comprised the current study. This exploratory, multiple-case study was bound by place and time. First, the participants worked within a single, rural school district in North Carolina. I chose the location for convenience and ease of access to participants. This location was also chosen because the research questions focused on rural schools. Second, I conducted the research in the fall of 2023. Third, the participants for the current study were teachers of advanced courses. Therefore, the sample of teachers was limited. I had a goal of 10 to 12 participants, and 11 teachers participated. Due to the limited number of potential participants, I did not limit participation via characteristics such as gender, ethnicity, or years of experience. Fourth, I currently work within the district of the study and have been a colleague of many participants. Since the current research was qualitative, participants were encouraged to share in-depth, personal experiences. I communicated that the participant's descriptions and experiences were confidential, providing an environment where participants could share their experiences safely. Lastly, as a qualitative study, the research findings are not generalizable, representing specific lived experiences of the current participants through their lenses.

Assumptions

A few assumptions reside within the context of this study. The first assumption was that two focus groups and 11 participants would yield enough data to sufficiently address each research questions by providing in-depth descriptions and relevant information. Another assumption was that participants would honestly and openly answer the research questions. Since the participation was voluntary, this assumption was likely. I reassured participants that their opinions and experiences would be confidential through identification and data security

measures. Lastly, I assumed that teachers of advanced courses would have the expertise to discuss college readiness and curriculum rigor to provide rich data and information.

Definitions of Terms

The following definitions were used throughout this dissertation. These definitions may be repeated and expanded upon within the subsequent chapters.

American College Test (ACT). The ACT is a curriculum-based college readiness assessment. The assessment includes academic achievement tests in English, math, reading, science, STEM, and the optional ELA and writing (ACT, 2022).

advanced placement. The Advanced Placement program is a collaborative effort between Advanced Placement teachers, students, states, school districts, and universities to prepare students for college-level knowledge and skills academically. It is a College Board-authorized course taught by a high school teacher. Students who pass the corresponding exam demonstrate mastery of college-level content and can earn college credit or placement (College Board, 2014, 2023).

college readiness. The preparation needed to enroll and succeed in entry-level college courses without needing remedial classes (Conley, 2005; Conley et al., 2011; Conley, 2012).

dual enrollment. While in high school, students enroll in a college course sponsored by a postsecondary institution, receiving high school and college credit for passing the course. (Bailey et al., 2002; Karp et al., 2004; Mokher & McLendon, 2009)

North Carolina Career and College Promise (CCP). Career and College Promise is a tuition-free program that allows all eligible North Carolina students to complete college courses while enrolled in high school (North Carolina Community College System, 2022; Southern Regional Education Board, 2021).

rigor. Cooper (2014) defined rigor as "providing challenging work, pushing students through

     academic press, and conveying passion for content" (p. 368). It moves beyond providing

     challenging tasks requiring high levels of cognition and focus (Cooper, 2014).

Scholastic Assessment Test (SAT). A standardized college entry assessment. It guides college

     entrance decisions and consists of two college-ready benchmarks, math and evidence-

     based reading, and writing (College Board, 2022b).

seated classes. In-person classes taught by a teacher or instructor with students present in the

     classroom.

soft skills. Non-cognitive behaviors "often defined as a combination of people skills, social skills,

     communication skills, character or personality traits, and attitudes that enable people to

     navigate their environment and interact effectively with other people" (Lindstrom et al.,

     2022, p. 228).

underrepresented groups. Operationally defined in this study as students of color and students

     from economically disadvantaged backgrounds.

Organization of the Study

In this chapter, I introduced the concept of college readiness, describing the importance

and background, identifying the gap in the literature on teacher perspectives, and delineating the

current study that proposes an exploration of advanced-course teachers' perspectives of college

readiness and curriculum rigor. Of notable concern was the need for qualitative research

surrounding teachers' perspectives on college readiness due to their role in developing college-

ready students. Findings from this current research may aid in better understanding college

readiness and aid in discussions to improve policy and curriculum. Adding to this gap in the

literature may positively affect student learning and outcomes.

The following chapters include a literature review, the methodology for the current study, the findings, and a discussion. Chapter 2 includes a literature review of pertinent studies on college readiness. It creates a background and builds a foundation for the current study. Chapter 3 specifies the methodology. I describe the multiple-case study approach, the participants, data collection, and analysis. Chapter 4 displays the current study's findings, presents each case study and a cross-case analysis, and identifies themes related to the three research questions. Finally, Chapter 5 discusses the findings, implications for educational stakeholders, and possible future research still needing exploration.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

This study explored the perceptions of Advanced Placement high school teachers and Dual Enrollment community college faculty in a rural North Carolina school district about the college readiness of their students and the curriculum rigor of their respective programs. Three research questions guided this exploration:

1. How do secondary teachers of Advanced Placement courses in a diverse, rural school district perceive Advanced Placement and Dual Enrollment courses as avenues for college readiness?

2. How do postsecondary teachers of Dual Enrollment courses in a diverse, rural school district perceive Advanced Placement and Dual Enrollment courses as avenues for college readiness?

3. How do perceptions of Advanced Placement and Dual Enrollment teachers differ regarding Advanced Placement and Dual Enrollment courses as avenues for college readiness?

This chapter presents the current themes in the literature surrounding advanced courses and college readiness, intending to build a foundation for the current study.

The following literature review begins with the theme of college readiness. Carnevale et al. (2021) reported that the U.S. high school educational system had supported a college-for-all agenda for over forty years with little progress in producing college-ready high school graduates. Therefore, understanding college readiness in the high school context is essential to the current study.

Next, I explore the literature on the two most common advanced courses in high schools: Advanced Placement and Dual Enrollment. Most colleges and universities grant college credit

for Advanced Placement and Dual Enrollment courses given specified criteria (Dutkowsky et al., 2009). Understanding the benefits and criticisms of these courses is essential to explore for the current study.

Subsequently, the literature on underrepresented groups in advanced courses is presented, followed by a review of the literature found on the rural setting. Finally, I share teachers' perspectives on college readiness. Their perspectives are important because teachers are the link between curriculum and students; delivering a rigorous curriculum to prepare college-ready students is their charge. Klopfenstein and Lively (2012) concluded their study with "true readiness comes from the mechanisms through which students are supported in their efforts to reach college-level standards" (p.66). Understanding teachers' perspectives is essential to any academic conversation on college readiness, and current literature rarely investigates their voices. Table 2 outlines the topics associated with each theme identified in the literature review and the corresponding research literature examined.

Table 2

Identified Themes in the Literature

Theme	Sources
College Readiness	
	Balfanz, 2009; Common Core State Standards, 2010; Conley, 2005; Conley et al., 2011; Klasik & Strayhorn, 2018; Mishkind, 2014; North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, 2023a
Long-Term Effects of College Readiness	ACT, 2020; Bridgeland et al., 2011; Carnevale et al., 2021; Carlson & McChesney, 2015; Conley, 2005; Conley, 2013; Irwin et al., 2022; Royster et al., 2015; Perna et al., 2014
College Readiness Assessments	ACT, 2019; ACT, 2022; Allen & Radunzel, 2017; College Board, 2022a; College Board, 2022b

Table 2 *Identified Themes in the Literature (continued)*

Theme	Sources
Non-Academic Indicators of College Readiness	Conley, 2007a; Conley, 2008; Conley, 2013; Conley & French, 2014; Lombardi et al., 2011; Nagaoka et al., 2013
Curriculum Rigor and College Preparatory Course Track	ACT, 2019; ACT, 2022; Adelman, 1999; Adelman, 2006; Attewell & Domina, 2008; Blackburn, 2018; Conley, 2007b; Conley et al., 2011; Cooper, 2014; DesJardins & Lindsay, 2008; Kaliski & Godfrey, 2014; Long et al., 2012; Maruyama, 2012; Morgan et al., 2018; Porter & Polikoff, 2012; Royster et al., 2015
Advanced Courses	
Advanced Placement Courses	College Board, 2014; College Board, 2021c; Johnstone & Del Genio, 2001
History of the Advanced Placement Program	College Board, 2020; College Board, 2021a; Johnstone & Del Genio, 2001; Keller, 1958; Nugent & Karnes, 2002; Rothschild, 1999; Schneider, 2009
Non-academic Benefits of Advanced Placement Courses	Ackerman et al., 2013; Beard et al., 2019; Bleske-Rechek et al., 2004; Callahan, 2015; Foust et al., 2009; Thompson & Rust, 2007; Vanderbrook, 2006
Academic Benefits of Advanced Placement Courses	Ackerman et al., 2013; Allen et al., 2019; Beard et al., 2019; Bleske-Rechek et al., 2004; Chajewski et al., 2011; College Board, 2014; College Board, 2021a; College Board, 2021c; Geiser & Santelices, 2004; Johnstone & Del Genio, 2001; Klopfenstein & Thomas, 2009; Morgan et al., 2018; Scott et al., 2010
Criticism of the Advanced Placement Program	Barnard-Brak et al., 2011; 2004; Clayton & Guzman, 2022; College Board, 2005; College Board, 2021b; Cooper, 2014; Geiser & Santelices, 2004; Johnstone & Del Genio, 2001; Klopfenstein & Thomas, 2009; Kolluri, 2018; Lichten, 2000; Rothschild, 1999; Thompson & Rust, 2007; Warne, 2017
Dual Enrollment Courses	Bailey et al., 2002; Karp et al., 2004; Mokher & McLendon, 2009
History of the Dual Enrollment Program	Jamieson et al., 2022; Karp et al., 2004; Mokher & McLendon, 2009; National Alliance of Concurrent Enrollment Partnerships, 2022; National Center for

Table 2 *Identified Themes in the Literature (continued)*

Theme	Sources
	Educational Statistics, 2019; National Center for Educational Statistics, 2020; Pompelia, 2020; Southern Regional Education Board, 2021
North Carolina's Dual Enrollment Program	North Carolina Community College System, 2020; North Carolina Community College System, 2022; North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, 2022a; SERVE Center, 2022; Southern Regional Education Board, 2021
Non-academic Benefits of Dual Enrollment Courses	Adkins & Garcia, 2023; Bailey et al., 2002; Johnson & Brophy, 2006; Johnson et al., 2021; Kanny, 2015; Karp et al., 2004; Lile et al., 2017; Rivera et al., 2019; Speroni, 2011; Venezia & Jaeger, 2013; Witkowsky & Clayton, 2020
Academic Benefits of Dual Enrollment Courses	Allen & Dadgar, 2012; An, 2013; An, 2015; Buckley et al., 2020; Grubb et al., 2017; Karp et al., 2007; Lee et al., 2022; SERVE Center, 2022
Criticism of the Dual Enrollment Program	Bailey et al. 2002; Crowe, 2020; Field, 2021; Hoffman et al., 2009; Kanny, 2015; Kilgore & Wagner, 2017; Klopfenstein & Lively, 2012; Liu et al., 2020; Moreno et al., 2021; Pretlow & Wathington, 2013; Rivera et al., 2019; Spencer & Maldonado, 2021; Witkowsky & Clayton, 2020
Comparison of Advanced Placement and Dual Enrollment Courses	An, 2015; Buckley et al., 2020; Burns & Leu, 2019; Clayton & Guzman, 2022; Eimers & Mullen, 2003; Johnstone & Del Genio, 2001; Klopfenstein & Lively, 2012; Speroni, 2011; Taylor & Yan, 2018; Thomas et al., 2013; Wyatt et al., 2015; Xu et al., 2021
Underrepresented Groups in Advanced Courses and College Readiness	
Race and Poverty	Cates & Schaefle, 2011; Cisneros et al., 2014; Conger et al., 2009; Creamer, 2020; Iatarola et al., 2011; Klopfenstein, 2004a; Long et al., 2012; Nichol, 2018; Pretlow & Wathington, 2013; Rivera et al., 2019; Xu et al., 2021
Underrepresented Groups' Access and Participation	Attewell & Domina, 2008; Cates & Schaefle, 2011; Cisneros et al., 2014; College Board, 2014; Conger et al., 2009;

Table 2 *Identified Themes in the Literature (continued)*

Theme	Sources
	Conley & French, 2014; Gamoran, 1987; Iatarola et al., 2011; Jeffries & Silvernail, 2017; Klopfenstein, 2004a; Loveless, 2016; Lucas, 1999; Moreno et al., 2021; National Center for Educational Statistics, 2019; North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, 2022a; Nowicki, 2018; Patrick et al., 2020; SERVE, 2022; Spencer & Maldonado, 2021; Sutton, 2017; Taylor & Yan, 2018; Tsoi-A & Bryant, 2015; Yonezawa et al., 2002; Xu et al., 2021
Underrepresented Groups' College Readiness	ACT, 2022; An, 2013; Cisneros et al., 2014; College Board, 2014; College Board, 2022a, College Board, 2022b; Lee et al., 2022; Moreno et al., 2021; Morgan et al., 2018; Scott et al., 2010
Underrepresented Groups' Factors to Overcome Barriers	Cates & Schaefle, 2011; Jeffries & Silvernail, 2017; Klopfenstein, 2004a; Xu et al., 2021; Zietz & Joshi, 2005
The Rural Setting and College Readiness	
Rural Definition	Geverdt, 2019; Showalter et al., 2019
Rural Setting Barriers to College Readiness	Balfanz, 2009; Barbour & Mulcahy, 2006; Burns & Leu, 2019; Byun et al., 2012a; Byun et al., 2012b; Cisneros et al., 2014; College Board, 2022a; College Board, 2022b; Gagnon & Mattingly, 2015; Gagnon & Mattingly, 2016; Iatarola et al., 2011; Klopfenstein, 2004b; Koricich et al., 2018; Kryst et al., 2018; LeBeau et al., 2020; Mann et al., 2017; National Center for Education Statistics, 2020; Pretlow & Wathington, 2013; Rivera et al., 2019; Roberts & Grant, 2021; Showalter et al., 2019; Spencer & Maldonado, 2021; Tieken, 2016; Wells et al., 2019
Teacher Perspectives	
	Budge et al., 2021; Draeger et al., 2013; Duncheon & Muñoz, 2019; Edgerton & Desimone, 2018; Ferguson et al., 2015; Garcia et al., 2020; Hanson et al., 2015; Howley et al., 2013; Jo & Milson, 2013; Leong et al., 2021; Lindstrom et al., 2022; Mace, 2009; Reed & Justice, 2014; Williams et al., 2018

College Readiness

College readiness gained heightened importance in the United States in the early 1980s as the *A Nation at Risk* report in 1983 asserted that the American educational system lacked the rigor needed to support an oncoming shift from an industrial to a global, informational economy (Balfanz, 2009). Continuing through the present day with The No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) of 2002, Race to the Top Act (RTT) of 2009, and Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) of 2015, college readiness remains a primary goal of high school education. In pursuit of this goal, Common Core State Standards (2010) aimed to help all students become college and career ready by the end of high school through rigorous standards aligned with postsecondary needs.

Most states have a definition of career and college readiness which includes academic skills, critical thinking, and social-emotional learning (Mishkind, 2014). A standard definition of college readiness is the preparation needed to enroll and succeed in entry-level college courses without needing remedial classes (Conley, 2005; Conley et al., 2011; Klasik & Strayhorn, 2018). Specifically, for North Carolina, the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction (2023a) released a new initiative related to college and career readiness, *A Portrait of a Graduate*. Along with academic rigor, the initiative focuses on adaptability, collaboration, communication, critical thinking, empathy, a learner's mindset, and personal responsibility to support students toward a goal of career and college readiness.

Long-Term Effects of College Readiness

Educational attainment has become necessary for entry into the workforce and social mobility (Conley, 2005; Conley, 2013). Royster et al. (2015) stated that students not college-ready were less likely to earn a degree even if they enrolled in college. In order to meet the demands of the changing economic structure, college readiness supports the competencies

needed for a global knowledge-based economy (Carnevale et al., 2021; Perna et al., 2014). Responsibility, adaptability, and problem-solving are necessary for success, as identified by workforce supervisors and employees (ACT, 2020). Industry leaders believe that a four-year degree impacts success and that educational attainment positively impacts the economy (Bridgeland et al., 2011).

Research has shown that college readiness leading to college completion has significant financial benefits for individuals and the economy. Carlson and McChesney (2015) found that advanced degrees helped increase social mobility. Carnevale et al. (2021) found that adults between 22 and 27 years old with a bachelor's degree have median earnings that have risen since 1980. Similarly, Irwin et al. (2022) found that the higher the educational attainment, the higher the economic outcomes. Additionally, they found that employment rates were higher in 2021 only for adults ages 25 to 34 with at least a bachelor's degree. By contrast, purchasing power and standard of living are declining for people without at least a bachelor's degree because they have experienced declining median earnings (Carlson & McChesney, 2015). Given the relationship between advanced educational attainment and social and economic mobility, it was concerning that Carlson and McChesney (2015) found that undergraduate enrollment was declining.

College Readiness Assessments

Colleges and universities typically use two college entrance assessments to determine college readiness: The Scholastic Assessment Test (SAT) and the American College Test (ACT). Both tests have college and career readiness benchmarks (Allen & Radunzel, 2017; College Board, 2022a). Research on both assessments has shown a need for better college readiness preparation for students entering college.

The two SAT college-ready benchmarks, math and evidence-based reading and writing, correspond to a 75% chance of earning a "C" or better in a first-semester college-level corresponding class (College Board, 2022b). In 2022, the College Board (2022b) found that 43% of U.S. students taking the SAT met both benchmarks, while 32% met none. Half of White students met both benchmarks, while 19% of Black students and 26% of Hispanic students met both. Approximately half of the Black and Hispanic students met none of the benchmarks, while 21% of White students met none of the readiness benchmarks. Twenty percent of test takers came from a rural educational setting. Over a third of rural students met both benchmarks, while 35% met none. Additionally, a relationship existed between economic status and test outcomes. Students from the highest two quintiles of family income comprised 46% of all SAT test-takers, and they were more likely to meet both readiness benchmarks (College Board, 2022b).

Comparatively, the College Board (2022a) found that 61% of students in North Carolina met both benchmarks, with 15% not meeting any. The report specified that 68% of White students in North Carolina met both benchmarks, with 30% of Black students and 50% of Hispanic students meeting both. White, Black, and Hispanic students meeting no readiness benchmarks were 9%, 40%, and 22%, respectively. Thirty percent of test takers in North Carolina came from rural areas, with 56% of those students meeting both readiness benchmarks. Students from the highest two quintiles of family income comprised 61% of all North Carolina SAT test-takers. Again, these higher-income students were more likely to meet both benchmarks than students of other quintiles.

The four ACT college readiness benchmark scores indicate a 50% chance of earning a "B" or higher or about a 75% chance of earning a "C" or higher in related college courses (Allen & Radunzel, 2017). Nationally, 22% of the 2022 graduating class met all four English, math,

reading, and science benchmarks, with 32% meeting three or four benchmarks (ACT, 2022). The

ACT (2022) report showed that the percentage of students meeting each benchmark and all four

benchmarks steadily decreased from 2018 to 2022. In addition, the average composite score

declined from 20.8 to 19.8 over the same four-year period. The research also found that fewer

students of color are taking the ACT, and these students have a lower composite score than their

White counterparts.

In 2019, the ACT produced a report with crucial North Carolina findings (ACT, 2019).

This report showed that North Carolina students earned an average composite score of 19.0, with

18% meeting all four college readiness benchmarks. The percentage of North Carolina graduates

who met zero benchmarks rose from 46% to 49% over four years. The percentage of Black and

Hispanic students meeting three or four benchmarks was significantly less than their White

counterparts. Furthermore, the state was below national results on all benchmarks. Research

from these recent college readiness assessments indicated a need for state and national college

readiness improvement.

Non-Academic Indicators of College Readiness

Measuring college readiness has moved beyond test scores, content knowledge, and

cognitive strategies. Conley (2007a) stated that "study skills, time management, awareness of

one's performance, persistence, and the ability to utilize study groups" are behaviors needed for

college readiness (p.5). He posited that college-ready students assess their level of competence,

study independently and in groups, interact with faculty and students, and work on long-range

assignments. Additionally, college readiness transcended academic content knowledge to include

self-awareness, self-monitoring, self-control, prioritizing study skills, and time management

(Conley, 2008; Conley & French, 2014). Conley and French (2014) stated that a critical factor in

college readiness is student ownership of learning through the following: "motivation and engagement, goal orientation and self-direction, self-efficacy and self-confidence, metacognition and self-monitoring, and persistence" (p. 1020). Similarly, Nagaoka et al. (2013) found five traits related to college readiness: "academic behaviors, academic perseverance, social skills, learning strategies, academic mindsets" (p. 47). They argued that completing assignments, participating, remaining engaged regardless of obstacles, cooperation, responsibility, empathy, the belief that ability can improve with effort, belief in success, and belief in the value of task demonstrate college readiness.

Additionally, tools measuring college readiness via non-academic factors may be necessary. Lombardi et al. (2011) examined a tool, College and Career Ready School Diagnostic, which measures study skills and self-monitoring. Along with study skills and self-monitoring, they found that goal-driven behaviors and persistence emerged as academic behaviors related to college readiness. Research indicates that college readiness was more than content knowledge.

Curriculum Rigor and College Preparatory Course Track

Cooper (2014) suggested that rigor goes beyond the academic curriculum. This study defined rigor as "providing challenging work, pushing students through academic press, and conveying passion for content" (p. 368). Cooper (2014) found that students rated more advanced high school classes significantly more rigorous. Rigor creates an environment that supports, demonstrates, and expects high levels of learning (Blackburn, 2018). To increase rigor, Blackburn (2018) posited valuing depth, increasing text difficulty, creating connections, reviewing, not repeating, and raising student ownership. Moreover, Blackburn (2018) believed that raising expectations can enhance rigor.

Measures of college readiness included scores on national assessments, college placement tests, not needing remedial college courses, high school grade point average, and high school curriculum (Adelman, 1999; Conley et al., 2011; Kaliski & Godfrey, 2014; Porter & Polikoff, 2012). Regarding curriculum, research indicated that students who take more than three years of math and science are more likely to be college-ready (ACT, 2019; ACT, 2022; Kaliski & Godfrey, 2014; Long et al., 2012). Conley (2013) also noted that the high school setting must consistently refine the cognitive strategies students need for college success. Conley (2013) stated that students must focus on "problem formulation, research, interpretation, communication, precision, and accuracy" (p. 3). More rigorous, advanced high school coursework would likely produce students who are better prepared for higher education and college-level courses (Conley, 2007b; Maruyama, 2012).

Curriculum rigor and quality were strong indicators of college readiness and postsecondary success (Adelman, 1999, 2006; DesJardins & Lindsay, 2008). Attewell and Domina (2008) found that students of all academic levels would benefit from increased curriculum intensity, helping improve academic skills, college access, and increased college graduation rates. In addition, Morgan et al. (2018) found a positive relationship between a college preparatory track and college enrollment, persistence, and graduation. Moreover, they found that participation in these rigorous classes benefited students across all demographics. Postsecondary plans and college preparatory courses were also college readiness indicators (Royster et al., 2015). Research consistently underscores the importance of curriculum rigor and college preparatory courses as essential factors of college readiness. Furthermore, these studies indicate that enhancing curriculum rigor may lead to broader educational benefits, including higher rates of academic achievement.

Advanced Courses

Advanced Placement Courses

Advanced Placement courses are one type of advanced course offered in high schools. According to the College Board (2014), the Advanced Placement program is a collaborative effort between Advanced Placement teachers, students, states, school districts, and universities to academically prepare students for college-level knowledge and skills. The program consists of course outlines and curricula similar to introductory college courses that are developed by Advanced Placement high school teachers and college instructors (Johnstone & Del Genio, 2001; College Board, 2014). Students scoring a "3" or higher on an Advanced Placement exam have the chance to earn college credit and/or placement (College Board, 2021c).

History of the Advanced Placement Program

The Advanced Placement program began in the 1950s after the Second World War, the beginnings of the Cold War, and the Korean War (Rothschild, 1999; Schneider, 2009). In order to compete with other countries and advance technologically and scientifically, the United States needed an educational system that would produce engineers and scientists from the best and brightest students (Rothschild, 1999; Schneider, 2009). Therefore, in 1951, the Ford Foundation funded a project by a committee from three private high schools and three elite universities: Harvard, Princeton, and Yale (Rothschild, 1999). The committee recommended establishing a set of examinations to determine the advanced placement of superior students (Nugent & Karnes, 2002). Simultaneously, in 1952, the Ford Foundation funded a pilot program of ten advanced courses by the School and College Study of Admission with Advanced Standing, consisting of 12 colleges and secondary schools (Nugent & Karnes, 2002; Rothschild, 1999; Schneider, 2009). In 1954, the first Advanced Placement exams were given to 532 students from the 18

participating schools (Keller, 1958; Rothschild, 1999; Schneider, 2009). In 1955, the College

Board obtained the Advanced Placement program under the leadership of Charles Keller, with

nationally given exams (Johnstone & Del Genio, 2001; Keller, 1958; Nugent & Karnes, 2002;

Rothschild, 1999; Schneider, 2009).

Since 1956, the Advanced Placement program has grown, increasing in participation and

the number of exams given (College Board, 2020). Table 3 shows the increase in Advanced

Placement program participation in schools, students, exams, and colleges from 1956 to 2020.

Table 3

Increasing Advanced Placement Participation by Decade from 1956 - 2020

Year	Schools	Students	Exams	Colleges
1956	104	1,229	2,199	130
1960	890	10,531	14,158	567
1970	3,186	55,442	71,495	1,368
1980	4,950	119,918	160,214	1,868
1990	9,292	330,080	490,299	2,537
2000	13,253	768,586	1,272,317	3,070
2010	17,861	1,845,006	3,213,225	3,855
2020	22,152	2,642,630	4,751,957	3,160

Note. Derived from the College Board (2020) *Annual AP Participation 1956-2020.*

Rothschild (1999) stated that the exams began with ten subjects: biology, chemistry, English

composition, French, German, Latin, literature, mathematics, physics, and Spanish. By 2021, the

number of Advanced Placement exams increased to 38 (College Board, 2021a).

Non-academic Benefits of Advanced Placement Courses

Researchers have noted both academic and non-academic benefits for Advanced

Placement students. Bleske-Rechek et al. (2004) found that students in Advanced Placement

courses desire intellectual stimulation. Advanced Placement students declared that the

opportunities these classes provided were what they liked most about high school (Bleske-

Rechek et al., 2004; Thompson & Rust, 2007). Similarly, students reported that Advanced

Placement classes had a number of other benefits: (a) a better atmosphere, (b) a special bond with classmates, (c) created pride and self-confidence by participating in more rigorous course work, and (d) academic and emotional support of peers and teachers (Foust et al., 2009; Vanderbrook, 2006). Additionally, Callahan (2015) found that students reported an increase in several important areas: (a) taking initiative, (b) time management, (c) self-knowledge, and (d) self-confidence. Furthermore, research supported a potential financial benefit to Advanced Placement participation. For example, students passing Advanced Placement exams were more likely to reduce the time it took to graduate from college, thus earning a financial benefit (Ackerman et al., 2013; Beard et al., 2019).

Academic Benefits of Advanced Placement Courses

The Advanced Placement program is exam-based, culminating in an exam to signify content mastery (Johnstone & Del Genio, 2001; College Board, 2014). The College Board (2014) reported that 20.1% of U.S. graduates passed an Advanced Placement exam in high school. Specifically, 19.35% of graduates in North Carolina passed an Advanced Placement exam, increasing 7.9% from the previous tenth annual report in 2003. For the graduating class of 2021, the College Board (2021a) reported that 22.5% passed an Advanced Placement exam.

The academic benefits of Advanced Placement courses are well researched. Students participating in Advanced Placement courses typically have higher college readiness and placement test scores (Chajewski et al., 2011; Scott et al., 2010). Moreover, colleges and universities consider Advanced Placement participation during the admissions process (College Board, 2021c; Geiser & Santelices, 2004). The odds of enrolling in a four-year university increased with Advanced Placement participation and taking at least one Advanced Placement exam (Chajewski et al., 2011; College Board, 2021c).

Many studies focused on college outcomes. Bleske-Rechek et al. (2004) analyzed longitudinal data collected over 30 years, finding that Advanced Placement courses positively predict educational success. Advanced Placement participation with passing exam scores was particularly associated with positive college performance (Ackerman et al., 2013; Beard et al., 2019; College Board, 2014; Geiser & Santelices, 2004). When considering first-year college grade point average (GPA), students participating in Advanced Placement courses typically have a higher GPA (Allen et al., 2019; College Board, 2014; Morgan et al., 2018; Scott et al., 2010). Students who participated in Advanced Placement courses without passing the exam performed as well or better than non-Advanced Placement students in introductory classes (College Board, 2021c). Klopfenstein and Thomas (2009) found that Advanced Placement students were likely to persist and enroll in a second year of college. Additionally, students who participated in an Advanced Placement program and passed an Advanced Placement exam were more likely to graduate with a four-year degree on time (Ackerman et al., 2013; Beard et al., 2019; College Board, 2014). Moreover, Bleske-Rechek et al. (2004) found that 70% of Advanced Placement students had earned an advanced educational degree. Comparatively, 43% of non-Advanced Placement students had obtained an advanced degree.

Criticism of the Advanced Placement Program

Although most research supported the positive effect of participation in an Advanced Placement program, criticisms exist. Much of the criticism stemmed from conflicting research on the educational benefits and changes in the program. Some studies claimed that much of the College Board's research and similar studies have exaggerated outcomes (Warne, 2017). For example, Thompson and Rust (2007) found that Advanced Placement students did not have significantly higher college GPAs when compared to high-achieving students not involved in an

Advanced Placement program. Similarly, Klopfenstein and Thomas (2009) determined that students with or without Advanced Placement experience do well in college when variables of other rigorous courses, demographics, and school characteristics are considered.

Criticism about Advanced Placement programs also involved concerns about non-academic factors. For example, in their thirty-year longitudinal study, Bleske-Rechek et al. (2004) found that students in Advanced Placement courses reported negative aspects such as social isolation and peer pressure. Additionally, during the early years of the Advanced Placement program, the program was criticized for racism and elitism (Rothschild, 1999). Also, Johnstone and Del Genio (2001) stated that the Advanced Placement program had limited access due to insufficient qualified teachers and students, the size of school enrollment, and the resources to offer a class to a small number of students.

Some critics have also reported a decline in the quality of the Advanced Placement program due to increased access to students of less ability and motivation (Klopfenstein & Thomas, 2009; Lichten, 2000). Signaling students of less ability and motivation, Geiser and Santelices (2004) found that more students were enrolling in Advanced Placement courses without taking the exam. Although performance on Advanced Placement exams was related to positive outcomes, the number of Advanced Placement courses taken did not show a significant positive relationship (Geiser & Santelices, 2004). In addition, the expansion of the Advanced Placement program has resulted in fewer students passing exams (College Board, 2005; College Board, 2021b); Kolluri, 2018).

Finally, a major criticism of the Advanced Placement program was the lack of access for students from economically disadvantaged backgrounds and students of color. Students of color, students from economically disadvantaged backgrounds, students from smaller schools, and

students in rural settings have less access and lower academic outcomes (Barnard-Brak et al., 2011; Clayton & Guzman, 2022; Cooper, 2014; Kolluri, 2018). A more detailed presentation of research surrounding this topic will be included in a later section.

Dual Enrollment Courses

Another type of advanced course offered in high school is Dual Enrollment. Although Dual Enrollment programs have not been established as long as Advanced Placement programs, Dual Enrollment courses, like Advanced Placement courses, are considered a way to increase the rigor of the high school curriculum (Bailey et al., 2002). Dual Enrollment programs varied immensely depending on state policies and institutional programs (Karp et al., 2004; Mokher & McLendon, 2009). In addition, dual enrollment, concurrent enrollment, and dual-credit courses are terms used interchangeably for such programs (Bailey et al., 2002). Karp et al. (2004) described Dual Enrollment courses as actual college courses where students are enrolled in a college course sponsored by a postsecondary institution. Through this partnership, Dual Enrollment students received high school and college credit for passing the Dual Enrollment course (Bailey et al., 2002; Mokher & McLendon, 2009).

History of the Dual Enrollment Program

In 1976, California was the first state to implement Dual Enrollment policies (Mokher & McLendon, 2009). Mokher and McLendon (2009) summarized the expansion of states developing Dual Enrollment policies. By 1986, they found that nine more states, including North Carolina, had developed policies. By 1996, 17 more states created Dual Enrollment policies; by 2005, 12 states began Dual Enrollment programs, for a total of 39 states. As of 2022, 48 states and the District of Columbia have Dual Enrollment policies (Jamieson et al., 2022). As Dual Enrollment programs evolved, states were left to develop policies to guide these programs.

Diverse state policies and program features revolve around enrollment qualifications, program structures, and funding sources (Jamieson et al., 2022; Karp et al., 2004). Analyzing 30 years of longitudinal data, Mokher and McLendon (2009) determined that states' political characteristics, organizational structures, and policy conditions are needed elements in understanding states' Dual Enrollment policies. More recently, Pompelia (2020) reported that various states considered 219 bills related to Dual Enrollment in 2019, with 108 bills introduced in 37 states, including North Carolina. Pompelia (2020) found four themes: (a) reducing costs for students, (b) removing barriers to participation, (c) expanding student eligibility, and (d) increasing qualified educators. Most states have more than one type of Dual Enrollment program, have established eligibility criteria, and have specified funding sources (Jamieson et al., 2022). States with larger two-year community college enrollments were more likely to develop Dual Enrollment policies (Mokher & McLendon, 2009).

States can voluntarily participate in an accreditation process related to Dual Enrollment. The National Alliance of Concurrent Enrollment Partnerships (2022) accredits Dual Enrollment programs. Currently, 27 states and 134 Dual Enrollment programs participate in the accreditation process. However, North Carolina is not included in the accreditation program.

By the 2017 – 2018 school year, 82% of public high schools nationwide offered Dual Enrollment, with 34% of students participating (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2019; National Center for Educational Statistics, 2020). National Center for Educational Statistics (2020) reported that 78% of the funding for Dual Enrollment programs came from state, district, or school funds, 42% from families or students, and 10% from some other entity.

Specifically, the 16 southern states that are members of the Southern Regional Education Board all offered Dual Enrollment programs, with 14 passing Dual Enrollment legislation within

the last three years (Southern Regional Education Board, 2021). The Southern Regional

Educational Board (2021) also stated that eight of the 16 states, including North Carolina,

provide state funding to cover tuition and possibly other costs.

North Carolina's Dual Enrollment Program

North Carolina Department of Public Instruction (2022a) stated that the Dual Enrollment

program in North Carolina evolved over the years. North Carolina began offering college

transition programs to high school students in 1983 (SERVE Center, 2022). To increase

effectiveness, the General Assembly consolidated all previous college transition programs:

Huskins, Concurrent Enrollment, Cooperative and Innovative High Schools, Learn and Earn, and

Learn and Earn Online. This resulted in the Career and College Promise in 2011 (North Carolina

Community College System, 2020; SERVE Center, 2022).

Career and College Promise is a tuition-free program for all eligible North Carolina

students to complete community college courses while enrolled in high school (North Carolina

Community College System, 2022; Southern Regional Education Board, 2021). Career and

College Promise offers high school students three pathways: (a) the college transfer pathway, (b)

the career and technical education pathway, and (c) cooperative innovative high school

programs, also known as early college programs (North Carolina Community College System,

2022; North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, 2022a). North Carolina Community

College System (2022) described the three pathways as such:

- The college transfer pathway is for students who plan to enroll in a postsecondary
  institution and requires completing at least 30 semester hours of transfer courses.
  Students must be high school juniors or seniors and have an unweighted GPA of 2.8.

- The career and technical education pathway is for students interested in a career certificate or diploma. Students must be a high school juniors or seniors and have an unweighted GPA of 2.8.

- The cooperative innovative high school programs are located on a college campus. Students have five years to work toward an associate degree or earn up to two years of college credit. This program serves dropout-risk students, first-generation college students, or academically-gifted students (SERVE Center, 2022).

During the 2019–2020 school year, 28% of North Carolina high school seniors participated in Career and College Promise, with most students involved in the college transfer pathway (North Carolina Community College System, 2022). SERVE Center (2022) found that 32% of high school graduates had taken at least one dual enrollment course in 2020–2021. Although Career and College Promise enrollment has increased over time, in the 2020–2021 school year, enrollment decreased by 4% from the previous year, reflecting a general decrease in college enrollment (North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, 2022a).

Non-academic Benefits of Dual Enrollment Courses

One benefit of Dual Enrollment courses was helping students transition to college because these programs expose students to rigorous courses and the demands of college-level work not typically offered in high school (Bailey et al., 2002; Johnson & Brophy, 2006; Kanny, 2015). Moreover, Dual Enrollment courses can potentially increase students' motivation in their final year of high school by offering courses students may find interesting (Bailey et al., 2002; Johnson & Brophy, 2006).

Dual Enrollment courses can also ease the psychological transition from high school to college (Bailey et al., 2002; Johnson & Brophy, 2006). Rivera et al. (2019) found that students in

Dual Enrollment courses had high levels of school belonging and engagement. Kanny (2015) suggested that students benefited from a better understanding of interactions with college professors, which requires more self-advocacy. Additionally, students became more self-aware and more familiar with their own learning styles (Kanny, 2015). Witkowsky and Clayton (2020) found that high school counselors identified positive factors in students who participated in Dual Enrollment programs, such as maturity, independence, responsibility, organizational skills, self-advocacy, and confidence. Overall, Dual Enrollment students felt more prepared for college-level courses and experiences (Adkins & Garcia, 2023; Lile et al., 2017).

Another benefit of a Dual Enrollment program was career exploration (Adkins & Garcia, 2023; Bailey et al., 2002; Johnson et al., 2021). A community college partnership allows students access to vocational courses, equipment, and labs that may not be available at their high school (Bailey et al., 2002). Lile et al. (2017) insisted that Dual Enrollment students benefited from exposure to new ideas and the kinds of career options, helping them determine what education was needed to reach their career goals. In addition, high school counselors reported that a benefit was access to technical careers through the variety of career and technical courses available in Dual Enrollment programs (Witkowsky & Clayton, 2020).

Lastly, cost effectiveness benefited students participating in Dual Enrollment programs (Karp et al., 2004; Johnson & Brophy, 2006). Speroni (2011) found that Dual Enrollment classes reduce the number of courses and time required to earn a college degree, creating cost-savings for the student. Similarly, Venezia and Jaeger (2013) stated that students do not pay for Dual Enrollment courses, accumulating free college credit and accelerating progress through college.

Academic Benefits of Dual Enrollment Courses

Dual Enrollment influenced high school graduation, college enrollment, and college persistence (Lee et al., 2022). Participation in Dual Enrollment programs had multiple academic benefits, which include: (a) increased likelihood of earning a high school diploma, (b) increased likelihood of college enrollment, (c) higher first-semester college GPA, (d) continued college enrollment, and (e) more progress toward a college degree (Karp et al., 2007). Using the data from a large, longitudinal study, An (2013) found that Dual Enrollment students performed substantially better than nonparticipants, earning higher first-year GPAs and requiring fewer remedial courses. Dual Enrollment students at mid-selective or very selective institutions had a higher first-year GPA benefit than students at highly selective universities (An, 2015). Allen and Dadgar (2012) observed positive and substantial gains in earning more credits and higher GPAs during the first semester. Additionally, students in their study were more likely to reenroll in college (Allen & Dadgar, 2012). In an analysis of Colorado students, Buckley et al. (2020) concluded that Dual Enrollment students were more likely to enroll in college within a year of high school graduation, earn a college degree early or on time, and have higher earnings after five years. Grubb et al. (2017) found that Dual Enrollment students were 9% less likely to require remedial courses and 28% more likely to graduate within three years.

Specifically, for North Carolina's Career and College Promise Dual Enrollment program, SERVE Center (2022) reported that 94% of 2021 graduates earned credit in their Dual Enrollment course. In the fall of 2020, 84% of students participating in the Career and College Promise pathways earned a grade of C or better in their courses. Additionally, Career and College Promise students graduated with an average 3.14 high school GPA.

Criticism of the Dual Enrollment Program

Although research has shown many positive benefits of Dual Enrollment programs, some criticisms exist. Crowe (2020) stated that the lack of a standard definition of Dual Enrollment leads to confusion and difficulty understanding research analysis. Another criticism was that Dual Enrollment courses may compromise the rigor of college-level courses (Bailey et al., 2002; Hoffman et al., 2009; Field, 2021). Field (2021) stated that concerns over rigor have led some colleges to limit the number and types of Dual Enrollment courses that transfer for college credit.

Additionally, Kanny (2015) found that issues with credits earned, negative impacts for poor grades on high school transcripts, and limited support systems dominated student concerns. Therefore, support services are needed for Dual Enrollment students transitioning between high school and college-level courses (Klopfenstein & Lively, 2012; Witkowsky & Clayton, 2020). Similarly, Kilgore and Wagner (2017) stated that some institutions did not accept Dual Enrollment credit transfers and found a need for student support advisors to help with college and career planning.

Lastly, a well-documented criticism of Dual Enrollment programs was the inequities for specific populations. For example, research showed that Dual Enrollment students tend to be White, female, and of higher socioeconomic status (Liu et al., 2020; Moreno et al., 2021; Pretlow & Wathington, 2013; Rivera et al., 2019). In addition, Dual Enrollment opportunities vary based on high school characteristics, with access gaps in participation for the suburb and urban settings and for settings with high percentages of students of color or poverty (Pretlow & Wathington, 2013; Spencer & Maldonado, 2021).

Comparison of Advanced Placement and Dual Enrollment Courses

Advanced Placement and Dual Enrollment courses are both advanced courses offered to high school students as a way to earn college credit. The significant difference between Advanced Placement and Dual Enrollment is how students earn college credit. In Dual Enrollment programs, students earn college credit by passing the course (Buckley et al., 2020; Johnstone & Del Genio, 2001; Klopfenstein & Lively, 2012). Conversely, Advanced Placement students must pass a summative, standardized exam to potentially earn credit at a postsecondary institution (Buckley et al., 2020; Johnstone & Del Genio, 2001; Klopfenstein & Lively, 2012).

Additionally, Advanced Placement and Dual Enrollment courses differ by type of teacher and curriculum. Advanced Placement courses are college-level, introductory courses taught by high school teachers with course guidelines to follow (Buckley et al., 2020; Johnstone & Del Genio, 2001). By contrast, Dual Enrollment courses are actual college courses taught by a qualified high school teacher on a high school campus or by a college instructor on a college campus, with varying college curricula depending on the college affiliation and program (Buckley et al., 2020; Klopfenstein & Lively, 2012). Furthermore, Thomas et al. (2013) acknowledged that Dual Enrollment courses might have an academic, career, or technical focus.

Klopfenstein and Lively (2012) claimed that the two programs may serve different student populations in different settings. Dual Enrollment courses are more likely to be offered in the South, in rural settings, in small schools, and in schools with higher percentages of low-income students (Burns & Leu, 2019; Clayton & Guzman, 2022). Conversely, Xu et al. (2021) found that a district with school children of educated parents was more likely to offer Advanced Placement courses over Dual Enrollment courses. Taylor and Yan (2018) found that female and Hispanic students were more likely to participate in Advanced Placement than Dual Enrollment,

with special education students more likely to participate in Dual Enrollment courses than Advanced Placement. Overall, more students participated in Advanced Placement than Dual Enrollment courses (Taylor & Yan, 2018).

Lastly, much of the research surrounds student outcomes. Dual Enrollment participants had lower SAT/ACT scores than Advanced Placement students (An, 2015; Burns & Leu, 2019). Advanced Placement participants had better enrollment in four-year universities and had a higher college GPAs (Eimers & Mullen, 2003; Speroni, 2011; Taylor & Yan, 2018). Additionally, Wyatt et al. (2015) found that Advanced Placement participants, especially those who passed the exam, had better college success. However, those researchers determined that the type of Dual Enrollment college affiliation mattered. Specifically, when compared to Dual Enrollment students affiliated with a community college, Dual Enrollment students affiliated with a four-year university had a higher high school GPA, SAT scores, higher first-year college GPA, higher four-year college enrollment rates, and higher college persistence rates (Wyatt et al., 2015).

Underrepresented Groups in Advanced Courses and College Readiness

Race and Poverty

Race and poverty are intertwined, with students of color more likely to live in poverty than White students (Creamer, 2020; Nichol, 2018). Nichol (2018) noted that "No two characteristics of life in the state of North Carolina are as closely, consistently, and constantly linked as poverty and race" (p. 143). Additionally, he claimed that the state had one of the fastest-growing poverty rates (Nichol, 2018). For underrepresented groups in advanced courses, such as students of color and students in poverty, research affirmed significant gaps in access, participation, and college readiness (Cates & Schaefle, 2011; Cisneros et al., 2014; Conger et al.,

2009; Iatarola et al., 2011; Klopfenstein, 2004a; Long et al., 2012; Pretlow & Wathington, 2013; Rivera et al., 2019; Xu et al., 2021).

Underrepresented Groups' Access and Participation

For decades, research has shown disparities in access and participation for underrepresented groups. For example, students of more affluent backgrounds have more access to rigorous courses (Gamoran, 1987; Lucas, 1999; Nowicki, 2018). Conversely, schools with high percentages of students from economically disadvantaged backgrounds were less likely to offer advanced courses (Iatarola et al., 2011). Similarly, Sutton (2017) found that differences in parental socioeconomic status contributed to the variation in advanced course offerings. Furthermore, family socioeconomic status was influential in Advanced Placement participation gaps (Klopfenstein, 2004a). Specifically, students from economically disadvantaged backgrounds were three times less likely to take advanced courses (Conger et al., 2009). Similarly, Tsoi-A and Bryant (2015) stated that despite access to advanced courses, students of color and students from economically disadvantaged backgrounds are underrepresented in participation. More current research demonstrated participation gaps for these students as well (Moreno et al., 2021; Spencer & Maldonado, 2021; Taylor & Yan, 2018). For example, Xu et al. (2021) found that districts with more economically disadvantaged students had more significant racial gaps in advanced course participation.

As schools' percentages of students of color increased, Advanced Placement course opportunities decreased (Cisneros et al., 2014). Klopfenstein (2004a) found that students of color enrolled in Advanced Placement classes at half the rate as their White counterparts. Even if all observable variables are equivalent, the gap between White students and students of color remained substantial (Klopfenstein, 2004a). For 2013 Advanced Placement exam takers, Black students were the most underrepresented group in the classroom, and students from economically

disadvantaged backgrounds were represented proportionately less than overall low socioeconomic public school enrollment (College Board, 2014). More recently, Xu et al. (2021) found gaps in participation for Advanced Placement and Dual Enrollment between White and Black students and White and Hispanic students. Nationally, students of color were less likely to participate in Dual Enrollment courses (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2019), and students of color in North Carolina were less likely to participate in Dual Enrollment courses (North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, 2022a; SERVE, 2022). However, when advanced courses were available and controlling for prior academic achievement variables, Black and Hispanic students were more likely than White students to take an advanced course (Conger et al., 2009; Attewell & Domina, 2008). Even with trends to increase participation of underrepresented groups in advanced courses, disparities remained for economically disadvantaged students and students of color (Cisneros et al., 2014; Conger et al., 2009), as non-minority, higher socioeconomic students took advantage of the offerings at faster rates (Conger et al., 2009).

Researchers have investigated why disparities in access and participation exist for underrepresented groups in advanced courses. Students of color may opt out of advanced courses due to perceived course rigor, teacher influence, lack of parental involvement, or cultural identity (Cates & Schaefle, 2011; Jeffries & Silvernail, 2017; Klopfenstein, 2004a; Yonezawa et al., 2002). Tracking and middle school course-taking may also limit access as students enter high school (Conley & French, 2014; Klopfenstein, 2004a; Loveless, 2016; Yonezawa et al., 2002). Specifically, Conley and French (2014) stated that tracking and test scores outweighed student college and career-ready aspirations. Conger et al. (2009) found that the advanced course gap of students of color was significantly related to middle school test scores and high poverty rates.

They concluded that the gaps reversed by controlling for pre-high school differences, supporting the need for significant investments in underrepresented groups well before high school. The importance of middle school achievement on advanced course participation showed how the divisiveness of tracking affected students' academic trajectory (Conger et al., 2009).

In a more recent report, Patrick et al. (2020) analyzed data from the Civil Rights Data Collection and Common Core of Data. They found that students of color were less likely to be enrolled in gifted programs in elementary school and less likely to be enrolled in Algebra 1 in middle school, resulting in being tracked out of advanced courses in high school. Institutional barriers of lack of funding, teacher bias, lack of same-ethnicity teachers, lack of early childhood experiences, and lack of communication have created a gap in access to advanced courses (Patrick et al., 2020; Yonezawa et al., 2002). Furthermore, Patrick et al. (2020) identified overreliance on teacher recommendation and teacher bias as one of the most significant barriers.

Underrepresented Groups' College Readiness

Most research found that underrepresented students face gaps in college readiness compared to non-minority students (ACT, 2022; Cisneros et al., 2014; College Board, 2014; College Board, 2022a; College Board, 2022b; Scott et al., 2010). Specifically, for Advanced Placement students between 2000 and 2013, Black students were less successful on the exams, and Hawaii was the only state that closed the performance gap for Black students (College Board, 2014). Hispanic Advanced Placement students were the largest proportion of exam takers in Arizona, with 26% passing at least one exam (Cisneros et al., 2014). Also, Dual Enrollment students of color and students from economically disadvantaged backgrounds are less likely than White and higher-income Dual Enrollment students to continue their education after high school (Moreno et al., 2021).

For college ready assessments, fewer Black and Hispanic students take the ACT, earning lower composite scores than non-minority students when they do (ACT, 2022). In addition, nationally for SAT takers, Black students met both college-ready benchmarks at 34% less than White students, with Hispanic students at 27% less than White students (College Board, 2022b). Furthermore, Black and Hispanic students were more likely not to meet any SAT college-ready benchmarks than White students, 32% more and 26% more, respectively (College Board, 2022b). For North Carolina SAT takers meeting both college-ready benchmarks, Black students were 38 percentage points below White students, while Hispanic students were 18 percentage points below White students (College Board, 2022a). Moreover, analyzing North Carolina students meeting none of the college-ready benchmarks on the SAT, Black and Hispanic students were 31 percentage points higher than White students and 13 percentage points higher than White students, respectively (College Board, 2022a). When considering socioeconomic status, College Board (2022a) found that most North Carolina families of SAT takers had higher income levels, showing a gap in the socioeconomic status of SAT takers. Nationally, the gap in socioeconomic status was smaller than in North Carolina, with almost half of the SAT taker's families having higher income levels (College Board, 2022b).

Although research supports gaps in college readiness, Scott et al. (2010) found that college GPA performance of underrepresented students of color with Advanced Placement credit surpassed their peers without advanced course credit, regardless of high school GPA or SAT performance. Similarly, Morgan et al. (2018) found a positive relationship between college outcomes and advanced courses, with outcomes not significantly different for socioeconomic status and underrepresented students of color. They concluded that access and participation in college preparatory courses mitigated factors that disadvantaged underrepresented groups face

(Morgan et al., 2018). While Lee et al. (2022) suggested that Dual Enrollment may help close gaps for underrepresented groups, An (2013) suggested that equalizing advanced course participation alone would not reduce academic gaps in first-year GPAs and remediation courses between socioeconomic levels.

Underrepresented Groups' Factors to Overcome Barriers

Jeffries and Silvernail (2017) identified factors such as perceived rigor, peer pressure, and cultural identity that negatively impact Black students' participation in advanced-level coursework. Teacher and parental involvement often counter those negative influences of success in advanced-level coursework (Jeffries & Silvernail, 2017). In addition, Klopfenstein (2004a) found that access to an advanced-course teacher of the same race substantially increased participation for Black male students considering college. Also, mentoring programs for underrepresented groups may help encourage enrollment and success in advanced courses (Cates & Schaefle, 2011; Klopfenstein, 2004a). Moreover, Cates and Schaefle (2011) found that advising hours, summer programs, educational field trips, and college campus visits encouraged underrepresented groups to consider participation in advanced courses. Lastly, raising students' achievement before high school may increase participation in advanced courses (Xu et al., 2021; Zietz & Joshi, 2005).

<div align="center">

The Rural Setting and College Readiness

</div>

Rural Definition

Twenty percent of students in the United States attend a rural school, and half of those rural students live in only ten states, including North Carolina (Showalter et al., 2019). Geverdt (2019) defines rural schools and districts using three local codes as follows:

- Rural fringe, local code 41, is "a census-defined rural territory that is at most 5 miles from an urbanized area, and a rural territory that is at most 2.5 miles from an urban cluster" (p. 2).

- Rural distant, local code 42, is "a census-defined rural territory that is more than 5 miles but at most 25 miles from an urbanized area, and a rural territory that is more than 2.5 miles but at most 10 miles from an urban cluster" (p. 2).

- Rural remote, local code 43, is "a census-defined rural territory that is more than 25 miles from an urbanized area and is more than 10 miles from an urban cluster" (p. 2).

Specifically, for North Carolina, Showalter et al. (2019) stated that North Carolina has the second largest rural student population, with the rural school districts being one of the most racially diverse in the nation.

Rural Setting Barriers to College Readiness

Rural students face challenges and barriers to college readiness (Roberts & Grant, 2021; Showalter et al., 2019). One barrier was that rural high schools tend to offer less advanced courses than non-rural schools (Balfanz, 2009; Byun et al., 2012a; Cisneros et al., 2014; Iatarola et al., 2011). Rural students were less likely to have access to Advanced Placement courses (Gagnon & Mattingly, 2015, 2016; Klopfenstein, 2004b; Kryst et al., 2018; LeBeau et al., 2020), but they were more likely to have access to Dual Enrollment courses (Burns & Leu, 2019; Kryst et al., 2018; National Center for Education Statistics, 2020; Pretlow & Wathington, 2013; Rivera et al., 2019; Spencer & Maldonado, 2021). Moreover, Klopfenstein (2004b) found that rural schools were less likely to offer Advanced Placement in math or science. Rural students participating in Advanced Placement courses were less likely to take the exam, have lower exam scores, and have fewer passing scores (Barbour & Mulcahy, 2006; Gagnon & Mattingly, 2016;

Mann et al., 2017). As a result, Gagnon and Mattingly (2016) found that a lack of access to rigorous courses disadvantaged rural students.

Studies also show that rural students are less likely to continue their education after high school (Byun et al., 2012b; Koricich et al., 2018; Wells et al., 2019). Thus, in 2022, 20% of all SAT test-takers were from rural schools (College Board, 2022b). Specifically, in North Carolina, 30% of 2022 SAT test-takers were from rural schools (College Board, 2022a). Additionally, rural students were less likely to earn a bachelor's degree than their non-rural peers (Byun et al., 2012b; Wells et al., 2019) and were more likely to attend a two-year college than a four-year university (Koricich et al., 2018; Wells et al., 2019). Rural students were more likely to be from economically disadvantaged families with lower parental education (Byun et al., 2012b; Wells et al., 2019). Tieken (2016) found that guidance counselors encouraged rural students to attend college via career-focused discussions with a community college push, and students often faced unsupportive parents. For rural students, family socioeconomic status had the most impact on college enrollment and degree attainment (Byun et al., 2012a; Byun et al., 2012b; Well et al., 2019).

Specifically, in North Carolina's rural areas, Showalter et al. (2019) found that one in five school children live in poverty, and rural school children have lower achievement than non-rural students. To gauge college readiness, Showalter et al. (2019) analyzed the following: (a) the graduation rate, (b) the percentage of male juniors and seniors in dual enrollment, (c) the percentage of female juniors and seniors in dual enrollment, (d) the percentage of juniors and seniors passing at least one Advanced Placement exam, and (e) the percentage of juniors and seniors taking the ACT or SAT. North Carolina's rural students were below the national median on the five college-ready indicators (Showalter et al., 2019).

Teacher Perspectives

Research on educators' insights into advanced courses and college readiness is limited, and teachers' perspectives are needed (Duncheon & Muñoz, 2019; Hanson et al., 2015; Jo & Milson, 2013; Reed & Justice, 2014; Williams et al., 2018). Budge et al. (2021) found that educational stakeholders believed that they focused on college readiness. In addition, secondary teachers believed that rigorous courses exposed students to topics they may not have the opportunity to study in high school while providing insight into the level of work needed in college courses (Hanson et al., 2015).

Specifically examining teacher perspectives on college readiness, secondary teachers felt that the range of student abilities, inadequate student preparation, lack of parental support, insufficient class time, and student absenteeism posed challenges to college readiness (Edgerton & Desimone, 2018). In addition to student preparation and support networks, Williams et al. (2018) found that secondary teachers felt that socioeconomic status and maturity influenced college readiness. Duncheon and Muñoz (2019) found that secondary teachers stressed grade performance, motivation, organizational skills, maturity, and personal responsibility as college readiness. In addition to academic skills, secondary teachers felt college-ready students should develop social skills, advocacy, communication, time management, adaptability, and persistence (Lindstrom et al., 2022). Secondary teachers felt that student-centered approaches used in the high school setting would leave students unprepared for the lecture-centered approach of college courses (Duncheon & Muñoz, 2019). For instance, Mace (2009) found that the lecture format was unfamiliar to his Dual Enrollment students. When researching college instructors, Draeger et al. (2013) found that postsecondary teachers felt college-ready students should synthesize ideas, apply theories, and use higher-order thinking skills.

A lack of communication (Howley et al., 2013; Jo & Milson, 2013; Williams et al., 2018) and conflicting views (Ferguson et al., 2015; Jo & Milson, 2013; Leong et al., 2021; Reed & Justice, 2014) between postsecondary and secondary teachers exists. Postsecondary teachers felt that students need self-management to succeed, while secondary teachers felt motivation and the ability to learn independently were important (Leong et al., 2021). Reed & Justice (2014) found that secondary teachers perceived students were college-ready in "academic maturity, academic motivation, learning styles, assertiveness, social and interpersonal skills, advice seeking, and goal setting" (p. 41). However, the postsecondary teachers in their study felt those were where students were unprepared (Reed & Justice, 2014). Additionally, secondary teachers perceived their classes as challenging as postsecondary classes offered in high school through Dual Enrollment (Ferguson et al., 2015; Garcia et al., 2020; Howley et al., 2013).

Summary

In this chapter, I reviewed the literature on what college readiness means, the long-term effects of college readiness, college readiness assessments, non-academic indicators, and curriculum rigor. Secondly, I reviewed relevant literature on advanced courses, focusing on Advanced Placement and Dual Enrollment courses, reviewing the history, non-academic and academic benefits, and criticisms. Next, I reviewed literature surrounding underrepresented groups in advanced courses, delving into race, poverty, access, participation, college readiness, and overcoming barriers to college readiness. Afterward, I explored the literature on the rural setting. Lastly, I reviewed the limited research on teacher perspectives.

Through the literature review, I sought to underpin the current study by showcasing extensive research on college readiness. The push toward college and career readiness has resulted in substantial studies of college readiness. Moreover, finding research on college

outcome benefits of advanced courses was unchallenging, as decades of research on outcomes exist. However, little research exists on teachers' perspectives of college readiness. Even more challenging to locate is research at the intersection of college readiness, advanced courses, the rural setting, and teachers' perspectives. This study seeks to bridge the gap at this intersection of the college readiness literature to inform educational stakeholders who develop educational policy and recommend course programming. In Chapter 3, I will delineate the methodology developed for this qualitative, multiple-case study, including the research design, positionality statement, research setting, participants' descriptions, data collection techniques, and data analysis procedures.

CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

College readiness is critical for high school and college educators, politicians, and policymakers. In Chapter 1, the significance of the present study was described. Despite much focus on college readiness, many students have entered postsecondary institutions with gaps in college-readiness skills (ACT, 2022; Balfanz, 2009; Carnevale et al., 2021; College Board, 2022b; Conley, 2005, 2017). Typical advanced-course paths to college readiness, Advanced Placement, and Dual Enrollment, led to positive college outcomes (Allen et al., 2019; Mann et al., 2017; Taylor & Yan, 2018). However, despite a focus on college readiness and a push for more participation in advanced courses, students of color, students from economically disadvantaged backgrounds, and rural students faced additional challenges (Moreno et al., 2021; Showalter et al., 2019; Spencer & Maldonado, 2021). Moreover, college readiness assessment data showcased the gaps of these underrepresented students (ACT, 2022; College Board, 2022a; College Board, 2022b).

Chapter 2 reviewed relevant literature surrounding the concept of college readiness. The literature review exposed the need to explore teachers' voices concerning college readiness (Duncheon & Muñoz, 2019; Lindstrom et al., 2022; Williams et al., 2018). Therefore, the purpose of the current study was to explore perceptions about college readiness and curriculum rigor of Advanced Placement secondary teachers and Dual Enrollment postsecondary teachers in a rural North Carolina public school district, adding to the limited literature on this topic and informing practitioners and policymakers seeking to improve students' college readiness.

Through this qualitative study, I sought to understand the teachers' viewpoints and experiences of college readiness and curriculum rigor. Mertens (2020) stated that qualitative research provides an in-depth description of a specific program or practice. I explored the

qualitative question "how" through two focus groups' perceptions of college readiness and curriculum rigor, analyzing their descriptions for shared themes (Mertens, 2020; Ravitch & Carl, 2021). Advanced Placement secondary teachers comprised one focus group, and Dual Enrollment postsecondary teachers comprised another. Through this exploratory, multiple-case study, I aimed to understand the participants' experiences. Subsequently, I analyzed their perceptions and experiences through the lens of Conley's framework (Conley, 2012).

Chapter 3 includes the current study's research questions and an explanation of the research design. Participant selection, instrumentation, and data collection are described. Next, the data analysis procedures and participants' protection are presented. Finally, I discuss the trustworthiness and limitations of the current study.

Research Questions

Three research questions explored advanced-course teachers' perspectives on the avenues of college readiness. The questions sought to elicit in-depth, rich descriptions of participants' experiences with college readiness and curriculum rigor (Mertens, 2020; Ravitch & Carl, 2021). Question one aligns with the Advanced Placement focus group, while question two aligns with the Dual Enrollment focus group. Both focus groups responded to interview questions designed to address question three. Question three sought to examine the similarities and differences between the views of the two groups.

These questions were designed to uncover valuable information regarding college readiness and curriculum rigor, including the strengths and weaknesses of both programs in preparing college-ready students. The first two questions sought to identify the perceptions of two critical groups of teachers directly involved in advanced courses taken by high school students. Their insight is vital as they guide high school students through these advanced course programs designed to increase access to a rigorous curriculum. These questions may guide an

understanding of Advanced Placement teachers' and Dual Enrollment instructors' opinions on how effective advanced courses are in preparing students academically, providing insights into how to improve students' college readiness. The last question sought to reveal insights on whether Advanced Placement teachers and Dual Enrollment instructors perceived one program more beneficial than the other and their views on how the two advanced courses programs affect students' college readiness similarly or differently.

The following research questions guided this qualitative exploration:

1. How do secondary teachers of Advanced Placement courses in a diverse, rural school district perceive Advanced Placement and Dual Enrollment courses as avenues for college readiness?

2. How do postsecondary teachers of Dual Enrollment courses in a diverse, rural school district perceive Advanced Placement and Dual Enrollment courses as avenues for college readiness?

3. How do perceptions of Advanced Placement and Dual Enrollment teachers differ regarding Advanced Placement and Dual Enrollment courses as avenues for college readiness?

Positionality Statement

I am a single, White, over-fifty-year-old woman. As a high school student, I excelled in the most advanced courses offered in my high school. I was a first-generation college student, earning a Bachelor of Science in mathematics. Following my husband's death, I raised my two boys while earning a Master of School Administration degree. As a lifelong learner, I am working toward my Educational Leadership Doctorate. During my twenty-year educational

career, I have worked in the county where I was born and attended public schools. The county is a low-wealth, rural county near a southern metropolitan city.

While serving as a teacher, I taught inclusion, standard, and honors-level middle and high school math classes. As a school administrator, I initially served as the assistant principal of a small, rural high school. Prior to COVID-19, this high school was building an Advanced Placement Capstone Diploma program offering six Advanced Placement classes. However, the disruptions of COVID-19 halted the progress, and the diploma program is no longer active. Over the last three years, I observed that our high school students failed Dual Enrollment courses at higher rates than traditional courses.

I am currently the principal of the early college high school in the district where this study takes place. Upon taking the position, my superintendent stated that our students struggled with college courses and needed support. My passion has always been to prepare students for their future goals, support them, and empower them with the skills needed to become career- or college-ready.

Several years ago, before I went into the field of education, I worked in an uptown metropolitan area for a large bank corporation. During conversations with the well-respected department manager, he consistently made disparaging jokes about my rural county. Although he respected me and my job performance, he viewed most of the county as uneducated and illiterate. I vowed I would change this impression of my county. Eventually, I followed my heart and returned to my rural county to teach. Rural education is essential to me, and rural education matters.

Beyond being professionally important, college readiness is personal. As my academically gifted son transitioned to high school, he questioned our traditional high school

course rigor and advanced course offerings. He applied to the local early college and the area charter school. Being academically gifted, both schools accepted him. He and I discussed his options at length. He ultimately chose the charter school because of the perceived rigor, multiple advanced course offerings, and friend group. As a public school educator, I was disappointed that he felt our traditional high school lacked the academic rigor needed to prepare him for his future goals. Supporting rigorous curriculum and advanced courses is vital to me. Moreover, my passion is the intersection of rural education, public school education, rigorous curriculum, and advanced courses.

Such a personal and professional connection to rural education, rigorous curriculum, and advanced courses benefits my role as a researcher. As a rural educator invested in rigorous, advanced courses, I understand student needs, teacher needs, and the need to prepare a college-ready graduate. Because of these experiences, I desire to understand more about advanced-course teachers' perspectives on curriculum rigor and college readiness.

Acknowledging my positionality within advanced courses and my positionality as an educator helps me to clarify my role within my study. My positionality as an administrator within the district of my study may supply understanding and bias to my research design, findings, and recommendations. In my former role as a teacher and current role as an administrator, many of the Advanced Placement participants were former colleagues and aware of my background and passion for advanced courses. Knowing this connection, I bracketed my conceptions and interactions during focus group interviews. Bracketing of presuppositions helped me to be open and unprejudiced (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015). As I moved through the analysis of the thick descriptions applying the theoretical framework, I held preconceived opinions and biases about curriculum rigor and college readiness. Thus, I utilized peer debriefing

to aid in recognizing any assumptions or biases I may have during the data collection and analysis process. Lastly, I employed continuous reflexivity (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015). I cannot deny my position as a rural educator who values college readiness. My own experiences affect the lens through which I view college readiness. Thus, ongoing awareness and monitoring of that influence was critical (Ravitch & Carl, 2021).

Research Design

A multiple-case study design was used for this exploratory, qualitative study. As an exploratory study, I sought to understand a concept where little is known: teachers' perspectives on college readiness (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). Furthermore, as a case study researcher, I investigated complex issues to understand the phenomena more deeply (Mertens, 2020; Yin, 2018). The power of the multiple-case study was capturing and understanding in-depth descriptions of each individual case and arriving at findings and conclusions across the cases (Yin, 2018). A multiple-case study design allowed the exploration of the perceptions of two critical groups supporting high school students' college readiness.

Yin (2018) suggested establishing the research's theoretical framework, defining the cases, and bounding the cases to time and participants. The current study was framed through Conley's college and career readiness framework (Conley, 2012). Conley's framework provided a common language that identified the skills high school students needed to be successful in the postsecondary environment. I aimed to explore teachers' perceptions of college readiness and curriculum rigor through the lens of teachers of two common advanced-course pathways of college readiness, Advanced Placement and Dual Enrollment. I bound the current study to the experiences of the two groups of teachers within one rural school district in North Carolina. Additionally, I bounded the time of the multiple-case study to the fall of 2023. However, the

participants reflected on their experiences with college readiness and curriculum rigor throughout their careers teaching Advanced Placement or Dual Enrollment.

Next, I used the Multiple-Case Study Procedure (see Figure 1) to replicate and conduct the two case studies (Yin, 2018). In order to capture the in-depth descriptions from the two groups, semi-structured focus group interviews were used. Following the data analysis of the transcribed interviews, I wrote the Advanced Placement case report and the Dual Enrollment case report. Subsequently, I conducted a cross-case analysis, drawing any cross-case conclusions. Finally, I presented the cross-case findings and developed any implications from the analysis. Figure 1 showcases the multiple-case study design procedure from the development to the conclusion.

Figure 1

Multiple-Case Study Procedure by Yin
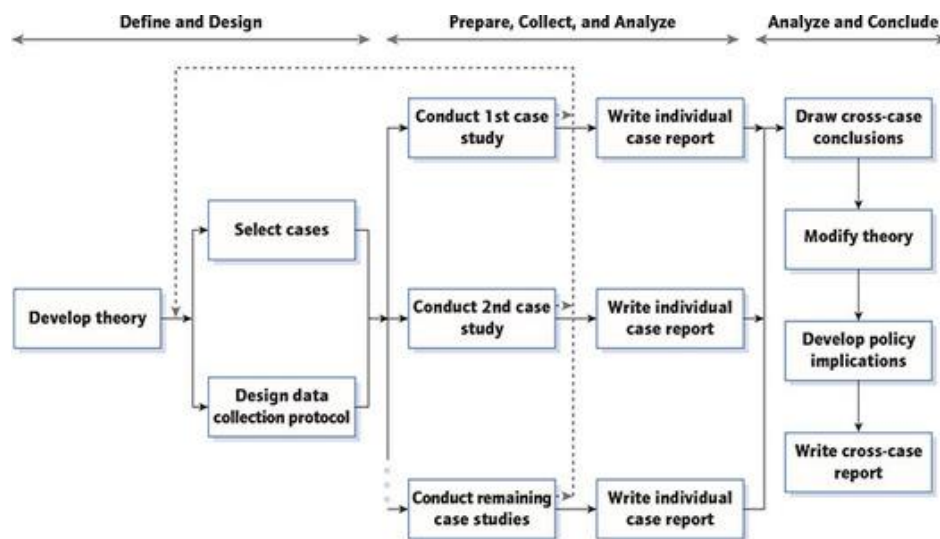
Note. From *Case study research and application: Design and methods* (6th ed., p 58), by R. Yin, 2018, Sage.

Participants

Yin (2018) suggested that in multiple-case designs, the individual cases should be selected carefully, with a goal of at least two cases the researcher would need or like in their study. I conducted two individual case studies. One case study consisted of high school Advanced Placement teachers, and the other consisted of community college Dual Enrollment teachers. These two individual groups were selected because both programs are common advanced-course routes to prepare college-ready high school students.

In order to encourage a variety of viewpoints, gather opinions, and understand the teachers' perspectives in each case study, I conducted two semi-structured focus group interviews (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015; Krueger & Casey, 2015). Krueger and Casey (2015) suggested five to 10 participants in a focus group. Thus, I identified five Advanced Placement participants and six Dual Enrollment participants for the focus group interview in each case study.

All participants selected for this study worked in a rural, low-wealth county in North Carolina and had experience teaching high school students Advanced Placement or Dual Enrollment courses. I chose this site because its rural, low-wealth status aligned with the research questions. I also chose this site for convenience and location. In addition to being in close proximity, the county had four traditional public high schools from which Advanced Placement teacher-participants could be recruited. Dual Enrollment teacher-participants could also be recruited from the one community college in the county that offers Dual Enrollment courses to high school students.

Purposeful sampling was used to select participants. I chose this sampling method to identify information-rich cases, allowing an in-depth study of teachers' perspectives (Mertens, 2020; Ravitch & Carl, 2021). Criterion sampling identified individuals for this study with

experience teaching Advanced Placement high school classes or Dual Enrollment community college classes.

To obtain my sample, I secured approval from the school district and community college to conduct the study before contacting potential participants. In the email to district and community college officials seeking approval, I requested email contact information for teachers meeting the criteria for participation in the study. Once approval was received, I sent an introductory recruitment email to Advanced Placement and Dual Enrollment teachers. The email included introducing myself, explaining the purpose of the study, providing a brief explanation of how and when data would be collected, and providing a link to the pre-participant recruitment survey. The pre-participant recruitment survey was a Google form I created (see Appendix A). I emailed the Google form to potential participants. The form introduced me and the study, shared participation criteria, and gathered interested potential participants' basic information and contact information. The survey consisted of six items. The first three questions determined if the potential participants have experience teaching advanced courses and collected years of experience and the teacher's work location. The remaining three questions sought to determine the teacher's interest in participating in a focus group and collected contact information.

After emailing the pre-participant recruitment survey twice, I conducted snowball sampling to identify additional potential participants. Snowball sampling allows participants to recommend other teachers willing to participate in the study (Mertens, 2020). After identifying participants, I contacted each participant to set up participation in the focus group interview. I provided an informed consent form explaining that participation in the study is voluntary. I summarized information collected from the recruitment survey and described the participants in Chapter 4.

Instrumentation

Primary Data Collection Instrument

Two instruments were used for data collection. The primary data collection instrument was a semi-structured focus group interview protocol. Due to the multiple-case study design, I conducted two focus group interviews, one for the Advanced Placement teachers and one for the Dual Enrollment teachers. The interview protocol for the Advanced Placement focus group (see Appendix B) and the Dual Enrollment focus group (see Appendix C) mirrored each other. The interview protocol consisted of five categories: (a) warm-up questions for background and experience, (b) perceptions of students' college readiness, (c) perceptions of the college readiness of students from economically disadvantaged backgrounds and students of color, (d) perceptions of curriculum rigor, (e) and perceptions of the other advanced course concerning curriculum rigor and college readiness.

I used an interview protocol that included questions to evoke conversation, from general questions to more specific ones (Krueger & Casey, 2015). I designed the questions to instigate descriptions leading to conclusions regarding the research questions. Each series of questions aligned with a research question. Through the questioning route, I sought to determine how the respective set of teachers perceive college readiness and curriculum rigor.

Development of the Interview Protocols. In order to refine the interview protocol, I developed a draft, reviewed the draft with knowledgeable professionals, and conducted a pilot test of the instrument (Mertens, 2020). I shared the interview protocol draft with an expert panel to begin the pilot process. Ravitch and Carl (2021) stated that vetting instruments are valuable for identifying issues for clarity, flow, or scope (p. 89). The panel consisted of two experts in advanced courses. One expert taught Advanced Placement courses before earning her doctoral

degree and working outside public education to train teachers on best practices. The other expert taught Dual Enrollment courses while holding a dean-level position at the community college level of education. Based on the expert panel's feedback, I adjusted the protocol with minor word choices and added a probing question. Specifically, I included a scale to rate student preparedness and course accessibility. Additionally, I added a question to asked participants to compare how representative students were in their classes to the student body.

Additionally, I conducted a pilot study to test the interview protocol. I recruited two high school teachers familiar with advanced courses as the participants for the pilot study. The participants answered the questions and provided feedback regarding understandability and question flow. While participants' responses were not included in the overall data analysis for the study, rehearsing the interview process allowed me to experience the structure and timing of the process (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). After rehearsing the interview protocol, the participants provided feedback on the content and flow. As a result of the pilot study feedback, I adjusted the instrument by changing the order of the questions so they were more closely aligned by category. As a result of the expert panel and pilot study feedback, the focus group interviews utilized an interview protocol designed to solicit a rich discussion and interaction among participants and provide answers to the study's research questions, adding trustworthiness to the study (Ravitch & Carl, 2021).

Secondary Data Collection Instrument

The secondary data collection instrument was a document collection of participants' syllabi. I asked each participant to bring an advanced course syllabus to the focus group session. Additionally, I requested that the participants highlight their respective syllabi for critical items or wording that demonstrated college readiness in one color and curriculum rigor in a different

color. Highlighted documents offered perspective on each participant's perception of college readiness and curriculum rigor. The document analysis allowed me to triangulate participants' comments and their syllabi.

Data Collection Techniques

Before collecting data, I completed the Institutional Review Board process and obtained permission from the school system superintendent and the local community college president to conduct the study. In addition, I obtained a list of possible participants from the school system and community college to email the recruitment survey, using a Google form. After receiving the Institutional Review Board, school district, and community college permissions, I emailed the recruitment survey to the list of potential participants. I anticipated personally knowing the limited number of potential Advanced Placement participants. However, I was unfamiliar with possible Dual Enrollment participants. The pre-participant recruitment survey allowed me to gather demographic and preferred contact information while introducing the study and identifying interested participants. The pre-participant recruitment survey aided in identifying a purposeful sampling of teachers meeting the criteria of advanced course experience who could provide the data needed to answer the research questions (Ravitch & Carl, 2021).

Since interviews are central to qualitative, case study research (Ravich & Carl, 2021; Yin, 2018), this study's primary data collection method was two semi-structured focus group interviews. One was conducted with Advanced Placement teacher-participants and the other with Dual Enrollment teacher-participants. The interviews were an active process where I sought to understand the experiences of the Advanced Placement and Dual Enrollment teachers, producing better insight into college readiness from their perspectives (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015; Ravitch & Carl, 2021). Specifically, focus group interviews allowed me to understand various

perceptions and the differences and commonalities between the two cases (Krueger & Casey, 2015). They also allowed more natural interaction between participants than occurs in one-on-one interviews (Krueger & Casey, 2015).

Because of challenges associated with securing a convenient time and location for participants, the focus group interviews were conducted using the university's online platform Zoom. In order to secure data and protect confidentiality, participants were given a meeting identification number and passcode to enter the Zoom sessions, and a passcode-protected device was utilized to video and audio record each session. Video and audio files were then stored in my password-protected university Google Workspace. I complied with and upheld the privacy and confidentiality procedures detailed in the Institutional Review Board protocol and informed consent form.

I reviewed and transcribed the sound file. I did not anticipate a perfect transcription and listened to each recording multiple times, formatting and correcting the transcription. I used the additional video recording to correct transcription errors and produce a verbatim transcription. At this point, I deleted any identifying information to protect the confidentiality of the participants, and coded pseudonyms were substituted. I deleted the video recording after finalizing the transcription.

The secondary data collection was a document review. Ravitch and Carl (2021) claimed that documents are essential in data collection, providing a source context and data triangulation. I asked each participant to bring a syllabus to the session. However, moving to an online platform, participants provided documents via courier. Each participant previously highlighted what they considered evidence of college readiness and curriculum rigor in different colors.

Reviewing participants' syllabi provided perspective and collaborated with the data gathered during the focus group sessions (Yin, 2018).

Data Analysis Procedures

Data analysis for the focus group interviews consisted of identifying the underlying themes based on the participants' descriptions guided by a constant comparative method (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Yin (2018) suggested that grounded theory can be applied to all case studies. The constant comparative data analysis method is a standard method to analyze data by identifying patterns and eventually uncovering emergent themes. The process was recursive, with a constant back-and-forth, comparing and reorganizing the data until patterns emerged into more concise and precise meanings. I looked for repetition, agreement, and disagreement in the transcribed participants' descriptions (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). Multiple-case study analysis should identify patterns within and across cases (Stake, 2006; Yin, 2018). Since I conducted a multiple-case study, themes were identified by matching patterns in each case, with a cross-case analysis to illuminate any differences between cases (Yin, 2018).

Data analysis began with thematic coding. I read each case's transcription separately and multiple times to gain a broad understanding of the entirety of each case. Next, I read each case study more thoroughly, making notes in the margins and inductively establishing descriptive codes from the raw data (Saldaña, 2013). Using a Microsoft Excel spreadsheet, I documented the descriptive codes, constantly rereading, revising, and connecting the codes. As I sorted and reduced the data, anticipated connective, conceptual categories formed (Saldaña, 2013). I constantly compared and revised the categories. Finally, broader themes related to the research question emerged.

After each case study analysis was completed, I performed a cross-case analysis. During the cross-case analysis, I sought to understand the commonalities and differences between the two case studies. I identified how the cases compare. I reread individual cases and synthesized impressions within cases relevant to the research. Commonalities and differences were recorded in an additional tab of the Microsoft Excel spreadsheet. I organized the themes with supporting quotes, presenting the findings in Chapter 4.

For the document analysis, I used the themes identified in the focus group interviews. Participants highlighted syllabi sections based on their perceptions of college readiness and curriculum rigor. I organized common themes and activities in an additional tab of the Microsoft Excel spreadsheet. Subsequently, I connected the themes from the participants' narratives to the highlighted syllabi sections. The document analysis informed and supported the findings from the primary data source.

I analyzed the data through the lens of Conley's college and career readiness framework (Conley, 2012). Connecting the participants' narratives, the document review, and the college readiness framework aided in understanding their perceptions of college readiness and curriculum rigor. The analysis and findings are reported in Chapter 4.

Protection of Human Subjects

Ethical safeguards are essential to research, moving beyond procedural to seminal (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). Before beginning the study, I completed training in responsible conduct of research for social and behavioral sciences through the Collaborative Institutional Training Initiative. This study fully complied with ethical guidelines, posing minimal risk to participants. Institutional Review Board protocol was followed throughout. Additionally, the school district

and community college granted permission to conduct the study and contact potential participants.

To protect human subjects, I sent a brief pre-participant recruitment survey explaining the study, allowing potential participants to consider participating. Once potential participants indicated interest, I contacted the participant to discuss an Informed Consent form, explaining the study's parameters (see Appendix D). The form stated that I was inviting participants to participate in the study, and participation was voluntary. I explained the study's risks, benefits, and data security, allowing potential participants to ask questions. With the informed consent form and explanation, participants received verbal and written notification that they could withdraw from the study at any time. All participants reviewed and voluntarily signed the form before data collection, fully understanding the study's parameters.

Transparency is crucial to protecting participants' confidentiality (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). I explained the process of protecting confidentiality and data security. However, I informed participants that information shared by other focus group members was beyond my control. Initially, I had planned to use a peer research assistant to video the face-to-face interviews. The peer signed an informed consent form and agreed to follow the Institutional Review Board protocol. I explained this process during the informed consent form discussion, allowing participants to ask questions. However, with the switch to virtual interviews, the peer assistant did not attend the focus group interviews. She did participate in peer debriefing. To ensure confidentiality, I assigned a pseudonym for each participant throughout the research process. After transcription, I protected the identity and responses of the participants by not providing the identifying information to anyone. Additionally, participants could ask questions throughout the

study and had the opportunity to review the transcription for accuracy with an opportunity to

redact or clarify statements.

Lastly, I secured all data collected by placing audio recordings, video recording, and

transcriptions on a password-protected device accessible only to me. Documents provided by

participants for the document review were locked in a file cabinet accessible only to me. At the

end of the data analysis process, I shredded or deleted any identifiable information in paper or

electronic files.

Trustworthiness

Qualitative researchers establish confidence in their study through four main components:

credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Shenton,

2004). Credibility was crucial in building a trustworthy study (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Shenton,

2004). I planned four processes to establish credibility, as outlined by Shenton (2004) and

Lincoln and Guba (1985). First, I sought to establish an early familiarity and rapport with the

participants by explaining my role within the district. Additionally, I explained that my role as a

researcher was separate from the role of an administrator within the district, providing

qualifications and background. Second, I engaged in peer debriefing with the peer research

assistant. The peer assistant critiqued the data collection process after the transcription, reviewed

the coding process, and evaluated where thicker descriptions were needed. Third, I used multiple

data sources by collecting and reviewing syllabi to inform focus group interview findings.

Lastly, I used member checking, allowing the participants to verify transcription accuracy and

provide additional insight.

Although qualitative research findings are not generalizable, transferability refers to how

a study applies to other contexts (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). To aid in transferability to different

circumstances, I provided detailed descriptions of the participants' perceptions of college readiness and curriculum rigor. Although the current study included a small, purposive sample, I provided enough information about the participants and setting to allow other researchers to determine if the findings of this study transfer to their settings or situations.

Dependability refers to the ability of the study to replicate similar results (Shenton, 2004). To ensure dependability, I provided an in-depth description of the research design, data collection, and data analysis in this chapter. Additionally, as noted in the data analysis section of this chapter, I conducted multiple readings and rounds of coding, leading to data saturation.

Confirmability ensures objectivity by minimizing bias to ensure the findings reflect the participants' experiences and perceptions (Shenton, 2004). In the positionality statement of this chapter, I described experiences with college readiness and curriculum rigor. The reflective process of developing a positionality statement aided in confirmability. I bracketed to establish confirmability by remaining neutral during the data collection and analysis. Bracketing means that I suspended judgment, not allowing personal experiences with college readiness and curriculum rigor to affect participant responses (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015). Additionally, I used a peer research assistant to debrief and review the accuracy and relevance of the data.

Limitations

As with most studies, the current study has potential weaknesses and flaws. First, the current study was set in a single school district during a limited data collection period. The data collection period took place in November 2023. The unique characteristics of the school district and data collection period, such as funding, policies, resources, teacher practices, and culture, may impact participants' perspectives. However, qualitative research is not generalizable across broader contexts. As such, the single district setting provided an atmosphere where participants

could safely share rich, in-depth experiences, allowing for detailed case study exploration to uncover dynamics that may not be apparent in a broader setting.

Second, a limitation resulted from the limited number of participants with recent advanced-course teaching experience for the Advanced Placement focus group. Participants must meet the criteria for teaching Advanced Placement courses and working within a single school district. Recently, the district experienced a decline in Advanced Placement course offerings. Additionally, the district recently experienced a high turnover rate as teachers left the district for surrounding higher-paying districts, potentially resulting in teachers with Advanced Placement experience seeking positions in other areas. Thus, some participants did not currently teach Advanced Placement courses but had prior experience teaching Advanced Placement courses. Additionally, the possibility of selection bias may have existed as participants may have similar characteristics and experiences. Of the four traditional high schools in the study setting, Advanced Placement participants worked in two of those four high schools. Due to the extenuating factors indicated above, the other schools were not represented.

Third, a data collection limitation resulted from the secondary data collection instrument. I relied on secondary and postsecondary teachers to voluntarily submit pre-highlighted syllabi. Inherently busy, participants must prepare the documents and respond to the request. Seven of the 11 participants submitted a syllabus for their course.

Finally, a limitation of this study was the focus group interview process. The focus group interview relied on my moderating skills. Specifically, participants occasionally strayed from the questions and possibly withheld honest responses due to another participant's participation. Additionally, I could unintentionally influence responses due to bias and the nature of the interactive process. Thus, to mitigate these potential issues, I bracketed during the interview

process to decrease the influence of the participants' perspectives, ensuring the integrity and rigor of the study.

Summary

A detailed description of the research methodology is provided in Chapter 3. This qualitative, multiple-case study consisted of a recruitment survey, an Advanced Placement focus group interview, a Dual Enrollment focus group interview, and a document review of participants' syllabi. I included a positionality statement, demonstrating transparency and building trust for readers. I presented plans to analyze data through the constant comparison method, where constantly reducing the data to descriptive codes results in themes for the individual cases and across both cases. Additionally, steps to protect human subjects and create trustworthiness while recognizing study limitations were described. In the following chapters, I reveal and discuss the findings.

CHAPTER 4: DATA ANALYSIS

Introduction

This study aimed to understand high school Advanced Placement teachers and community college Dual Enrollment instructors' perspectives of college readiness and curriculum rigor in a rural setting. Guided by three research questions and a multiple-case design, this study used two focus group interview sessions. The Advanced Placement focus group centered around the question: How do secondary teachers of Advanced Placement courses in a diverse, rural school district perceive Advanced Placement and Dual Enrollment courses as avenues for college readiness? The focal point of the Dual Enrollment focus group revolved around the question: How do postsecondary teachers of Dual Enrollment courses in a diverse, rural school district perceive Advanced Placement and Dual Enrollment courses as avenues for college readiness? Lastly, a cross-case analysis was conducted to address the question: How do perceptions of Advanced Placement and Dual Enrollment teachers differ regarding Advanced Placement and Dual Enrollment courses as avenues for college readiness?

First of all, the findings of the multiple-case, qualitative study are presented in this chapter. Recruitment strategies and participants are described. Next, I expound on the codes, categories, and emerging themes identified through data analysis for each case. Subsequently, two case study reports are presented, detailing the findings of each case separately. Finally, using Yin's (2018) Multiple-Case Study Procedure, I elaborate on the findings of the cross-case analysis, presenting the overarching themes found in the data analysis of the two cases. The cross-case analysis aims to identify and compare any patterns across the two cases (Yin, 2018). The present study's more profound significance and implications in relation to prior research are presented in Chapter 5.

Recruitment

In October 2023, I emailed a pre-participant recruitment survey to six Advanced

Placement teachers and ten Dual Enrollment instructors working in the study's setting (see

Appendix A). Five Advanced Placement teachers and one Dual Enrollment instructor completed

the survey and indicated interest in participating. In November 2023, I sent the recruitment email

a second time, including three additional Dual Enrollment instructors. With the second attempt, I

received four responses indicating an interest in participation. Table 4 shows the frequencies of

the first four pre-participant survey questions. The last two questions collected names and

contact information, and Table 4 does not include this confidential data. Additionally, in Table 4,

the school names were converted to pseudonyms to provide anonymity and maintain

confidentiality.

Table 4

Frequencies of the Questions on the Pre-Participant Survey

Question	Response Choices	Frequency
1. Do you have experience teaching advanced courses?	Yes. Currently Teach Advanced Placement	1
	Yes. Past experience teaching Advanced Placement	4
	Yes. Dual Enrollment	5
	No	0
2. Where are you located?	High School A	2
	High School B	3
	High School C	0
	High School D	0
	Community College A	5

Table 4 *Frequencies of the Questions on the Pre-Participant Survey (continued)*

Question	Response Choices	Frequency
3. What are your years of experience teaching advanced courses?	1 – 5 years	3
	6 – 15 years	2
	16 or more years	5
4. Are you interested in sharing your perceptions, experiences, and reflections by participating in the respective focus group as a study participant?	Yes	10
	No	0

All five Advanced Placement teachers and four of the five Dual Enrollment instructors agreed to participate and signed a university-approved informed consent agreement. Hence, I employed snowball sampling to obtain more Dual Enrollment focus group participants. This strategy resulted in two more Dual Enrollment instructors who expressed a willingness to participate and signed an informed consent form. However, it is noteworthy that they did not complete the pre-participant recruitment survey. Out of the twenty-one teachers contacted, eleven opted to participate in one of the focus groups. The focus groups comprised five Advanced Placement participants and six Dual Enrollment participants.

Participants and Setting

The setting for this study is a low-wealth, rural school district in North Carolina offering Advanced Placement and Dual Enrollment courses. Focusing on a single school district as the study's setting allowed me to manage time and access constraints feasibly. Moreover, the study setting allowed me to conduct a detailed, in-depth comparative analysis between the secondary and postsecondary teacher groups, better understanding the historical or cultural factors influencing their perceptions.

All eleven participants work in the chosen setting for the study. High school teachers teach Advanced Placement courses in the high school setting, whereas community college instructors teach Dual Enrollment classes. Most Dual Enrollment classes are taught asynchronously online, with a few seated, specialized classes on the community college campus. For traditional high school students, these seated classes include career and technical education classes, like welding. These seated classes are in-person, face-to-face classes taught by the instructor. In recent years, the district has experienced a reduction in Advanced Placement offerings concurrent with an increase in Dual Enrollment participation. All study participants signed the university-approved informed consent forms (Appendix D). To ensure anonymity and maintain confidentiality, pseudonyms were assigned for both the school locations and the names of participants. Table 5 provides descriptive data on all participants.

Table 5

Descriptive Data on Focus Group Participants

	Advanced Placement Focus Group			
	Total Years Teaching	Total Years Teaching Advanced Placement	Setting	Content Area
Veronica	7	3	High School A	English
Abigail	20	5	High School A	Mathematics
Lillian	12	7	High School B	Mathematics
Katherine	27	24	High School B	English
Grace	19	2	High School B	English
	Dual Enrollment Focus Group			
	Total Years Teaching	Total Years Teaching Advanced Placement	Setting	Content Area

Table 5 *Descriptive Data on Focus Group Participants (continued)*

	Total Years Teaching	Total Years Teaching Advanced Placement	Setting	Content Area
Rachel	17	17	Community College A	Psychology, Health
Mark	14	14	Community College A	English
Steve	3	3	Community College A	History
Isabella	11	6	Community College A	Foreign Language
Bryan	16	16	Community College A	Humanities, Religion, History, Sociology
Michelle	10	10	Community College A	Psychology

One participant taught in both settings. Alongside their role as a high school teacher, Katherine began teaching as a Dual Enrollment instructor at Community College A in the fall of 2023, offering a unique perspective into both environments. At the time of the study, Katherine had three months of Dual Enrollment experience. Included in the Advanced Placement focus group as a veteran teacher with 24 years of Advanced Placement experience, Katherine's insights into the relationship between Advanced Placement and college readiness added significant depth to the study.

Codes, Categories, and Themes

After completing the two focus group interview sessions, I transcribed the focus group interviews from the audio recording. I followed the same data analysis process for each transcript separately. I read the transcripts multiple times to familiarize myself with the overall content of each case. Next, I created a Microsoft Excel spreadsheet to organize the data analysis process. I copied the transcript into the first column of the spreadsheet with a second column for

descriptive codes. I employed an in vivo coding approach, analyzing each transcript line and developing line-by-line descriptive codes (Saldaña, 2013). In order to more deeply analyze the data, I copied the descriptive codes into a new tab in the spreadsheet. Guided by a constant comparative method, I followed a recursive process of comparing and reorganizing the data, looking for patterns in the descriptive codes (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). I then sorted the data into connective, conceptual categories (Saldaña, 2013). I condensed and refined the categories until apparent themes emerged. Adding columns to the spreadsheet for categories and themes, I denoted categories and themes for each line. Subsequently, I reread the transcript, descriptive codes, categories, and themes line-by-line, color-coding chunks of participants' comments with a related color chosen for each theme.

Table 6 lists the themes and related categories developed from the data analysis for case 1, Advanced Placement focus group. Table 7 lists themes and related categories developed from the data analysis for case 2, Dual Enrollment focus group. Each of these tables includes the corresponding research question and a number denoting the number of descriptive codes represented in each category.

Table 6

Themes Related to Case 1, Advanced Placement Focus Group

Research Question 1: How do secondary teachers of Advanced Placement courses in a diverse, rural school district perceive Advanced Placement and Dual Enrollment courses as avenues for college readiness?		
Theme 1: College Readiness is More Than Academic Knowledge		
Subtheme	Main Category: • Category Codes	Number of Codes
	College Readiness: • Student Attributes – Soft Skills • Academic Skills	60
Theme 2: Barriers to College Readiness Enhance a Lack of College Readiness		
Subtheme	Main Category: • Category Codes	Number of Codes

Table 6 *Themes Related to Case 1, Advanced Placement Focus Group (continued)*

	Not College Ready:	54
	• Student Attributes – Limited Critical Thinking	
	• Lack of Student Preparation	
	• Reasons for Lack of College Readiness	
	Policy:	
	• College Readiness Assessments are Not the Best College Readiness Predictor	

Theme 3: A Decline of the Advanced Placement Program Despite Perceived Benefits

Subtheme	Main Category: • Category Codes	Number of Codes
Advanced Placement Fosters College Readiness	AP Program: • AP Curriculum – Rigorous Preparation for College • AP Teacher – Grows Students • AP Students – Develop Self-Awareness AP Participation & Support: • No AP Entry Requirements • AP Support Systems Rigor: • AP – Seated Classes with Rigor	72
Lack of Support for the Advanced Placement Program	District Support for AP: • Current State of AP is Dismal • Lack of AP Resources & Training Policy: • Policy Changes are Needed in AP	35
Advanced Placement Lacks Accessibility for All	AP Participation & Support: • AP Lacks Accessibility for All	30

Theme 4: Frustration with Dual Enrollment

Subtheme	Main Category: • Category Codes	Number of Codes
Perceptions of a Lack of Academic Responsibility and Accountability in Dual Enrollment Courses	DE Program: • DE Curriculum – Online not Preparing Students • DE Student Lacks Accountability • DE is Accessible • DE has Entry Requirements Rigor: • DE Rigor – Core classes are rigorous, but online lack accountability	77
Dual Enrollment Courses Have Become a Substitute for Advanced Placement Courses	DE affects AP Program: • DE Negatively affects High School Teacher • DE Negatively affects upper-level High School Courses	40

Table 6 *Themes Related to Case 1, Advanced Placement Focus Group (continued)*

Policy:
- Policy Changes are Needed in DE

Table 7

Themes Related to Case 2, Dual Enrollment Focus Group

Research Question 2: How do postsecondary teachers of Dual Enrollment courses in a diverse, rural school district perceive Advanced Placement and Dual Enrollment courses as avenues for college readiness?

	Theme 1: College Readiness is More Than GPA	
Subtheme	Main Category: • Category Codes	Number of Codes
	College Readiness: • Defined by Policy • Student Attributes – Soft Skills • Student Academic Skills • Factors Which Hinder • Factors Which Benefit DE Program: • College Readiness Assessments Don't Provide Full Scope	102
	Theme 2: Dual Enrollment Equips Students for University	
Subtheme	Main Category: • Category Codes	Number of Codes
	DE Program: • Design Follows State Guidelines • DE Pros – Student Growth • DE is Accessible • Supporting with Program Design • Supporting with Advising DE Courses: • Structure – Scaffolded Courses • Rigor is Same in DE • Have a Rigorous Design • Have Rigorous Activities	128
College Identity is a Journey	High School to College: • Transition, College Identity	28
	Theme 3: Variability in Academic Success of Dual Enrollment Students	
Subtheme	Main Category: • Category Codes	Number of Codes
	DE Student: • Description – Young, Diverse Group	28

Table 7 *Themes Related to Case 2, Dual Enrollment Focus Group (continued)*

Subtheme	Main Category: Category Codes	Number of Codes
Factors that Encourage Success	DE Program: • DE Pros – Student Growth DE Instructors: • Attributes – Guiding Students • Resources Rated High	53
Factors that Hinder Success	DE Student: • Reasons Students Struggle DE Courses: • Online verses Seated DE Program: • DE Cons – Not All Transition • Factors that Hinder Accessibility DE Instructors: • Policy Changes Needed Between School System and College System • Limited Knowledge of AP	106

Case 1: Advanced Placement Teachers

The Advanced Placement focus group consisted of five high school teachers with experience teaching Advanced Placement courses. Participants taught in two of the four traditional high schools within the study's setting. These geographic locations bound the case since the most recent Advanced Placement classes occurred in these two locations. By focusing on participants from the most recent Advanced Placement participation locations, I could delve deeply into the context and intricacies of participants' perceptions, providing rich, detailed descriptions and allowing for nuanced analysis. Participants from these schools contributed to a more comprehensive understanding of Advanced Placement as an avenue for college readiness. Their experience teaching Advanced Placement courses varied significantly, from two years to 24 years. At various career stages, I had previously worked with all participants within the same school setting.

Arranging the face-to-face interview proved challenging given the participants demanding schedules, often juggling professional commitments and family responsibilities. Consequently, I opted to transition the focus group interview to a virtual format, ensuring accessibility and participation for all five participants. During the interview, I asked 19 questions to address the research question: How do secondary teachers of Advanced Placement courses in a diverse, rural school district perceive Advanced Placement and Dual Enrollment courses as avenues for college readiness? Four discernible themes emerged from the Advanced Placement teachers' responses, which are described in the following sections.

College Readiness is More Than Academic Knowledge

The first theme, *college readiness is more than academic knowledge*, emerged as participants began describing what college readiness meant to them. To describe college readiness, participants noted the academic skills of taking and reviewing notes, reading and writing well, and participating in discussions. However, they moved beyond skills to cognitive and learning strategies. They described students who could advocate and communicate and demonstrate ambition, accountability, potential, self-awareness, independence, initiative, work ethic, and willingness. All five participants described college readiness as going beyond ability and academic knowledge.

Participants asserted that academic ability and knowledge are critical to college readiness. At the beginning of Advanced Placement Calculus, Abigail noted that ability is needed. She stated, "I think, for calculus, a lot of it just depends on ability." She explained further, "and then, as long as they have the ability, and like someone else mentioned, initiative. Then I think that they are, I guess you would say, college-ready at that point." Relating intelligence and college

readiness, Grace shared that her students had a distorted view of college readiness at the beginning of her class. She said:

> And so, they don't understand what college readiness is. They are oblivious, and in their mind, they've been told, or they understand, or they think that they're smart, which you know for the most part, they get that. But on the flip side of that is, they truly don't know what college level work is, so I think that they, my perception of them, is that they come into the class with a distorted view of what it means to be ready for college.

When describing a college-ready student, Veronica focused on needed skills, sharing:

> I typically quantify it with three things. Can they read a peer-reviewed like article or journal, and annotate it, and participate in a discussion on it without me interfering, and have it be fruitful, and then can they write a strong timed essay? Not just because of AP but because that's what a lot of their midterms and finals are going to look like in college. So, I tell them in the beginning … you need to know how to write longer papers and have discussions.

> Participants acknowledged that academic skills and ability are essential to college readiness. However, participants continuously noted the importance of soft skills beyond ability and academic skills. Lillian, Grace, and Katherine perceived college readiness beyond ability and intelligence, noting the need for self-awareness, maturity, work ethic, perseverance, and ambition to do well. Veronica illustrated the participants' views of college readiness:

> College readiness is someone who's confident being an independent learner. Someone who is willing to advocate for themselves, ask questions, someone who has these foundational skills, like note-taking, but also the independent skills, like knowing how to review them … like making sure their attendance is what it needs to be, taking notes

properly, reviewing the notes, knowing what questions to ask. And also, just having a

willingness to be a little bit more creative. Think outside the standardized testing box …

and can they communicate complex ideas effectively.

Katherine agreed that students needed to be mature, independent and creative, putting

emphasizing time management: "I think it's that ability to be independent.… And so, I think a

college-ready student is one that at that point can do those things, in a lot of ways and can

manage their time. That's huge time management.

Grace highlighted perseverance, saying, "College readiness is someone who has the

ambition to work through obstacles." Lillian shared that college-ready students are self-aware.

She said, "But look for students that have self-accountability, and then also self-awareness.…

They are really gonna have to put in the time and have that accountability." Participants shared

that as students transition from the beginning to the end of their Advanced Placement courses,

they begin to understand what college readiness is, developing self-awareness to move beyond

natural ability to maturing, working hard, and preserving. Grace said, "I think that understanding

what it means to be college ready, and then, whether or not they get there, helps them understand

what it is to be college ready."

Participants described college-ready students as creative, independent thinkers who can

manage their time and work through obstacles. They described college readiness as multifaceted

beyond ability and academic knowledge. In order for students to thrive in a college-level

academic environment, they perceived that college readiness requires a combination of cognitive

abilities, skills, and dispositions. I denoted a pattern in the participants' responses and concluded

that the Advanced Placement teachers viewed students' college readiness not only as academic

skills but also as thinking and learning skills.

Barriers to College Readiness Enhance a Lack of College Readiness

All participants voiced concern over their perceived lack of student college readiness, sharing their views on potential barriers adding to this deficiency. Overall, the participants agreed that a minimal level of college readiness exists before students enrolled in Advanced Placement classes, quantifying it as a level two on a scale where level five represents the highest level of college readiness. Participants described students who lacked independence, perseverance, curiosity, and accountability. Inherit in participants' views of college readiness was students' lack of college readiness. For example, Veronica noted that many of her students lack college readiness skills. When describing her Advanced Placement students at the beginning of her course, she said, "My students come to me with very, very, very little college readiness at all. Tons of potential, but it's just not there."

Further into the interview, Veronica explained that students' lack of college readiness is related to a lack of time management and independence. She stated, "A lot of it is not having the core skills of time management. A lot of it is not being confident enough to say I can read these instructions and just do the assignment without having to be walked through it." Several other participants identified that lack of independence hindered their students' college readiness. Embodying this view, Katherine noted:

> I've noticed, like they want you to tell, like, they want to just get the answer, like, they want to 'Quizlet,' or they want to find the answer somewhere. They don't want to really have to think, and they want you to tell them if it's right or wrong like they're not okay with having to create and think outside the box.

Additionally, participants related college readiness to work ethic and accountability, viewing a lack of college readiness as a lack of accountability. Katherine stated, "I still measure

it by their accountability." She provided insight into her perception of a lack of accountability and work ethic with two student examples She compared her perceptions of a naturally capable, less college-ready student to a less capable, more college-ready student:

> I had a kid just this past year who did really well on the AP Exam, but I don't necessarily think that this kid, he, is college ready. He didn't make a good grade in AP, my class, because he didn't have the work ethic, and he didn't complete the assignments, but he's very smart. Whereas, I had another student who didn't do as well on the AP Exam as this student but is probably more college ready in terms of will work through the adversities of maybe not being the smartest one in her class, but she's going to work hard enough to do it.

Participants reflected on possible explanations for students' lack of college readiness, identifying barriers that hinder college readiness. Foremost, participants noted a lack of student preparation as a possible reason for this lack of college readiness. Participants believed that students need more experience with rigorous, college-level work and access to rigorous courses at all levels. Prior to taking her Advanced Placement language course as eleventh graders, Grace alluded to a possible lack of rigor in non-Advanced Placement classes. She stated, "And they've never really had a challenge, as far as like college-ready work, you know, or like college-level work." Additionally, she noted that students have difficulty transferring skills learned between courses. Veronica described what she had observed in relation to this lack of rigor:

> There's this interesting phenomenon in English that I've noticed. Is where some teachers have this view, that there's like high school teaching, high school writing, and then college writing, that will contradict itself, that contradict each other some, and like they'll do things that, you know, in college, you wouldn't do. But in high school, sure, fine, go

ahead.… We don't need to teach them like a lesser way, per se, and so it's really kind of

interesting, the different grab bag of skills I get.

Katherine agreed, sharing, "They've done the high school writing where the teacher says 'it's

okay, just put the URL,' and I get it as a high school teacher because … you don't want it to take

forever, and it takes forever to teach, you know, MLA formatting, or whatever."

Other barriers to college readiness were district focus, students' out-of-school focus, and

lack of support. Veronica posited that the district's focus is on something other than college

readiness. She perceived the district focus as caring more about engaging students who are

uninterested in school. She summarized the district's point of view by stating:

It takes the resources away from the motivated, bright, college-ready students, and we

kind of put all of our focus all the way down here and saying, "Well, how do we get the

kids who don't care to come to school? How do we get the kids who don't care to try

something?"

Participants discussed that the students' out-of-school focus was work, relating to a lack

of home support. Veronica said, "They're working crazy weird hours all the time … they're

working a lot." Although participants acknowledged that some students have to work to pay their

bills, they believed most students seem to become accustomed to a flexible schedule with the

availability of online courses. Grace related working to a lack of support at home:

A challenge is the support because the reason why they have to work is because they

don't have the support, or I guess maybe their parents don't have the financial stability

for them to not have to work, to provide or to establish. But then also you have the, you

know, time management aspect. So, I think the lack of support at home is a challenge.

Additionally, participants related college readiness assessments to support and were unsure about how they indicate college performance. Participants acknowledged that universities use college readiness assessments to determine college readiness. Grace said:

> We measure college readiness based off of like the ACT or the SAT, or you know, standardized testing, which tells us if we're college-ready. So, and what those do, you know, in essence, is not only measure if someone can read well or write well, but we know that they're also like social things that add into or influence someone's ability to take a standardized test well.

Veronica explained, "But I don't know if I trust the academic results, because it's also a test of: Did your parents make sure you got practice for it? Did they pay for the tutoring and the programs?"

I first examined participants' perceptions of college readiness to gain insight into how participants perceived Advanced Placement as an avenue of college readiness. Participants generally viewed college readiness as more than academic knowledge. They noted that students lack college readiness upon entering their Advanced Placement courses. They identified several barriers, including limited exposure to rigorous work, district priorities, inadequate home support, and competing outside interests, which may contribute to this lack of college readiness. However, participants also saw Advanced Placement courses as beneficial as they help students develop self-awareness and enhance college readiness skills.

A Decline of the Advanced Placement Program Despite Perceived Benefits

Participants indicated a strong belief that Advanced Placement courses are rigorous and effective in fostering college readiness, leading to the subtheme *Advanced Placement fosters college readiness*. However, despite this perceived benefit, there has been a decline in the

number of Advanced Placement classes offered. Currently, the district offers one Advanced

Placement course. Grace mentioned, "There's only one AP class from what I've gathered in the

entire county this year, and it's my AP Lang class." They believed the decline was partly due to

insufficient support for the Advanced Placement program, establishing *a lack of support for the*

Advanced Placement program as a subtheme. Additionally, participants expounded on the lack

of access to Advanced Placement courses in their district, leading to the subtheme, *Advanced*

Placement lacks accessibility for all. As a result of participants' perceptions of a lack of support

and access intensifying a decline of the rigorous Advanced Placement program, I developed the

overarching theme, *a decline of the Advanced Placement program despite perceived benefits*.

Advanced Placement Fosters College Readiness

Participants strongly believed that Advanced Placement teachers play a critical role in

developing college-ready students by providing a challenging curriculum, fostering critical

thinking skills, and offering support and guidance throughout college preparation. Additionally,

all participants felt that their specific Advanced Placement course was rigorous and prepared

students for college through essential skills and necessary habits. Participants explained that

Advanced Placement courses had deeper connections and rigor, delivered key content

knowledge, and influenced cognitive strategies, learning skills, and transitional knowledge. To

this point, Katherine said, "I probably give less work in AP, honestly, but it's just the breadth

and depth of what I'm expecting from them and wanting them to do." Lillian illustrated how

students become more aware of the deeper connections:

> But with these AP-level courses, there's a deeper understanding to them. In terms of
>
> math, I don't just have to do the problem, but I've got to justify why I'm doing what I'm
>
> doing. And I've gotta connect that to a real-world situation or something else. So,

watching to see how quickly they become self-aware, to know that it's gonna take more than just prepping for it five minutes before class.

Adding her students' perspectives of Advanced Placement rigor, Veronica stated:

It was definitely like college prep in mind, as far as how students and their parents would talk about it. And just hearing my AP students come in from like AP Calc with Abigail, and knowing that they had to kind of be on their game.… It was like, Okay, this is gonna be serious because I seriously want to go to college, and it was very kind of focused on that particular thing.

Illustrating the belief that Advanced Placement prepared students for college, Katherine, stated:

The experience you had, you know, in Grace's AP Lang class, or you know, AP Calc, if we could ever teach it again, or whatever like, that's like real legit college, and that's gonna benefit you more, even if you don't get credit for it, because it's gonna prepare you.

To this point, Katherine spoke of her son's experience with Advanced Placement courses. He currently attends the University of [institution blinded]. She attributed his success at the university to his preparation in Advanced Placement courses, where he learned to write and perform at high levels. She said, "He says it's nothing to do that now because of what I did in high school."

Participants concurred that the Advanced Placement courses they teach enhance all aspects of college readiness, encompassing essential content knowledge, cognitive strategies, learning skills, and transitional knowledge. Katherine said, "I think with AP, you have those discussions and the curriculum's set up in such a way that the requirements have it … they certainly help them for their ability to analyze and their ability to write." She discussed when her

school had multiple Advanced Placement courses, indicating that this resulted in a majority of her students passing the Advanced Placement exam. She stated, "Wasn't like I was having to build the basics; I really gotta take them to the next level. And every single one of those kids passed the AP Exam that year and did well, like better than just pass." Veronica explained why the Advanced Placement Literature curriculum prepares students for college:

> I like the AP Lit curriculum. Particularly because it relies so much on the reader-response theory, which transfers to everything else that they would be doing their senior year and in college. If you can look at a text and identify its complexities and acknowledge different sides and different perspectives, then, I feel really confident letting you go off to college next year … I think it is really important when we talk about college and career readiness that they can read a really wide, diverse amount of text.

Participants believed that Advanced Placement courses enhance college readiness through a rigorous curriculum, imparting essential skills, and delving deeper into content. They emphasized that Advanced Placement courses deliver college-level content to high school students by design.

In addition to the curriculum, all participants observed that the seated format of Advanced Placement courses contributed to the rigor of their courses. Moreover, they viewed the accountability inherent in a seated class as synonymous with rigor. Grace said, "Obviously, the seated class is going to have the rigor. And then they're gonna, you know, be accountable while they're in the seat in front of someone." Lillian and Abigail illustrated the view of accountability and rigor of students working in a seated class. Lillian stated:

> There's so much to be said, like we were saying earlier, with kids sitting in your class doing it … so, there's so much more accountability with the AP classes. When they know

that they're going to be put on the spot, and they're going to be seen, and their work is going to be evidently theirs.

Further explaining, Abigail responded:

I think that rigor and accountability are literally hand in hand., like you were explaining. So, right, when a kid is sitting in front of me, and I say, you know, find the derivative of this function, and they stare at me like a deer in headlights, whereas behind a computer they can just go photo math or whatever they want to do … so yeah, I always just consider accountability pretty much the same as rigor.

Participants believed that the format of the Advanced Placement class is crucial to student success. They believed seated classes offer more opportunities for direct interaction with teachers and classmates, which can enhance learning and engagement in a college preparatory course.

In their roles as Advanced Placement teachers, participants saw themselves as catalysts for student growth, going beyond the curriculum and seated format. Despite students often being unprepared for the rigors of Advanced Placement courses, participants believed that students were at the exact starting point necessary to develop into college-ready students. Veronica's view on entry requirements brought smiles and nods from all participants. She said, "My class has never had any entry requirements other than please sign up.… So, my entry-level requirements are: Are you breathing? And do you want to take the class? Love that. Come in. Please come in. Oh, my God!" She discussed how she molds her Advanced Placement students:

The beginning is spent remolding their expectations, but also letting them know that the methods that they're used to working don't work anymore because it's just not

appropriate for a college format, and I'm trying to get them as close to what they should

expect as possible.

Abigail responded, "I know I'm going to grow them into independent thinkers along the way."

She described how she builds college-ready students in her Advanced Placement course:

But it also has to do with the way that you actually deliver it. And the way the

opportunities that you give the students to do those things. So, you know, yeah, I might

put them in groups. But I'm not gonna assign roles. The kids are. I'm not gonna tell them

exactly what needs to happen for their project. They're gonna determine that. You know

what I mean. Like, give them the ownership. Especially that level. So that's just one

example when I say how you teach it.

Katherine alluded that the process of building up students resulted in most of her students

passing the Advanced Placement exam last year. Participants mentioned that through these

challenges and growth, students became more self-aware. Students began to understand that

college readiness extended beyond knowledge. They needed to utilize a variety of learning and

thinking skills. Grace explained, "They feel like they aren't as smart as they thought they were.

Which in some cases, maybe, that's the self-awareness that they needed to have in order to grow

in themselves, in, to grow to be college ready." Participants believed that as Advanced

Placement teachers, they enhanced the college-ready skills of their students. They described

molding students, building up students, developing independent thinkers, creating ownership in

learning, and enhancing self-awareness.

Participants mentioned peer support as aiding college readiness for Advanced Placement

students. Katherine discussed her son's and daughter's competitive Advanced Placement classes.

She discussed how the Advanced Placement program grew during that time. She said, "I had a

huge AP class in 2020 when we went out because that group of kids was competitive … because those kids were, you know, encouraging each other to do those things." Grace added:

There's nothing like positive peer pressure. You've got kids who want to do well in school.… So, when you have a group of competitive, like-minded kids that encourages them to also, you know, do well in school or in the advanced level classes.

Participants believed that support is crucial and collaborating with like-minded students aids in college readiness. They noted that Advanced Placement encourages college readiness through rigorous preparation, growth, self-awareness, participation, and support. They described transforming underprepared students into students who are gaining college-ready skills. However, they perceived a lack of support for the Advanced Placement program hindered their ability to offer these beneficial courses.

Lack of Support for the Advanced Placement Program

Regarding college readiness, all participants felt that their school system was failing students. Participants believed the district has shifted its focus away from Advanced Placement and college readiness. As fierce supporters of college readiness and with a strong belief that Advanced Placement courses support student growth, they lamented over the decline of the Advanced Placement Program. They laughed at the notion of district and school support for the program. Abigail was among the most vocal participants regarding district support, access, and resources. In response to another participant, she stated:

I agree with that. As far as math goes, on a scale from 0 to 10, our county preparing kids for that type of class in college is probably a negative 10. They do not provide any opportunities for the upper crust at all.… But I think that a lot of people, admin, county-

level, maybe even some teachers think, oh well, those upper-level kids, they can just do it

online.… So, I think we're doing a huge injustice for those kids.

Veronica responded:

It feels like there's a trend of setting the standard to the lowest common denominator.

Which, like Abigail was talking about, it takes the resources away from the motivated

bright college ready students. And we kind of put all of our focus all the way down

here.… And so, I don't think it's working what we have right now.

Lillian, Grace, and Katherine discussed how they perceived building-level leaders as

supportive of offering Advanced Placement courses. However, Lillian went on to explain that the

district cut the Advanced Placement courses from the school schedule at the district level due to

low student participation and to decrease the class size of standard classes. She stated, "So it

seemed like the admin and our school generally wanted that to happen, and it was the district

level that shut that down and said no, to cap it." Grace added, "The support from the district level

isn't there." Katherine discussed her son's experience at the University of [institution blinded].

He is in classes with students who had "all these AP credits that they're bringing in" and "had to

take like SAT Prep starting in sixth grade." She said, "Our county doesn't do anything to prepare

kids."

Participants noted a need for more resources and training. Most participants stated they

received no resources or training. Lillian stated that as a first-year teacher, she taught three

different courses, including Advanced Placement Calculus. She said, "And I was given nothing; I

didn't even get sent to an AP workshop or any kind of AP training whatever. It was just kind of

handed to me.… But I received nothing, very little support." Over the next seven years, she

continued to seek training. She said, "I went to several of the principals and mentioned going to

some kind of AP training. And it was all the response was: basically, I would have to kinda do

that on my own because the county wouldn't support that." However, Grace classified the

resources as "adequate." She explained that teachers had to persistently advocate for training:

> I had to apply for a rural fellow's grant through AP to get the grant to go to the capstone
>
> training, and that was only because it was a district initiative. The other AP training that I
>
> went to, I also had to advocate and apply for a grant in order to attend. So, if you can
>
> advocate for it yourself, and you have the initiative to do it, by all means, go and get all
>
> the resources. If you do not advocate for it, then it's not accessible to the teacher. So, I
>
> say that everything, all the training that I've gotten has been wonderful and adequately
>
> preparing me. But, whether or not it's supported or encouraged is a totally different story.

Participants expressed frustration with the lack of support for Advanced Placement. They

noted a need for more support at the district level for offering Advanced Placement classes. They

believed that the district shifted its focus to struggling students, assuming that students desiring

to prepare for college do not need additional support. Participants believed this lack of support

hinders students in their rural community as they compete for college admission and struggle to

complete Dual Enrollment community college courses. Additionally, participants viewed the

district's lack of resources and professional development in Advanced Placement courses as

further evidence of their lack of support for the program. They emphasized the importance of

adequate resources and training to ensure students receive a high-quality, rigorous education

with adequately prepared teachers.

Advanced Placement Lacks Accessibility for All

In addition to an overall lack of support for the Advanced Placement program,

participants indicated that Advanced Placement was not accessible for everyone. Grace stated,

"If we're talking about accessibility, it's hard for every single student in [district name blinded] to have an AP course. They're not accessible to anyone. I think that's the bottom line." Abigail acknowledged disparities between higher poverty and minority schools and lower poverty and minority schools within her system. However, she was unsure how to overcome those barriers. She went on to state that Advanced Placement was not accessible to any students:

> I know that High School D [highest minority school in the district], for example, that obviously has a different demographic than High School A [lowest minority school in the district]. They have not had calculus since [name blinded] taught it. I think that was five years ago.… I'm not really sure how to overcome that barrier because if you only have so many kids interested, you know … no matter of their race at all, or ethnic background, or anything. How are you going to form a class, seated, I mean … but, I don't think it's fair for me to have a class of 12, like I had, and then no other place in the county have it … I don't feel like it's accessible for any kids. Not just kids of color or anything like that. I just don't think it's fair across the board for any students.

Speaking from the perspective of a minority teacher, Veronica stated, "I think we're talking about like systemic issues that started way, way, way before they got to an AP-level class.… So, we can identify these problems, but I don't know exactly how we solve certain issues." Lillian and Abigail discussed how the district attempted to solve the issue by streaming or offering Advanced Placement at one high school location. Abigail stated, "They were streaming into my class and found it way too difficult. I didn't know what else to do, so they dropped." Lillian added, "So it might look, I said, look like, it's easily accessible for everybody, but it, so, it might be accessible, but it's not fair to the student who are having to go out of their way to make those accommodations."

Participants indicated a lack of access for all students while acknowledging disparities among minority students. They acknowledged the district's efforts to accommodate students by streaming Advanced Placement classes. However, streaming was ultimately unsuccessful.

Participants noted possible causes for the decline of Advanced Placement classes such as a lack of recruitment, under preparation, and students' perceived rigor of Advanced Placement classes. Participants felt the program benefited from teachers and guidance counselors being willing to recruit. Katherine mentioned how recruitment helped as the county initiated the Advanced Placement Seminar class in 2020 at her high school, which was offered to all high schools but ended after COVID-19. She said, "It's proof that if you encourage them because our guidance counselors were out there like beating the streets to get these kids to do this because they wanted the program to grow." However, after COVID-19, participants felt like the district and guidance counselors had shifted their focus to Dual Enrollment courses. In order for the program to be successful, Katherine said, "The guidance counselors have to. Everybody has to kind of promote it."

Participants discussed a need for preparation for Advanced Placement courses, implying that preparation begins well before the first Advanced Placement course. Grace provided an example of middle school preparation. She said:

> Like our AIG programs in sixth, seventh, and eighth grade. They are not being offered currently in our middle schools, as our policy says, they should be. There should be advanced reading and math courses for sixth, seventh, and eighth-grade courses.… It's not being held accountable from the district level to the middle school level to even get advanced courses at all.

When discussing accessibility and encouraging students to participate in Advanced Placement, Katherine discussed a lack of rigorous classes prior to Advanced Placement. She said, "It takes somebody starting when they're in sixth grade.… Our county is then dis-servicing these really smart babies." Lillian discussed when the county invested in a rigorous pre-calculus curriculum through a partnership with [institution blinded] University. She felt that it positively impacted Advanced Placement Calculus:

> But the curriculum that we started using for the pre-calculus class really was set up to be like a pre-AP class. So those kids then, once they transition to calculus, they kinda knew what to expect.… Maybe a year or two after that, I didn't have enough kids sign up for AP calculus anymore, and they cut it. But I felt like those, that small window of kids, that I had did come in more prepared because of that pre-AP calculus.

Veronica discussed how students perceive rigor may have impacted student participation in Advanced Placement classes. She stated:

> And I think that in a way, the rigor, or the perception of rigor, among the student body has kind of helped, partly, in killing the program. Cause we mentioned earlier [students think] I don't want to do that all year. I don't want. I don't want to do that. When that's what the class is designed for. It's designed to be rigorous, so like, what's going on?

Participants pondered potential reasons for the decline in the Advanced Placement program. They emphasized a need for more recruitment, preparation in lower level courses, and the perceived rigor of Advanced Placement classes as potentially intensifying the decline.

Participants spoke passionately about Advanced Placement's benefits and inadequate support and access to the program. They viewed the Advanced Placement curriculum as an avenue for college readiness, allowing students to engage with college-level material in a

challenging academic environment. However, they felt constrained by inadequate support, resources, and access. Participants indicated that policy changes needed to occur. Specifically, participants said the district should offer more Advanced Placement courses. Katherine said, "I would have it." Grace added, "No matter the number of students signed up, the course will be taught. That's what the policy needs to be."

Frustration with Dual Enrollment

All comments regarding Dual Enrollment had a clear tone of frustration, leading to the theme of *frustration with Dual Enrollment*. Participants believed Advanced Placement courses prepare high school students better than Dual Enrollment courses. They emphasized increased accountability and developing executive functioning skills. As participants voiced concerns about Dual Enrollment as an avenue to college readiness, two subthemes emerged: *perceptions of a lack of responsibility and accountability in Dual Enrollment courses* and *Dual Enrollment courses have become a substitute for Advanced Placement courses*. Katherine was the first participant to mention Dual Enrollment. She said, "I think we think we're making them college ready by signing up for all the CCP [Career and College Promise] courses or whatever."

Katherine has a unique perspective as a veteran teacher who has taught Advanced Placement courses for 24 of her 27 years and as a Dual Enrollment instructor of three months at the time of the interview. Her following comment came from the perspective of a mother, not an Advanced Placement or Dual Enrollment teacher. She said, "Most of those college classes that they took were not college and did not prepare them." She expressed her frustration with Dual Enrollment with an impactful comment: "It's just, it's glorified high school."

Perceptions of a Lack of Academic Responsibility and Accountability in Dual Enrollment

Courses

While participants acknowledged that some Dual Enrollment courses are rigorous and beneficial for students, they believed that most of these courses do not adequately prepare students in the way Advanced Placement courses do. Much of the conversation revolved around the perceived lack of accountability stemming from the online format of many Dual Enrollment courses versus the seated format of Advanced Placement courses. Grace said, "I think the rigor is determined by whether there is an in-person class for it. For the high school setting, whether it's in-person or online, that's where the rigor is. You can draw a line in the sand." When discussing her district's embrace of online Dual Enrollment courses, Abigail stated:

> But what they don't realize is the quality and rigor of a seated class is so different than an
> online class. And I'm speaking strictly from math, but I think it does apply to other
> courses. So, I think we're doing a huge injustice for those kids, just across the board.
> It is nowhere in the same ballpark.

She later stated:

> There is no comparison, bottom line, between the two. None! Like, I said, because
> accountability and you being able to apply something and do it on the spot is a thousand
> times different than being able to sit there, and you know, mull over it and look it up, and
> all of that.

Katherine commented that she viewed the English, science, and math courses as rigorous. However, she added, "But the rest of them they 'Quizlet' it. And so, they literally cheat their way through it, and so that's not rigor at all. There is no rigor to it" All participants mentioned that

students cheat while taking online Dual Enrollment classes, and they viewed the online format as hindering student academic responsibility and accountability. Lillian said:

> And then with the dual enrollment classes, they're sitting behind a computer screen, so it might be their authentic work, or it might be AI or their Snapchat AI. It might be a recycled essay because my friend took this class last semester. So, I'm just gonna change some words. So, it doesn't look like that I've copied the whole thing. So, there's so much more accountability with the AP classes … and their work is going to be evidently theirs as opposed to sitting behind a computer screen, and maybe it's theirs, or maybe it's not.

Katherine believed Dual Enrollment classes add to the lack of preparation college professors are seeing. She mentioned that although students have fulfilled general education requirements, upper-level college classes remain challenging. She said:

> I recently heard a lot of college professors talk about how they, the kids, just aren't prepared when they come in. And then I think those dual enroll classes are actually probably making that more likely. Because these kids take these classes, then they get to college. They have these Gen. Ed. requirements out of the way. And then they're going to upper level classes 300 level 400 [meaning courses beyond introductory, freshman-level classes]. And then they're certainly not ready for a paper of that magnitude or discussion of that magnitude because they took an online class, you know, in psychology, that they 'Quizlet' it.

Participants believed Dual Enrollment is easily accessible and has attainable entry requirements. Grace stated, "As long as they have the GPA, they will stick you in a CCP class in a heartbeat. It doesn't matter what you have. As long as you have the GPA, you can get there." However, they believed Advanced Placement classes are more rigorous and better prepare

students. Veronica illustrated this point, saying, "Entirely, more. Completely. Not even close."

Followed by Abigail saying, "1000%." Veronica commented from her students' perspectives:

> From their own mouths, not even just my very opinionated feeling about the current state
>
> of Dual Enrollment. Them coming up to me and saying … I had three or four girls come
>
> up to me unprompted, saying, this class is preparing me more than this, you know, these
>
> psychology classes I'm taking or the sociology class I'm taking.

Katherine's opinion as both a Dual Enrollment and Advanced Placement teacher demonstrates

the belief that Advanced Placement is more rigorous and better prepares students. She said:

> My AP class at High School B is as hard or more rigorous than the English 111 class that
>
> I'm currently teaching, and I think the English 111 class at the community college is one
>
> of the more rigorous, if that puts that into perspective.

> Participants believed that Dual Enrollment is less effective at preparing college-ready

students than Advanced Placement courses. They contended that Advanced Placement courses

are more rigorous and hold students more accountable. Participants emphasized the lack of

accountability in the online format of Dual Enrollment classes, noting that many students lack

academic responsibility in completing assignments.

Dual Enrollment Courses Have Become a Substitute for Advanced Placement Courses

> Many participant comments revolved around how Dual Enrollment affected Advanced

Placement. Participants believed that Dual Enrollment affected their high school classes, affected

them as teachers, and affected participation in Advanced Placement courses. They noted a shift

in their district, where Dual Enrollment is increasingly seen as a viable alternative to their

Advanced Placement courses for students seeking college-level courses, leading to the subtheme

of *Dual Enrollment courses have become a substitute for Advanced Placement courses*.

Participants noted how students' lack of preparedness in Dual Enrollment classes affected them as teachers. They often become impromptu tutors or have their classes interrupted. Veronica, Lillian, and Katherine illustrated this point. Veronica discussed how Dual Enrollment courses interrupted her class, saying:

They're not prepared at all as far as humanities go, and then they come to me panicking about it, a few times a week. Because it's, I guess, it's just the shock of it. But, they come to me with the English and the humanities classes, and it's being lost.… But it's not just that they're not prepared; it eats up a lot of their time that I don't think it would normally be eaten up, constantly, trying to do work [meaning on Dual Enrollment assignments] in my class, even though we're doing other things, saying, "Can I just go down and speak to [Dual Enrollment Liaison's name blinded] about my online classes?" and saying, "Well, I couldn't do your work because I had online classes." So, it becomes a priority in a way that it wouldn't if they were prepared.

Lillian commented on how she becomes an impromptu tutor, stating:

I end up being their personal tutor for the majority of the year because this is the first time that they're having to learn math independently, and they don't have somebody holding their hand and walking them through something…. They'll come to me with a homework assignment … and without having a teacher there explaining it to them, they just get overwhelmed. And then it snowballs. And they get behind.

Katherine noted her frustration with students asking for help in their Dual Enrollment classes, stating:

If I, as the high school teacher, am having to field all the questions for Dual Enrollment, and it kinda irks me like if I'm being completely honest because you could have just

taken my class. You didn't sign up for AP Lit, but you want me to help you and give you feedback. It's not my job to help you on a college class you're in, you know.

Participants highlighted the challenges they face as teachers of high school students taking Dual Enrollment courses. They described becoming impromptu tutors and having their classes interrupted by students seeking help from the dual enrollment liaison. Participants highlighted the frustration they feel supporting students in Dual Enrollment classes when those students could have taken an Advanced Placement course taught by them.

In Katherine's comment, she lamented how students could have signed up for her AP course. In addition to Dual Enrollment affecting the teacher, participants perceived dual enrollment as affecting participation in Advanced Placement Courses. Abigail felt that Dual Enrollment has directly impacted all of her courses. She noted a decline in participation, stating:

But an issue I'm having is that I am competing with the associate's degree program pre-calculus class with my pre-calculus class. What I mean is, I'm vying for the same kid. So, they end up taking that pre-calculus because that is the specific one required for their associate's degree. So, they're not going to sit through my class. So, for example, this year, I've only got one class of 16, and last year I had 40. In the year before, I had three classes. So, it is a dramatic drastic drop … it's like it's undermining us having those AP kids.… So, it so it's like eating away at the kids that I could even have in those classes and feed an AP class.

Lillian said her school no longer offers an advanced fourth-level math course, leaving a Dual Enrollment course as the only option. Katherine felt that student perception of Dual Enrollment increased the low participation rates of Advanced Placement. She stated, "Our numbers are hurt because kids just want the easy way out, like I can take the CCP class and do less work and get

this college credit." She said her students think, "I'm not taking AP. I'm not gonna do that. I don't wanna go to school the whole year, my senior year," and "I don't wanna be there in the spring." Later on, she said, "As a county, we talk about … how our numbers are down, etc., etc. But we kick kids out. We don't have good kids on campus anymore because we don't have anything for them to do."

Participants believed that Dual Enrollment had directly impacted participation in their Advanced Placement classes. They were frustrated as they viewed Dual Enrollment had become a substitution for Advanced Placement, leading to fewer students opting for Advanced Placement classes. Participants believed students perceive Dual Enrollment as allowing them to potentially earn college credit more quickly with less effort.

Participants believed updated policies are needed to address Dual Enrollment. Katherine suggested better alignment to pathways as she has observed students taking classes that may not benefit them. Grace did not believe online Dual Enrollment courses benefited high school students. She felt both systems need more collaboration between teachers and courses. She considered how to adjust the current policy. She stated, "I think the policy should be if you're gonna take a CCP course, it needs to be seated at the community college." Thinking further, she commented that having a seated Dual Enrollment class as a prerequisite to an online class may be a viable policy change. She also brainstormed how Advanced Placement and Dual Enrollment can function together. Veronica said students should be more accountable when taking Dual Enrollment courses. She explained how Advanced Placement could bridge the gap:

> Like if you have people emailing you because you have not logged on in three weeks, and you're failing because you straight up don't do the work. You should be barred from dual enrollment for the time being, but not AP. Because if you are still a teenager who's

having executive function problems [meaning processes that help them organize, complete tasks, or interact with other], that's what I'm here for. I'm also teaching you how to function to a higher level with a year-long seated class. That you're not going to get from an online class where you're just jacking up your college GPA for no reason. So, I think that if we would just be a little bit more realistic about who's taking Dual Enrollment and who should get to take Dual Enrollment based on their track record … I think we would have enough room for both in a lot of courses.

Participants believed policies need to be updated for Advanced Placement and Dual Enrollment to benefit high school students. They suggested limiting the online format for high school students, more closely monitoring students' progress in classes, and limiting the number of courses students can take if they have a history of poor performance. Participants would also like to figure out a way for both programs to serve students simultaneously.

Overall, participants valued their impact as Advanced Placement teachers and believed that the Advanced Placement curriculum is beneficial for developing college-ready skills. However, they expressed concern over the decreasing popularity of the Advanced Placement program in their rural school district. They perceived low support and access to the program as factors for the decline. Additionally, they believed the current state of the county's Dual Enrollment program was hurting the Advanced Placement program.

<center>**Case 2: Dual Enrollment Instructors**</center>

The study setting included one community college, where all participants were instructors. Focusing on this one site allowed me to gain a comprehensive understanding and provide a rich, in-depth analysis. The focus group for Dual Enrollment instructors comprised six community college instructors, most of whom had over 10 years of experience teaching Dual

Enrollment courses. Two instructors had between three- and six-years of experience. I offered an online meeting for the Dual Enrollment participants because that format worked well for the Advanced Placement focus group. All participants agreed that it would be more convenient and established a favorable day and time for the interview.

In the study setting, most Dual Enrollment classes are asynchronous, online classes serving traditional junior and senior high school students. However, the community college and these instructors serve an early college student population in seated class options. Additionally, the community college offers five career and technical pathways for traditional high school students with seated classes, such as heavy equipment operations and welding technology.

I asked 19 questions mirroring the Advanced Placement focus group to address the research question: How do postsecondary teachers of Dual Enrollment courses in a diverse, rural school district perceive Advanced Placement and Dual Enrollment courses as avenues for college readiness? The analysis of the Dual Enrollment instructors' responses revealed three distinct themes which are presented in the following sections.

College Readiness is More Than GPA

As a community college offering university transfer courses, participants acknowledged that state policy defines college readiness as a 2.8 grade point average (GPA). However, participants described college readiness using varied student attributes and academic skills of college-ready students, leading to the theme *college readiness is more than GPA*. Participants believed college readiness surpasses grade point average, asserting that soft skills are crucial. They described a college-ready student as motivated, persistent, capable, and mature. However, participants recognized that factors exist that influence college readiness. When participants described factors that benefit and hinder college readiness, they emphasized athletics, coping

skills, and family issues as hindrances, with resiliency, cognitive skills, and support as factors that benefit students.

All participants described college readiness as encompassing skills other than a numerical benchmark. Mark recently had a conversation about college readiness with a community college board. He illustrated the view that college readiness is dynamic, stating:

> I just had a really long conversation with the advisory board for university transfer about what exactly constitutes college readiness, and I think a lot of that background has bearing on this conversation. College readiness has changed over the years, but it's a matter of students being able to have the requisite character, the internal characteristics, to be able to endure, to persist throughout the entire journey.

Rachel agreed and noted thinking skills beyond GPA. She responded:

> Yes, I totally agree. Our state defines college readiness as a GPA of 2.8, and we all know that that really does not matter. We have some 2.8 students who may not have the motivation but have the intellect to be successful. Then we have 3.5 GPA students who have the motivation and drive but may struggle with some things. So, our state definition of being college ready really does not define being college ready.… Communication skills are necessary … and critical thinking skills. So, college readiness, to me, is not GPA. It's more of the soft skills that they need to be successful in college.

Bryan described the three college-ready attributes he viewed as necessary. He described a "mentally capable" student as "capability of to think and to work at a college level, at a higher level." He described "academically ready" as "means they can actually write formative research or just even a submission of an essay in a way that is academically correct. They can read at that level." Lastly, he said, "Ready with the time and the effort that's required ... and just having an

understanding of what that means to be in college, and how that's different than being in high school." Additionally, Isabella mentioned autonomy, while Steve added emotional resiliency. Describing what an emotionally resilient student may think, he said, "Yeah, I'm not going to be crushed by this. I'm gonna learn from it. I'm going to, you know, do better the next time." Similarly, Rachel said a student might think, "Oh, okay, I understand, I do have to work for this." Steve summarized, illustrating the point that college readiness is beyond GPA:

> I would completely agree with Rachel that is beyond GPA. I'm not sure that that is a measure of college readiness at all, to be honest. What GPA you have. I think those soft skill aspects are much more important, resiliency and maturity.

Overall, participants strongly believed college readiness encompasses academic skills and strategies beyond the GPA. They agreed that soft skills were more important to becoming a college-ready student than the GPA on a student's transcript. However, they recognize that many factors benefit or hinder college readiness.

Participants believed a delicate balance of factors impacts college readiness, identifying factors that benefit and hinder it. As hindrances, they emphasized athletics, lack of resiliency, and family issues. For benefits, participants recognized cognitive ability, support, and preparation. From their perspectives, athletics was both a benefit and a hindrance. Steve illustrated the point by saying:

> I have some high school-age students who participate in athletics. And in many cases, they feel that those athletics are more important than their class. So, for example, I have a lot of student who tell me, "Oh, I can't be here for class today because we have a game," or "I can't be here because we have practice." And you say, Well, okay, I guess that's more important to you than classes.

Bryan agreed, responding, "We hear that I had a game last night, so I didn't get my homework done." However, Rachel viewed athletics as a motivator. Rachel countered, "Athletics makes your students more driven and gives them something to work for. That sense of working as a team helps build them as a person … there's a spectrum there with that being a positive thing."

Beyond athletics, Rachel mentioned that students dealing with abuse hindered college readiness. She said:

> And I've seen a lot of high school students who have lots of family issues, emotional abuse, physical abuse. Sometimes DSS has to be involved. So, there are a lot of things going on in younger students' lives that they may not be able to cope with and handle…. So, there are a lot of outside things that affect the younger students. Their ability maybe to compartmentalize and cope may be lacking, whereas an older student may be able to overcome that in a different way.

Regarding benefits, Rachel mentioned resiliency and parents who support students as a benefit to college readiness. Bryan acknowledged that students' backgrounds affect their college readiness, responding:

> Some of this readiness is academic capabilities, the actual cognitive skills/ability and the preparatory work in high school to give them the knowledge, and some of it is their support system, family focuses on education, internet connectivity, transportation, proper diet, etc. A student may have the academic capabilities but not the support system, or they have the support but not the academic capabilities.

Participants viewed college readiness assessments as a benefit and a hindrance. Rachel mentioned that a benefit of college readiness assessments was the state policy that a particular score on the ACT indicated college readiness. She stated:

Let's say we have a student who has a 2.0 GPA with a really great ACT score. They can take classes with us based on those test scores. So, they are showing that they have the capacity, but their GPA is not reflecting that in some way…. I think our expectations now have gone up from with our state guidelines from an 18 on the ACT, maybe to a 19.

However, Mark believed that being a college-ready student is more than that score. He believed perseverance and critical thinking are critical. Therefore, regardless of a high score, struggling with soft skills or academic strategies hinders their college readiness. He responded:

I don't know that I have a high opinion of standardized tests or tests that attempt to benchmark students, because I've seen a lot of students that can excel, that did not do very well on those. And I've seen a lot of students that do very well on those that cannot persist when they encounter a difficulty.… One of the problems I see when a student comes in is applicable here, and that is that they think there's one right answer to things, and they freak out when they can't figure out what that one right answer is.… They need an ability to critically think through, and to be able to develop an opinion based on that critical process. And many of them lack that ability early on or at this point. And so that's one of the reasons that I, I feel as I do about these tests, because yes, the tests are good at measuring something, but it's not always full scope of everything.

Participants addressed differing factors that affect college readiness. They realized that college readiness is multidimensional and that many factors enhance or hinder the academic skills and strategies students need to be fully college-ready. Specifically, they highlighted perseverance, support, athletics, preparedness, ability, and family issues.

Participants' perspectives on college readiness revealed a consensus that extends beyond GPA to include essential soft skills. They mentioned that college-ready students should endure,

persist, communicate, and think critically. Participants discussed factors influencing college readiness. From their perspectives, external factors like abuse and lack of support may hinder college readiness, while internal and external factors like maturity, support, and resiliency may support it. Participants described a multifaceted nature to college readiness, emphasizing the need for varied skills as a college-ready student.

Dual Enrollment Design Equips Students for University

As participants discussed the community college environment and the Dual Enrollment program design as pathways to university studies, their voices resonated with pride and satisfaction. Participants believed their Dual Enrollment program's design ensures that students are college ready. They highlighted the program's accessibility to all students, adherence to state guidelines, rigorous courses, and support through scaffolded courses and advising. The theme of *dual enrollment design equips students for university* emerged from these discussions.

Community colleges must adhere to Dual Enrollment state guidelines. Participants discussed that the college and instructors deliberately developed the program with intentional placement and advising. Students meeting GPA and college-ready assessment benchmarks may enroll in Dual Enrollment classes. Moreover, college liaisons work directly with each high school to monitor student progress and advise students throughout their courses. Rachel illustrated the placement of students and state guidelines as she described how her institution ensures college readiness, stating:

> We have the placement of our students. Again, that's based on high school GPA. Those
> students who do not meet that requirement will take the transition courses or the co-req
> courses to help them with their gateway math and English.… To ensure that they're
> college-ready is really helpful for them to be in the gateway classes that they need. That

goes back to our advising and our coaches, and the supports that we offer through our

institution.

Bryan spent seven years as an advisor at the community college before moving into teaching.

From that perspective, he emphasized intentional advising and placement:

Looking at their transcripts, looking at their GPA, the courses they've taken, one of

things we try to do is make sure they get into those gateway math and English as early as

possible. And then also be thoughtful to not overload them … to help them be successful

in that first semester. So, they can build a foundation.… From an advising perspective,

we try to be very intentional about where we're putting students in classes and how many

classes we're putting them in … trying to gauge that to help them be successful.

Mark illustrated the point that the recommended pathways are intentional:

Those are, I think, the crux of everything we do. The recommended pathways that we

have posted on our website … we try to get students into the courses that will scaffold

them into the other classes as they go along.… If they're following that recommended

pathway, they should have the scaffolding they need to get into those other structures.

Participants acknowledged that support is critical to the program's design. They believed that the

program's design captures potentially college-ready students, advises them, places them in the

courses they need to transfer to a university, and supports success through a scaffolded structure.

For the program to be successful and support rural students as they matriculate into

careers or a university setting, accessibility is critical. Participants believed that the Dual

Enrollment program is accessible to diverse students, particularly students of color and low-

income students. They emphasized access to technology, online instruction and resources, and

collaboration with high schools. Rachel highlighted why she viewed the program as highly accessible. She said:

> I think we do a great job of trying to make our courses accessible. Especially, [Dual Enrollment liaison director's name blinded] working with [high schools]. He's our director of CCP. We have offered classes at High School D [highest minority school in the district] to encourage students too, who may not have internet at home. They can take the classes seated. We hope our students will use the time on [high school] campus with their Chromebook and with internet to work on their classes there. Our online classes are very accessible…. But the high schools having the Chromebooks and having the internet has really helped with our ability to provide good online classes to the students. And hopefully, we can have some seated stuff that they're able to be a part of as well.

Mark added how the community college has a committee to address accessibility issues. He said:

> We also have an internal team called the idea committee or idea team that constantly brainstorms and discusses these issues and how we can best address these issues. By providing resources or talking about the resources that we have and how they can meet that need, especially inside the county. And so that entire conversation encompasses things like everything Rachel just mentioned a second ago. So, when we run out of one resource, we start immediately looking for another resource that we can replace it with to make sure that we could assist those students as best as possible.

Steve and Michelle noted specific resources. Steve stated, "I've gone to all OER [Open Educational Resources] resources.… I think that's something that has helped the accessibility, at least in my classes." Michelle added:

But, I agree with Steve. Most all of our books in social sciences, as far as I know, are

OERs, and they can read those on their phone. They may not be very big, but they can

read other things on their phone. So why can't they read the textbook, you know. And

then they do have the option to go to the high school and a lot of them have a block for

that.

All participants agreed that Dual Enrollment classes were accessible. They noted that the

area high schools provided the devices, technology, and space on their campuses for students to

participate in online Dual Enrollment classes. They emphasized that many courses have moved

from physical textbooks to Open Educational Resources (OERs). Participants using the OERs

embedded the educational material into the modules of their online courses, providing

accessibility to educational materials. Additionally, participants mentioned a supportive

environment where the college developed a committee to address accessibility needs.

In addition to program design and accessibility, participants believed they rigorously

designed their Dual Enrollment courses to equip students for university. They considered Dual

Enrollment courses equal to any college course, and they felt their courses' rigor met university

standards, preparing students for the university environment. Two instructors stated that the rigor

in their dual enrollment classes matched the rigor of any of their college classes. Bryan said,

"The rigor in Sociology 210 is the same in every class, regardless of who's there or who's not

there. And the expectation is the same.… It's a student in the class, and the expectation is the

same all the way." Steve added:

But if I'm doing my job right, and I feel like I am, then the rigor it, I mean, it's the exact

same class. It's the same material. It's the same assignment. It's the same outside

resources and textbook, and to the best of my ability, graded to the exact same standards. And so, I would say that it would be, as best I can, the same level of work.

Participants viewed course rigor as a course with rigorous activities that allowed students to reflect, participate, and develop critical thinking. Moreover, they believed that Dual Enrollment courses are more rigorous than any high school-level course. Michelle defined rigor by stating:

There's a certain amount of written assignments that have to be done. Apparently, that's very rigorous for a lot of them.… I remind them that this is a UGETC, you know, the University General Education Transfer Course, and this is going to be different than what you've done before because it is, it does transfer to university. And I think that's kind of what we use as our guideline, you know. What would they expect at a university if a student were taking this class.

Bryan stated that he would like to believe his classes are more rigorous than high school. He illustrated his point by stating:

For instance, in sociology, we're doing a chapter a week. So, they're reading a college textbook, one chapter a week. And they're writing something every week. It's not always APA format. It's not, but there's some expectation. There's a quiz, or somewhat I would call a simpler activity related to what they've read every week … they've had twenty assignments over the last fourteen weeks where they had to submit a written [assignment] or discussion. So, I think they've done a lot this semester. And all of it is, it's none of it is true or false. None of it is, you know, one sentence answers. They're writing and responding and communicating.… For me, rigor involves the responsibility to read and

prepare for class. It involves the ability to turn in the actual submissions and to think …

the rigor requires them to be able to think and read and write.

While Bryan viewed rigor as reading, writing, and discussing. Isabella succinctly stated, "They have to have like critical thinking and actually input their own reflection and opinions." Mark demonstrated that participants view rigor as successfully meeting a university standard. He responded:

To me, rigor means being able to meet a certain standard successfully.… I'm always

thinking of what is [university blinded]? What is [university blinded]? What is [university

blinded] doing? And how can I best meet that standard? So that that way, when my

students go from my class into one of those environments, they're best prepared for that,

and so I try to base my assignments on that. I try to base our standards inside our

department on that. So that students can be successful, ideally, if they take all the things

that I taught them and carry that forward as they move forward. So yeah, it's the ability to

meet that standard and to utilize that standard in other classes.

All participants held that rigorously designed Dual Enrollment courses promoted

academic skills that closely paralleled university standards. Participants purposefully tailored

their courses to equip students with the necessary foundations for success in higher educational

settings.

College Identity is a Journey

As participants illustrated their view that Dual Enrollment equips students for university,

they also acknowledged that young students may require time and patience to transition from a

high school environment to a college environment. Through this voyage of self-discovery and

personal growth, high school students must embrace their newfound independence and explore

interests that carry forward into their future careers or university majors. This journey requires a level of responsibility many high schoolers have yet to encounter. Thus, they may encounter self-doubt or fear as they find their belonging. Participants' comments continually centered on developing a college identity as students transition from high school to college. The subtheme, *college identity is a journey*, emerged as participants described high school students navigating the process of Dual Enrollment.

Through networking with other colleges and universities, Mark indicated he learned that most educational institutions were facing how best to assist students as they navigate their college readiness journey. He mentioned that students must persist throughout the entire journey. He shared:

> That is something that they have to develop as they go forward. Sometimes that jump from a high school level environment to a university is one that they're not quite ready for. I can even speak personally and say I wasn't ready for that when I made that journey a long time ago. But that is, I think, one of the central pieces of this.

As students begin this journey, Rachel described her experience with the diverse group. She said:

> I have found that students lack maturity to be in college classes. But then some are highly mature. So, it's a very diverse group of students that we have that are high school students.… They're afraid to communicate with their instructors. So, working toward that, we need to, you know, be mindful that our students may not have the skills they need to be successful.

Mark described it as "the fear associated with entering into the college-level environment." He illustrated the point regarding college identity:

So, one of the biggest obstacles for students to be college-ready is to develop the identity

that they need as a college student. They oftentimes come in they don't see themselves as

a college student. Especially, I would say, in an environment like this college. One of the

things that we talked about was that a lot of people in [name blinded] county, a lot of

students in [name blinded] county don't necessarily see college as a viable option, and

it's developing that sense and that identity, and that "I can do this and I belong here" and

that's an important component. And so, getting them ready is getting them prepared to

make that identity, that next step, and develop that facet of themselves to be a part of this

environment.

Bryan added that when he asks about his students' college experience, indicating a lack of

college identity, several would say, "Well, I've never been in college, I don't know," and several

would say, "I'm not in college now." He explained the difficulty in the transition:

Just because if they're 14 or 15 years old, and they're doing an online class, and they've

not done it before. And they don't know, I mean, they know Canvas, but they don't know

the expectations of college. It would be difficult for any of us to make that transition.

Participants noted that it was rewarding to experience their students' growth and

progression. They described students participating in discussions and communicating more.

Bryan stated, "Their growth over the semester or two will be obvious in their writing,

discussions, etc. There is great joy in seeing this progress." Mark described his students'

progression. He said:

They are terrified. They are wide-eyed. They are in some cases shaking. And they start

that journey in that way. And they don't know exactly what to do or how to behave, but

by week two or three they start to settle in. And then by week 16, they fully do see

themselves. They embrace again, I'm gonna go back to what I said a minute ago, that identity, that sense of self and belonging. And "okay, I can do this. I have this." And so, when the hit those initial hurdles, they have a hard time persisting through those hurdles. And they have a hard time developing a sense of identity…that's a huge step for some of them. But for those of them that persist through sixteen weeks, I'd say that they are far more ready for the rigors of college study by the end of that 16 weeks than they are during that first week. And it's kind of amazing to see that journey.

Although participants viewed Dual Enrollment as equipping students for university, they acknowledged that college readiness is a journey as high school students develop their college identity. Participants perceived that their community's rural setting posed challenges for students' college identity development. However, as Dual Enrollment students persist along the journey, they emerge empowered to navigate the complexities and responsibilities of higher education. Participants viewed their part in that growth and development as truly rewarding.

Overall, participants characterized Dual Enrollment as a rigorous program that guides students' college-ready journey. They underscored the accessibility of their online classes to diverse student populations, emphasizing available resources. Moreover, through personalized advising and meticulously structured courses, participants believed the program equips students with essential skills and instills the confidence and competence crucial for university success.

Variability in Academic Success of Dual Enrollment Students

Participants perceived Dual Enrollment high school students' capacity to navigate the transition between the high school environment and the community college setting of Dual Enrollment courses as vital. Participants expressed confidence in the Dual Enrollment program's capacity to support students in developing the essential skills for success in university settings

through its rigorously designed and structured courses. They highlighted their attributes as instructors and the availability of high-quality resources as beneficial factors in their students' journey. They noted guiding their students with standards, expectations, and feedback.

However, they identified various factors that impede a successful transition, including lack of preparation, communication breakdowns, insufficient effort, lack of learning, instances of cheating, and reliance on excuses. Throughout the focus group conversation, I identified two emergent subthemes*: factors that encourage success* and *factors that hinder success* of dual enrollment students. The two subthemes illuminated the underlying theme, *variability in the academic success of Dual Enrollment students*.

The Dual Enrollment instructors described Dual Enrollment students as a young, diverse group. Participants agreed that Dual Enrollment students blend in with other learners. Steve and Bryan shared, respectively, "In some cases, you don't know" and "We don't always know who's dual enrolled." Mark illustrated the point more fully:

> They blend in with everybody else, and we attempt not to point them out or not to draw attention to them. So sometimes, I am surprised when I find that one of the students has been dual enrolled because I try to treat everyone in my classes like they're a college student.

Participants noted that students come into Dual Enrollment classes with different levels of preparation and different backgrounds. Steve stated that Dual Enrollment students' preparedness levels varied. He said:

> But in think in some cases you can have such a spread, right? Because you have some students who may be, maybe, they're coming from a family where one or both their parents went to college and really emphasized education.… But at the same time, you

have other students who aren't coming from that home background where education is really emphasized ... but I don't know that average is telling the whole picture because you really do have a significant gap.

Isabella described how her foreign language students may even regress academically. She said, "What's a little challenging is that sometimes I may have students who have taken four semesters of Spanish ... and then, when they come to Spanish 111, they kind of like regress, in a way." Bryan illustrated the point of varied success in the program by sharing:

There are some students who are taking full advantage of it. Doing extremely well. They are learning. They are learning critical thinking skills. They're learning skills that they'll need when they get to [university blinded] or to [university blinded], both academic skills and perseverance skills. And there are other students who are coming to class or logging in, but I don't think they're actually learning anything there…. There's some Dual Enrollment students who are doing fantastic work and learning really well and add a lot to the class. And there are others who are not.

After reflecting, he later quantified the variability of Dual Enrollment students' college readiness. He shared:

Regarding student readiness, I estimate approximately 25% of my high school students are college-ready.… There is another approximately 25% who are not college-ready at the beginning of the semester or the end. Perhaps not ready after two or three or more semesters. The majority of students, that middle group [50% of students] are capable of completing the work, considering the ideas, and gaining knowledge. Some will crossover to the top 25% and become college ready.… Others in the middle group will not

crossover, either remaining where they are … capable but not making the transition … or sliding down toward the bottom group.

Despite participants' belief that the Dual Enrollment program is well-designed and fosters an environment conducive to student success, they also acknowledged a reality where academic success does not always align with expectations. Participants identified various obstacles that hinder success alongside factors that serve as catalysts for student success.

Factors that Encourage Success

Participants pinpointed various factors influencing a student's success in Dual Enrollment. They emphasized student and teacher attributes, along with access to high-quality resources. Participants agreed that students' increasing effort and persisting through the obstacles along the journey impact success. Steve mentioned how students may be used to getting "As" but now have to work at a higher level to earn them. He said, "You earn the grade that you get. And in this case, here's some things that we need to correct." Mark consistently mentioned persistence throughout the journey. He related that to his students and his journey as a student. He shared:

> But it goes back to what Steve was saying as well. And that's why I said I have lots to say about this. It's exactly what Steve said. They have to persist through that because by the time they hit week one or week two, they might not be getting the grades that they want or that they expected. To this point, and as Steve's saying too, I was the "A" student, and I just glided thorough. And, you know, then I hit university, and I wasn't doing that anymore. And I actually put in the effort. And I can see that in some of these students as well.

Rachel mentioned a student who struggled at first but is now thriving. She said:

One student, for example, in the beginning, started off really rocky. Now they're in the swing of things. And they're probably gonna make a 91 in class. So, there are some students who learn. And they're, "Oh, okay, I understand, I do have to work for this." Just like Mark was saying … I will say most of my students are being successful now, and I hope that what they learn in my class they will carry over next semester into other classes, as well.

In addition to student attributes, participants described how they helped students grow and persist by structuring their courses to impact success. Mark realized that his course may be the first Dual Enrollment class for high school students. He said, "When I go in on day one, I try to set the tone because I'm hyper-aware that this is oftentimes their first class or an early class for a great number of them." Steve illustrated the point by adding how he tried to make students feel comfortable. He added, "And one of the things that I try to do, even beyond teaching them History, is teaching them to feel comfortable in a college class … for the first couple weeks is let's just get comfortable talking with each other." Isabella stressed communication with students and making sure that they understand expectations. She said, "I always try to communicate with them and make sure that's clear … if I don't communicate with them, it's hard for me to know where they stand and what's their backgrounds in the languages." Michelle mentioned providing resources and feedback. She said, "There's a sample paper. There's examples. There's, you know, we give feedback."

Participants recognized the potential for success among students who persist and work hard in the Dual Enrollment program. Additionally, they recognized their crucial role in fostering learning and growth. They believed they cultivated an environment conducive to students'

success, emphasizing establishing a safe space for discussions, effective communication, illustrative examples, and constructive feedback.

In addition to student and teacher attributes positively impacting student success in Dual Enrollment, participants believed adequate resources to deliver a rigorous curriculum are crucial. Participants agreed that their resources were a five on a scale from one to five, with five being the highest level. Mark illustrated that perspective, saying:

> Yeah, I would say a five as well … we've spent a lot of time and energy and effort in our department building our courses. We all participated together. We've done presentations of what we did. So, we have videos, podcasts, a textbook that we created, everything that we need. Yeah, definitely a five, easily a five. We're very proud of what we've done. And I think everybody else feels the same.

Rachel and Michelle collaborated on content and resources. Rachel responded:

> Yes, Michelle and I work together on developing our PSY150. And she developed the 241. I developed 281. So, we work really hard to make sure that our content and what we're teaching align with state guidelines, with what students are supposed to be learning, whether they're taking it with us or at [university blinded] or [university blinded]. We want to make sure that we're meeting those needs, and that our student learning outcomes are on point that follow those guidelines by the state.

Participants perceived student success in the Dual Enrollment program as impacted by the student, teacher, and curriculum. The alignment of these three factors creates an environment ripe for success. However, achieving success is not always straightforward. Participants noted numerous factors that can impede success.

Factors that Hinder Success

Although participants believed Dual Enrollment's design propels students through a successful journey to university, they indicated numerous factors hindering their success. Participants mentioned preparation, communication, effort, cheating, excuses, and lack of learning as reasons students struggle. For lack of preparation and navigating the college experience, Rachel and Bryan mentioned an online course, ACA122, that early college students take before enrolling in college classes to help prepare them to navigate the expectations and achieve college transfer success. Rachel described how students need more fundamental knowledge of college expectations and how the school system haphazardly places traditional high school students into Dual Enrollment classes:

> Our traditional high school students who are taking CCP [Career and College Promise] courses with us, they do not have to take ACA, and a lot of them don't want to take it because they don't get the high school credit for it. Because it's only the one credit hour. So, a lot of our CCP traditional high school students are missing out on some fundamental things. They're kind of just thrown into college classes right away without the base knowledge of what to expect when they're taking college classes. So that's, whereas our early college students, they have the benefit of the first class they take is ACA122. That helps prepare them. But our regular high school students do not have that. And also, some of them are just thrown into classes because we don't have teachers at the high schools, a teacher shortage, or that there are not that many CTE courses or elective classes that students can take, and so they are just kind of pushed into taking college courses with us.

Isabella mentioned high school students' reliance on parents to communicate with instructors under challenging situations. She said:

> If there were cases where they plagiarized something, sometimes they won't message instructors. They're gonna go straight to their parents. So, there's still that confusion between that high school to college transition to where they think that they can go to their parents, and the parents can contact the instructor.… So, I feel like students still have that level of maturity … and that they still need to learn to not rely on their on their parents, so much, so like on bargaining their grades.… If the instructor fairly graded with the rubric and everything that means they got what they deserved.… They can communicate with the instructor a little further, and I feel like it's something that's missing sometimes.

Participants believed some students must put in the effort required to be successful. Mark believes students think "it's a series of hoops that they have to jump through." He said, "They don't see that it's an interconnected web of meaning." Rachel illustrated a lack of learning:

> I sometimes find that there is no carryover. So, what they learn in week one module one is supposed to go with them throughout the whole semester. And it's kinda like they either they don't read my feedback or they don't understand my feedback, or they don't use my feedback to improve. So, they may learn something in module one that's supposed to help them on at the end of the semester, and it's like they do it, and then it's like they flush it away and forget that existed. And they continue to make the same mistakes.

Michelle agreed. She said:

> I agree with that. And one of the things that frustrates, I know Rachel and I. I agree, it's like there's no carryover.… I don't feel like they're taking the time to use the resources

that are available. I had a student email me last week that they had never written a paper in APA, and that's why they didn't do well. Well, I went back and looked and this is because that was the first written assignment they completed all semester. But the issue she was having, I made a new resource just for that. And obviously, they don't read the emails where we tell them that's available. And then also, they don't use the resources.… But they don't want to take the time to learn it, some of them, not all of them.

All participants mentioned students making excuses. They were highly frustrated by the number of excuses they received, recognizing that it impacted success and achievement in the program. Steve said, "I'm gonna have to retract my qualified positivity when it comes back to things like meeting deadlines, not turning in work, and them wanting to give an excuse for it." Bryan demonstrated this frustration. He stated:

The maturity level of they have more excuses than they have capabilities … the excuse level is seemingly unending. With what they and the expectation that because they offered an excuse, it is good enough to get them an extension or to get them. There's an expectation level that, "Well, I left my Chromebook at school" or "It's my grandmother's birthday so we went to the party, and I didn't get home until 10 O'clock" or "I had a game last night" and they expect that's a good enough excuse that they're gonna get an extension for it.

Participants mentioned an observed difference in success between online and seated classes. Bryan illustrated the point by stating that he sees more growth in seated classes. He said:

It may make a difference online or seated. I do both. And I tend to believe I get better experiences in terms of seeing that progression and growth over the course of a semester with seated students than with online students.… And so, they're still learning that

process and the responsibility level, but if they're seated, I think I get a better, and I have

a lot more online students than I have seated, but I do think there's a difference in the

younger students have a seated option.

Steve agreed, mentioning that he was to overcome this in his online classes. Steve stated, "There

is a significant difference between, I feel like, between seated and online. And I keep trying to

think of ways to overcome that difference."

Participants mentioned other personal issues that may affect success, like accessibility to

the internet, transportation, and family support. Rachel mentioned accessibility issues. She said,

"I hate that the hotspots are going away, but we will try our best to help those students. If they

can come on campus, and then we know that transportation may be an issue." Michelle said,

"Maybe if their family isn't as supportive about education. Because, you know, maybe they're

not motivated to get into the library where they can, you know, use the internet or those different

things."

Participants recognized various factors that impede students' success in Dual Enrollment.

They emphasized preparation, communication, effort, cheating, excuses, and lack of learning as

common challenges students face. Moreover, they observed more opportunities for growth in

seated classes than in online classes, indicating the importance of physical presence in

educational settings.

Dual Enrollment students teeter between two systems, the secondary high school

environment and the postsecondary community college environment. Within these two systems

are competing or complementary policies and processes. Participants noted practices that may

affect student success. Participants emphasized a need to require students to be on their high

school campus while participating in online Dual Enrollment classes and the difference between the grading systems of the college and high schools. Rachel illustrated both points. She stated:

> Just students coming in, thrown in classes as a place filler for something that they're not able to get at their local high school. Also, students not being required to be on [their high school] campus. I know a lot of high schools have started, if their grade drops below a 70 or something, they're required to come on [their high school] campus, but at least having one block on their high school campus. I know a lot of our seniors take four online classes, so they're never seen [on the high school campus]. So just the requirement that students at least come onto their high school for one block would be great in my mind.… The withdrawal versus the "F." So, if a student withdraws from a college course, they receive a zero on the high school side. Whereas, if a student fails our course, they receive a 50 on the high school side. So, the withdrawal and the "F," I don't know that's a fair thing.

Lastly, participants demonstrated little knowledge of the Advanced Placement program. The Advanced Placement program is often the college preparatory class at the high school level. As such, those classes may impact the success and preparation of Dual Enrollment students. Mark, Rachel, and Michelle noted their experience with Advanced Placement students. Rachel said, "We may not have as much insight on our AP students … it's very hard for us to delineate out who those are unless they tell us." Mark explained that Dual Enrollment instructors look beyond high school courses to rigor set to university standards. Therefore, Dual Enrollment instructors do not necessarily reflect on Advanced Placement courses. He stated, "And so when we think of rigor and the English classes, we're not thinking of necessarily the AP classes." However, based on his experiences with students, he had a positive opinion of the Advanced

Placement program. Mark said, "I don't know of many, but every single time that I've encountered a student that has a great deal of knowledge about the paper writing process. They inevitably reveal themselves to have been an AP student." Michelle countered with a differing opinion. She mentioned that her daughter participated in both Dual Enrollment and Advanced Placement, and she felt Dual Enrollment better prepared her for university-level classes.

Participants recognized the benefits of the Dual Enrollment program. However, they acknowledged that success is variable. Participants understood that external and internal factors hinder and encourage the success of high school students throughout their journey. They emphasized that students must persist through the initial shock of the transition and work hard to develop the necessary college-ready skills while growing in maturity and responsibility.

Overall, participants believed college readiness extends beyond a quantifiable number, noting numerous academic and soft skills that college-ready students should possess. Additionally, they viewed the Dual Enrollment program as a valuable model for fostering the acquisition of those skills throughout the college readiness journey. However, they acknowledged that students demonstrated variability in academic success as Dual Enrollment students are young learners who experience various factors that may either encourage or hinder their success.

Cross-Case Analysis

Following Yin's (2018) multiple-case study design, I identified and presented within-case patterns for the two cases. In this section, the findings of a cross-case analysis are presented. Cross-case analysis compares any within-case patterns across the cases (Yin, 2018). Through this analysis, I found similarities and differences with the Advanced Placement and Dual Enrollment cases. This analysis was guided by the third research question: How do perceptions of Advanced

Placement and Dual Enrollment teachers differ regarding Advanced Placement and Dual

Enrollment courses as avenues for college readiness?

Similar themes in the Advanced Placement and Dual Enrollment cases were identified.

Subsequently, I conducted an in-depth analysis comparing these cases regarding these common

themes, leading to the development of two overarching themes that apply to both cases. Finally,

based on the analysis, other notable similarities and differences between the two cases are

described. Table 8 lists these overarching themes, corresponding cases, and case themes related

to the research question.

Table 8

Overarching Themes Related to Cross-Case Analysis

Research Question 3: How do perceptions of Advanced Placement and Dual Enrollment teachers differ regarding Advanced Placement and Dual Enrollment courses as avenues for college readiness?		
Overarching Theme	Case	Emerging Case Theme
College Readiness Transcends Academics, Encompassing a Range of Multifaceted Strategies and Skills	Advanced Placement Teachers	College Readiness is More Than Academic Knowledge
	Dual Enrollment Instructors	College Readiness is More Than GPA
Overarching Theme	Case	Emerging Case Theme
Rigorous Program Design is a Valuable Endeavor to Enhance College Readiness	Advanced Placement Teachers	A Decline of the Advanced Placement Program Despite Perceived Benefits. Subtheme: Advanced Placement Fosters College Readiness
	Dual Enrollment Instructors	Dual Enrollment Design Equips Students for University

College Readiness Transcends Academics, Encompassing a Range of Multifaceted

Strategies and Skills

Participants in both focus groups discussed college readiness in terms of strategies and

skills that transcended academic knowledge. Using Conley's college and career readiness

framework, I compared, sorted, and color-coded the descriptive codes from each case, aligning

them to each of Conley's four key components (Conley, 2012). In addition to the codes in the

tables below, I identified 10 codes for reading and writing for each case related to Conley's

content knowledge component (Conley, 2012). Furthermore, regarding Conley's transition

knowledge and skills component, the Advanced Placement case had one code, while the Dual

Enrollment case had 16 codes related to advocacy and postsecondary awareness. However, based

on participants' perceptions, most of the descriptive codes related to cognitive strategies and

learning skills. Table 9 lists the descriptive codes for each case concerning Conley's key

cognitive strategies (Conley, 2012). Table 10 shows the descriptive codes for each case related to

Conley's key learning skills and techniques (Conley, 2012).

Table 9

Descriptive Codes Related to Conley's Key Cognitive Strategies

Conley's key cognitive strategies are the thinking skills needed to learn and connect, such as: "problem formation, research, interpretation, communication, active inquiry, and explanation" (Conley, 2012, p.3).	
Advanced Placement Case	Dual Enrollment Case
ability	mentally capable
ability	capable to think
natural ability	capable to work at college level
they think they're smart	academically ready
very smart	academically correct
they perceive themselves as smart	work at high level
well on exam	prepared for the level of work
not just exam score	communication skills
tons of potential	willingness to communicate
ask questions	openness to communicate

Table 9 *Descriptive Codes Related to Conley's Key Cognitive Strategies (continued)*

Advanced Placement Case	Dual Enrollment Case
knowing what questions to ask	communicate well
creative	communicating
communicate complex ideas	responding to each other
independent learner	ask questions
independent skills	responding
independent	need ability to critically think through
independent thinkers	need critical processes
think outside the box	critical thinking skills
they understand rationale	critical thinking
application	learning critical thinking skills
acknowledge difference perspectives	able to receive constructive feedback
identify complexities	able to develop an opinion
connect to real-world situation	input their reflection
Not just do, but justify why and what	discussion
discussion	interact with the material
participate in discussion	considering ideas
fruitful discussion	
have discussions	

Table 10

Descriptive Codes related to Conley's Key Learning Skills and Techniques

Conley's key learning skills and techniques indicates how college-ready students act, such as: "ownership, goal setting, persistence, self-awareness, motivation, help-seeking, progress monitoring, self-efficacy, time management, test-taking skills, note-taking, and collaborative" (Conley, 2012, p. 3).

Advanced Placement Case	Dual Enrollment Case
attendance	soft skills more important
ambition	requisite character (endure, persist)
ambition to do well	internal characteristics (endure, persist)
accountability	endure
accountability	persist
accountability	persist
self-accountability	persist through
self-aware	persistence
self-awareness	learning perseverance skills
confidence	learn perseverance
initiative	emotional resiliency
work ethic more that intelligence	resiliency
put in time	work hard for this
put in time	motivation more than intellect
time management	motivation

Table 10 *Descriptive Codes related to Conley's Key Learning Skills and Techniques (continued)*

Advanced Placement Case	Dual Enrollment Case
work ethic	drive
work hard	time management
work hard	learn time management
work through adversities	understand assignments take time
work through obstacles	can't turn in assignments late
maturity	can't submit late work
reflection	submit work on time
willingness	completing work
foundational skills	submission
note taking	effort
reviewing notes	correcting things
taking notes	autonomy
reviewing notes	maturity
revising work	maturity
transference skills	emotional maturity

Regarding cognitive strategies, Advanced Placement teachers mentioned ability in nine of the 28 codes. They mentioned being an independent learner and participating in discussions four times each. Additionally, they discussed communication, creative thinking, and connection. On the other hand, Dual Enrollment instructors mentioned capability-related words in eight out of the 26 identified codes. They also focused on communication for eight of the 26 codes, with critical thinking skills noted often. Thus, both cases identified cognitive readiness as a critical strategy for college readiness. However, Advanced Placement teachers focused on independent thinking and active participation in discussions, while Dual Enrollment instructors stressed communication and critical thinking.

Analyzing learning skills and techniques, Advanced Placement teachers identified ambition, accountability, and awareness for eight of the 30. They focused on work ethic, time management, and note-taking in 14 codes. Dual Enrollment instructors mentioned endurance, persistence, and perseverance in 12 of the 30 codes, with time management and submitting work

comprising eight identified codes. Advanced Placement teachers noted accountability and hard work as crucial college readiness traits. In contrast, Dual Enrollment instructors frequently highlighted accountability through the submission of work and emphasized persisting through the college readiness journey.

Through the analysis of each case and further cross-case analysis, the following theme emerged: *College readiness transcends academics, encompassing a range of multifaceted strategies and skills.* Participants discussed college readiness in terms of thinking strategies and learning skills more than content or transition knowledge. Moreover, these soft skills were said to be more important than academic knowledge. Concerning college readiness, Rachel stated, "It's more of the soft skills that they need to be successful in college." Veronica, Katherine, and Grace described college readiness using the terms "independent learner," "thinking outside the box," and "working through obstacles." Leading Katherine to say, "I think a college-ready student is one that is at that point and can do those things in a lot of ways."

Rigorous Program Design is a Valuable Endeavor to Enhance College Readiness

In both cases, the participants perceived that they had rigorously designed their respective programs to enhance their students' readiness for college. As Rachel, Mark, and Bryan discussed ensuring students are college-ready with the design of their program, Mark said it was the "crux of everything we do." Likewise, Veronica, Abigail, and Katherine discussed that their curriculum design delivered rigorous content. Abigail said it is "set up in such a way that the requirements have it." Additionally, Katherine discussed that her students did well on the course exam. I developed the theme that *rigorous program design is a valuable endeavor to enhance college readiness* from each case's individual themes. Subsequently, I analyzed participants' perceptions of curriculum design and rigor, comparing the two cases.

Seven participants shared documents after the focus group sessions. Two Advanced Placement teachers provided access to their online courses, highlighting activities demonstrating their views of college readiness or rigor. These teachers have the most recent experience teaching Advanced Placement courses. Five Dual Enrollment instructors shared their syllabi, highlighting portions of the documents and activities that showcased college readiness or rigor. Participants used different colors to denote college readiness and rigor, enabling comparisons of their perceptions of college readiness and rigor.

Table 11 lists participants' perceptions of rigor and college readiness based on participants' highlighted documents. Most of the words listed in the table are direct words highlighted by the participants. However, I summarized specific topics. For example, I put "grading methods" in the table to denote the actual grading weight percentages highlighted in the documents. Additionally, "online class skills" represent a variety of computer skills that the participants highlighted in their documents.

Table 11

Words Relating to Rigor and College Readiness from the Documents

Advanced Placement Rigor	Dual Enrolment Rigor	Advanced Placement College Readiness	Dual Enrollment College Readiness
analysis (2)	teaching style (2)	think critically	self-motivated (2)
inquiry-based (2)	self-motivated	think independently	highly disciplined (2)
craft writings (5)	highly disciplined	analyze (4)	willing and ready (2)
team work	critical thinking (4)	question	effort (2)
present (3)	problem-solving	explore	brainstorming
defend & debate (3)	distinguish	understand	abstract & annotated
evidence (3)	critique (3)	evaluate	presentation
performance task	examine (5)	multiple perspectives	cultural awareness
formulate solutions	evaluate (3)	synthesize ideas	identify main idea
relationship	discussion (5)	discussion	compare
transform	citations (3)	provide evidence	characteristics
transmit	writing & editing (4)	interpret	compose sentences
conduct research	projects (4)	reflection	respond orally
projects (2)	quizzes (5)	essay that defends	interpret basic info

Table 11 *Words Relating to Rigor and College Readiness from the Documents (continued)*

Advanced Placement Rigor	Dual Enrolment Rigor	Advanced Placement College Readiness	Dual Enrollment College Readiness
rigorous	no cheating (2) attendance (2) no late work (2) transfer course (2) grading methods (5)	no late work responsible self-sufficient college identity	regular attendance (3) no late work (11) responsibility (7) communicate (3) online class skills (7) APA format transfer course

Note. The number in parentheses denotes the number of times the word occurred.

For rigor, participants in both cases highlighted words from activities involving critical thinking skills, projects, and writing. The Advanced Placement participants emphasized defending, presenting, providing evidence, and writing, while the Dual Enrollment participants focused on critical thinking, examination, discussion, writing, assignment types, and grading methods. One of the five Dual Enrollment instructors highlighted sections that conflicted with the others. For rigor, this instructor included words that most others included in college readiness, such as self-motivation and no cheating. Additionally, this instructor denoted some things as college readiness, whereas most others perceived it as rigor, such as "transfer course."

For college readiness, participants in both cases highlighted skills including exploration, evaluating, and interpreting and the characteristic of responsibility. The Advanced Placement participants related college readiness to analysis and thinking skills. The Dual Enrollment participants focused on motivation, effort, communication, and responsibility.

I identified an overlap between rigor and college readiness during the document analysis. For instance, participants perceived evaluation and discussion as rigor and college readiness. In the highlighted documents and focus group interviews, participants illustrated their perception of college readiness and rigor in their program design, highlighting the design's intentional efforts to enhance college readiness.

Other Similarities and Differences Between the Two Cases

The most significant similarities between the two cases were the common overarching themes that emerged from the cross-case analysis detailed above. Specifically, participants in both cases believed that college readiness transcends academic knowledge and that rigorous course design benefits college readiness. However, I identified four additional notable similarities and three differences between the Advanced Placement and Dual Enrollment cases. Although teaching high school students is the charge of both sets of educators, and they had similar perceptions, differences were noted, possibly stemming from the different secondary and postsecondary environments. Similarities comprised perceptions around the more rigorous program, barriers, assessments, and policies. Differences comprised perceptions around the other program, accessibility, and support and resources. Table 12 lists the similarities and differences between the two cases.

Table 12

Similarities and Differences Between the Two Cases

Similarities	Differences
Perception that their respective program was more rigorous	Perception of the other group
Perception of college readiness assessments	Perception of accessibility of their respective courses
Perception of needed policy updates	Perceptions of Support and Resources

A notable similarity was that participants believed their program was more advantageous to college-ready students, and a corresponding difference was each case's perception of the other program. As participants in each case discussed the rigor of their respective programs, each group felt their program was more rigorous than the other. For example, Veronica said Advanced

Placement courses were "entirely more" rigorous than Dual Enrollment, while Bryan said he "would like to think" that Dual Enrollment was more rigorous than Advanced Placement.

When discussing the rigor of the other program, Dual Enrollment teachers did not dwell on Advanced Placement, and only half participated in the discussion. They shifted the conversation to explaining why their courses were rigorous, rarely mentioning high school course rigor. To this point, Bryan explained, "In sociology, we're doing a chapter a week, so they're reading a college textbook." He mentioned writing, reading, and discussing. He also discussed the amount of assignments and the student responsibility level. Mark explained that Dual Enrollment instructors do not think about Advanced Placement courses. As Dual Enrollment teachers, he stated that they prepared students for university-level work, implying those standards are inherently more rigorous than Advanced Placement.

In contrast, Isabella mentioned that her introductory foreign language course was similar to high school courses. She mentioned that students may have more advanced knowledge depending on how many foreign language courses they have completed. She said, "Sometimes, it's tough to know how rigorous should I be." Overall, Dual Enrollment participants believed their courses were rigorous and prepared students for a university-level environment. Accordingly, they spent little time reflecting on the high school environment or the rigors of Advanced Placement courses.

Conversely, all Advanced Placement teachers believed Advanced Placement courses were more rigorous than Dual Enrollment courses and joined the discussion. When they spoke, they had a tone of opinionated passion. The most significant comment came from Katherine. She stated, "My AP class at [school name blinded] is as hard or more rigorous than the English 111 class that I'm currently teaching, and I think the English 111 class at the community college is

one of the more rigorous." Advanced Placement participants considered their courses more rigorous because they believed in-person, seated classes offered greater accountability than online classes, making them more challenging. Although both cases believed their courses were more rigorous than the other, the explanations differed. Dual Enrollment instructors focused on college-level course work, amount of assignments, and type of assignments. However, Advanced Placement teachers focused on accountability and the mode of delivery of the course.

While each case shared a similar perception when comparing the rigor of the two programs, they held contrasting views of the other program. Advanced Placement teachers referenced Dual Enrollment 50% more than Dual Enrollment instructors mentioned Advanced Placement. This disparity in mentions reflects a prevalent frustration with Dual Enrollment, as Advanced Placement teachers believed these classes negatively impacted their Advanced Placement classes. In contrast, Dual Enrollment instructors rarely mentioned Advanced Placement, indicating a different perspective on the matter.

Dual Enrollment instructors' knowledge of Advanced Placement centered on enrollment in the community college with college credit or high school students concurrently enrolled in both courses. Rachel said, "We may not have as much insight on our AP students…. It's hard for us to delineate out who those are unless they tell us." Mark noted that his students with Advanced Placement experience had "a great deal of knowledge about the paper writing process." Whereas, Michelle's daughter felt that dual enrollment classes better prepared her for college than Advanced Placement. Even when directly asked, Dual Enrollment participants rarely spoke of Advanced Placement.

Conversely, Advanced Placement teachers perceived Dual Enrollment courses had become a substitute for Advanced Placement, while they believed Dual Enrollment lacked

academic responsibility and accountability. Due to their perceptions, a third of the focus group interview centered on Dual Enrollment. Advanced Placement participants demonstrated a strong opinion of Dual Enrollment. They believed that Dual Enrollment negatively affected upper-level high school classes and placed them in a position to assist students with navigating the Dual Enrollment environment. Lillian and Katherine discussed how high school students "want the easy way out" by taking Dual Enrollment classes. They perceived Dual Enrollment classes as requiring less rigorous work than Advanced Placement and an easier route to college credit. Abigail explained how she had fewer students enrolling in pre-calculus or calculus. Since many students opted to take the Dual Enrollment version of the class, she had over a 40% reduction in students taking pre-calculus this year. Therefore, the pathway to Advanced Placement calculus has broken. As a result, the county did not offer it this year. Lillian, Katherine, Abigail, and Veronica discussed how students sought help from them with Dual Enrollment assignments. They also noted that their class time was interrupted by students called to meet with the community college liaison due to failing grades or missed assignments.

Key findings from the cross-case analysis revealed a need for Dual Enrollment instructors to gain more significant knowledge of the Advanced Placement program, while Advanced Placement teachers expressed frustration with the Dual Enrollment program. Although other similarities and differences are noted below, they were less prevalent in the interview discussion than the shared perception of their respective programs having more rigor and differing perspectives of the other program.

Another similarity between the two groups of teachers was the perception of existing barriers to college readiness. Although both Advanced Placement teachers and Dual Enrollment instructors believed their respective programs were valuable at enhancing college readiness, both

groups recognized that barriers exist. Advanced Placement teachers identified that students lacked college readiness before enrolling in Advanced Placement classes. They noted a deficiency in independence, perseverance, curiosity, and accountability. They highlighted a lack of preparation as a possible explanation, identifying a need for more rigorous courses at the middle and high school secondary levels. In addition to a lack of preparation, Dual Enrollment instructors believed that students exhibited behaviors that hindered success in their college-level courses. Bryan noted that approximately one-fourth of his high school students were not college-ready when they entered or completed his class. They mentioned that students not communicating, not putting in effort, cheating, and making excuses hindered success. To increase preparation and decrease hindering behaviors, Dual enrollment instructors suggested that dual enrollment students need a course that introduces them to college expectations and teaches them success strategies. Additionally, they noted that students seemed more successful in seated classes. Similarly, Advanced Placement teachers felt that students were more successful in seated classes and that online college classes should be limited.

Other similarities were perceptions of college readiness assessments and a need for policy changes. Both cases perceived college readiness assessments as a small indicator of college readiness. Rachel said that the assessments did not fully measure college readiness, and Veronica said they more likely assessed how much preparation students received for the assessment. Both cases noted that policy changes needed updating. Dual Enrollment instructors focused on grading and accountability, while Advanced Placement teachers were concerned with Advanced Placement offerings and regulating the Dual Enrollment process. Both cases mentioned that seated classes were better for high school students than online courses.

Participants had differing perceptions of accessibility, resources, and support. The Advanced Placement case perceived a lack of accessibility, resources, and support for Advanced Placement courses. However, Dual Enrollment instructors perceived appropriate accessibility, support, and resources for their program.

Advanced Placement teachers held the belief that their courses were not accessible to any student in the district. Underscoring this, Abigail said, "I don't feel like it's accessible for any kids. Not just kids of color or anything like that. I just don't think it's fair across the board for any students." However, it is essential to note that the lack of access disproportionately affected students of color. Abigail's example of the high school with the highest percentage of students of color not having an Advanced Placement Calculus offering for five years is a poignant illustration of this. Additionally, Katherine indicated that the last time she had students of color cross-enrolled from that school in an Advanced Placement class was in 2020, further underscoring this disparity.

By contrast, Dual Enrollment instructors believed their courses were very accessible, as online courses are accessible to all students in the district. Students are assigned Chromebooks, and all students have internet access at their schools. Rachel illustrated the point, saying, "But the high school having the Chromebooks, having the internet, has really helped with our ability to provide good online classes to the students." She mentioned that the school with the highest percentage of students of color had the same access as other schools. Additionally, many of the courses high school students take have Open Educational Resources (OERs) embedded in their online courses, making the course materials fully accessible.

On a scale of one to five, with five being the highest level, Dual Enrollment instructors rated their resources a five, a testament to their satisfaction and pride in their resources.

Specifically, they highlighted their collaboration with colleagues in developing course materials, a clear demonstration of their dedication and satisfaction. Mark and Rachel's discussion of the development of their resources with their departments was filled with pride. Additionally, they mentioned their access to college committees and intercollegiate conversations, indicating the support they received from their institution.

Conversely, Abigail and Lillian stated that the district needed to provide curriculum resources or training to develop a curriculum for Advanced Placement courses. As they discussed resources, they demonstrated a tone of frustration. However, Grace described her ability to advocate for resources, claiming her resources were "adequate." I could hear the frustration in her tone, and she described that without self-advocating for training and resources, resources are not accessible to teachers. Additionally, all Advanced Placement teachers noted a lack of support for the Advanced Placement program, especially at the district level.

The two cases highlighted contrasting views on accessibility, resources, and support. Advanced Placement teachers perceived inadequate resources, accessibility, and support. Meanwhile, Dual Enrollment instructors believed they had excellent support, resources, and accessibility.

<div align="center">**Summary**</div>

In Chapter 4, I presented findings for the current study. I discussed recruitment and the pre-participant recruitment survey. Next, I described the participants of each focus group. Afterward, I discussed the data analysis process. Finally, I presented each case study and the cross-case analysis.

In Chapter 5, I will discuss the findings, relating the findings to previous research and the study's theoretical framework. Next, I present conclusions and implications. Finally, recommendations for future research based on the current study's findings are described.

CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION

Chapter 5 is the culminating chapter of the current study. In this final chapter, I describe the study, including an overview of the problem, purpose, and methodology. Additionally, I summarize the findings of the current study. Next, I discuss the findings related to prior research, followed by the study's conclusions and limitations. Finally, I present the implications for educational practitioners and stakeholders, recommending ideas for further study.

Overview of the Study

For decades, the U.S. educational system has been under scrutiny, with politicians, policymakers, businesses, communities, and families eager to evaluate its current state. Since 1983, when *A Nation at Risk* was published, college readiness has emerged as the mission of the U.S. secondary education system (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983). Subsequently, over the last four decades, policymakers and educational reformers have established many initiatives designed to improve the quality of U.S. education. For instance, in 2015, the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) emphasized high academic standards and accountability to prepare college-ready students. North Carolina responded by outlining strategies and initiatives to provide a well-rounded education with rigorous coursework, focusing on college and career readiness, including increased access to Dual Enrollment and Advanced Placement courses (North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, 2023b).

Today's secondary and postsecondary institutions are responsible for preparing graduates to meet the challenges of a rapidly evolving world and economy. Despite the national focus and previous studies, college readiness warrants continued emphasis and research. College readiness assessment data illustrate this need. These data have shown a decline in college readiness, as noted by test-takers falling short of college-ready benchmarks (ACT, 2019, 2022; College Board,

2022b). Additionally, businesses claim that today's workers need more cognitive competencies typically gained through postsecondary education (Carnevale et al., 2021; Tieken, 2016). Specifically, the share of workers in jobs where problem-solving and complex thinking are in high demand has increased by 19% from 1970 to 2019 (Carnevale et al., 2021).

To advance the college-readiness mission, advanced courses with college competencies have become a staple in the educational landscape. Research has emphasized Advanced Placement and Dual Enrollment courses' positive impact on college readiness (Ackerman et al., 2013; Allen & Dadgar, 2012; An, 2013, 2015; Beard et al., 2019; Buckley et al., 2020; Chajewski et al., 2011; College Board, 2014, 2021c; Geiser & Santelices, 2004; Grubb et al., 2017; Karp et al., 2007; Lee et al., 2022; Scott et al., 2010). However, college-readiness gaps exist for students of color, students from economically disadvantaged backgrounds, and rural students (Gagnon & Mattingly, 2016; Iatarola et al., 2011; Moreno et al., 2021; Roberts & Grant, 2021; Showalter et al., 2019; Spencer & Maldonado, 2021; Sutton, 2017; Taylor & Yan, 2018; Xu et al., 2021).

In the era of educational reform and an emphasis on college readiness, research has centered on positive college outcomes and a rigorous high school curriculum. However, much of the research is quantitative and outcome-focused. While quantitative research collects numerical data that can be generalizable across multiple contexts, understanding college readiness may be enriched by the insights drawn from human experiences. Thus, exploring college readiness through advanced-course teachers' lenses can provide a nuanced understanding that complements outcome-focused numerical data. Qualitative research is needed to examine how teachers perceive college readiness (Duncheon & Muñoz, 2019; Hanson et al., 2015; Jo & Milson, 2013; Lindstrom et al., 2022; Reed & Justice, 2014; Williams et al., 2018). Since

advanced-course teachers teeter between college competencies and high school students, their insights may help improve curriculum, policy, and student learning, potentially improving student outcomes and college readiness.

This current study aimed to bridge the literature gap by focusing on the intersection of advanced courses, a rural setting, college readiness, and teachers' perspectives. I conducted an exploratory, multiple-case, qualitative study in a rural North Carolina public school district, exploring Advanced Placement secondary teachers' and Dual Enrollment postsecondary teachers' perspectives on college readiness and curriculum rigor in two focus group interviews. After recruiting participants with a pre-participant recruitment survey, I found five Advanced Placement teachers and six Dual Enrollment teachers willing to participate in two focus group interviews. I complied with and upheld the Institutional Review Board's protocol to protect human subjects' privacy and confidentiality. All participants signed an informed consent agreement and agreed to a virtual interview. I conducted the semi-structured focus group interviews using an interview protocol designed to elicit responses to answer the following research questions:

1. How do secondary teachers of Advanced Placement courses in a diverse, rural school district perceive Advanced Placement and Dual Enrollment courses as avenues for college readiness?

2. How do postsecondary teachers of Dual Enrollment courses in a diverse, rural school district perceive Advanced Placement and Dual Enrollment courses as avenues for college readiness?

3. How do perceptions of Advanced Placement and Dual Enrollment teachers differ

     regarding Advanced Placement and Dual Enrollment courses as avenues for college

     readiness?

Additionally, seven of the eleven participants provided syllabi and documents with highlighted

instances of college readiness and curriculum rigor for document analysis, allowing for

perspective and collaboration of interview data (Yin, 2018).

After the interviews, I transcribed the recorded interviews, listened multiple times and

adjusted the transcripts as needed. During the data analysis phase, I identified underlying themes

through a constant comparative method of identifying and condensing patterns (Glaser &

Strauss, 1967). After identifying descriptive codes, I sorted and reduced the data into conceptual

categories until broader themes emerged (Saldaña, 2013). Additionally, I analyzed participants'

documents connecting and supporting the themes from each case's interview analysis. Following

a multiple-case study design, I analyzed each case independently, followed by a cross-case

analysis to note commonalities and differences (Yin, 2018).

Summary of Findings

Four themes emerged in case one relating to the question: How do secondary teachers of

Advanced Placement courses in a diverse, rural school district perceive Advanced Placement and

Dual Enrollment courses as avenues for college readiness? College readiness is more than

academic knowledge and barriers to college readiness enhance a lack of college readiness

emerged as Advanced Placement teachers discussed college readiness. Additionally, a decline in

the Advanced Placement program despite perceived benefits and frustration with Dual

Enrollment emerged as common themes. The four themes illustrated Advanced Placement

teachers' views on their courses as a crucial pathway for enhancing students' college readiness.

They firmly held that the Advanced Placement program benefits college readiness. However, they noted that inadequate support for the program and limited access to these courses hindered its success. Furthermore, their perceptions that certain aspects of the Dual Enrollment program adversely affected Advanced Placement contributed to their significant frustration with Dual Enrollment.

In case two, I identified three themes relating to the question: How do postsecondary teachers of Dual Enrollment courses in a diverse, rural school district perceive Advanced Placement and Dual Enrollment courses as avenues for college readiness? During the discussion with Dual Enrollment teachers, college readiness is more than GPA, and Dual Enrollment equips students for university emerged as common themes. Additionally, they noted that variability in the academic success of dual enrollment students existed. Participants firmly believed that the Dual Enrollment design propelled students toward university-level education, thus providing an avenue to college readiness. However, they noted various factors that supported and hindered success, possibly resulting in variability in high school students' academic success.

The cross-case analysis sought to answer the question: How do perceptions of Advanced Placement and Dual Enrollment teachers differ regarding Advanced Placement and Dual Enrollment courses as avenues for college readiness? I found two overarching themes in both cases: College readiness transcends academics, encompassing a range of multifaceted strategies and skills, and rigorous program design is a valuable endeavor to enhance college readiness. Other similarities were a perception that their respective program was more rigorous than the other, the perception of existing barriers/hindrances to college readiness, the perception of college readiness assessments, and the perception of needed policy updates. Perception of the other program, perception of accessibility of their respective courses, and perception of support

and resources were noticeable differences between the two cases. In the following section of this chapter, I discuss these findings and their relationship with the research literature and prior research, anchoring my findings within the lens of Conley's college and career readiness framework (Conley, 2012).

Discussion of Findings

The participants in each case believed their program and courses created a positive avenue for college readiness. In analyzing both cases in the cross-case analysis, two overarching themes emerged. Prior research found during the literature review for the current study strongly supported each of the themes presented below. Additionally, the themes are well grounded in the framework of this study and Conley's framework (Conley, 2012).

Overarching Theme One Regarding College Readiness

The current study's findings align with prior college-readiness research, indicating that college readiness extends beyond knowledge and performance (Conley, 2007a, 2008, 2012, 2017; Conley & French, 2014; Lombardi et al., 2011; Nagaoka et al., 2013). The overarching theme one, *college readiness transcends academics, encompassing a range of multifaceted strategies and skills*, resounded in the dialogue of both cases. Participants in the study recognized that while ability and content knowledge are essential, college readiness goes beyond grades and natural ability. As supported by Conley's (2005) research, participants noted that a college-ready student manifests the skills necessary for success after college admission. When describing their perceptions of college readiness, all participants predominantly used terms grounded in Conley's research (Conley, 2012). Conley (2008) noted that these strategies, skills, and techniques were the heart of college readiness. These multifaceted skills and strategies are critical as students with a wide range of skills are more likely to be successful in a postsecondary setting (Conley,

2017). Moreover, postsecondary success and completing a college degree will likely better equip young adults to fulfill the demands of the current workforce in our evolving, increasingly global economy (Carnevale et al., 2021; Conley, 2017; Tieken, 2016).

This study found that advanced-course teachers believed college-ready students must utilize cognitive strategies highlighted in Conley's (2012) framework. Advanced Placement participants described college-ready students using the terms: knowing what questions to ask, creative, communicating complex ideas, independent thinkers, application, justification, discussion, evaluating, synthesizing, interpreting, defending, identifying complexities, and connection. Similarly, Dual Enrollment participants described college-ready students using the terms: communicating, responding, critically thinking, reflecting, interacting, interpreting, comparing, and considering. Both cases identified key cognitive strategies using similar terminology found in Conley's (2012) framework.

According to the prior research and the participants, college-ready students must utilize cognitive strategies to solve problems, research, reason, and interpret (Conley, 2008). Conley highlighted the importance of the thinking skills needed to interact and engage with material at a deeper level (Conley, 2008, 2017). Conley used the following terms to describe vital cognitive strategies: develops, applies, formulates, active inquiry and dialogue, defends, explains, argues, evaluates, compares and contrasts, and analyzes (Conley, 2007a, 2008, 2012, 2013, 2017). Participants illustrated a college-ready student noting similar thinking skills. Thus, the current study's findings support those found throughout Conley's college-readiness framework on key cognitive strategies (Conley, 2007a, 2008, 2012, 2013, 2017).

Similarly, the current study findings support the research on Conley's learning skills and techniques component, which transcend core content areas and emphasize how students act as an

essential college-readiness component (Conley, 2008, 2012). He specified ownership of learning and learning techniques needed to demonstrate college readiness, using the terms: goal setting, persistence, self-management, self-awareness, motivation, help-seeking, progress monitoring, self-efficacy, time management, test-taking skills, and note-taking skills (Conley, 2007a, 2008, 2012, 2017; Conley & French, 2014). Advanced Placement teachers described college readiness as ambition, self-awareness, confidence, initiative, time management, working through adversities, work ethic, responsibility, self-sufficiency, maturity, note-taking, reviewing notes, and revising work. Likewise, Dual Enrollment instructors used terms like endure, persist, resiliency, motivation, time management, responsibility, effort, and maturity.

Participants and prior research suggest that non-cognitive factors such as academic perseverance, self-management, time management, adaptability, communication, and motivation affected college readiness and success (Lindstrom et al., 2022; Nagaoka et al., 2013; Witkowsky et al., 2020). Overall, participants described college readiness in terms similar to Conley, indicating they viewed college readiness in terms of how students act and the soft skills they demonstrated, as supported in the prior research literature on college readiness and teacher perspectives of college readiness (Conley, 2007a, 2008, 2012, 2017; Conley & French, 2014; Duncheon & Munez, 2019; Leong et al., 2021; Lindstrom et al., 2022; Nagaoka et al., 2013; Witkowsky et al., 2020).

Accordingly, the current study findings fit snuggly into previous research on critical components of college readiness. Participants described college readiness using a language similar to Conley's vital cognitive strategies and essential learning skills and techniques (Conley, 2012). Both cases indicated that students need skills beyond academic knowledge to be successful in the postsecondary environment, highlighting the importance of developing a

multifaceted set of competencies, including problem-solving, critical thinking, and self-management, to ensure students are fully prepared for postsecondary education's challenges.

Overarching Theme Two Regarding Curriculum Rigor

The findings of this study align with prior research indicating that a rigorous curriculum enhances college readiness (ACT, 2019, 2022; Adelman, 1999, 2006; Attewell & Domina, 2008; Conley, 2007b; DesJardins & Lindsay, 2008; Kaliski & Godfrey, 2014; Long et al., 2012; Maruyama, 2012; Morgan et al., 2018). The second overarching theme, *rigorous program design is a valuable endeavor to enhance college readiness*, emerged in both cases. All participants agreed that their curriculum's design provided rigorous content, which enhanced critical thinking skills and influenced cognitive strategies and learning skills.

Advanced Placement teachers described their rigorous curriculum as analysis, inquiry-based, writing, presenting, defending, debating, providing evidence, formulating solutions, performing tasks, researching, justifying solutions, and project-based learning. They described successful students who write and perform at high levels. Often, this level of rigor aided in passing Advanced Placement exams and earning college credit. However, Advanced Placement teachers considered the development of college-ready skills more significant than the college credit itself. They believed they were molding students into college-ready learners, well-prepared for the challenges of postsecondary education. Beyond rigorous content, as advanced-course teachers in a high school setting, they believed they held students accountable while helping guide those who needed improvement in executive functioning skills, which means how students interact with curriculum, tasks, and others.

Dual Enrollment participants described their rigorous curriculum through students critiquing, examining, evaluating, discussing, writing, editing, and completing projects. They

described rigorous reading and writing activities that allowed students to develop critical thinking skills and earn transferable college credit to four-year universities. Participants viewed their Dual Enrollment courses as rigorous as any entry-level university course, encouraging the college-ready skills students need to succeed in higher-level college courses. They believed their high expectations and college-level material added to students' college readiness.

In order to enhance college readiness, Conley described the need to add missing content to the core curriculum, emphasizing an increased amount and quality of writing and requiring students to explain, defend, and justify solutions (Conley, 2007b). In a study on academic rigor, Draeger et al. (2013) found that college instructors described rigor as emphasizing analyzing, making judgments, applying theories to new problems, synthesizing, and interpreting. According to prior research and participants, curriculum rigor enhances college readiness by emphasizing writing, explaining, defending, and justifying. Additionally, the current study supports prior research on positive student outcomes gained through advanced courses, such as Advanced Placement and Dual Enrollment. Morgan et al. (2018) found that participation in college-level courses in high school positively affected postsecondary success. Participants and prior research suggested that curriculum rigor strongly enhances college readiness, encouraging improved academic skills, critical thinking, and potential college success (Adelman, 1999, 2006; Attewell & Domina, 2008; DesJardins & Lindsay, 2008).

Other Similarities Between the Two Cases

Other similarities between the two cases were perceptions that their program was more rigorous than the other, barriers/hindrances to college readiness, college readiness assessments, and needed policy updates. The current study's findings were similar to prior research in those areas. Specifically, prior qualitative research examining teacher perspectives among comparable

groups corroborates the current study's finding that each group perceived their program as more rigorous than the other.

In the current study, both cases considered their respective programs more rigorous than the other, meaning their program demands high academic performance and requires students to engage in complex, challenging coursework. Advanced Placement teachers highlighted seated classes and accountability, while Dual Enrollment instructors focused on college-level courses and the amount and type of assignments. Prior qualitative studies on teacher perspectives have had similar findings. Hanson et al. (2015) found that Dual Enrollment teachers believed Dual Enrollment courses offered more rigorous classes than high school classes and raised the expectations for student performance in preceding high school courses. Ferguson et al. (2015) also found that Dual Enrollment teachers believed their classes were possibly more rigorous than traditional college classes. Similar to the current study, Howley et al. (2013) found that some high school teachers felt Dual Enrollment was less rigorous than their high school classes. Moreover, possibly supporting Advanced Placement teachers' belief that their program is more rigorous than Dual Enrollment, prior research suggested that positive student outcomes may be more significant in Advanced Placement students than Dual Enrollment students (An, 2015; Burns & Leu, 2019; Eimers & Mullen, 2003; Speroni, 2011; Taylor & Yan, 2018).

Another similarity between both cases was that Advanced Placement teachers and Dual Enrollment teachers acknowledged that barriers or hindrances to college readiness exist. Advanced Placement teachers noted that students lacked independence, perseverance, curiosity, and accountability. These cognitive strategies and learning skills they identified as essential to college readiness were missing for many students before taking their Advanced Placement classes. One possible reason they highlighted was a need for more rigorous classes before

students took their first Advanced Placement course. In the current study, Advanced Placement teachers believed that their rigorous curriculum and instruction improved students' college readiness skills. Similarly, Williams et al. (2018) reported that some teachers in their qualitative study believed proper placement in high school allowed them to differentiate instruction and meet their students' college and career goals.

The current study, set in a rural district, also aligns with previous research on rural education. The rural setting is significant because it presents unique challenges and opportunities for college readiness. Studies have shown that rural districts face many barriers to students' college readiness preparation (Byun et al., 2012a, 2012b; Roberts & Grant, 2021; Showalter et al., 2019; Wells et al., 2019). Supporting participants' perception of lack of preparation, Edgerton and Desimone (2018) found that rural districts have not shifted instructional practices despite standard-based reform to more rigorous standards. Additionally, rural teachers taught significantly fewer rigorous standards than suburban teachers. Thus, rigorous standards did not result in rigorous instruction, and inadequate preparation in prior grades was a significant challenge (Edgerton & Desimone, 2018). Similarly, Byun et al. (2012a) found that rural students attended schools with significantly less curriculum rigor. However, Wells et al. (2019) found that rural students' academic preparation had increased more than their peers, illuminating a more positive outlook for future rural students. This progress may not be enough to offset the disparity in degree attainment, as rural students still enroll in college and earn bachelor's degrees at lower rates than their non-rural peers (Wells et al., 2019). As asserted by Advanced Placement participants, studies have found that preparation for advanced courses must begin before high school, but access disparities for students of color, rural students, and students from economically disadvantaged backgrounds exist (Conger et al., 2009; Iatarola et al., 2011;

Klopfenstein, 2004a). Thus, rural education research aligns with current participants' perception that students may lack sufficient preparation for advanced courses. This context is critical for understanding the current study's findings and moving forward to informing policies and practices.

Dual Enrollment instructors also noted that students faced challenges with preparation. However, they focused on behaviors that impeded success in their Dual Enrollment classes. They noted a lack of communication and effort, as well as cheating and making excuses. Dual Enrollment instructors implied that a college success class should be a prerequisite for all Dual Enrollment students. Additionally, both groups mentioned that students would be more successful in seated classes.

Previous research supports implicit instruction in college transition and is significant to understanding the findings of this study and its implications for future practice. Hoffman et al. (2008) noted that students need school-based support to transition to postsecondary education successfully. Additionally, Dual Enrollment students mentioned a limited support system from high school to community college and a need for more structured support (Kanny, 2015). In a national curriculum survey, secondary and postsecondary teachers believed schools should teach thinking, study, and learning skills, like acting honestly and sustaining effort (ACT, 2020).

Specifically, Cram and Béjar (2019) highlighted a dual enrollment course, Strategies for Success, developed to address the college readiness preparation gap of Florida International University's Dual Enrollment high school students. The course drew heavily from Conley's (2008) framework and found high enrollment and persistence for students enrolled in the course. By 2019, the program continued to evolve as it intentionally worked to improve academic and non-academic behaviors for students transitioning to their postsecondary environment (Cram &

Béjar, 2019). Conley (2012) stated that key transition knowledge, skills, and postsecondary awareness are essential. However, in the current study, while secondary teachers did not mention postsecondary awareness instruction, they mentioned students' lack of success in navigating Dual Enrollment classes, demonstrating a need for such transition success instruction.

Although the postsecondary teachers mentioned transition skills more than the Advanced Placement teachers, the skills were less prevalent than cognitive and learning skills. In a qualitative study of high school counselors, Witkowsky and Clayton (2020) recommended that Dual Enrollment institutions foster the soft skills high school students need. Therefore, research and the current study support the need for implicit instruction on transitional skills for high school students. Previous research and the current study's findings suggest that a comprehensive approach to college readiness is needed, and support systems should be in place to help students navigate the transition to college.

The current study findings are consistent with prior research on online advanced classes. Due to geographic, staffing, and participation barriers, advanced courses in rural and low-wealth areas may typically be available virtually, and rural students are more likely to take advanced courses online (Hoffman et al., 2008; National Center for Education Statistics, 2019). Some research has shown the adverse effects of online classes. For example, students who took Advanced Placement courses online in rural areas were less likely to take the exam which led to college credit (Barbour & Mulcahy, 2006; LeBeau et al., 2020). Gagnon and Mattingly (2015) stated that critics believed students engage better with their instructor and peers in seated classes. Additionally, Budge et al. (2021) found that students sometimes felt online advanced courses hindered their ability to learn specific content. For instance, Lui et al. (2020) found that students who participated in Dual Enrollment courses online benefited more than non-Dual Enrollment

students; however, the benefit gains were smaller than those gained in seated classes. Similarly, in this study, Dual Enrollment and Advanced Placement participants felt seated classes were more beneficial to high school students. For example, a Dual Enrollment participant compared the growth of his non-traditional early college high school students who had seated classes to his online classes with traditional Dual Enrollment high school students. He said, "I get better experiences in terms of seeing that progression over the course of the semester with the seated classes."

Moreover, students drop out of online advanced courses, citing academic rigor, motivation, and less interaction with teachers, suggesting that better preparation and advising would benefit rural students in online classes (de la Varre et al., 2014). Conley and French (2014) noted that students need to demonstrate ownership of learning in online classes where they are less likely to interact with the instructor, illustrating the need for thinking and learning skills and implicit instruction in transition skills. Research on the mode of advanced courses for high school students aligns with the current study's findings, implying that students may benefit from seated advanced courses.

Lastly, participants demonstrated similar views of college readiness assessments and a need for policy changes. Participants believed college readiness assessments, like the SAT and ACT, do not fully measure college readiness. While these assessments are one indicator of college readiness, participants believed a student's thinking and learning skills best determine college readiness. Conley (2012) supported this idea and developed his college and career readiness framework, believing one score does not describe college readiness. Conley (2017) posited that a more comprehensive model and profile approach to career readiness should identify students' strengths and match them to resources. Student profiles could contain multiple

measures, such as test scores, grades, student self-reports, parent survey responses, and teacher observations (Conley, 2019).

Similarly, North Carolina is developing *a Portrait of a Graduate* measures, hoping to provide a more comprehensive measure of student college readiness (North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, 2023a). College readiness assessments are still crucial to the college readiness conversation, and secondary and postsecondary institutions utilize the data. In the national curriculum survey conducted by ACT (2020), postsecondary instructors believed that these assessments provided helpful information about college readiness, and 94% of respondents indicated that their institutions used the data from these assessments. Approximately 25% of instructors did not agree that this data helped identify students who may not be successful (ACT, 2020). While college readiness assessments continue to dominate college readiness data, research and the findings of this current study indicate that more comprehensive indicators of college readiness are essential for a successful transition between high school and the postsecondary environment. Participants of the current study believed that college readiness is more than a benchmark score on a college readiness assessment. They believed a student should exhibit cognitive strategies and learning skills to demonstrate college readiness fully. Such skills may be more easily identifiable and measurable via a more comprehensive profile approach, including student portfolios and teacher observations.

Participants believed that policies regarding advanced courses need updates. Advanced Placement participants focused on offering Advanced Placement courses and changing Dual Enrollment processes. Dual Enrollment participants highlighted a need for consistent grading policies between the two systems. Additionally, they believed that all students would benefit

from a required college success transition class before beginning Dual Enrollment courses,

noting that such a class may enhance the needed cognitive strategies and learning skills.

Policy efforts to address college readiness are constantly evolving. Roberts and Grant (2021)

stated that college readiness was a policy priority. Many studies detailed current policies or

recommend policy changes based on their findings (Budge et al., 2021; Grubb et al., 2017;

Mokher & McLendon, 2009; Patrick et al., 2017; Pretlow & Wathington, 2013; Taylor & Yan,

2018). For example, Grubb et al. (2017) recommended increased equity and access, alignment to

national definitions, and improved data for research. Patrick et al. (2020) discussed that more

policy changes must address minority access to rigorous courses. Similarly, in this study,

Advanced Placement participants noted a lack of access for students and a need for more

rigorous coursework before Advanced Placement. Fifteen years ago, Mokher and McLendon

(2009) discussed the changing policy efforts to unite the secondary and postsecondary systems,

and that conversation continues. Prior research is consistent with the current study's finding on

needed policy changes. As college readiness continues to be at the forefront of education and as

more research becomes available, policy should continue to evolve.

Similarities between the two cases were perceptions that their program was more rigorous

than the other, barriers/hindrances to college readiness, college readiness assessments, and

needed policy updates. Although the cross-case analysis revealed several similarities, differences

between the two cases were noted. Specifically, variations emerged in the view of the other

program, accessibility, and resources.

Differences Between the Two Cases

The cross-case analysis revealed three key differences between the Advanced Placement

and Dual Enrollment participants: perception of the other program, perception of accessibility of

their respective courses, and perception of support and resources. The three notable differences between the two cases seem intertwined in prior literature. Participants held dissimilar views of the other program. Notably, Advanced Placement teachers expressed frustration with the Dual Enrollment program, while Dual Enrollment instructors showed little thought or opinion of the Advanced Placement program. Participants also demonstrated opposing views of the accessibility of their respective programs as well as support and resources. Advanced Placement teachers expressed frustration with support, which may have led to a lack of accessibility for all students, as Dual Enrollment teachers felt fully supported, agreeing that their program was fully assessible.

In addition to perceiving Advanced Placement courses as more rigorous than Dual Enrollment courses, Advanced Placement teachers perceived that Dual Enrollment adversely impacted their courses, exhibiting frustration with the program. They indicated that students believed that Dual Enrollment was an easier route to college credit. They also mentioned minimal support for the Advanced Placement program from the district. As a result, Dual enrollment courses have become a substitute for Advanced Placement. However, they also noted that students' difficulty transitioning to those courses negatively impacted their high school classes. Students were often called from their classes to meet with officials due to poor performance in their online Dual Enrollment classes or asked high school teachers for help with assignments and course content, showing a lack of time management and independent learning. Conversely, Dual Enrollment instructors believed their college-level courses were more rigorous than those of Advanced Placement and expressed little knowledge of the Advanced Placement program.

Prior research illustrated that high school teachers and Dual Enrollment instructors may have different perceptions of student preparation and curriculum goals (Garcia et al., 2020; Jo & Milson, 2013; Kilgore & Wagner, 2017; Leong et al., 2021; Reed & Justice, 2014; SERVE Center, 2022). Additionally, previous research signified a possible lack of communication and rivalry between the secondary and postsecondary systems (Hoffman et al., 2009; Howley et al., 2013; Williams et al., 2018). The ACT National Curriculum Survey gathered insights from teachers regarding educational practices and college readiness expectations (ACT, 2020). This study found that secondary and postsecondary English teachers have conflicting views of the importance of specific research skills, meaning they believed different skills were more important (ACT, 2020). They also noted a disconnect in perceived preparedness. Postsecondary Chemistry instructors viewed incoming students as unprepared, while secondary Chemistry teachers believed their students were well prepared (ACT, 2020). Similarly, Advanced Placement participants in the current study perceived their students as more college-ready after their courses. Dual Enrollment participants felts some students needed more preparation, highlighting academic behaviors.

Additionally, Reed and Justice (2014) found that high school and college instructors perceived motivation, maturity, and learning styles differently. Secondary teachers perceived their students as college-ready in those areas, while postsecondary teachers did not. Kilgore and Wagner (2017) found that Dual Enrollment instructors believed that Dual Enrollment course completion signaled that a student was college-ready. However, secondary teachers were less likely to agree. The study found that 76% of postsecondary instructors believed this was true compared to 52% of secondary participants (Kilgore & Wagner, 2017). Like the current study's participants, Garcia et al. (2020) found that about a third of their participants believed conflicts

existed with Dual Enrollment and Advanced Placement students may take Dual Enrollment as an easier path to college credit. Moreover, in a study on Dual Enrollment, less than half of high school teachers had a positive attitude toward Dual Enrollment, almost 20% less than college respondents (SERVE Center, 2022).

Collaboration and communication are foundational for successful Dual Enrollment relationships (Hoffman et al., 2009; Howley et al., 2013). In their small qualitative study, Leong et al. (2021) noted that participants felt networking and outreach between the two systems might aid collaboration. Another qualitative study noted that secondary teachers were unaware of college transition issues and expressed irritation with college instructors' lack of understanding of their environment (William et al., 2018). A lack of communication and different perceptions may explain the misunderstandings, leading to frustration and potential rivalries between the two groups of teachers. However, with increased collaboration and communication, districts may overcome the perceived rivalry between the two programs.

In regards to a possible substitution effect, research collaborates Advanced Placement participants' perception of possible competition and substitution between the Dual Enrollment and Advanced Placement programs (Clayton, 2021; Dutkowsky et al., 2009; Johnstone & Del Genio, 2001; Klopfenstein & Lively, 2012; Lee et al., 2022; North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, 2022a, 2023c, 2024; Showalter et al., 2019; Wyatt et al., 2015). The two programs may serve demographically different students, making Dual Enrollment a good alternative to Advanced Placement (Lee et al., 2022). Dual Enrollment students tend to be from rural settings and economically disadvantaged backgrounds (Klopfenstein & Lively, 2012; Lee et al., 2022; North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, 2022a; Showalter et al., 2019) and are more likely to apply to community colleges (Koricich et al., 2018; Tieken, 2016). Advanced

Placement students tend to be from non-rural settings and higher economic backgrounds (Gagnon & Mattingly, 2015; Xu et al., 2021) and are more likely to apply to selective colleges (Dutkowsky et al., 2009; Geiser & Santelices, 2004; Johnstone & Del Genio, 2001). Due to geographic location and student demographics, schools may not be able to offer both programs, leading districts to prefer one over the other (Clayton, 2021; Dutkowsky et al., 2009; Gagnon & Mattingly, 2016; Kryst et al., 2018; Showalter et al., 2019; Xu et al., 2021). Xu et al. (2021) found that areas with higher parent educational levels had more Advanced Placement and less Dual Enrollment participation. Additionally, they found that offering more Advanced Placement classes increased Advanced Placement participation and decreased Dual Enrollment participation. They attested that the two programs may be substitutes as schools allocate resources to different programs, and educated parents may value one program over the other (Xu et al., 2021).

I analyzed the North Carolina School Report Cards for the study setting. In this low-wealth rural district, primarily eleventh and twelfth-grade traditional high school students participate in Dual Enrollment. Based on this data, Advanced Placement participation decreased from 2021 to 2023, while Dual Enrollment participation increased. This data-driven analysis provides a clear picture of the district's advanced course trends. Specifically, of students who took Advanced Placement and Dual Enrollment, Advanced Placement participation decreased from 18.7% to 7%. In comparison, Dual enrollment increased from 81% to 93% during those two years (North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, 2021, 2023c). Additionally, in 2023, 2.7% of all students participated in Advanced Placement, and 35.7% participated in Dual Enrollment (North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, 2023c). In 2024, 65% of the students in the study setting took at least one Dual Enrollment course, while 35% of North

Carolina students took at least one Dual Enrollment course (North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, 2024).

Aligning with Advanced Placement teachers' perceptions that Dual Enrollment has become a substitute for their courses, Dual Enrollment participation has increased and Advanced Placement participation has decreased. This data underscores the changing landscape of the district's advanced courses. Given the study's rural setting, access to Advanced Placement classes may be an issue, leading the district to encourage one program over the other. Participants also indicated differing views of access to their respective programs. Students' access to advanced courses may have fostered the district's decline in Advanced Placement and rise in Dual Enrollment.

Participants in each case had opposing perceptions of student access. Advanced Placement teachers perceived no course accessibility for any of the district's students, noting that accessibility for students of color was especially limited. Conversely, Dual Enrollment instructors perceived their courses as highly accessible to all students, noting that students of color had equal accessibility. Given that the rural low-wealth district's data show that Dual Enrollment may serve as a substitute for Advanced Placement, both groups may perceive access differently. Research affirms advanced course access, participation, and college readiness disparities for students of color and students from disadvantaged backgrounds (Cates & Schaefle, 2011; Cisneros et al., 2014; Conger et al., 2009; Iatarola et al., 2011; Klopfenstein, 2004a; Long et al., 2012; Pretlow & Wathington, 2013; Rivera et al., 2019; Xu et al., 2021). Rural schools offer less advanced courses than non-rural ones (Balfanz, 2009; Byun et al., 2012a; Cisneros et al., 2014; Iatarola et al., 2011). However, they are more likely to offer Dual Enrollment courses than Advanced Placement courses (Burns & Leu, 2019; Kryst et al., 2018; National Center for

Education Statistics, 2020; Pretlow & Wathington, 2013; Rivera et al., 2019; Spencer & Maldonado, 2021). Burns and Leu (2019) reported that Dual Enrollment-only schools are most prevalent in the South. The current study's findings align with prior research on rural, low-wealth settings and with research on underrepresented students' access. Advanced Placement teachers' perception of lack of access and Dual Enrollment possibly becoming a substitute for their courses aligns with prior research for southern, rural, and low-wealth districts.

The difference in the perceived accessibility of Dual Enrollment courses was unexpected. Given that the district primarily offers Dual Enrollment courses online, Dual Enrollment instructors may not have perceived these accessibility effects as their students participate in online classes. As such, they are increasing access to advanced courses for students who meet the GPA requirement. However, even as participation in Dual Enrollment has grown, disparities in access exist as students of color participate in Dual Enrollment courses at much lower rates than their White counterparts (North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, 2024). Specifically, the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction (2024) reported that Black and Hispanic students' participation rates were 21 percentage points and 16 percentage points less than their White peers, respectively.

Lastly, this study found that Advanced Placement teachers perceived a need for more resources and support, unlike Dual Enrollment instructors, who rated their resources and support highly. As Advanced Placement teachers discussed a lack of district support leading to a decline in the Advanced Placement program, they noted a shift to Dual Enrollment courses, resulting in frustration with the district and Dual Enrollment program. They lamented this lack of training and resources. Lillian and Abigail reported no training or curriculum resources. Furthermore, Lillian described how she repeatedly sought Advanced Placement training over the years but was

told the district would not support it. However, Katherine and Grace reported some access to training when the teacher advocated for it, applied for grants, and the request aligned with district initiatives. Grace declared the professional development was "adequate" when those things aligned. Advanced Placement teachers' perception of lack of support may stem from the decline of their program as students enroll in more Dual Enrollment courses.

Conversely, Dual Enrollment teachers highlighted high satisfaction with their resources and support. They mentioned collaboration with each other to build and develop their curriculum. Specifically, they discussed Open Educational Resources (OERs) embedded into their online courses, sequenced pathways, and intercollege and school-based committees. The stark difference between the two cases was unexpected. The finding highlights the differences between the secondary and postsecondary systems.

Consistent with the secondary teacher participants' perceptions, a lack of resources is a common barrier for rural school districts and is well supported in prior research (Budge et al., 2021; Edgerton & Desimone, 2018; Lavalley, 2018; Lindstrom et al., 2022). Limited funding due to a smaller tax base may affect professional development opportunities as rural districts must allocate limited resources (Howley & Howley, 2005; Tieken & Montgomery, 2021). In a study on teachers' perspectives regarding implementing a new program aligning high school and college curricula, Lansing et al. (2017) found that secondary teachers felt they lacked the resources and time to develop the course. In a narrative analysis of rural education literature, Burton et al. (2013) found that rural teachers experienced professional isolation, leading to diminished resources for professional development. Additionally, they noted that rural teachers were resistant to change. Being resistant to change may add to participants' frustration with the Dual Enrollment program in the current study.

Conclusions

This qualitative, multiple-case study found that the perceptions of secondary and postsecondary advanced-course teachers are crucial in understanding college readiness. They perceived their programs as avenues for college readiness, emphasizing that college readiness transcends academics and that a rigorous program design enhances college readiness. These two overarching themes, which align with Conley's framework underscored the importance of cognitive and metacognitive capabilities in college readiness (Conley, 2008, 2012). Of the four keys, participants most often highlighted cognitive strategies used by Conley (2012, p. 3) such as "problem formation, research, interpretation, and communication", along with learning skills, like "ownership of learning," and techniques, like "time management." Thus, this study's findings illuminated that college readiness is multifaceted, including soft skill capacities that help students achieve postsecondary success.

The current study found that advanced-course teachers are optimistic about the impact of rigorous, advanced courses with college competencies on students' college readiness. Secondary teachers believed they positively affected content knowledge, cognitive strategies, and learning skills. Likewise, postsecondary instructors declared that their college-level work helps students develop the skills they need in universities. This finding, which aligns with prior research suggesting many positive outcomes of rigorous courses, instills hope in the potential of advanced courses to enhance college readiness.

The study identified several similarities between the two advanced-course focus groups. Both groups of teachers perceived their programs as more rigorous than the other, focusing on different aspects such as seated classes and college-level coursework. This finding agreed with other small qualitative studies regarding teacher perspectives. Whether Advanced Placement

courses or Dual Enrollment courses are more rigorous than the other may depend on various factors, including the institution offering the course, the instructor, and the curriculum. Overall, both programs aim to provide college-level academic experiences to high school students. Perceptions of rigor may be subjective and vary among educational stakeholders.

Both groups of educators noted barriers to college readiness. They highlighted the lack of preparation before entering their courses and the need for transition support. The literature on rural education supported this finding. Rural students, students of color, and students from economically disadvantaged backgrounds face barriers to college readiness. Additionally, they mentioned that they believed seated classes may be more beneficial than online classes. Although online courses are common in rural areas, research does support the perception that seated classes may be more beneficial for high school students.

Additionally, participants and prior research agreed that standardized tests like the SAT and ACT do not fully measure college readiness, prompting a call for a more comprehensive assessment method. Lastly, participants noted a pressing need for policy changes, which was collaborated with the evolving policy discussion in previous research. This underscores the urgency and importance of addressing the current assessment and policy landscape to better support college readiness.

The current study highlighted a notable disparity in perceptions between Advanced Placement teachers and Dual Enrollment instructors. Advanced Placement teachers expressed frustration with Dual Enrollment, while Dual Enrollment instructors showed little knowledge of Advanced Placement. Prior research aligned with these findings, indicating differing perceptions of student preparedness and curriculum goals between high schools and college instructors. Studies also revealed a need for more communication and possible rivalry between the two

educational systems. Data from the low-wealth rural district supported the perception of a decline in the Advanced Placement program as the Dual Enrollment program's enrollment increases. Additionally, previous research on the substitution effect of the two programs suggested that access and demographic factors may influence the district's preference for Dual Enrollment over Advanced Placement. Enhanced collaboration and communication between the two educational systems may help bridge these gaps and address the perceived competition between the programs.

In the current study, secondary teachers felt that their advanced courses were inaccessible, while postsecondary instructors felt their classes were fully accessible. Research fully supported a lack of accessibility for rural students, students of color, and students from economically disadvantaged backgrounds. However, research may not fully support the perception of postsecondary instructors that their courses are fully accessible. Although Dual Enrollment and online advanced courses are possible solutions for accessibility in rural areas, disparities between students of color and students from economically disadvantaged backgrounds remain in the North Carolina Dual Enrollment program. Dual Enrollment instructors may recognize the opportunities their program provides and assume their online classes are accessible to all. These disparities may be less visible to instructors who focus on the positive outcomes for those with access.

Lastly, this study found a stark contrast in perceptions of resources and support between the two sets of advanced-course educators. Advanced Placement teachers felt a significant lack of district support and resources. Conversely, Dual Enrollment instructors expressed high satisfaction with their resources and support. This disparity highlights the differences between the two education systems. Prior research supported secondary teachers' view, noting that rural

school districts often face resource constraints due to limited funding and professional isolation, which can hinder professional development and access to resources. This context helps explain the secondary teachers' frustration with the district and the district's growing preference for Dual Enrollment programs.

Limitations

As a qualitative study, the current study's research findings are not generalizable (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). This study represented specific lived experiences through the lenses of the current participants during a specific time and place. A significant limitation of this study was the setting of the study. The study took place in one school district. The school district is a rural, low-wealth district currently experiencing a decline in Advanced Placement enrollment and an increase in Dual Enrollment participation. This district has four traditional high schools, but only two have recently offered Advanced Placement courses. The district has one community college that offers Dual Enrollment classes to high school students. While this narrowed the pool of potential participants, the 11 participants offered rich, detailed descriptions of their perceptions. Through the presentation of the study's findings and providing detailed, in-depth descriptions after nuanced analysis, the results of this study may be transferrable to researchers and educational stakeholders.

Another limitation of this study was the secondary source for data collection. It was the intention that all participants would provide a pre-highlighted syllabus for document analysis. Seven of the 11 participants submitted a syllabus for their course. Of the remaining participants, two indicated that they would send their highlighted syllabi, and two stated that they did not have a syllabus they could provide. Although I made multiple attempts to obtain the additional two syllabi, I never received them due to participants' busy schedules. With a majority of the

participants submitting documents, the data provided an overall understanding of participants' perspectives of college readiness and curriculum rigor. Importantly, this data aligned with the narrative descriptions from the transcriptions, enhancing the coherence of the research.

Implications for Policy and Practice

The findings of this study carry significant implications and policy recommendations for practitioners and policymakers involved with advanced courses. The findings from the first theme underscore that college readiness is more than core content or academic knowledge. As posited by this study's participants, Conley, and other researchers, college readiness involves cognitive strategies, academic behaviors, and transitional knowledge (Baber et al., 2010; Conley, 2012; Conley & French, 2014; Klasik & Strayhorn, 2018; Nagaoka et al., 2013; North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, 2023a). These findings indicate that school leaders should consider assessing college readiness with multiple indicators, not just a benchmark score on a college readiness assessment, before entry into college. Recently, policymakers have begun to develop new measures to address the gaps in assessing college readiness (Conley, 2017, 2019; Lombardi et al., 2011; North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, 2023a; Person Education, 2017). However, the depth and detail of these new assessments may make them challenging to implement on a broad scale (Klasik & Strayhorn, 2018).

Administrators serving North Carolina districts should consider exploring the resources in development for *A Portrait of a Graduate*, a comprehensive framework that helps monitor and assess these academic behaviors of adaptability, collaboration, communication, critical thinking, empathy, learner's mindset, and personal responsibility (North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, 2023a). These resources, which include rubrics, performance tasks, and professional development materials, can be used to track and support students' development of these skills.

Secondary and postsecondary teachers, counselors, and advisors should consider assisting students with building a digital portfolio of artifacts demonstrating these career and college readiness skills. Students could share their portfolios with university admission offices and potential employers. In order to transition to a multifaceted assessment and digital portfolio, both secondary and postsecondary systems need to implement professional development and build robust collaboration processes. In order to implement these measures, policymakers need to consider possible resource allocation and policy reforms.

The findings from the second theme imply that students may need and benefit from rigorous advanced courses. More rigorous, advanced coursework would likely make high school students better prepared for higher education and the workforce (Attewell & Domina, 2008; Conley, 2007b; Maruyama, 2012; Morgan et al., 2018). Coupled with the finding that participants perceived their programs as more rigorous than the other, these findings imply that curriculum alignment, expectation alignment, and more advanced course access may benefit both programs and high school students. Through Dual Enrollment, postsecondary systems are becoming increasingly more responsible for the education of high school students. Research has implied that outcomes are better for students who participate in both Advanced Placement and Dual Enrollment (Eimers & Mullen, 2003; Speroni, 2011; Taylor &Yan, 2018). However, research has shown disparities in advanced course access and participation for rural students, students of color, and students from economically disadvantaged backgrounds (Conger et al., 2009; Iatarola et al., 2011; Klopfenstein, 2004a; Moreno et al., 2021; Spencer & Maldonado, 2021; Sutton, 2017; Taylor & Yan, 2018; Xu et al., 2021).

Based on the findings of this study, policymakers and practitioners should consider aligning the curriculum and expectations of the secondary and postsecondary systems. Research

has shown that in rural districts, students are more likely to have access to advanced courses through Dual Enrollment (Burns & Leu, 2019; Kryst et al., 2018; National Center for Education Statistics, 2020; Pretlow & Wathington, 2013; Rivera et al., 2019; Spencer & Maldonado, 2021). Additionally, school leaders should consider increasing the rigor in lower-level classes, implementing pre-advanced placement classes in elementary and middle school, and building Advanced Placement courses for ninth and tenth graders. Early implementation of rigorous classes may increase student college readiness potential. Additionally, practitioners should consider spending time in the early implementation years to nurture students from underrepresented groups. Preparing students for advanced courses begins before high school, but schools often place rural students, students of color, and students from economically disadvantaged backgrounds in lower, less college preparatory tracks (Conger et al., 2009; Iatarola et al., 2011; Klopfenstein, 2004a; Jeffries & Silvernail, 2017). Aligning the curriculum and creating a funnel of academically more ready students may enhance college readiness skills and the potential for successful outcomes.

Another implication of this study is a need for increased support for students and teachers. Participants observed barriers to students' college readiness. These barriers were related to academic preparation, academic behaviors, transition to the postsecondary environment, and the online modality of Dual Enrollment courses. Research has shown that students need a combination of academic and social support, including mentoring, counseling, and peer support (Balfanz, 2009; Cate & Schaefle, 2011; Conley, 2007a, 2017; Ferguson et al., 2015; Irvin et al., 2009; Kanny, 2015; Leong et al., 2021; Morton et al., 2018; Vanderbrook, 2006). Secondary and postsecondary systems must collaborate to create a community of support with parents to ensure students are college and career-ready. The findings of this study imply that

a Dual Enrollment transition class may be beneficial. Practitioners and policymakers should consider requiring all potential Dual Enrollment students to participate in a Dual Enrollment success course.

Additionally, secondary school leaders could consider beginning this process earlier through secondary college readiness programs, like Advancement Via Individual Determination (AVID) or consistent academic advising. In these settings, students would learn academic skills, hone learning techniques, and have exposure to postsecondary awareness to enhance future success. As many rural students participate in online Dual Enrollment courses, these academic behaviors may lead to more independence and successful experiences. Policymakers and districts should consider allocating resources to teach students these transition skills directly.

Since secondary and postsecondary teachers are increasingly responsible for teaching students simultaneously, fostering a sense of support and collegiality is crucial. Staff in each educational system could use exposure and professional development regarding the other environment. If both sets of educators understood the expectations and reality of the other, frustrations may lessen, and understanding may increase. Policymakers and practitioners should consider supporting policies that would encourage such processes. Dual Enrollment instructors could learn about best practices for teaching adolescents and the secondary environment, while Advanced Placement teachers could learn more about the postsecondary environment and expectations.

Relating closely to support and training for advanced-course teachers, the last implication based on this study is a dire need for better communication between the secondary and postsecondary systems. Collaboration between the two systems is critical to meet the needs of our students and prepare them for the eventual economic benefits of career and college readiness.

Research suggested that students would likely benefit from strong partnerships and consistent communication of educational stakeholders (Conley, 2005; Hoffman et al., 2009; Howley et al., 2013; Leong et al., 2021; Reed & Justice, 2014; Williams et al., 2018). Creating positive professional relationships may bridge gaps, decrease frustration, increase understanding, and reduce potential rivalry. Thus, secondary and postsecondary school leaders should consider developing processes for both groups to collaborate. One way to accomplish this would be to develop intersystem committees that meet consistently throughout the year. As far as resource allocation is concerned, time is the most important. Practitioners involved in the committees could share resources around problems of practice.

The findings of this study revealed implications for policymakers and practitioners regarding college readiness measurement, curricular and expectation alignment, support, and communication. While all systems and processes can be improved, it is critical for both the secondary and the postsecondary educational systems to work together, demolishing barriers and creating a seamless educational system. College and Career readiness is the mission of both systems, and together, they impact the success of our communities, states, and nation.

Recommendations for Further Study

This study explored the perceptions of college readiness and curriculum rigor of advanced-course teachers. After data analysis of focus group interviews with two groups of advanced-course teachers, Advanced Placement secondary teachers and Dual Enrollment postsecondary instructors, I presented the findings and implications of the current study. Policymakers and practitioners may use the findings of this study to improve policies and practices surrounding college readiness measurement, curricular and expectation alignment, support, and communication between the secondary and postsecondary educational systems.

Although this study adds to the research literature on college readiness, the issue remains relevant, and continued research is warranted.

Several researchers have advocated for more studies on teacher's perspectives of college readiness (Duncheon & Muñoz, 2019; Hanson et al., 2015; Jo & Milson, 2013; Reed & Justice, 2014; Williams et al., 2018). Expanding on the insights of this qualitative study, future qualitative research could delve deeper into additional teacher perspectives. A potential approach could involve conducting more focus groups in rural districts across North Carolina, specifically focusing on each of the eight regional school districts of North Carolina. This regional approach would enable researchers to uncover regional disparities, thereby better understanding college readiness in rural North Carolina communities. Such studies, viewed through the lens of teachers, could potentially influence regional and state policies and practices, thereby enhancing students' college readiness outcomes.

Expanding the scope of qualitative research to more educational stakeholders is crucial. In addition to the teacher's lens, future research must incorporate administrators, counselors, Dual Enrollment liaisons, and Dual Enrollment advisors. Each of these roles plays a direct and unique part in shaping the educational outcomes of North Carolina students, and they each offer a unique lens. Understanding their perspectives would more fully reveal the state of college readiness. Counselors, Dual Enrollment liaisons, and Dual Enrollment advisors guide students closely, helping them determine their future goals. Administrators are in positions to advocate for necessary policy and practice improvements. Understanding all these perspectives can better guide policymakers toward needed improvements and expand current successes.

Another qualitative direction for future research would be conducting non-focus group interviews. The focus group method was helpful during this study in collecting data succinctly,

allowing participants' discussions to build from simple comments of others. However, the focus group participants may have withheld comments due to the group setting, or some may have dominated the conversation at certain times. Holding multiple individual interviews would allow a researcher to delve deeply into each participant's perceptions, possibly exploring different avenues and directions.

Based on the findings of this study, it is evident that the district is experiencing a decline in Advanced Placement, potentially linked to the rise of Dual Enrollment. Therefore, future research could focus on the substitution effect and the rise of Dual Enrollment, potentially aiding the decline of Advanced Placement. Dual Enrollment is a valuable program that enhances rural student outcomes and access to advanced classes. Understanding how curriculum offerings impact rural areas is crucial. Research could focus on quantitative student outcome data to determine if one program is more beneficial. Additionally, qualitative researchers could examine first-year university students' experiences after participating in each program. Such research would be instrumental in developing policies and practices that better align the curriculum and facilitate postsecondary transition conversations with families, fostering a more hopeful future for college readiness.

Finally, in addition to qualitative research, quantitative research is essential. As college readiness policies and practices continue to evolve, researchers should continue to explore the effects of these changes. Quantitative research allows for generalizations, whereas qualitative research, like this study, seeks to understand specific participants' views of their experiences. Both types of research add to the conversation of college readiness, potentially positively affecting student learning and outcomes.

Summary

Chapter 5 began by presenting an overview of the current study, reiterating the purpose, the research questions, the methodology, and the data analysis techniques. Next, the findings section summarized the four themes found in the Advanced Placement case and the three themes found in the Dual Enrollment case. The cross-case analysis summary also highlighted the two themes relating to Conley's college and career readiness framework, identifying other similarities and differences between the two cases (Conley, 2012). Furthermore, the discussion of the findings connected those two themes, other similarities between the two cases, and differences between the two cases to prior literature on college readiness. The conclusion section distilled the essence of the findings and discussion into a summary of the insights gathered and limitations of the study, followed by a presentation of the study's implications for policymakers and practitioners. I discussed implications for college readiness measurement, curriculum and expectation alignment, support, and communication. Lastly, I recommended expanding the scope of qualitative research and continued quantitative research.

This exploratory, multiple-case, qualitative study delved into Advanced Placement secondary teachers' and Dual Enrollment postsecondary instructors' perspectives on college readiness and curriculum rigor. Both sets of educators emphasized concepts similar to those found in Conley's (2012) framework, demonstrating similar views of college readiness and curriculum rigor. However, I noted nuanced differences between the two groups. They viewed the other programs, accessibility of their programs, and resources differently. Although this study did not lead to groundbreaking or significantly unexpected findings, it contributes to the conversation about college readiness. Policymakers and practitioners should consider a comprehensive college readiness measurement encompassing all aspects of college readiness.

They should consider better curriculum alignment between the two systems to improve college readiness and ease postsecondary transitions, preparing students for current workforce demands. Moreover, the two systems' support, resources, and communication are critical. Focusing on enhancing educational quality by creating a coherent educational pathway better supports student success, leading to better academic outcomes and a more capable, competitive workforce. Lastly, future research is essential to address the dynamic nature of college readiness, helping policymakers and practitioners adapt to changing educational needs and maintain a forward-moving, globally competitive educational system.

REFERENCES

Ackerman, P. L., Kanfer, R., & Calderwood, C. (2013). High school advanced placement and

    student performance in college: STEM majors, Non-STEM majors, and gender

    differences. *Teachers College Record*, *115*(10), 1–43.

    https://doi.org/10.1177/016146811311501003

ACT. (2019). *The condition of college & career readiness 2019 North Carolina key findings.*

    https://www.act.org/content/dam/act/unsecured/documents/cccr-2019/North-Carolina-

    CCCR-2019.pdf

ACT. (2020). *ACT national curriculum survey® 2020.*

    https://www.act.org/content/dam/act/unsecured/documents/NCS_Report_Web_2020.pdf

ACT. (2022). *The ACT profile report – national: Graduating class 2022.*

    https://www.act.org/content/dam/act/unsecured/documents/2022/2022-National-ACT-

    Profile-Report.pdf

Adelman, C. (1999). *Answers in the tool box: Academic intensity, attendance patterns, and*

    bachelor's degree attainment. U.S. Department of Education, Office of Educational

    Research and Improvement. https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED431363.pdf

Adelman, C. (2006). *The toolbox revisited: Paths to degree completion from high school through*

    college. U.S. Department of Education. https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED490195.pdf

Adkins, C., & García, L. (2023). Dual enrollment in community colleges: The importance of

    understanding the student experience. *Change: The Magazine of Higher Learning*, *55*(2),

    20–27. https://doi.org/10.1080/00091383.2023.2182059

Allen, D., & Dadgar, M. (2012). Does dual enrollment increase students' success in college?

    Evidence from a quasi-experimental analysis of dual enrollment in New York City. *New*

Directions for Higher Education, *158*, 11–19. https://doi.org/10.1002/he.20010

Allen, J., Mattern, K., & Ndum, E. (2019). An empirically derived index of high

school academic rigor. *Educational Measurement: Issues and Practice*,

38(1), 6–15. http://dx.doi.org/10.1111/emip.12236

Allen, J., & Radunzel, J. (2017). *What are the ACT college readiness benchmarks?* [Issue Brief].

Arts and Culture Trust Research & Policy.

https://www.act.org/content/dam/act/unsecured/documents/pdfs/R1670-college-

readiness-benchmarks-2017-11.pdf

An, B. (2013). The influence of dual enrollment on academic performance and college readiness:

Differences by socioeconomic status. *Research in Higher Education*, *54*(4), 407–432.

http://dx.doi.org/10.1007/s11162-012-9278-z

An, B. (2015). The role of academic motivation and engagement on the relationship between

dual enrollment and academic performance. *The Journal of Higher Education*, *86*(1), 98–

126. http://doi:10.1080/00221546.2015.11777358

Attewell, P., & Domina, T. (2008). Raising the bar: Curricular intensity and academic

performance. *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis*, *30*(1), 51–71.

https://doi.org/10.3102/0162373707313409

Baber, L., Castro, E., & Bragg, D. (2010, August). *Measuring success: David Conley's college

readiness framework and the Illinois College and Career Readiness Act.* Office of

Community College Research and Leadership, University of Illinois at Urbana-

Champaign.

Balfanz, R. (2009). Can the American high school become an avenue of advancement for

all? *The future of children*, *19*(1), 17–36. http://www.jstor.org/stable/27795033

Bailey, T., Hughes, K., & Karp, M. (2002). *What role can dual enrollment programs play in easing the transition between high school and postsecondary education?* U.S. Department of Education, Office of Vocational and Adult Education. https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED465090.pdf

Barbour, M., & Mulcahy, D. (2006). An inquiry into retention and achievement differences in campus based and web based AP courses. *The Rural Educator*, *27*(3). https://doi.org/10.35608/ruraled.v27i3.489

Barnard-Brak, L., McGaha-Garnett, V., & Burley, H. (2011). Advanced placement course enrollment and school-level characteristics. *NASSP Bulletin, 95*(3), 165–174. https://doi.org/10.1177/0192636511418640

Beard, J. J., Hsu, J., Ewing, M., & Godfrey, K. E. (2019). Studying the relationships between the number of APs, AP performance, and college outcomes. *Educational Measurement: Issues and Practice*, *38*(4), 42–54. http://dx.doi.org/10.1111/emip.12295

Blackburn, B. (2018). *Rigor is NOT a four-letter word* (3rd ed.). Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203704240

Bleske-Rechek, A., Lubinski, D., & Benbow, C. (2004). Meeting the educational needs of special populations: Advanced placement's role in developing exceptional human capital. *Psychological Science*, *15*(4), 217–224. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.0956-7976.2004.00655.x

Bridgeland, J., Milano, J., & Rosenblum, E. (2011*). Across the great divide: Perspectives of CEOs and college presidents on America's higher education and skills gap.* Civic Enterprises. https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED518231.pdf

Brinkmann, S. & Kvale, S. (2015). *InterViews: Learning the craft of qualitative research interviewing* (3rd ed.). Sage.

Buckley, P., Pendergast, P., Klopfenstein, K. (September 2020). *Does concurrent enrollment improve college access, success, time-to-degree, and earnings? A quasi-experimental analysis of Colorado students.* Technical report (Report No. 19-15B). Denver, CO: Colorado Evaluation and Action Lab at the University of Denver.

Budge, K., Wargo, E., Carr-Chellman, D. & Canfield-Davis, K. (2021). When "college and career ready" means only (or mostly) college ready: Perspectives from stakeholders in six rural and small communities. *Leadership and Policy in Schools*, *20*(4), 543–562. https://doi.org/10.1080/15700763.2019.1696371

Burns, L., & Leu, K. (2019). *Advanced placement, international baccalaureate, and dual-enrollment courses: Availability, participation, and related outcomes for 2009 ninth-graders--2013. Web tables.* (NCES 2019-430). U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics.

Burton, M., Brown, K, & Johnson, A. (2013). Storylines about rural teachers in the United States: A narrative analysis of the literature. *Journal of Research in Rural Education*, 28(12), 1-18. http://jrre.psu.edu/articles/28-12.pdf

Byun, S., Irvin, M., & Meece, J. (2012a). Predictors of bachelor's degree completion among rural students at four-year institutions. *The Review of Higher Education*, *35*(3). https://doi.org/10.1353/rhe.2012.0023

Byun, S., Meece, J., & Irvin, M. (2012b). Rural-nonrural disparities in postsecondary educational attainment revisited. *American Educational Research Journal*, *49*(3), 412–437. https://doi.org/10.3102/0002831211416344

Callahan, C. (2015). *The handbook of secondary gifted education*. Routledge.

Carlson, R., & McChesney, C. (2015). Income sustainability through educational attainment. *The Exchange*, *4*(1), 44–56. https://ssrn.com/abstract=2676859

Carnevale, A., Gulish, A., & Campbell, K. (2021). *If not now, when? The urgent need for an all-in-system approach to youth policy.* Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce. http://cew.georgetown.edu/allonesystem

Cates, J. T., & Schaefle, S. E. (2011). The relationship between a college preparation program and at-risk students' college readiness. *Journal of Latinos and Education*, *10*(4), 320–334. https://doi.org/10.1080/15348431.2011.605683

Chajewski, M., Mattern, K. D., & Shaw, E. J. (2011). Examining the role of Advanced Placement® exam participation in 4-year college enrollment. *Educational Measurement: Issues and Practice*, *30*(4), 16–27.

Cisneros, J., Holloway-Libell, J., Gomez, L. M., Corley, K. M., & Powers, J. M. (2014). The Advanced Placement opportunity gap in Arizona: Access, participation, and success. *AASA Journal of Scholarship and Practice*, *11*(2), 20–33.

Clayton, G. (2021). Advanced placement and concurrent enrollment substitution effects. *Journal of Advanced Academics*, *32*(3), 380–397. https://doi.org/10.1177/1932202X211004901

Clayton, G., & Guzman, M. (2022). Access to academic intensity through advanced placement and concurrent enrollment: Statewide evidence from Colorado. *Educational Research: Theory and Practice*, *33*(2), 116–131.

College Board. (2005). *AP grade distribution – all subjects 1956-2005*. https://reports.collegeboard.org/media/pdf/gradedistall_47029_1.pdf

College Board. (2014). *The 10th annual AP report to the nation.* https://secure-

media.collegeboard.org/digitalServices/pdf/ap/rtn/10th-annual/10th-annual-ap-report-to-

the-nation-single-page.pdf

College Board. (2020). *Annual AP participation 1956-2020 annual report.*

https://reports.collegeboard.org/media/pdf/Annual-AP-Program-Participation-1956-

2020_1.pdf

College Board. (2021a). *AP program results: Class of 2021.* https://reports.collegeboard.org/ap-

program-results/2021

College Board. (2021b). *AP score distribution – all subjects 2001-2021.*

https://reports.collegeboard.org/media/pdf/2021-ap-score-distributions-all-subjects_1.pdf

College Board. (2021c). *New analyses of AP scores of 1 and 2*.

https://reports.collegeboard.org/ap-program-results/2021

College Board. (2022a). *2022 North Carolina SAT suite of assessments annual report.*

https://reports.collegeboard.org/media/pdf/2022-north-carolina-sat-suite-of-assessments-

annual-report.pdf

College Board. (2022b). *2022 total group SAT suite of assessments annual report.*

https://reports.collegeboard.org/media/pdf/2022-total-group-sat-suite-of-assessments-

annual-report.pdf

College Board. (2023). *About AP course audit.* Retrieved June 15, 2023, from

https://apcentral.collegeboard.org/courses/ap-course-audit/about

Common Core State Standards (CCSS). (2010). *Common core state standards for English

language arts and literacy in history/social studies, science, and technical subjects.*

National Governors Association Center for Best Practices & Council of Chief State School Officers. https://learning.ccsso.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/11/ADA

Conger, D., Long, M., & Iatarola, P. (2009). Explaining race, poverty, and gender disparities in advanced course-taking. *Journal of Policy Analysis and Management*, *28*(4), 555–576. https://doi.org/10.1002/pam.20455

Conley, D. (2003). *Understanding university success. A report from standards for success*. Center for Educational Policy Research. https://math.mnrt.net/standards/SandS%20Introduction%20and%20Mathematics.pdf

Conley, D. (2005). *College knowledge: What it really takes for students to succeed and what we can do to get them ready*. Jossey-Bass.

Conley, D. (2007a). *Redefining college readiness*. Educational Policy Improvement Center (NJ1). https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED539251.pdf

Conley, D. (2007b). The challenge of college readiness. *Educational Leadership*, *64*(7), 23–29. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/292668272_The_Challenge_of_College_Readiness

Conley, D. (2008). Rethinking college readiness. *New Directions for Higher Education*, *2008*(144), 3–13. https://doi.org/10.1002/he.321

Conley, D. (2012). *A complete definition of college and career readiness*. Educational Policy Improvement Center (NJ1). https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED537876.pdf

Conley, D. (2013). *Getting ready for college, careers, and the common core: What every educator needs to know*. John Wiley & Sons, Incorporated.

Conley, D. (2014). New conceptions of college and career ready: A profile approach to admission. *Journal of College Admission*, (223) 12–23.

Conley, D. (2017). The new complexity of readiness for college and careers. In K. McClarty, K. Mattern, & M. Gaertner (Eds.), *Preparing Students for College and Careers* (pp. 9–22). Routledge.

Conley, D. (2019). The promise of next generation systems of assessments. *School Administrator*. 5(76), 16 – 22.

Conley, D., Drummond, K., de Gonzalez, A., Rooseboom, J., & Stout, O. (2011). *Reaching the goal: The applicability and importance of the Common Core State Standards to college and career readiness*. Educational Policy Improvement Center. https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED537872.pdf

Conley, D., & French, E. (2014). Student ownership of learning as a key component of college readiness. *American Behavioral Scientist*, *58*(8), 1018–1034. https://doi.org/10.1177/0002764213515232

Cooper, K. (2014). Eliciting engagement in the high school classroom: A mixed-methods examination of teaching practices. *American Educational Research Journal*, *51*(2), 363–402. https://doi.org/10.3102/0002831213507973

Cram, B., & Béjar, E. (2019). Achieving college readiness through a dual enrollment course: "Strategies for Success". *Metropolitan Universities*, *30*(2), 73–83.

Creamer, J. (2020, September 15). *Inequalities persist despite decline in poverty for all major race and Hispanic origin groups*. United States Census Bureau. https://www.census.gov/library/stories/2020/09/poverty-rates-for-blacks-and-hispanics-reached-historic-lows-in-2019.html

Crowe, M. (2020). *Dual enrollment research: A comprehensive review.* Southern Regional

    Education Board. https://www.sreb.org/sites/main/files/file-

    attachments/dual_enrollment_2020.pdf?1595860864

de la Varre, C., Irvin, M., Jordan, A., Hannum, W., & Farmer, T. (2014). Reasons for student

    dropout in an online course in a rural K-12 setting. *Distance Education*, *35*(3), 324–344.

    https://doi.org/10.1080/01587919.2015.955259

DesJardins, S., & Lindsay, N. (2008). Adding a statistical wrench to the "Toolbox." *Research in

    Higher Education*, *49*(2), 172–179. http://www.jstor.org/stable/25704554

Draeger, J., del Prado Hill, P., Hunter, L. R., & Mahler, R. (2013). The anatomy of academic

    rigor: The story of one institutional journey. *Innovative Higher Education*, 38, 267–

    279. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10755-012-9246-8

Duncheon, J., & Muñoz, J. (2019). Examining teacher perspectives on college readiness in an

    early college high school context. *American Journal of Education*, *125*(3), 453–478.

    https://doi.org/10.1016/j.econedurev.2004.05.006

Dutkowsky, D., Evensky, J., & Edmonds, G. (2009). Should a high school adopt Advanced

    Placement or a concurrent enrollment program? An expected benefit approach. *Education

    Finance and Policy*, *4*(3), 263–277. https://doi.org/10.1162/edfp.2009.4.3.263

Edgerton, A., & Desimone, L. (2018). Teacher implementation of college- and career-readiness

    standards: Links among policy, instruction, challenges, and resources. *AERA Open*, *4*(4),

    1– 22. https://doi.org/10.1177/2332858418806863

EdImagine. (n.d.). *About David*. Retrieved May 24, 2023, from http://edimagine.com/about

Eimers, M. T., & Mullen, R. (2003, May 20). *Dual credit and advanced placement: Do they help

    prepare students for success in college* [Paper presentation]. 43rd Annual Association of

    Institutional Research (AIR) Conference, Tampa, FL.

Ferguson, C., Baker, P., & Burnett, D. (2015). Faculty members' perceptions of rigor in dual

    enrollment, accelerated programs, and standard community college courses: Faculty

    members' perceptions of academic rigor. *New Directions for Community*

    Colleges, *2015*(169), 83–91. https://doi.org/10.1002/cc.20135

Field, K. (2021). The rise of dual credit: More and more students take college classes while still

    in high school. That is boosting degree attainment but also raising doubts about

    rigor. *Education Next*, *21*(1), 56–62. https://www.educationnext.org/wp-

    content/uploads/2022/01/ednext_XXI_1_field.pdf

Foust, R. C., Hertberg-Davis, H., & Callahan, C. M. (2009). Students' perceptions of the non-

    academic advantages and disadvantages of participation in advanced placement courses

    and international baccalaureate programs. *Adolescence*, *44*(174), 289–312.

Gagnon, D., & Mattingly, M. (2015). *Limited access to AP courses for students in smaller and*

    more isolated rural school districts. University of New Hampshire, The Carsey School of

    Public Policy. https://dx.doi.org/10.34051/p/2020.227

Gagnon, D., & Mattingly, M. (2016). Advanced placement and rural schools: Access, success,

    and exploring alternatives. *Journal of Advanced Academics*, 27(4), 266-284.

    https://doi.org/10.1177/1932202216656390

Gamoran, A. (1987). The stratification of high school learning opportunities. *Sociology of*

    Education, *60*(3), 135–155. https://doi.org/10.2307/2112271

Garcia, H., Eicke, D., McNaughtan, J., & Harwood, Y. (2020). Understanding dual credit

    programs: Perspectives from faculty, staff, and administrators. *Community College*

    Journal of Research and Practice, *44*(8), 584–594.

    http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/10668926.2019.1626301

Geiser, S., & Santelices, V. (2004). *The role of advanced placement and honors courses in college admissions.* UC Berkeley: Center for Studies in Higher Education. Retrieved from https://escholarship.org/uc/item/3ft1g8rz

Geverdt, D. (2019). *Education Demographic and Geographic Estimates Program (EDGE): Locale Boundaries File Documentation, 2017* (NCES 2018-115). U.S. Department of Education. Washington, DC: National Center for Education Statistics. https://nces.ed.gov/programs/edge/docs/EDGE_NCES_LOCALE.pdf

Glaser, B., & Strauss, A. (1967). *The discovery of grounded theory: Strategies for qualitative research*. Aldine.

Grubb, J. M., Scott, P. H., & Good, D. W. (2017). The answer is yes: Dual enrollment benefits students at the community college. *Community College Review*, *45*(2), 79–98. https://doi.org/10.1177/0091552116682590

Hanson, J. M., Prusha, T., & Iverson, C. (2015). Principal, teacher, and counselor views of concurrent enrollment. *New Directions for Community Colleges*, 169, 71–81. https://doi.org/10.1002/cc.20134

Hoffman, N., Vargas, J. and Santos, J. (2009). New directions for dual enrollment: Creating stronger pathways from high school through college. *New Directions for Community Colleges*, *2009*(145), 43–58. https://doi.org/10.1002/cc.354

Howley, A., & Howley, C. B. (2005). Rural Research Brief: High-Quality Teaching: Providing for Rural Teachers' Professional Development. *The Rural Educator, 26*(2), 1-5. https://doi.org/10.35608/ruraled.v26i2.509

Howley, A., Howley, M., Howley, C., & Duncan, T. (2013). Early college and dual enrollment challenges: Inroads and impediments to access. *Journal of Advanced Academics*, *24*(2), 77–107. https://doi.org/10.1177/1932202X13476289

Iatarola, P., Conger, D., & Long, M. C. (2011). Determinants of high schools' advanced course offerings. *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis*, *33*(3), 340–359. https://doi.org/10.3102/0162373711398124

Irvin, M., Hannum, W., Farmer, T., de la Varre, C., & Keane, J. (2009). Supporting Online Learning for Advanced Placement Students in Small Rural Schools: Conceptual Foundations and Intervention Components of the Facilitator Preparation Program. *The Rural Educator, 31*(1), 29-37. https://doi.org/10.35608/ruraled.v31i1.440

Irwin, V., De La Rosa, J., Wang, K., Hein, S., Zhang, J., Burr, R., Roberts, A., Barmer, A., Bullock Mann, F., Dilig, R., & Parker, S. (2022). *Report on the condition of education 2022* (NCES 2022-144). U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics. https://nces.ed.gov/pubsearch/ pubsinfo.asp?pubid=2022144

Jamieson, C., Duncombe, C., Bloomquist, S., & Keily, T. (2022, June 21). *50-state comparison: Dual/concurrent enrollment policies.* Education Commission of the States. https://www.ecs.org/50-state-comparison-dual-concurrent-enrollment-policies/

Jeffries, R., & Silvernail, L. (2017). Barriers to black student enrollment in honors and advanced placement courses. *The Negro Educational Review*, *68*(1-4), 56–157.

Jo, I., & Milson, A. (2013). College readiness for geography: Perceptions of high school teachers and college faculty. *Journal of Geography*, *112*(5), 193–204. https://doi.org/10.1080/00221341.2012.761718

Johnson, J., Paris, J., Curci, J., & Horchos, S. (2021). Beyond college access: An exploration of the short-term impact of a dual enrollment program. *Journal of College Student Retention: Research, Theory & Practice, 0*(0), 1–23, https://doi.org/10.1177/15210251211056319

Johnson, T., & Brophy, M. (2006). Dual enrollment: measuring factors for rural high school student participation. *Rural Educator*, *28*(1), 25–32.

Johnstone, D. B., & Del Genio, B. (2001). *College-Level learning in high school: Purposes, policies, and practical implications. The Academy in Transition*. Association of American Colleges & Universities. https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED464529.pdf

Kaliski, P., & Godfrey, K. (2014). *Does the level of rigor of a high school science course matter? An investigation of the relationship between science courses and first-year college outcomes* (Research Report 2014-2). College Board. https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED564301.pdf

Kanny, M. (2015). Dual enrollment participation from the student perspective. *New Directions for Community Colleges*, *2015*(169), 59–70. https://doi.org/10.1002/cc.20133

Karp, M., Bailey, T., Hughes, K., & Fermin, B. (2004). *State dual enrollment policies: Addressing access and quality.* U.S. Department of Education. https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED484432.pdf

Karp, M., Calcagno, J., Hughes, C., Jeong, D., & Bailey, T. (2007). *The postsecondary achievement of participants in dual enrollment: An analysis of student outcomes in two states.* National Research Center for Career and Technical Education.

Keller, C. (1958). The Advanced Placement program now has a history. *The Bulletin of the National Association of Secondary School Principals*, *42*(242), 6–12. https://doi.org/10.1177/019263655804224202

Kilgore, W., & Wagner, E. (2017). Dual enrollment from two points of view: Higher education and K-12. *College and University*, *92*(3), 57–62.

Klasik, D., & Strayhorn, T. (2018). The complexity of college readiness: Differences by race and college selectivity. *Educational Researcher*, *47*(6), 334–351. https://doi.org/10.3102/0013189X18778598

Klopfenstein, K. (2004a). Advanced Placement: Do minorities have equal opportunity? *Economics of Education Review*, *23*(2), 115–131. https://doi.org/10.1016/S0272-7757(03)00076-1

Klopfenstein, K. (2004b). The advanced placement expansion of the 1990s: How did traditionally underserved students fare? *Education Policy Analysis Archives*, *12*(68). https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ853532.pdf

Klopfenstein, K., & Lively, K. (2012). Dual enrollment in the broader context of college-level high school programs. *New Directions for Higher Education, 2012* (158), 59–68.

Klopfenstein, K., & Thomas, M. (2009). The link between advanced placement experience and early college success. *Southern Economic Journal*, *75*(3), 873–891. https://doi.org/10.1002/j.2325-8012.2009.tb00935.x

Kolluri, S. (2018). Advanced placement: The dual challenge of equal access and effectiveness. *Review of Educational Research*, *88*(5), 671–711. https://doi.org/10.3102/0034654318787268

Koricich, A., Chen, X., & Hughes, R. (2018). Understanding the effects of rurality and socioeconomic status on college attendance and institutional choice in the united states. *Review of Higher Education, 41*(2), 281–305. https://doi.org/10.1353/rhe.2018.0004

Krueger, R. & Casey, M. (2015). *Focus groups. A practical guide for applied research* (5th eds.). Sage.

Kryst, E. L., Kotok, S., & Hagedorn, A. (2018). Pursuing higher education in rural Pennsylvania schools: Shaping the college path. *Rural Educator*, *39*(1), 1–15. https://doi.org/10.35608/ruraled.v39i1.211

Lansing, J., Ahearn, C., Rosenbaum, J. E., Mokher, C., & Jacobson, L. (2017). Improving high school–college alignment: A sociological reform and new challenges. *The Educational Forum*, *81*(3), 267–280. https://doi.org/10.1080/00131725.2017.1314573

Lavalley, M. (2018). *Out of the loop: Rural schools are largely left out of research and policy discussions, exacerbating poverty, inequity, and isolation.* Center for Public Education. https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED608842.pdf

LeBeau, B., Assouline, S., Lupkowski-Shoplik, A., & Mahatmya, D. (2020). The advanced placement program in rural schools: Equalizing opportunity. *Roeper Review*, *42*(3), 192–205. https://doi.org/10.1080/02783193.2020.1765923

Lee, J., Fernandez, F., Ro, H. K., & Suh, H. (2022). Does dual enrollment influence high school graduation, college enrollment, choice, and persistence? *Research in Higher Education*. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11162-021-09667-3

Leong, E., Mercer, A., Danczak, S., Kyne, S., & Thompson, C. (2021). The transition to first year chemistry: student, secondary and tertiary educator's perceptions of student

preparedness. *Chemistry Education Research and Practice*, *22*(4), 923–947.

https://doi.org/10.1039/d1rp00068c

Lichten, W. (2000). Whither advanced placement? *Education Policy Analysis Archives*, *8*(29).

https://doi.org/10.14507/epaa.v8n29.2000

Lile K., Ottusch T., Jones T., Richards L. (2017). Understanding college-student roles:

Perspectives of participants in a high school/community college dual-enrollment

program. *Community College Journal of Research and Practice*, *42*(2), 95–

111. https://doi.org/10.1080/10668926.2016.1264899

Lincoln, Y. & Guba, E. (1985). *Naturalistic inquiry*. Sage

Lindstrom, L., Lind, J., Beno, C., Gee, K. A., & Hirano, K. (2022). Career and college readiness

for underserved youth: Educator and youth perspectives. *Youth & Society*, *54*(2), 221–

239. https://doi.org/10.1177/0044118X20977004

Liu, V., Minaya, V., Zhang, Q., & Xu, D. (2020). *High school dual enrollment in Florida:

Effects on college outcomes by race/ethnicity and course modality.* Community College

Research Center, Teachers College, Columbia University. Retrieved from

https://ccrc.tc.columbia.edu/ media/k2/attachments/dual-enrollment-florida-race-

ethnicity-course-modality.pdf

Lombardi, A., Seburn, M., & Conley, D. (2011). Development and initial validation of a measure

of academic behaviors associated with college and career readiness. *Journal of Career

Assessment*, *19*(4), 375–391. https://doi.org/10.1177/1069072711409345

Long, M. C., Conger, D., & Iatarola, P. (2012). Effects of high school course-taking on

secondary and postsecondary success. *American Educational Research Journal*, *49*(2),

285–322. https://doi.org/10.3102/0002831211431952

Lucas, S. (1999). *Tracking inequality: Stratification and mobility in American high schools.* New York: Teacher's College Press.

Mace, L. (2009). Dual enrollment: An instructor's perspective. *International Review of Economics Education*, *8*(1), 32 – 47. https://doi.org/10.1016/S1477-3880(15)30080-3.

Mann, S., Sponsler, B., Welch M., & Wyatt J. (2017). *Advanced Placement Access and Success: How do rural schools stack up.* Education Commission of the States. https://www.ecs.org/wp-content/uploads/Advanced-Placement-Access-and-Success-How-do-rural-schools-stack-up.pdf

Maruyama, G. (2012). Assessing college readiness: Should we be satisfied with ACT or other threshold scores? *Educational Researcher*, *41*(7), 252–261. http://www.jstor.org/stable/23271495

McNeish, D., Radunzel, J., Sanchez, E. (2016). *Adjusted differences in ACT scores by race/ethnicity.* ACT Research & Policy. https://www.act.org/content/dam/act/unsecured/documents/5692-data-byte-2016-7-adjusted-differences-in-act-scores-by-race.pdf

Mertens, D. (2020). *Research and evaluation in education and psychology: Integrating diversity and quantitative, qualitative, and mixed methods* (5th ed). Sage.

Mishkind, A. (2014). *Overview: State definitions of college and career readiness*. College and Career Readiness and Success Center. https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED555670.pdf

Mokher, C., Lee, S., & Sun, C. (2019). Evaluating innovations for improving college and career readiness in rural schools. *Research in the Schools, 26*(1), 48-63.

Mokher, C., & McLendon, M. (2009). Uniting secondary and postsecondary education: An event history analysis of state adoption of dual enrollment policies. *American Journal of Education*, *115*(2), 249–277.

Moreno, M., McKinney, L., Burridge, A., Snodgrass Rangel, V., & Carales, V. (2021). Access for whom? The impact of dual enrollment on college matriculation among underserved student populations in Texas. *Community College Journal of Research and Practice*, *45*(4), 255–272. https://doi.org/10.1080/10668926.2019.1688734

Morgan, T., Zakhem, D., & Cooper, W. (2018). From high school access to postsecondary success: An exploratory study of the impact of high-rigor coursework. *Education Sciences*, *8*(4). https://doi.org/10.3390/educsci8040191

Morton, T., Ramirez, N., Meece, J., Demetriou, C., & Panter, A. (2018). Perceived barriers, anxieties, and fears in prospective college students from rural high schools. *The High School Journal*, 101(3), 155-176. https://doi.org/10.1353/hsj.2018.0008

Nagaoka, J., Farrington, C., Roderick, M., Allensworth, E., Keyes, T., Johnson, D., & Beechum, N. (2013). Readiness for college: The role of noncognitive factors and context. *Voices in Urban Education*, *38*, 45–52. https://eric.ed.gov/?id=EJ1046369

National Alliance of Concurrent Enrollment Partnerships (2022, September 14). *NACEP accredited programs updated 2021-22.* https://www.nacep.org/docs/accreditation/Website/NACEP%20Accredited%20Programs%20Updated%202021-22%20v3.pdf

National Center for Education Statistics. (2019, February). *Dual enrollment: Participation and characteristics.* U.S. Department of Education. https://nces.ed.gov/pubs2019/2019176.pdf

National Center for Education Statistics. (2020, December). *Dual or concurrent enrollment in public schools in the United States.* U.S. Department of Education. https://nces.ed.gov/pubs2020/2020125.pdf

National Commission on Excellence in Education. (1983). *A nation at risk: The imperative for educational reform.* http://edreform.com/wpcontent/uploads/2013/02/A_Nation_At_Risk_1983.pdf

Nichol, G. (2018). *The faces of poverty in North Carolina: Stories from our invisible citizens.* University of North Carolina Press.

North Carolina Community College System, (2020, February 1). *Career and college promise state board code (curriculum).* https://www.nccommunitycolleges.edu/sites/default/files/basic-pages/academic-programs/attachments/1d_sbccc_400.11_01feb20_0.pdf

North Carolina Community College System. (2022, December 2). Career and college promise: operating procedures. https://www.nccommunitycolleges.edu/sites/default/files/basic-pages/academic-programs/attachments/section14_2023sp-_final_version-_12-2-22.pdf

North Carolina Department of Public Instruction. (2021). *North Carolina school report cards*. https://ncreports.ondemand.sas.com/src/

North Carolina Department of Public Instruction. (2022a, March 15). *Report to the North Carolina General Assembly: Career and college promise*. North Carolina State Board of Education. https://www.dpi.nc.gov/students-families/enhanced-opportunities/advanced-learning-and-gifted-education/career-and-college-promise

North Carolina Department of Public Instruction. (2022b, September 29). *2021-22 ACT results.* https://www.dpi.nc.gov/2021-22-act-results

North Carolina Department of Public Instruction. (2023a, January). *Operation polaris 2.0: Navigating students toward a brighter future.* https://www.dpi.nc.gov/districts-schools/operation-polaris

North Carolina Department of Public Instruction. (2023b, March). *NC ESSA state plan amendment final*. https://www.dpi.nc.gov/documents/program-monitoring/esea/nc-essa-state-planamendmentfinal20230329/download?attachment

North Carolina Department of Public Instruction. (2023c). *North Carolina school report cards*. https://ncreports.ondemand.sas.com/src/

North Carolina Department of Public Instruction. (2024, March 15). *Report to the North Carolina General Assembly: Career and college promise*. North Carolina State Board of Education. https://www.dpi.nc.gov/documents/advancedlearning/cihs/2024-ccpcihs-report/download?attachment

Nowicki, J. (2018). *Public high schools with more students in poverty and smaller schools provide fewer academic offerings to prepare for college*. Washington, DC: US Government Accountability Office. Retrieved from https://www.gao.gov/assets/700/694961. pdf

Nugent, S., & Karnes, F. (2002). The advanced placement program and the international baccalaureate programme: A history and update. *Gifted Child Today*, *25*(1), 30–39. https://doi.org/10.4219/gct-2002-52

Patrick, K., Socol, A, Johnson, J., & Morgan, I. (2020, January). *Inequalities in advanced coursework: What's driving them and what leaders can do*. The Education Trust. https://edtrust.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/09/Inequities-in-Advanced-Coursework-Whats-Driving-Them-and-What-Leaders-Can-Do-January-2019.pdf

Pearson Education. (2017). *Conley readiness index: What do new college students aspire to and are they ready to achieve their goals?* Pearson. https://www.pearson.com/content/dam/one-dot-com/one-dot-com/us/en/files/ConleyReadinessIndexCRIFlyerResearchbase.pdf

Perna, L., Finney, J., & Callan, P. (2014). *The attainment agenda: State policy leadership in higher education*. Johns Hopkins University Press.

Pompelia, S. (2020, January). *Dual enrollment access.* Education Commission of the States. https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED602439.pdf

Porter, A., & Polikoff, M. (2012). Measuring academic readiness for college. *Educational Policy (Los Altos, Calif.)*, *26*(3), 394–417. https://doi.org/10.1177/0895904811400410

Pretlow, J., & Wathington, H. (2013). Access to dual enrollment courses and school-level characteristics. *Community College Journal of Research and Practice*, *37*(3), 196–204. https://doi.org/10.1080/10668926.2013.739513

Ravitch, S. & Carl, N. (2021). *Qualitative research: Bridging the conceptual, theoretical, and methodological* (2nd ed.). Sage.

Reed, E., & Justice, M. (2014). College and high school educators' perceptions of current college readiness levels. *International Journal of Humanities and Social Science*, *4*(14), 37–44.

Rivera, L., Kotok, S., & Ashby, N. (2019). Access to dual enrollment in the United States: Implications for equity and stratification. *Texas Education Review*, *7*(2), 14–29. http://dx.doi.org/10.26153/tsw/2282

Roberts, J., & Grant, P. (2021). What we know and where to go: A systematic review of the rural student college and career readiness literature and future directions for the field. *The Rural Educator*, *42*(2), 72–94. https://doi.org/10.35608/ruraled.v42i2.1244

Rothschild, E. (1999). Four decades of the advanced placement program. *The History Teacher*, *32*(2), 175–206. https://doi.org/10.2307/494439

Royster, P., Gross, J., & Hochbein, C. (2015). Timing is everything: Getting students back on track to college readiness in high school. *The High School Journal*, *98*(3), 208–225. https://doi.org/10.1353/hsj.2015.0005

Saldaña, J. (2013). *The coding manual for qualitative researchers* (2nd ed.). Sage.

Schneider, J. (2009). Privilege, equity, and the advanced placement program: Tug of war. *Journal of Curriculum Studies*, *41*(6), 813–831. https://doi.org/10.1080/00220270802713613

Scott, T., Tolson, H., & Lee, Y. (2010). Assessment of advanced placement participation and university academic success in the first semester: Controlling for selected high school academic abilities. *Journal of College Admission*, 208, 26–30.

SERVE Center. (2022, July). *Study of dual enrollment opportunity: A report to the North Carolina State Board of Education and the North Carolina General Assembly*. University of North Carolina at Greensboro. https://www.publicschoolsfirstnc.org/resources/important-research/

Shenton, A. (2004). Strategies for ensuring trustworthiness in qualitative research projects. *Education for Information*, *22*(2), 63–75. https://doi.org/10.3233/EFI-2004-22201

Showalter, D., Hartman, S. L., Johnson, J., & Klein, R. (2019). *Why rural matters 2018-2019: The time is now*. Washington, D.C: A Report of the Rural School and Community Trust. https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED604580.pdf

Southern Regional Education Board. (2021, December). *Dual enrollment: Common issues across SREB states.* https://www.sreb.org/sites/main/files/file-attachments/dual_enrollmentcommonissues2021.pdf?1641412140

Spencer, G., & Maldonado, M. (2021). Determinants of dual enrollment access: A national examination of institutional context and state policies. *AERA Open*, *7*(1), 1 – 18. https://doi.org/10.1177/23328584211041628

Speroni, C. (2011, November). *Determinants of students' success: The role of advanced placement and dual enrollment programs* (NCPR Working Paper). National Center for Postsecondary Research. https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED527528.pdf

Stake, R. (2006). *Multiple case study analysis*. Guilford Press.

Sutton, A. (2017). Preparing for local labor: Curricular stratification across local economies in the United States. *Sociology of Education*, *90*(2), 172–196. https://doi.org/10.1177/0038040717703447

Taylor, J., & Yan, R. (2018). Exploring the outcomes of standards-based concurrent enrollment and Advanced Placement in Arkansas. *Education Policy Analysis Archives*, *26*(123), 1–25. https://doi.org/10.14507/epaa.26.3647

The University of North Carolina System. (2023). *Admission Requirements*. Retrieved from https://www.northcarolina.edu/future-students/admission-requirements/

Thomas, N., Marken, S., Gray, L., & Ralph, J. (2013). *Dual credit and exam-based courses in US public high schools. 2010-11: First Look*. Washington, DC, U.S. Department of Education, https://nces.ed.gov/pubs2013/2013001.pdf

Thompson, T., & Rust, J. O. (2007). Follow-up of advanced placement students in college. *College Student Journal*, *41*(2), 416–422.

https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/A163679012/AONE?u=richland&sid=googleScholar&xid=691f911b

Tieken, M. (2016). College talk and the rural economy: Shaping the educational aspirations of rural, first-generation students. *Peabody Journal of Education*, *91*(2), 203–223. https://doi.org/10.1080/0161956X.2016.1151741

Tieken, M., & Montgomery, M. (2021). Challenges facing schools in rural America. *State Education Standard*, 21(1), 6–11. https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ1286832.pdf

Tsoi-A, R., & Bryant, F. (2015). *College preparation for African American students: Gaps in the high school educational experience.* Washington, DC: Center on Law and Social Policy (CLASP). http://hdl.handle.net/10919/83649

University of Oregon. (n.d.). *David Conley.* College of Education, Faculty and Staff. Retrieved May 27, 2023, from https://education.uoregon.edu/directory/faculty/all/conley

Vanderbrook, C. (2006). Intellectually gifted females and their perspectives of lived experience in the AP and IB programs. *Journal of Secondary Gifted Education*, 17, 133–148.

Venezia, A., & Jaeger, L. (2013). Transitions from high school to college. *The Future of Children*, *23*(1), 117–136. https://doi.org/10.1353/foc.2013.0004

Warne, R. T. (2017). Research on the academic benefits of the Advanced Placement Program: taking stock and looking forward. *SAGE Open, 7(1).* https://doi.org/10.1177/2158244016682996

Wells, R., Manly, C., Kommers, S., & Kimball, E. (2019). Narrowed gaps and persistent challenges: Examining rural-nonrural disparities in postsecondary outcomes over time. *American Journal of Education, 126*(1), 1–31. https://doi.org/10.1086/705498

Williams, M., Tompkins, P., & Rogers, B. (2018). High school teachers' perceptions of developmental education. *Journal of Developmental Education*, *41*(2), 2–11. http://www.jstor.org/stable/44987746

Witkowsky, P., & Clayton, G. (2020). What makes dual enrollment work? High school counselor perspectives. *Community College Journal of Research and Practice*, *44*(6), 427–444. https://doi.org/10.1080/10668926.2019.1610676

Wyatt, J., Patterson, B., & Di Giacomo, F. (2015). *A comparison of the college outcomes of AP® and dual enrollment students* (Research Report 2015-3). College Board.

Xu, D., Solanki, S., & Fink, J. (2021). College acceleration for all? Mapping racial gaps in advanced placement and dual enrollment participation. *American Education.al Research Journal*, *58*(5), 954–992. https://doi.org/10.3102/0002831221991138

Yin, R. (2018). *Case study research and application: Design and methods* (6th ed.). Sage.

Yonezawa, S., Wells, A., & Serna, I. (2002). Choosing tracks: "Freedom of Choice" in detracking *schools. American Educational Research Journal*, 39(1), 37–67. https://doi.org/10.3102/00028312039001037

Zietz, J., & Joshi, P. (2005). Academic choice behavior of high school students: Economic rationale and empirical evidence. *Economics of Education Review*, *24*(3), 297–308. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.econedurev.2004.05.006

APPENDIX A: PRE-PARTICIPANT RECRUITMENT SURVEY

Advanced Placement and Dual Enrollment Survey

My name is Kelly Simmons. I am the Principal of Stanly Early College and a doctoral candidate in the Educational Leadership program at the University of North Carolina at Charlotte. I invite you to participate in my research study about advanced course teachers' perspectives on avenues of college readiness. The current research is separate from my role or function as an administrator with Stanly County Schools. I am currently seeking secondary Advanced Placement teachers and post-secondary Dual Enrollment teachers. In the future, I will conduct two focus group interviews, an Advanced Placement focus group and a Dual Enrollment focus group. I need five to six teachers in each focus group. To assist with accurate recording of participant responses, focus group interviews will be audio and video recorded. Participation is voluntary, and I will protect participant confidentiality. The focus group sessions will take about an hour at a convenient location and time. The below survey is for eligibility determination and is not consent to participate in the study. If you indicate interest in participating in the study and are eligible, I will contact you to provide a consent form, provide more details of the study, and answer any questions you may have.

* Indicates required question

1. Do you have experience teaching advanced courses? *

    Mark only one oval.

    ( ) Yes. I am a high school teacher who currently teaches Advanced Placement Courses.

    ( ) Yes. I am a high school teacher with past experience teaching Advanced Placement courses.

    ( ) Yes. I am a community college teacher who currently teaches Dual Enrollment courses to high school students.

    ( ) No. I have not taught Advanced Placement or Dual Enrollment courses.

2. Where are you located?

    Mark only one oval.

    ◯ Albemarle High School

    ◯ North Stanly High School

    ◯ South Stanly High School

    ◯ West Stanly High School

    ◯ Stanly Community College

3. What is your years of experience teaching advanced courses?

    Mark only one oval.

    ◯ 1 - 5 years

    ◯ 6 - 15 years

    ◯ 16 or more years

4. Are you interested in sharing your perceptions, experiences, and reflections by participating in the respective focus group as a study participant.

    Mark only one oval.

    ◯ Yes

    ◯ No

5. If you are willing to participate, please provide your name below:

    _____

6. If you are willing to participate, please provide your email or phone number. I will reach out to you with more information and answer any questions you may have.

    _____

APPENDIX B: ADVANCED PLACEMENT GROUP INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

Warm-up

Thank you for being a part of this focus group and being willing to sharing your perceptions.
1. Please begin by stating your name and tell us about yourself.
    a. How long have you been teaching?
    b. How many years have you taught Advanced Placement classes?
    c. What Advanced Placement classes have you taught?

Please state your name before answering each question.

Research Question 1: How do secondary teachers of Advanced Placement courses in a diverse, rural school district perceive Advanced Placement and Dual Enrollment courses as avenues for college readiness?

Research Question 3: How do perceptions of Advanced Placement and Dual Enrollment teachers differ regarding Advanced Placement and Dual Enrollment courses as avenues for college readiness?

1. How would you define college readiness?
2. How do you perceive students' college readiness at the beginning of your courses?
    a. Possible Probe: how do you determine? What do you observe?
3. How do you perceive students' college readiness at the end of your courses?
    a. Possible Probe: how do you determine? What do you observe?
4. How does your school ensure students are college ready?
5. How does your district ensure students are college ready?
6. For students placed into Advanced Placement courses, how well prepared are those students to be successful in those courses?
    a. Possible Probe: May need to give a scale. On a scale 1 – 5, with 5 being the highest level, how well prepared?
7. For students placed into Dual Enrollment courses, how well prepared are those students to be successful in those courses?
    a. Possible Probe: May need to give a scale. On a scale 1 – 5, with 5 being the highest level, how well prepared?
8. How accessible are Advanced Placement courses to diverse students, particularly students of color and low-income students?
    a. Possible Probe: May need to give a scale. On a scale 1 – 5, with 5 being the highest level, how accessible?
    b. Probe: How representative are students in Advanced Placement classes compared with the student body at your school?
    c. Probe: What supportive measures are in place to support the college readiness of these students?
9. How accessible are Dual Enrollment courses to diverse students, particularly students of color and low-income students?
10. Tell me about your perceptions of the rigor of Advanced Placement courses.
11. Tell me about your perceptions of the rigor of Dual Enrollment courses.

      a. Probe: Are your courses less rigorous, more rigorous, or equally rigorous? Why?

      b. Probe: Are your students more, less, or equally college ready? Why?

12. How well does the Advanced Placement curricula (model/course design):
    a. Deliver/influence key content knowledge - *engaging with core content*
    b. Deliver/influence key cognitive strategies - *Thinking skills to connect content*
    c. Deliver/influence key learning skills and techniques- *behaviors of self-awareness, motivation, time-management*
    d. Deliver/influence key transition knowledge and skills - *Postsecondary awareness*
        i. Probe: If not well, how do students develop these skills?

13. How well do the entry requirements for Advanced Placement identify students who are prepared for college-level work?

14. How well do the entry requirements for Dual Enrollment identify students who are prepared for college-level work?

15. How adequate are the resources you receive to deliver a rigorous Advanced Placement curriculum?

16. What out-of-school challenges do students bring to the classroom that may help or hinder their college readiness?

17. What is your perception of college readiness assessments?

18. What policies and practices related to Advanced Placement would you change at your school or in your district? Why?

19. What policies and practices related to Dual Enrollment would you change at your school or in your district? Why?

APPENDIX C: DUAL ENROLLMENT GROUP INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

Warm-up

Thank you for being a part of this focus group and being willing to sharing your perceptions.

1. Please begin by stating your name and tell us about yourself.
   a. How long have you been teaching?
   b. How many years have you taught Dual Enrollment classes?
   c. What Dual Enrollment classes have you taught?

Please state your name before answering each question.

Research Question 2: How do postsecondary teachers of Dual Enrollment courses in a diverse, rural school district perceive Advanced Placement and Dual Enrollment courses as avenues for college readiness?

Research Question 3: How do perceptions of Advanced Placement and Dual Enrollment teachers differ regarding Advanced Placement and Dual Enrollment courses as avenues for college readiness?

1. How would you define college readiness?
2. How do you perceive students' college readiness at the beginning of your courses?
   a. Possible Probe: how do you determine? What do you observe?
3. How do you perceive students' college readiness at the end of your courses?
   b. Possible Probe: how do you determine? What do you observe?
4. How does your school ensure students are college ready?
5. How does your district ensure students are college ready?
6. For students placed into Dual Enrollment courses, how well prepared are those students to be successful in those courses?
   a. Possible Probe: May need to give a scale. On a scale 1 – 5, with 5 being the highest level, how well prepared?
7. For students placed into Advanced Placement courses, how well prepared are those students to be successful in those courses?
   a. Possible Probe: May need to give a scale. On a scale 1 – 5, with 5 being the highest level, how well prepared?
8. How accessible are Dual Enrollment courses to diverse students, particularly students of color and low-income students?
   a. Possible Probe: May need to give a scale. On a scale 1 – 5, with 5 being the highest level, how well accessible?
   b. Probe: How representative are students in Dual Enrollment classes compared with the student body at your school?
   c. Probe: What supportive measures are in place to support the college readiness of these students?
9. How accessible are Advanced Placement courses to diverse students, particularly students of color and low-income students?
10. Tell me about your perceptions of the rigor of Dual Enrollment courses.
11. Tell me about your perceptions of the rigor of Advanced Placement courses.

      a. Probe: Are your courses less rigorous, more rigorous, or equally rigorous?

      b. Probe: Are your students more, less, or equally college ready?

12. How well do the Dual Enrollment curricula (model/course design):

      a. Deliver/influence key content knowledge - *engaging with core content*

      b. Deliver/influence key cognitive strategies - *Thinking skills to connect content*

      c. Deliver/influence key learning skills and techniques- *behaviors of self-awareness, motivation, time-management*

      d. Deliver/influence key transition knowledge and skills - *Postsecondary awareness*

         i. Probe: If not well, how do students develop these skills?

13. How well do the entry requirements for Dual Enrollment identify students who are prepared for college-level work?

14. How well do the entry requirements for Advanced Placement identify students who are prepared for college-level work?

15. How adequate are the resources you receive to deliver a rigorous Dual Enrollment curriculum?

16. What out-of-school challenges do students bring to the classroom that may help or hinder their college readiness?

17. What is your perception of college readiness assessments?

18. What policies and practices related to Dual Enrollment would you change at your school or in your district?

19. What policies and practices related to Advanced Placement would you change at your school or in your district?

APPENDIX D: INFORMED CONSENT FORM

UNIVERSITY OF NORTH CAROLINA
CHARLOTTE

Consent to be Part of a Research Study

Title of the Project: Perceptions of Advanced Placement Teachers and Dual Enrollment Teachers About Avenues of College Readiness in Rural North Carolina.

Principal Investigator: Kelly Efird Simmons, UNCC Doctoral Candidate

Faculty Advisor: Dr. Walter Hart, UNCC Professor

You are invited to participate in a research study. Participation in this research study is voluntary. The information provided is to help you decide whether or not to participate. If you have any questions, please ask.

Important Information You Need to Know

- The purpose of this study is to explore perceptions of college readiness and curriculum rigor of Advanced Placement secondary teachers and Dual Enrollment postsecondary teachers in a rural North Carolina public school district.
- You will be asked to participate in a small focus group corresponding to Advanced Placement or Dual Enrollment. The focus group session will be audio and video recorded.
- If you choose to participate, it will require a maximum of one and a half (1.5) hours of your time.
- Risks or discomforts from this research include the discomfort of revealing your feelings about college readiness and curriculum rigor in a small focus group setting.
- Benefits may include the knowledge that you are adding to the overall literature on college readiness and curriculum rigor.
- You may choose not to participate at any time during the study.

Please read this form and ask any questions you may have before you decide whether to participate in this study.

Why are we doing this study?
The purpose of this study is to explore perceptions of avenues of college readiness of Advanced Placement secondary teachers and Dual Enrollment postsecondary teachers in a rural North Carolina public school district. Using Conley's Four Keys to College and Career Readiness Framework, the insights gained through this study will add to the limited literature on this topic and inform practitioners and policymakers seeking to improve students' college readiness.

Why are you being asked to be in this research study.
You are being asked to be in this study because you have experience teaching Advanced Placement or Dual Enrollment courses.

UNIVERSITY OF NORTH CAROLINA
CHARLOTTE
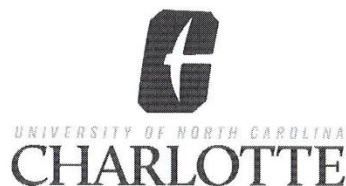
What will happen if I take part in this study?

If you choose to participate in this study, you will be asked to asked to participate in a focus group interview with a maximum of six (6) other participants. You will answer questions relating to the college readiness of your students, curriculum rigor, college readiness of students of color and low socioeconomic students, entry requirements, resources, college-readiness assessments, policies and practices, and your perceptions of your advanced course counterparts. You will be asked to bring a course syllabus with highlighted sections relating to college readiness and curriculum rigor to the investigator. This focus group interview will take place at a place and time convenient to participants, which could include your school site or another convenient location. The focus group session will be video and audio recorded. The investigator will use a peer research assistant to video record the sessions and debrief with the investigator.

Your time commitment will be a maximum of one and a half (1.5) hours. This includes the potential first contact, by phone or google meet, to go over the informed consent form answer any specific questions (15 minutes), the actual focus group interview (1 hour) and review of transcriptions and follow-up questions (15 minutes).

I will also collect a course syllabus from each participant. Prior to the interview, participants will highlight examples of college readiness in one color and examples of curriculum rigor in a different color. The documents will be reviewed and analyzed to support your descriptions during the interview.

What are the benefits of this study?

You will not benefit directly from being in this study. However, others might benefit because of your experiences as shared in this study are adding to the overall literature of college readiness and curriculum rigor.

What risks might I experience?

You may experience some mild or emotional discomfort as you will be asked reflective questions on college readiness and curriculum rigor which could be personal or sensitive. Should you be uncomfortable, you can decline to answer. Additionally, due the nature of a focus group setting and use of a peer research assistant, you may experience information risk due to a breach of confidentiality. To minimize this risk, I will use pseudonyms for participants names, school name, and district name. Additionally, the peer research assistant completed the human subjects research training, agreeing to comply with and uphold the ethical, privacy, and confidentiality procedures. However, I cannot control information shared by other participants.

How will my information be protected?

All data collection and digital files will be on password-protected devices. Copies of syllabi will be kept in a locked file cabinet assessible only by the investigator. Coding pseudonyms will be used in interview data, eliminating the actual participants' names. Data shared between the investigator, peer for debriefing, and faculty advisor will include the assigned coded pseudonyms. Audio and video files will be deleted after the interviews are transcribed. All digital files will be deleted within six (6) months of the study completion.

UNIVERSITY OF NORTH CAROLINA
CHARLOTTE

I will do everything we can to keep your identity private and your responses confidential. However, given the nature of focus groups, we cannot make guarantees about how others in the group might use your information. We ask that you respect the privacy and confidentiality of the group and group members to keep the discussion private and confidential.

Other people may need to see the information we collect about you. Including people who work for UNC Charlotte and other agencies as required by law or allowed by federal regulations.

How will my information be used after the study is over?

The data/information collected will not be used or distributed for future research studies even if identifiers are removed.

Data in the form of the final written study may be deposited in a public repository such as ProQuest, which is a database that houses theses and dissertations. Typically, access to these sites are restricted to students associated with an educational institution.

What other choices do I have if I don't take part in this study?
Not applicable. This is a voluntary study.

What are my rights if I take part in this study?
It is up to you to decide to be in this research study. Participating in this study is voluntary. Even if you decide to be part of the study now, you may change your mind and stop at any time. You do not have to answer any questions you do not want to answer.

If you chose to withdraw from the study, any data collected will be destroyed and not used in the final study.

Who can answer my questions about this study and my rights as a participant?
For questions about this research, you may contact Kelly Efird Simmons at klefird@charlotte.edu or 704-322-6162 and Dr. Walter Hart at water.hart@charlotte.edu or 704-687-8539.

If you have questions about your rights as a research participant, or wish to obtain information, ask questions, or discuss any concerns about this study with someone other than the researcher(s), please contact the Office of Research Protections and Integrity at uncc-irb@charlotte.edu.

UNIVERSITY OF NORTH CAROLINA
CHARLOTTE

Consent to Participate

By signing this document, you are agreeing to be in this study. To assist with accurate recording of participant responses, interviews will be audio and video recorded. Make sure you understand what the study is about before you sign. You will receive a copy of this document for your records. If you have any questions about the study after you sign this document, you can contact the study team using the information provided above.

I understand what the study is about and my questions so far have been answered. I agree to take part in this study.

_____

Name (PRINT)

_____

Signature   Date

_____

Name and Signature of person obtaining consent   Date