FROM EARLY COLLEGE TO THE UNIVERSITY: A CASE STUDY EXPLORING
FIRST-SEMESTER EXPERIENCES

by

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ABSTRACT

BRADLEY MILES SMITH. From Early College to the University: A Case Study Exploring First-Semester Experiences. (Under the direction of DR. MARK D'AMICO)

This single case study explored the first-semester experiences of twelve early college high school (ECHS) graduates as they transitioned to a large, public university in North Carolina. The purpose was to understand how early college graduates made meaning of their academic and social transition experiences and how they perceived their early college attendance as interacting with those experiences. Primary data collection occurred through two rounds of semi-structured interviews with each participant. Institutional websites and publications, a series of conversations with campus officials regarding policy and practice, and results from the Beginning College Survey of Student Engagement (BCSSE) administered to matriculating students at the university the previous fall semester provided data used to triangulate interview findings and establish institutional context. The constant comparative technique (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Lincoln & Guba, 1985) guided the data analysis process and resulted in seven distinct themes. Themes related to academic transition included exceptional preparation, academic adjustment, connecting with faculty, and impact of advanced standing. Themes related to social transition included unique status, connecting with others, and being ahead on academics but behind on experience. From these themes, the following conclusions were reached: (1) academic skills learned at ECHSs are applicable to the university; (2) ECHS graduates do not fully understand the impact of advanced standing; (3) ECHS attendance can influence social transition experiences; and (4) ECHS affiliation can influence transition experiences.

DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to my daughters, Grace and Virginia. May you each find your passion and absolutely rock at it. I love and am so very proud of you both.

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Thank you to my wife, Megan, for supporting me through this endeavor from the very beginning. These last five years have been marked by changes professional and personal, and I could not have navigated it all without your encouragement and persistence. Through many late nights and work-filled weekends, we made it! Our girls and I are so lucky to have you.

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Lastly, thank you to the students who volunteered to take part in this study and share their experiences. I appreciate your candor and meaningful reflection, and I wish you all the best in your college journeys and beyond.

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Postsecondary education is increasingly becoming a necessity for successful participation in the knowledge economy of today. Two-thirds of new jobs created between 1984 and 2000 require some level of postsecondary education (Cohen & Kisker, 2010), and 65% of all jobs are expected to require a postsecondary credential by 2020 (Carnevale, Smith, & Strohl, 2013). The Early College High School (ECHS) Initiative was founded in 2002 with the goal of helping students, particularly minority and first-generation students who have traditionally been underrepresented in higher education, begin work towards such a credential while still in high school. ECHSs afford students the opportunity to earn both a high school diploma and up to two years of college credit—or an associates degree—within four to five years of beginning 9th grade (Kisker, 2006). The schools partner with two and four-year colleges and universities to create an integrated curriculum that replaces high school electives with college coursework (Fischetti, MacKain, & Smith, 2011; Rosenbaum & Becker, 2011). To promote student success in the academically rigorous environment, early colleges incorporate regular academic and social support—such as tutoring and mentoring—into student schedules (see, e.g., Ari, Fisher-Ari, Killacky, & Angel, 2017; Born, 2006; Vargas & Miller, 2011) and limit class size to encourage the development of positive relationships amongst students, teachers, and staff (Ari et al., 2017; Kaniuka & Vickers, 2010; Smith, Fischetti, Fort, Gurley, & Kelly, 2012).

ECHSs are not the first attempt to blend high school and college (e.g., middle college high schools), but they are unique from their predecessors in their prevalence. The schools have experienced explosive growth over the last decade and a half, and over

280 ECHSs currently enroll in excess of 80,000 students. The highest concentrations are in North Carolina and Texas, which collectively house nearly 130 of the unique high schools (JFF, n.d., b). Such rapid expansion has been made possible through significant funding from private (e.g., the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation) and public (e.g., U.S. Department of Education and state governments across the nation) sources and the support of intermediary organizations at the national and state level (Edmunds, 2012; Edmunds, Willse, Arshavski, & Dallas, 2013; Edmunds et al, 2017; Lauen et al., 2017).

The expansion of the ECHS concept masks its youth, and research and evaluation on early colleges, though growing, currently leaves room for further exploration (Berger, Adelman, & Cole, 2010; Miller, Fleming, & Reed, 2013). Considering the scale of the ECHS movement, the resources invested in it, and, of most importance, the potential impact it can have on students—including those who have traditionally been underrepresented in higher education—it is imperative that student outcomes continue to be examined.

Background of Problem

College enrollment has consistently grown in the United States and is projected to increase by 13% between 2015 and 2026 (Snyder, de Brey, & Dillow, 2017). The preceding decade saw notable increases in degree attainment, especially for racially minoritized students. The number of earned bachelor's degrees from 2004 to 2014 increased by 42% for Black students, 115% for Hispanic students, and 38% for Asian and Pacific Islander students (Native American students unfortunately experienced a 1% decrease). White students, by comparison, earned 15% more undergraduate degrees during that time period (Snyder et al., 2017). Though college enrollment for minorities is

increasing, students of color remain underrepresented in higher education. In 2015, 42% of Whites aged 18-24 were enrolled in a postsecondary institution, compared to 35% of Blacks, 37% of Hispanics, 24% of Pacific Islanders, and 23% of American Indians. Asians in this age bracket have the highest rate of college enrollment at 63% (McFarland et al., 2017). Also of note is the discrepancy in graduation rates across racial and ethnic lines. Within six years of matriculating, 60% of all first-time, full-time students starting at four year institutions in 2008 earned a bachelor's degree. White and Asian students graduated at above-average rates (63% and 71%, respectively), but Black, Hispanic, Pacific Islander, and American Indian students fell between 6 and 19 percentage points below average (Musu-Gillete et al., 2017).

In a similar pattern, first-generation college students also remain underrepresented in higher education. Utilizing data from a national, longitudinal study that tracked high school students for a decade after their sophomore year, Lauff and Ingles (2013) found only 17% of first-generation students had earned a bachelor's degree, compared to 46% of students whose parents held bachelor's degrees and 59% of students whose parents held a graduate degree. When compared to their peers whose parents hold college degrees, first-generation students are more likely to come from lower-income households, less likely to enroll in postsecondary education, and more likely to cite financial hurdles as a reason for leaving college before they earned a degree (Redford & Hoyer, 2017).

The decreased likelihood of underrepresented racial minorities and first-generation college students to enroll in and graduate from a postsecondary institution significantly impacts their financial well-being. In 2015-2016, the average annual cost of attending a four-year public institution was nearly $17,000 (private non-profits, at

$43,000, had a price tag more than double this) (Snyder et al., 2017). Underrepresented minority and first-generation students are less likely to earn a bachelor's degree in four years (Musu-Gillette et al., 2017; Redford & Hoyer, 2017) and may need to cover that cost—or borrow money to do so—for longer periods of time. Those who are unable to graduate or enroll in higher education at all experience long-term financial consequences. In 2016, the unemployment rate among individuals ages 20-24 was more than doubled if a bachelor's or graduate degree had not been completed (McFarland et al., 2017). In addition to impacting the likelihood of employment, educational attainment also substantially affects earned income. Individuals ages 25-34 years earned in 2015, on average, $30,500 with a high school diploma, $36,900 with a two-year degree, and $50,000 with a bachelor's degree (McFarland et al., 2017).

Discrepancies in postsecondary achievement and the clear link between higher education and successful participation in today's economy are driving motivations behind the ECHS concept. Encouragingly, existing research on early colleges suggests the nontraditional secondary schools are experiencing some success in promoting the educational achievement of their students. When compared to their peers at traditional high schools, ECHS students are more likely to graduate from high school and earn college credit while enrolled in high school (Berger et al., 2010; Webb & Gerwin, 2014). This earned college credit gives ECHS students an advanced start on a postsecondary degree and, because they enroll in college coursework free of charge, helps to reduce the financial burden of higher education. Jobs for the Future (n.d., a) estimates that the average ECHS student saves 60% off the cost of an associate's degree and 30% off the cost of a bachelor's degree. Though limited in number, recent studies (e.g., Edmunds et

al., 2017; Haxton et al., 2017; Lauen et al., 2017; Unlu & Furey, 2016) also indicate that attending an ECHS can have a positive impact on student postsecondary enrollment and achievement after high school graduation.

Statement of Problem

Early college high schools continue to proliferate across the country and are present in more than 30 states, eight of which house at least 10 of the schools with some (e.g., California, North Carolina, Texas) offering substantially more (JFF, n.d., b). Current research shows that the institutions have a largely positive impact on high school student achievement (Bernstein, Edmunds, & Fesler, 2014), high school graduation (Webb & Gerwin, 2014), college credit earned in high school (Berger et al., 2010), and student academic and social experiences in high school (Ari et al., 2017). While ECHSs have been successful in accelerating high school students' attainment of college credits, the majority of those students do not leave the early college with a postsecondary degree (JFF, n.d., a; Webb & Gerwin, 2014). To earn one, most ECHS students seeking a two-year degree and all seeking a four-year degree must continue their college enrollment beyond high school graduation.

Researchers have primarily targeted ECHS student performance and experiences during high school, leaving a gap in the literature around this population as they matriculate at postsecondary institutions after graduation (Howley, Howley, & Howley, 2013; Miller et al., 2013). Existing literature on ECHS alumni enrolled at colleges and universities is comprised primarily of longitudinal quantitative studies (Edmunds et al., 2017; Haxton et al., 2016; Lauen et al., 2017; Unlu & Furey, 2016) that focus on college enrollment and degree attainment. These studies indicate that while the college

enrollment gap between ECHS and traditional high school students decreases after graduation, ECHS students are more likely to earn a degree in the six years following 9th grade. It is important to consider, however, that the degrees earned during this time period are often two-year degrees because students do not have time to complete a four-year bachelor's degree and that the impact of ECHS attendance on undergraduate degree completion remains largely unknown.

Also understudied are the experiences of ECHS graduates as they transition from their early colleges to four-year institutions. While students report generally positive experiences at their early colleges, the experiences they have with college life may differ substantially upon enrolling in four-year institutions that do not offer the close support network of their early colleges and, with comparatively large (and diverse) student populations and class sizes, present a very different postsecondary environment than the one to which they are accustomed. Existing research on ECHS student transition experiences includes only a few doctoral dissertations (Cerrone, 2012; McCorry-Andalis, 2013; Outlaw, 2017) and a study of three ECHS graduates by Woodcock and Olsen Beal (2013), all of which have centered on specific cases. Participants in these studies highlighted successes but also notable challenges in their transitions, a potentially concerning finding considering the emphasis of early colleges on enrolling minority and first-generation students, populations that have historically had lower-than-average college graduation rates (Musu-Gillette et al., 2017; Redford & Hoyer, 2017). Additional research is needed to develop a more comprehensive understanding of the experiences of early college graduates as they transition to four-year institutions. The present study was designed to contribute to that need.

Purpose of Study and Research Questions

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore the experiences of ECHS graduates as they transition to a large, public research university in North Carolina. As part of that exploration, this study also examined how the new students perceived their ECHS attendance contributing to their transition experiences at the university. The researcher sought to capture the perspectives of students with diverse academic backgrounds and trajectories in order to establish a more comprehensive understanding of how ECHS graduates experience their transition to the university. The following research questions guided the design and implementation of the study:

1. How do ECHS graduates make meaning of their academic experiences as they transition to a large, public university?

2. How do ECHS graduates make meaning of their social experiences as they transition to a large, public university?

3. How do ECHS graduates perceive the interaction between their high school experiences and their transition experiences at a large, public university?

Significance of Study

The experiences of students during their first year of college are critical, and the actions institutions take to ensure that these experiences are productive and meaningful can have a lasting impact on student development and success (Tinto, 2006). Yet, it is challenging for higher education administrators, faculty, and staff to support early college graduates in their transition to a university when so little is known about those early experiences. This study builds upon the very limited extant literature that examined

ECHS student transitions to a four-year institution and is useful to educators in several ways.

First, by including a thorough review of early college literature, it increases the familiarity that university faculty and staff have with ECHSs and the secondary experiences of their graduates, which past research (e.g., Outlaw, 2017) has shown to be limited in some cases due to the young age of the initiative. This may be particularly useful for academic advisors and others who work closely with students to develop plans of study based on their academic interests, abilities, and credits earned prior to admission. Additionally, a more thorough understanding of ECHS graduate experiences upon matriculating at a university can inform the efforts of faculty and staff to support their transition. Discussions around course planning, academic advising and support, student classification (i.e., whether ECHS graduates be considered first-year students), and targeted student organizations (e.g., learning communities) can benefit from a deeper understanding of student perspectives. Finally, knowledge generated through this study can also benefit educators working at ECHSs. Learning about the postsecondary experiences of their alumni—both the challenges and successes—can be used to improve how ECHS administrators, teachers, and counselors work to prepare students for university life.

In addition to the practical utility outlined above, this study also contributes to the developing body of knowledge and theory around early colleges by extending the scope of research on student experiences to university enrollment after graduation. Expanding the literature on early colleges is important not only to educational scholars but to policy makers as well. Understanding how well ECHS graduates transition to senior institutions

is an important component to efforts aimed at evaluating the effectiveness of the unique secondary schools and determining the extent to which their past and future expansion is merited.

Theoretical Framework

Tinto's (1993) model of institutional departure, and in particular, the components addressing college student integration, served as the theoretical framework for this study. Tinto (1988) conceptualized the transition to college as a three-stage, longitudinal process through which students separate from their previous communities (in this case, the ECHS), learn the behavioral norms and expectations of their new communities (the university setting), and integrate into their new institution by becoming active participants in campus systems. According to Tinto (1993), colleges and universities are comprised of both academic and social systems that, though distinct, are inevitably linked. The degree to which students successfully integrate into the academic and social systems on campus impacts their experiences and likelihood of success. Tinto's (1988, 1993) work around the student transition process and the nature of campus systems shaped both data collection and analysis.

Methodology

This was a single, instrumental case study involving 12 early college graduates newly enrolled at one public research university in North Carolina. Participants were selected using Creswell's "purposeful maximal sampling" in an effort to ensure that diverse perspectives were represented in the sample (2013, p. 100). Primary data collection took place through semi-structured individual interviews, one in the first two months of enrollment and another near the conclusion of the first semester. Interview data

was triangulated through a review of institutional policies related to ECHS graduates, feedback from key personnel who work with ECHS graduates, and the results of the Beginning College Survey of Student Engagement (BCSSE) administered to incoming first-year students at the university during the previous academic year. A thorough description of the case, including institutional context and participant profiles, is provided and followed by thematic analysis and interpretation of meaning (Creswell, 2013).

Assumptions, Limitations, and Delimitations

The present study was conducted with a reality-oriented approach to research as described by Mark, Henry, and Julnes (2000) and Patton (2002). This approach assumes that real-world truths, albeit imperfect real-world truths, exist. Within this assumption, however, the reality-oriented approach also acknowledges that individual constructions of truth are important contributors to those collective truths in larger society and should be carefully considered. In seeking to discover these individual and collective truths, the researcher assumed that participants in the study would respond to interview questions truthfully. To encourage participants to be truthful in their responses, they were informed and reminded that their participation was voluntary and that all accumulated data would be de-identified before being published or otherwise shared by the researcher. It was also assumed that the interview protocol utilized would elicit the desired perspectives from participants. A pilot study was conducted prior to this full-scale study and used to refine the questions included in the semi-structured interviews.

This study has several limitations. First, while the researcher sought to generate pragmatic knowledge that is transferable to other similar educational contexts and can be used by educators to improve the experiences of ECHS graduates, the qualitative nature

of the inquiry means that its findings are not be widely generalizable. The transferability

of the findings is further limited by the relatively small sample size (12 participants) and

the inclusion of participants at a single university. Another limitation is the possibility of

researcher bias, particularly because this study was be conducted by a single researcher.

Efforts to combat this are discussed in Chapter 3. Finally, this study is limited by the

timeline for data collection, all of which occurred in a single semester. The transition

process of some ECHS graduates to a university may extend beyond their first semester,

and perspectives of the transition may change as more time at their new institution

elapses. Despite these limitations, this study generates new and needed knowledge with

both practical and theoretical significance.

The researcher elected to examine ECHS graduates as they transitioned to a

university after working with them as an academic advisor and recognizing what he

perceived to be the uniqueness of their experiences. The researcher's interest in this

population was compounded when he became involved in the establishment of a new

ECHS at the institution where he was employed. The present study was delimited to

include only participants in their first semester at one university in North Carolina who

previously attended an ECHS. Participants' first semester at the university was chosen as

the time frame in an effort to capture their experience upon initially enrolling. A single

site was utilized both for practical reasons and also to allow the researcher to conduct an

in-depth study of transition experiences at one institution, taking into account that

institution's policies and practices regarding ECHS graduates and how they impact

student experiences. In order to capture diverse perspectives, participants were recruited

who attended ECHSs partnered with two and four-year colleges and universities, who

entered the university with varying amounts of credit hours, and who were pursuing

degrees in differing fields.

Definition of Terms

The following terms are widely in this study. General definitions are included

here and will be repeated and added to as needed within the subsequent chapters.

Early College High School (ECHS). A high school that partners with a two or four-year

institution of higher education to offer a blended secondary and postsecondary

five-year curriculum that allows students to earn an associate's degree or up to 60

hours of college credit prior to high school graduation (JFF, n.d., b). The terms

ECHS and *early college* will be used interchangeably.

Academic Experiences. All academic student engagement at the university, including

academic performance, course attendance and work, and interactions with faculty

and staff (Tinto, 1993).

Social Experiences. All non-academic student engagement at the university, including

institution-sponsored extracurricular activities and informal interactions with

other students (Tinto, 1993).

Conclusion

This chapter introduced the concept of early colleges, described the educational

and economic issues that led to their establishment, identified a gap in the existing

literature on early colleges (i.e., the transition experiences of ECHS graduates as they

matriculate at four-year institutions of higher education), and outlined the present study

that explored the populations' post-high school university experiences. The lack of

existing knowledge around the experiences of early college graduates transitioning to

university life is problematic for student success practitioners at the ECHS and four-year level. Results from this study can be used to better understand and support this population and the sometimes unique needs and experiences they have. Chapter 2 of this dissertation provides a more in-depth review of the early college and ECHS student transition literature and discusses in detail Tinto's (1993) model of institutional departure as a theoretical framework. Chapter 3 details the methodology and qualitative analytical procedures used in this dissertation study. Chapter 4 describes the findings of the study, including the institutional context, participants, and themes related to the three research questions. Finally, Chapter 5 discusses the findings and their relationship to extent literature, implications for practice related to early college students, and potential directions for future research.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

The purpose of this study was to explore the academic and social experiences of early college high school (ECHS) graduates during their first semester of enrollment at a four-year university. Three research questions guided the inquiry: (1) How do ECHS graduates make meaning of their academic experiences as they transition to a large, public university?; (2) How do ECHS graduates make meaning of their social experiences as they transition to a large, public university?; and (3) How do ECHS graduates perceive the interaction between their high school experiences and their transition experiences at a large, public university? This chapter is intended to ground the study in existing literature and provide context through which its findings can be understood and interpreted.

It begins with an overview of ECHSs, starting with past efforts at blending high school and college and the similar educational initiatives that preceded the development of ECHSs. The key characteristics of ECHSs are then examined through the framework of the movement's core principles established by the Early College High School Initiative (Berger et al., 2009). Next, a review of ECHS research literature is provided. The youth of early colleges has resulted in a growing but still developing body of research (Berger et al., 2010; Miller et al., 2013), and much of this research centers on ECHS student performance and experiences prior to high school graduation. Though the focus of this study is on the experiences of ECHS graduates as they matriculate at a four-year institution, pre-graduation literature is included to provide context for the third research question about the impact of ECHS attendance on first-semester experiences. Following this review, the limited body of research on the postsecondary enrollment of ECHS

graduates is discussed. Much of this research investigates the postsecondary achievement

of ECHS graduates, however, and research on transition experiences is currently limited

to three dissertation studies (Cerrone, 2012; McCorry-Andalis, 2013; Outlaw, 2017), only

two of which focus exclusively on those experiences occurring after high school

graduation. This gap in the literature surrounding the postsecondary transition

experiences of the ECHS graduates is one to which the present study hopes to contribute.

Finally, the totality of the ECHS literature is summarized and followed by a discussion of

Tinto's (1988, 1993) work on student integration, which served as the theoretical

framework for this study.

TABLE 1

Literature Review Reference Map

Combining High School and College	• 6-4-4 Plan (Kisker, 2006; Koos, 1946; Wechsler, 2001; Zook, 1947) • Middle College High Schools (Kisker, 2006; Lieberman, 2004; Wechsler, 2001) • Developing Early College High Schools (Edmunds, 2012: Edmunds et al. 2017; Kisker, 2006; Lieberman, 2004)
ECHS Characteristics	• Core Principles (Berger et al., 2009) • Student Characteristics (Berger et al., 2010; JFF, n.d.) Lauen et al., 2017) ○ Admissions (Berger et al., 2010; Berger et al., 2014; Bernstein et al., 2014; Haxton et al., 2016; Howley et al., 2013; Lauen et al., 2017; Smith et al., 2012) • Institutional Partnerships (Bush, 2017; Hoffman et al., 2009; Howley et al., 2013; JFF, 2009) • Integrated Curriculum (Adelman, 2006; Ari et al., 2017; Edmunds, 2012; Edmunds et al., 2017; Fischetti et al., 2011; Hoffman et al., 2009; Rosenbaum & Becker, 2011; Smith et al., 2012; Vargas & Miller, 2011) • Student Support (Ari et al., 2017; Berger et al., 2010; Born, 2006; Edmunds et al., 2017; Fischetti et al., 2011; Kanuika & Vickers, 2010; Lauen et al., 2017; Morros & Torres, 2012; Rosenbaum & Becker, 2011; Smith et al., 2012; Thompson & Ongaga, 2011; Vargas & Miller, 2011)

	• Intermediaries (Edmunds, 2012; Edmunds et al., 2013; Lauen et al., 2017; Smith et al., 2012)
ECHS Student Performance	• Academic Engagement (Berger et al., 2009; Edmunds et al., 2013; Lauen et al., 2017; Munoz et al., 2014) • High School Assessments (Berger et al., 2009; Berger et al., 2010; Bernstein et al., 2014; Edmunds et al., 2010; Hall, 2013; Kanuika & Vickers, 2010; Munoz et al., 2014) • High School Progression and Graduation (Berger et al., 2010; Haxton et al., 2016; Lauen et al., 2017; Webb & Gerwin, 2014) • College Enrollment and Performance (Berger et al., 2009; Berger et al., 2010; Berger et al., 2013; Edmunds et al., 2017; Fischetti et al., 2011; Haxton et al., 2016; Lauen et al., 2017; Unlu & Furey, 2016; Webb & Gerwin, 2014)

ECHS Student Experiences	• Perceived Support and High Expectations (Ari et al., 2017; Berger et al., 2009; Berger et al., 2010; Born, 2006; Edmunds et al., 2010; Edmunds et al., 2013; Fischetti et al., 2011; Hall, 2013; Kanuika & Vickers, 2010; Thompson & Ongaga, 2011)
	• New and Missed Opportunities
	    o New academic opportunities (Edmunds, 2012; Kanuika & Vickers, 2010; Locke & McKenzie, 2016; Valadez et al., 2012)
	    o Missed social opportunities (Ongaga, 2010; Saenz & Combs, 2015; Woodcock & Olsen Beal, 2013)
	• Accelerated Maturity, for Some (Edmunds, 2012; Martin, 2013; McDonald & Farrell, 2012; Smith et al., 2012; Valadez et al., 2012; Williams & Southers, 2010; Woodcock & Olsen Beal, 2013)
	• Development of Academic Identity (Fischetti et al., 2011; Heitin, 2016; Krumrei-Mancuso et al., 2013; McDonald & Farrell, 2012; Valadez et al., 2012; Woodcock & Olsen Beal, 2013)
	• Challenges (Haxton et al., 2016; Locke & McKenzie, 2016; Oliver et al., 2010; Ongaga, 2010; Valadez et al., 2012; Woodcock & Olsen Beal, 2013)

ECHS Students after Graduation	• Limited research on ECHS grad postsecondary experiences (Howley, Howley, Howley, & Duncan, 2013; Miller et al., 2013) • Postsecondary achievement (Berger et al., 2013; Berger et al., 2014; Edmunds et al., 2017; Haxton et al., 2016; Lauen, 2017; Unlu & Furey, 2016; Webb & Gerwin, 2014) • Transition experiences (Cerrone, 2012; McCorry-Andalis, 2013; Outlaw, 2017; Woodcock & Olsen Beal, 2013)
Student Transition to College (Theoretical Framework)	• Model of institutional departure and student integration in college (Tinto, 1988, 1993) o Van Gennep (1960), Tierney (1992)

A Brief History of Blending High School and College

According to Kisker (2006), "Educational ideas are rarely new; they simply reemerge at different times under different circumstances, and are put forth by different people" (p. 68). Current early college high schools stand on a history of similar initiatives. Integrating high school and community college—the idea at the core of the ECHS design—can be seen historically in Koos' (1946) 6-4-4 plan of the 1930s and 1940s and in the middle college movement beginning in the 1970s.

Koos' Six-Four-Four Plan

The concept of integrating high school and college is closely linked with the formation of two-year junior and community colleges that started in the early 20th century (Kisker, 2006). In a report from the President's Commission on Higher Education, Zook (1947) popularized the notion of the community college and advocated for their close articulation with high schools. An early iteration of this was Koos' 6-4-4 plan, which proposed an elementary school housing grades 1-6, a junior high school housing grades 7-10, and a junior college that included grades 11-14. Koos (1946) argued that the first two years of college—which are generally characterized by a diverse liberal arts curriculum—are closer in nature to the last two of high school than they are to the more specialized, discipline-specific coursework in the later part of a bachelor's degree. It made little sense to Koos (1946), then, that the 12th and 13th grades were marked by a transition to an entirely new institution, a structure that was also questioned by Zook (1947). Combining the last two years of high school with the first two of college was thought to have several advantages. First, eliminating redundant high school and college coursework created opportunities for students to take additional courses. Second, the

structure of the 6-4-4 plan ensured that all students, even those who do not pursue

postsecondary degrees after high school, have at least some exposure to a liberal arts

education (Wechsler, 2001). Lastly, by grouping grades 11-14, institutions could reduce

costs by sharing physical and human resources (Koos, 1946). Despite Koos' advocacy

and adaptation of the 6-4-4 plan in school districts across at least five states, interest in

combining high school and college waned and disappeared from practice by the 1950s

(Kisker, 2006). Citing the 1930s writings of Eells and Eby, Kisker (2006) advanced that

the American public's affection for a traditional undergraduate experience and the

reluctance of two-year colleges, in an effort to be seen as true institutions of higher

education, to affiliate with high schools created major barriers to the 6-4-4 plan's

expansion.

Middle College High Schools

The middle college movement started in 1974 with the opening of Middle College

High School (MCHS) on the campus of LaGuardia Community College in New York

(Wechsler, 2001). Borrowing elements of the 6-4-4 plan, LaGuardia's MCHS was

founded with the goals of increasing high school graduation and college enrollment for

students at risk of dropping out (Kisker, 2006). Its success in achieving these goals

prompted the formation of similar institutions, and 30 were in operation by 2000

(Wechsler, 2001). MCHSs are small schools with total enrollments no larger than 450

and located on college campuses. They operate on the college's schedule, allow students

to take select college courses when ready, promote career readiness through job

shadowing and professional internships, and incorporate enhanced support structures

such as regular individual and group counseling (Lieberman, 2004). Though MCHSs

remain in existence today, the distinct funding and organizational structures of K-12 and postsecondary education have prevented the model's large scale adoption (Kisker, 2006).

Developing Early College High Schools

The current early college high school concept grew from that of the middle college and shares several key features (e.g., small size, access to college courses in high school, increased levels of student support, physical location on a college campus). ECHSs differ in their level of coordination with higher education partners, however, with a goal of developing more cohesive academic curriculums and both increasing and accelerating the completion of postsecondary degrees (Lieberman, 2004). ECHSs also differ from MCHSs in their success with expansion. The Early College High School Initiative, with the help of intermediary organizations and financial support from the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, has overcome some of the barriers faced by middle colleges and experienced explosive growth since its inception in 2002 (Edmunds, 2012; Edmunds et al., 2017). The following section examines the characteristics of ECHSs through the framework of the initiative's core principles.

Early College High School Characteristics

Early college high schools are linked by five core principles established by the Early College High School Initiative: (1) ECHSs serve student populations traditionally underrepresented in higher education; (2) ECHSs are a partnership between a K-12 education agency, an institution of higher education, and the local community; (3) ECHSs have curriculums that integrate high school and college coursework and provide students the opportunity to graduate with one to two years of college credit; (4) ECHSs offer high levels of academic and social support for students; and (5) ECHSs partner with

intermediaries that work to foster policies and opportunities for early colleges to grow (Berger et al., 2009). Existing literature is saturated with examples of ECHSs working towards these principles.

Student Characteristics and Admission Practices that Shape Them

Populations underrepresented in higher education chosen as a focus by the ECHSI include minority (non-White), low-income, and first-generation students. A series of annual evaluations by American Institutes for Research and SRI International show that ECHSs have consistently enrolled minority and low-income (measured by eligibility for free and reduced lunch) students at rates higher than their comparison districts (Berger et al., 2010). National statistics provided by Jobs for the Future (n.d., a) show the racial and ethnic breakdown of ECHS students as follows: 4.5% Asian, 22.5% Black, 41% Latino, 2% Native America, 3% Mixed Race/Other, and 27% White. Comparison of first-generation status at a national level has proven more difficult to undertake because districts often do not publish it for their students (Berger et al., 2010). However, an analysis of 78 ECHSs in North Carolina, which houses more early colleges than any other single state and a substantial portion of the over 280 nationally (JFF, n.d., b), revealed that enrolled students were more likely to have parents who attended some college and less likely to have parents who did not graduate from high school than students at traditional high schools (Lauen et al., 2017). The authors also found students in North Carolina ECHSs to be more likely to be Asian or Hispanic and more likely to receive free or reduced lunch when compared to their peers at traditional high schools. Nationally, 61% of ECHS students come from low-income families and 56% are (or will be upon taking their initial college class) first-generation college students (JFF, n.d., a).

ECHSs take a variety of approaches towards admitting students in an effort to enroll the desired student groups. Performance on middle grades assessments can be considered but is often combined with other measurements such as essays and interviews to assess students holistically (Smith, Fischetti, Fort, Gurley, & Kelly, 2012). This practice is in alignment with a general trend to open access to early enrollment in college coursework to students of various ability levels (Howley, Howley, Howley, & Duncan, 2013). The target candidates are those students from disadvantaged groups who have the desire and ability to succeed but who may benefit from help in realizing their full potential, the "diamond(s) in the rough" (Berger et al., 2010, p. 338). Still, Lauen et al.'s (2017) study of North Carolina ECHSs revealed the institutions are more likely to enroll students identified as gifted and who have higher 8th grade exam scores than traditional high schools.

Other ECHSs employ lottery-based admissions systems, though these may be in the minority (Lauen et al., 2017). The randomized nature of the lottery admission systems in place, however, have allowed for the undertaking of quasi-experimental research on the impacts of ECHS attendance (see, e.g., Berger, Turk-Bicakci, Garet, Knudson, & Hoshen, 2014; Bernstein, Edmunds, & Fesler, 2014; Edmunds et al., 2017; Haxton et al., 2016; Lauen et al., 2017), the results of which are discussed later in this chapter.

Institutional Partnerships

Early college high schools partner with two and four-year institutions of higher education and are typically located on or near their campuses. This characteristic distinguishes ECHSs from other dual enrollment models where high school students may take college courses either on their high school campus or by traveling to that of a local

college (Hoffman, Vargas, & Santos, 2009). Because of their relative prevalence and proximity, most ECHSs are located on the campuses of community colleges. Approximately three quarters (72%) of ECHSs pair with community colleges while the remaining 28% are associated with four-year colleges and universities (JFF, 2009). Though located on the campuses of their higher education partners, ECHSs operate as autonomous institutions with their own leadership, teachers, and support staff. ECHSs and colleges and universities should not operate in silos, however, and the most successful partnerships are marked by a common vision, shared decision making, and open communication—often facilitated by liaisons capable of working across institutional lines—among leaders and other stakeholders (Bush, 2017; Howley et al., 2013).

Integrated Curriculum

An underlying assumption of the early college high school model is that, with proper preparation and support, students can enroll in and earn credit for college courses before the traditional college matriculation age of 18 (Smith et al., 2012). Building off research that shows the intensity of courses taken during high school is the strongest single predictor of academic success in college (Adelman, 2006), the ECHS curriculum includes honors and college coursework early. The goal of preparing students for college directs all actions of ECHSs (Edmunds, 2012). Student choice is sacrificed in favor of a structured college preparatory curriculum that forgoes traditional high school electives to maximize the opportunity to earn college credits (Fischetti et al., 2011; Rosenbaum & Becker, 2011). Some early colleges have eliminated tracking altogether and automatically place all students in honors courses (Vargas & Miller, 2011).

High school coursework is accelerated and often completed during freshman, sophomore, and junior years, leaving the last one to two years focused primarily on college coursework (Ari et al., 2017). While some early colleges have four-year curriculums, most recognize that earning both a high school and two-year degree (or two years of college credit) may not be possible for students in that time frame (Edmunds et al., 2017). Consequently, a "super-senior year" is often incorporated that affords students time to complete additional college coursework while still remaining connected to the supportive environment of the early college (Ari et al., 2017, p. 5). College coursework is not limited to the final two years, however, but rather is gradually implemented over time. ECHS students may start with a college success course restricted to only their fellow high school classmates in 9th grade and enroll in increasing numbers of college courses, eventually intermixed with traditional college students, in subsequent years (Edmunds et al., 2017). Some states have further enlarged the opportunity for students to earn college credit by allowing college courses taken while enrolled at an ECHS to count towards both a high school and postsecondary diploma (Hoffman et al., 2009).

Student Support

The academic rigor of the early college curriculum is presented in tandem with enhanced levels of academic and social support from teachers, counselors, and administrators. Counseling, tutoring, and advising are regularly incorporated into the schedules of ECHS students (Berger et al., 2010; Born, 2006; Fischetti et al., 2011). Students are coached not only on how to be successful at the early college but also on how to develop the skills and procedural knowledge required to successfully transition to other postsecondary enrollment after graduation. Students are taken on visits to other

colleges and universities and provided help with writing essays, requesting recommendations, navigating financial aid, and other aspects of applying to college (Edmunds et al., 2017; Morrow & Torres, 2012; Rosenbaum & Becker, 2011).

The small size of early colleges, typically no more than 400 total students (Lauen et al., 2017), is critical to developing the positive relationships between teachers and students that are a goal of the ECHS model (Ari et al., 2017; Kaniuka & Vickers, 2010; Smith et al., 2012). Teachers are expected to take responsibility for all students, which often involves the assumption of additional duties that might not apply to their colleagues at traditional high schools (Smith et al., 2012). Some early colleges, for example, assign small groups of students to teachers as mentors and expect those teachers to spend time with their students inside and outside of school in community-building activities (Vargas & Miller, 2011). The development of close, "family-like" (Ari et al., 2017, p. 21) relationships between teachers and students allows for the establishment of high levels of support and also the maintenance of high expectations for ECHS students from both their teachers and their peers (Thompson & Ongaga, 2011).

Intermediaries

Forming early college high schools requires substantial work and commitment (Smith et al., 2012), and ECHSs are encouraged to work with intermediary organizations that assist in the process. The Early College High School Initiative, started in 2002 with financial assistance from the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, has served, with continued support from the non-profit Jobs for the Future, as the overarching national intermediary for forming new early colleges (Edmunds, 2012). Smaller organizations have assisted in specific states. The North Carolina New Schools Project, for example, a

non-profit supported by both private and public funds, has assisted in the formation of over 70 early colleges in the state (Edmunds, Willse, Arshavsky, & Dallas, 2013; Lauen et al., 2017). Approximately $70 million has been awarded by the U.S. Department of Education (as of 2015) to five grant recipients to assist in the founding of early colleges in various locations (Edmunds et al., 2017). While alignment with these intermediaries is encouraged, it is not responsible for the formation of all early colleges and others have been established independent of specific initiatives (Edmunds, 2012).

Existing Early College High Schools

Though the body of research on early college high schools is growing, considerable opportunities for further inquiry remain as a result of the relative youth of the movement (Berger et al., 2010; Miller et al., 2013). Past research has primarily focused on student academic performance and experiences while enrolled at early colleges. Several recent studies have shed light on the impact of ECHS attendance on long-term student postsecondary achievement, but there is a notable gap in the literature around the experiences of early college graduates as they enroll in postsecondary institutions after high school (Howley et al., 2013; Miller et al., 2013). This section will (1) synthesize the current knowledge around student performance and experiences at early colleges; (2) discuss existing published and dissertation research on the higher education experiences of ECHS graduates; and (3) make the case for continued research on early college graduates transitioning to and enrolled at four-year institutions.

Student Performance at Early College High Schools

Research suggests that early college high school attendance has a positive impact on the academic engagement, high school performance and graduation rates, college enrollment, and amount of college credit students earn prior to high school graduation.

Academic engagement. In a study involving 1,607 ninth grade students who applied to North Carolina early colleges that used randomized lottery-based admission systems, Edmunds et al.'s (2013) survey study found students admitted to the ECHSs reported significantly higher levels of engagement with schoolwork and academic challenge. Students enrolled at the 10 participating early colleges also had significantly higher rates of attendance and were significantly less likely to be suspended than those attending traditional high schools. The findings around suspensions were echoed by Munoz, Fishetti, and Prather (2014) in a study of a single high-poverty early college high school in Kentucky, though the authors found no significant differences in attendance rates. Other large-scale studies (Lauen et al., 2017) have supported the notion that early colleges promote improved attendance rates, however, with Berger et al. (2009) citing average daily rates as high as 94%. Attendance and suspension rates may be impacted by the small size, close student-teacher relationships, and high expectations characteristic of early colleges. These factors, combined with required academic support and interactive pedagogy, work to create an atmosphere of "mandated engagement" in which students have little choice but to be actively involved in learning at their early college (Edmunds et al., 2013, p.2).

High school assessments. Research involving both small (Edmunds et al., 2010; Hall, 2013; Kanuika & Vickers, 2010; Munoz et al., 2014) and large (Berger et al., 2009;

Berger et al., 2010; Bernstein et al., 2014) samples of ECHS students indicates that early college students perform as well as or better than their peers at traditional high schools on state-level high school assessments. This holds true for students of all ethnicities and can also result in smaller achievement gaps among racial subgroups when considering only students enrolled at early colleges (Kaniuka & Vickers, 2010). Edmunds et al. (2010) found that in addition to scoring higher on state assessments, early college students are also more likely to take advanced courses and progress more rapidly through a college-preparatory curriculum. Performance on assessments is most improved in early college students who were underprepared (based on middle school performance) to enter the ninth grade, a promising impact given the goal of increasing their access to higher education (Bernstein et al., 2014).

High school progression and graduation. Consistent with their improved performance on high school assessments, research (e.g., Berger et al, 2010; Webb & Germin, 2014) suggests that ECHS students are also more likely to progress from grade to grade and graduate from high school than their peers at traditional secondary institutions. Progression rates from grade to grade at 12 early college high schools averaged 86%, and the Cumulative Promotion Index (CPI), used to predict the percentage of first-year students who will graduate on time, was on average 14% higher than the CPI at each school's home district (Berger et al., 2010). At the national level, 90% of early college high school students graduate with a high school diploma, 12% above the national average (Webb & Gerwin, 2014). Lauen et al. (2017) also found this to be true in North Carolina, where students are significantly more likely to earn a high school diploma within five years if they are enrolled in an early college. However, at least one

large-scale study (Haxton et al., 2016) found no meaningful differences in high school graduation rates between early college students and students at traditional high schools.

College enrollment and performance. As might be expected given their structure, attending an early college high school is associated with a positive impact on college enrollment and earned college credits. Haxton et al. (2016) conducted the first large-scale, longitudinal study of ECHS student postsecondary outcomes. Examining almost 2,500 students who were randomly admitted to an ECHS or traditional high school via lottery systems, the researchers found that students who attended an early college were significantly more likely to enroll in a college during the six years following 9th grade. When the results were separated by institutional type, the impact was positive and significant for two-year institutions and positive but not significant for four-year institutions. This difference is attributable to the majority of early colleges partnering with two-year instead of four-year institutions (Edmunds et al., 2017; Haxton et al, 2016). The type of partner institution impacts the type of postsecondary enrollment ECHS students are likely to have. Lauen et al.'s (2017) North Carolina study found early colleges housed on two-year campuses have essentially no impact on four-year enrollment and early colleges housed on four-year campuses have equally little impact on two-year enrollment.

Although less than a third of ECHS students earn an associate degree or other postsecondary credential at the time of high school graduation, 94% earn at least some college credit, considerably more than the national average of 10% (Webb & Gerwin, 2014). Estimates of average earned college credit at the time of early college graduation range from approximately 15-30 hours (Berger et al., 2009; Berger et al., 2010). ECHS

students enrolled in college classes tend to perform well and have college GPAs comparable to those of traditional first-year and second-year college students (Berger et al., 2009; Fischetti et al., 2011). Several studies have shown that attending an early college high school is especially impactful on the college enrollment and earned college credit of minority, first-generation, and low-income students (Berger et al., 2013; Edmunds et al., 2017; Haxton et al., 2016; Lauen et al., 2017; Unlu & Furey, 2016) as well as students whose home school districts are low performing (Lauen et al., 2017).

While it is clear that most students are not reaching the ECHS goal of finishing high school with a post-secondary credential, enrollment in ECHSs does have a positive impact on overall higher education achievement during the high school years. This impact is particularly notable for the populations underrepresented in higher education that ECHSs were designed to serve.

Student Experiences at Early College High Schools

Current research suggests that student experiences while enrolled at early colleges are largely positive, though not without challenge. Themes that were generated from the literature include perceived support, new (and missed) opportunities, accelerated maturity, the development of a scholarly identity, and struggles to solidify identity and overcome academic underpreparedness, stress, and burnout.

Perceived support and high expectations. Support resources such as counseling, tutoring, and advising are regularly worked into student schedules (Berger et al., 2010; Born, 2006; Fischetti et al., 2011) at almost all—89%—of early colleges (Berger et al., 2009), and students appear to recognize the high levels of support they receive from teachers and staff. Multiple qualitative studies indicate that students at early colleges

perceive greater levels of support from their teachers than they did at other K-12 schools (Ari et al., 2017; Edmunds et al., 2010; Kanuika & Vickers, 2010; Thompson & Ongaga, 2011). Students in Edmunds et al.'s (2010) study of one early college stated that "For some reason all the teachers seem like counselors," and "You can come in here early or late or teachers will make their schedule so they can find time to help you" (p. 360). These results were echoed in a larger survey of 1,607 students where early college students reported better relationships with teachers and more perceived support than participants at traditional high schools (Edmunds et al., 2013).

Early college students also report better relationships and high levels of involvement with school administrators (Kanuika & Vickers, 2010), though this is not always seen as an advantage (Saenz & Combs, 2015). Also of note is that high level of perceived support may not always be present when students are taking college classes. On a survey of students at four ECHSs in North Carolina, Hall (2013) reported that students consistently rated their ECHS instructors higher than their college instructors on survey questions regarding the degree to which instructors cared for them, listened to them, were concerned about their attendance, and offered encouragement.

The elevated levels of perceived support—at least from early college teachers and staff—are tied to greater perceived expectations around student performance from teachers, administrators, and even classmates (Edmunds et al, 2013; Kanuika & Vickers, 2010; Thompson & Ongaga, 2010). One early college student stated that her classmates "don't keep quiet when I score less than an A grade" and that "We [students] hold each other so highly that sometimes teachers say we over think" (Thompson & Ongaga, 2011, p. 49).

New and missed opportunities. Valadez, McDowell, Loveless, and DeLaGarza (2012) conducted a longitudinal, qualitative study that followed six students throughout four years at a Texas ECHS. The students, all of whom would be first-generation college students, recognized the academic and financial benefits of being able to attend high school and college simultaneously. One student described her enrollment in the ECHS as a way to "…get a jump on life and make my family proud" (p. 110). Similar findings are seen in Edmunds (2012), Kanuika and Vickers (2010), and Locke and McKenzie (2016). Students in Locke and McKenzie's (2016) study, which involved 10 Latina students at another Texas early college, appreciated their access to a "fifty percent discount on college" and the advanced pace at which they could complete their education (p. 168).

While attending an ECHS is seen as an opportunity by students, it is not without sacrifices. Because of their rigorous curriculums, ECHSs often do not offer extracurricular activities such as sports, homecoming, and other social events, and students miss out on the full experience of traditional high schools that is ingrained in popular culture (Ongaga, 2010; Saenz & Combs, 2015; Woodcock & Olsen Beal, 2013). Furthermore, students who choose to attend early colleges must leave behind the friends from their middle schools who attend their home high schools. Doing so is seen as another significant drawback of early college attendance in the eyes of some students (Woodcock & Olsen Beal, 2013).

Accelerated maturity (for some). ECHS students perceive themselves as being different from and harder working than their peers at traditional high schools (Valadez et al., 2012). In a qualitative study involving 31 students in their first and second-years at an ECHS, McDonald and Farrell (2012) found that the additional academic responsibilities

at the ECHS served as a catalyst for students to learn how to prioritize and manage their time and behavior. "Because my friends from my other school call me and like, 'I'm having a party' and I'm, 'Oh, I have this assignment'" one student in the study recounted (p. 228). This acquisition of discipline was perceived by the students to be the most significant part of their personal development while enrolled.

Attending classes on a college campus and interacting with older students has been largely seen as beneficial by ECHS students in helping them prepare for the academic and social interactions of college (Edmunds, 2012; McDonald & Farrell, 2012; Woodcock & Olsen Beal, 2013). McDonald and Farrell (2012) found that ECHS students did not want to stand out on college campuses and mirrored the more mature behavior of their older classmates. "If, if you go into a college class and start acting like a high schooler you're going to get stared at" described one student (p. 233).

While the studies mentioned above depict positive interactions between ECHS and traditional college students, concerns exist about the level of maturity high school students possess and how that might impact the learning of others in their college courses (Smith et al., 2012; Williams & Southers, 2010). In a survey by Williams and Southers (2010) of chief academic officers (CAOs) at 24 North Carolina community colleges with ECHS partners, 58% of participants cited issues with ECHS student discipline inside and outside of the classroom. Three quarters of the CAOs reported hearing complaints about ECHS students from adult students on campus. One instructor interviewed commented that "it feels like high school; we (instructors) go over everything at least twice and watch older students just roll their eyes; a guest speaker came to one class and the adult students were clearly embarrassed by the young students' behavior" (p. 28).

Development of academic identity. In addition to helping students learn self-discipline and time management skills, the elevated academic demands at ECHSs can have a positive impact on academic self-efficacy. Several qualitative studies found that the concerns ECHS students had about being successful in college coursework were lessened as they engaged in it and that they felt more confident and better prepared to continue after high school graduation (McDonald & Farrell, 2012; Valadez et al., 2012; Woodcock & Olsen Beal, 2013). In some instances, early college students who had formerly felt pressure to hide their academic ability in order to fit in with their high school peers were able to shed this feeling in college courses. The presence of older classmates with jobs and other adult responsibilities helped to create an atmosphere where achievement was celebrated. As ECHS students experienced academic successes over time, they began to identify as college students and develop scholarly self-images (McDonald & Farrell, 2012). Heitin (2016) describes how some ECHS students even became academic leaders in their college classes because their relatively young age was seen by their classmates as an indicator of advanced standing.

Fischetti et al. (2011) provided quantitative evidence to support these findings. In their North Carolina study, the Learning and Study Strategies Inventory was administered to 70 ECHS students during their first semester of taking college courses. The results were comparable to the national norms, indicating that the early college students saw themselves as having similar levels of academic readiness as traditional first-year college students. The Student Adaptation to College Questionnaire, designed to measure levels of adjustment and functioning in college students, also produced results comparable to those of traditional college students when administered to the same population.

Academic self-efficacy has been shown to be predictive of first-semester GPA in new college students, so these findings are promising (Krumrei-Mancuso, Newton, Kim, & Wilcox, 2013). It is worth noting, however, that student academic self-efficacy and scholarly identity may not always translate to strong performance. After graduating from their ECHS, the students in Woodcock and Olsen Beal's (2013) study had all received a C or below in at least one course at their current four-year IHE. This gap between felt academic preparedness and student performance may result from differences in instructor expectations and the perceived level of support services available at the two types of institution.

Challenges. The structure of early colleges is complex, and attending is not without challenges. Students must learn to navigate the worlds of high school and college simultaneously. As they learn the norms associated with each, they may develop dual identities (Valadez et al., 2012). Some students can struggle with balancing the two arenas, especially when their expectations are not met. Ongaga (2010) found that some students who chose to leave a newly established North Carolina ECHS did so due to what they perceived as the school's lack of social identity and an absence of school pride.

Additionally, the academically demanding ECHS environment is not one in which all students are prepared to succeed. Haxton et al. (2016) found that the impact that attending a ECHS had on students' overall college attainment was most profound for students with high scores on math and English standardized exams (i.e., the most academically prepared students). Locke and McKenzie (2016) took a critical view of the ECHS model when studying underperforming Latina students at a Texas ECHS. The students attributed their poor performance to a lack of experience with advanced courses

prior to enrolling at the ECHS, a lack of organizational skills, and obligations outside of school that made it difficult to take advantage of available support services. One student remarked that her homework had a "50-50 shot" (p. 171) of being completed once she left school grounds because of her responsibilities at home. The students described feelings of frustration and anxiety around their schooling, leading the researchers to conclude that ECHSs are not truly meeting the needs of underrepresented students because they fail to consider them holistically.

The academic demands at ECHSs are challenging even for academically prepared and successful students and are a constant focus in student interviews. One student in Woodcock and Olsen Beal's (2013) study remembered her experience at an ECHS favorably, but admitted that her perception would be been very different had she been interviewed while still enrolled. "At high school graduation, if you had asked me where I was going to college, I would have told you that I wasn't! I was just so sick of school" (p. 65). Survey research utilizing the College Student Inventory has also indicated that early college students experience elevated levels of academic stress while taking college courses in high school when compared to traditional incoming first-year college students (Oliver, Ricard, Witt, Alvarado, & Hill, 2010). These sentiments of stress and exhaustion are common in the literature, and ECHSs run the risk of burning students out if the push to achieve is too strong.

ECHS Alumni in Postsecondary Institutions

Research on early college students has primarily examined their performance and experiences during high school, and there is considerable room for further exploration around this population after they graduate and enroll in colleges and universities (Howley

et al., 2013; Miller et al., 2013). The post-graduation literature that does exist, examined

below, focuses on postsecondary enrollment and degree attainment, typically within six

years of students beginning 9th grade. Apart from a limited number of studies, the

experiences of early college graduates transitioning to four-year colleges and universities

are largely missing from current knowledge.

  Postsecondary academic achievement. Postsecondary enrollment and

achievement is most significantly increased for early college students prior to high school

graduation. Multiple longitudinal studies note that the college enrollment gap between

early college and traditional high school students decreased or even disappeared entirely

after year four of high school when students at traditional schools graduated and began

postsecondary enrollment on their own (Berger et al., 2013; Berger et al., 2014; Edmunds

et al., 2017; Haxton et al., 2016; Lauen et al., 2017; Unlu & Furey, 2016). Still, the

college credit earned during high school makes it more likely that ECHS alumni,

particularly the underrepresented populations targeted by the movement, complete a

degree and do so in a shorter time span. In Haxton et al.'s (2016) study, when compared

to their peers who graduated from traditional high schools, minority students who

attended an ECHS were almost 10 times more likely to obtain a college degree

(compared to four times more likely for White students) and low-income students were

8.5 times more likely to obtain a college degree (compared to four times more likely for

higher-income students) in the six years following ninth grade. The college degree most

commonly earned in this time frame was an associate degree as students did not have the

four years post-high school graduation typically required to earn a bachelor's degree.

However, 4.5% of ECHS students in Haxton et al.'s (2016) study earned a bachelor's

degree within six years of ninth grade, a statistically significant increase over the 1.2% of traditional high school students who accomplished the same. In a similar study involving 1,652 students who applied to attend North Carolina ECHSs, Unlu and Furey (2016) found students who were selected to attend to an ECHS by random lottery were 15.3% more likely to enroll in any postsecondary institution (31.4% more likely if only two-year institutional enrollment is considered) in the six years following ninth grade than their peers at traditional high schools. Again, because the length of the study encompassed only two years after high school graduation, the attainment of a bachelor's degree was not significantly different by high school type. ECHS alumni were, however, 24.9% more likely to obtain an associate degree in those six years than graduates of traditional high schools. Lauen et al. (2017) reported similar results for associate degree attainment and also found graduating from an early college significantly increased the likelihood of enrollment in a four-year institution in the public state system for Black students, though this impact on university enrollment after ECHS graduation was notably not present for White students.

Transition experiences. Existing research on the experiences of early college graduates as they transition to a four-year university, the topic of this proposal, is limited to a few studies focusing on specific cases and a brief discussion by Woodcock and Olsen Beal (2013) as part of a larger study of the ECHS experiences of three students. The research on transition experiences have examined current ECHS students interested in STEM majors in their last semester before high school graduation (Cerrone, 2012), the academic and social adjustment of ECHS graduates who earned at least 60 credit hours prior to enrolling at a public research university primarily serving Latino students

(McCorry-Andalis, 2013), and the experiences of students who graduated from ECHSs partnered with community colleges after earning associate's degrees who subsequently enrolled in a selective public research university (Outlaw, 2017).

Academic experiences. ECHS graduates report both positive and negative academic experiences upon transitioning to a university. Cerrone (2012) and McCorry-Andalis (2013) found ECHS participants felt prepared to engage in college-level coursework at the university, and students in Outlaw's (2017) study cited having already developed time-management and study skills and being acclimated to a college environment as positively contributing to their academic success. The students described new student orientation as being redundant at times because they were treated upon admission as new first-year students even though they had already completed two years of college coursework.

Woodcock and Olsen Beal (2013) found ECHS graduates' perceptions of academic preparedness do not necessarily relate to strong academic performance at a university, however, and this is supported by the dissertation research. ECHS graduates in McCorry-Andalis's (2013) study were significantly less likely to have first-semester GPAs 3.0 or higher when compared to other students with junior standing who had entered the university as traditional first-year students. Although 94% of ECHS graduates expected a first semester GPA of at least 3.0, only 39% actually earned one (McCorry-Andalis, 2013). The graduates in Outlaw's (2017) study of community college-based ECHSs cited notable differences in the academic rigor of their college classes taken at the ECHS and those taken at the selective research university, with one participant stating that "even the hardest community college class was nothing compared to my hardest

here" (p. 116). To compound the elevated rigor, Outlaw's participants reported having to learn anew how to study in a fast-paced learning environment and experienced peer pressure not to ask questions in class, something they had been encouraged to do at the early college. The absence of the high levels of support at the research university that students had become accustomed to at the early college was also noted. Some students reported being given additional support from community college instructors because of their young age, but professors at the research university did not offer any such special treatment. Their college coursework at the ECHS had given a somewhat inaccurate representation of what to expect of coursework at the university, and multiple participants elected to change their major after struggling in their initial choice (Outlaw, 2017).

Students in Outlaw's (2017) study also described needing to adjust their expectations around enrolling at the university with an earned associate's degree. While they praised being able to register for courses earlier than traditional first-year students (registration opened for students based on their earned credits), ECHS graduates who were not able to immediately enroll in their intended major due to missing prerequisites expressed frustration over a lack of course choices. Because their associate's degree had satisfied most general education requirements, some students were forced to double-up on challenging prerequisites (e.g., science) or fill their schedules with electives. The delay in starting their major also meant that early college graduates in Outlaw's (2017) study would not be able to earn their bachelor's degree in only two additional years as they had anticipated.

Participant experiences with academic advising at the university were also mixed (Outlaw, 2017). The institution's decentralized advising structure resulted in some early

college graduates being assigned to faculty advisors and others to full-time staff advisors with varying student caseloads. While some complained of a lack of access to their advisor and short, infrequent appointments, others expressed positive mentor-like experiences, and establishing connections with supportive university faculty and staff was reported as a factor that promoted their success. Positive experiences were associated with advisors who were familiar with early colleges and the academic implications of transferring with large amounts of earned hours.

Social experiences. The limited research that exists suggests the social experiences of ECHS graduates upon transitioning to four-year institutions are not impacted by their unique high school status. McCorry-Andalis (2013) and Outlaw (2017) found similar levels of social adjustment and engagement in early college graduates and traditional first-year students and attributed this to the fact that both populations enter the university at the same time and age. Although they had advanced academic standing and took different classes, Woodcock and Olsen Beal's (2013) early college graduates in their first year of university enrollment described many of their friends as traditional first-year students who they met and interacted with in dorms and at campus events. Some students of color in Outlaw's (2017) study reported experiencing microaggressions and, less frequently, outright racism when transitioning to the selective research university. Though beyond the scope of this review, their experiences may have less to do with their status as early college graduates than the institutional and student culture that existed at the university, a predominately-White institution. The students noted the positive impact that connecting with culturally-similar students, staff, and faculty had on their success (Outlaw, 2017).

Summary of Early College High School Literature

The majority of existing research on early colleges focuses on students while they are enrolled at the unique secondary schools (e.g., Berger et al. 2013, Edmunds et al., 2013; McDonald & Farrell, 2012). It suggests that ECHSs have a largely positive impact on the academic engagement, high school performance and graduation rates, college enrollment, and amount of college credit earned prior to high school graduation. The experiences of students while enrolled at early colleges are also largely positive, but with some notable challenges. ECHS students perceive elevated levels of academic and social support and appreciate the opportunities associated with earning college credit free-of-charge while still in high school. At the same time, they also acknowledge the missed opportunities that accompany ECHS attendance, such as leaving friends at their home schools behind and an absence of the full offering of extracurricular and social events that are part of the traditional high school experience. Early college students feel a sense of accelerated maturity as they interact with adult students in college classes at comparatively young ages, but some struggle to behave appropriately in the advanced setting. Starting college early can have a positive impact on their academic self-efficacy and identity. However, the demands of advanced coursework can result in elevated levels of stress and burnout, especially if the students are not academically prepared.

Research on graduates of early colleges has primarily centered on their postsecondary achievement (e.g., Haxton et al., 2016; Lauen, 2017; Unlu & Furey, 2016). While the sharp increase in college enrollment for EHCS students wanes after year four of high school when their counterparts at traditional secondary schools graduate and begin postsecondary coursework, their head start increases the likelihood that they will

earn a college degree and do so in a shorter length of time. Post-graduation research suggests that this increase in achievement is most pronounced for two-year degrees, but this is arguably due to the length of existing studies—typically only the six years following ninth grade during which there is insufficient time for most students to earn a bachelor's degree—and the tendency of ECHSs to be partnered with community colleges.

Literature on the experiences of early college graduates as they transition to four-year institutions is especially limited, and only a few dissertations address the topic (e.g., McCorry-Andalis, 2013; Outlaw, 2017). Those that do found the social experiences of this population are similar to those of students transitioning from traditional high schools, and the type of high school attended has limited impact on social engagement at the university. Still, because only two studies, each featuring students at a single university, have addressed this, further investigation is warranted. Academically, though ECHS graduates feel prepared from their previous experiences with college coursework, the existing research suggests that their feelings of preparedness may not be indicative of their actual academic performance in the first semester at a university. The one qualitative study (Outlaw, 2017) on transition experiences revealed the adjustment from community college coursework taken at the early college to university coursework taken at a selective four-year institution can be substantial for ECHS graduates, and that this adjustment is complicated in some cases by lower levels of perceived support, both inside (from instructors) and outside (from support staff) of the classroom. Also complicating the transition for students in Outlaw's (2017) study was a lack of course selection and needing to take multiple challenging courses in the same term because general education requirements were largely fulfilled by credits earned while in early college. Notably,

though, Outlaw (2017) included only ECHS graduates with earned associate's degrees from partnering community colleges, and these transition experiences may be different for students matriculating with less earned credit. They may also be different for students who graduated from early colleges housed on the campuses of four-year institutions and who already have experience with university coursework and classroom culture. The present study expanded on the existing ECHS transition literature by including in its participants early college graduates who entered the university with varying amounts of earned credit (not only the 60 required for an associate's degree) and who attended early colleges housed on two-year as well as four-year campuses. Because this study involved a site, described more extensively in Chapter 3, which differs from the selective research university featured in Outlaw's (2017) research, it also sheds light on how ECHS graduates experience academic and social transition at other types of four-year institutions.

Student Transition to College – Tinto's Model as a Theoretical Framework

Tinto's (1993) work on college student integration, part of the model of institutional departure, served as the theoretical framework for this study. Though the focus of this study was not student persistence, Tinto's model (1993) was chosen because it is, as the researcher observes, "also a model of educational communities" and how student integration into those communities influences their experiences in college (p. 137). Tinto (1988) theorized that student persistence in (and, at times, departure from) college is a longitudinal process occurring through three distinct phases. His work draws heavily on that of Dutch anthropologist Arnold Van Gennep. Van Gennep (1960) argued that the passage from youth to adulthood is marked by three phases, each of which is

accompanied by rituals and ceremonies that seek to ensure societal continuity from one generation to the next. Van Gennep's (1960) stages include (1) separation, during which the individual interacts less with members of the previous group (youth); (2) transition, during which the individual learns the norms of the new group (adults); and (3) incorporation, when the individual interacts as a fully functioning member of the new group (adults). These rites of passage, according to Van Gennep (1960), can be applied to a variety of situations, especially when movement is involved, and Tinto does this for student transitions to college.

Stages of Passage in Student Transitions

Tinto (1988) identifies three stages of passage in college student transitions, the progression through each of which contributes to the integration of students in the college environment. The phases, based on those of Van Gennep (1960), are separation, transition, and integration.

Separation. Students in this stage separate from their previous communities, both their previous academic communities—in this case, their ECHS—and, to varying degrees, their social communities (i.e., family and friends). Tinto (1988) argues that both physical and social separation is needed in order for student to fully integrate themselves into the college community. Students typically experience some level of stress during the separation phase, though this may vary from student to student as a result of personal characteristics and the degree of separation. For example, Tinto (1988) suggests that students who live at home do not need to separate fully from their previous communities and may experience less transitional stress as a result. However, this also means that such students may not receive the benefits of full integration in the college community. Tinto

(1988) notes the irony that although students who live at home "may find the task of persistence initially easier, it may be measurably more difficult in the long run" (p. 443).

Transition. In the transition stage, students have separated from their previous communities but are still learning and acclimating to the behavioral norms of their new college community. The experience of transitioning from one community to the next, but not yet having fully integrated into the new college community, can result in feelings of isolation for students. The degree of the transition and the associated stress that comes with it are impacted by both the difference between the student's former and new college communities (i.e., the greater the difference, the larger the transition) and the student's ability to cope with the changes (Tinto, 1988).

Integration. The integration stage occurs when students achieve "competent membership" in their new college community after learning its norms and becoming active participants (Tinto, 1993, p. 121). According to Tinto (1993), full integration into a college environment most often occurs through social interaction with faculty, staff, and other students, much of which originates in a classroom environment. Events outside of class aimed at engaging students do exist, but they are often either brief (e.g., new student orientation, convocation) or do not reach everyone (e.g., student clubs, Greek organizations) (Tinto, 1988).

Academic and Social Systems in College

Tinto (1993) describes colleges and universities as being composed of two primary systems, academic and social, each of which includes both formal and informal elements. The academic system houses all academic engagement, with formal elements including academic performance and class attendance and informal elements including

interactions with faculty and staff on campus. The social system encompasses all non-academic engagement on campus. This includes involvement in institution-sponsored extracurricular activities (i.e., formal elements) and interactions with other students (i.e. informal elements). The link between the two can vary in strength depending on institutional culture, but they are "invariably interwoven. Events in one may directly or indirectly influence, over time, events in the other" (Tinto, 1993, p. 109). It is possible, however, for students to successfully integrate in one system and not in the other. Tinto (1993) points out that social integration, though beneficial, is not mandatory, especially for non-residential students whose communities outside of college may continue to play a large role. Integration into the academic community on campus, on the other hand, is essential if the student is to be successful and remain eligible for enrollment.

Student Characteristics Influencing Student Integration

A variety of individual characteristics that impact student academic and social integration are described in Tinto's (1993) model. Pre-enrollment characteristics such as family background (e.g., socioeconomic status, family level of and attitude towards education), gender, race, ability level (both academic and social), and previous experiences with schooling can shape student transition experiences. Tinto (1993) points out that student goals and intentions around attending college, as well as their commitments (which can be institutionally based or external), impact their transitions as well.

Criticism of Tinto's Model

Tinto's (1993) model acknowledging the impact of pre-enrollment characteristics on student academic and social integration is a response to criticisms of earlier versions

of his theory. Tierney (1992) critiqued Tinto's model from an anthropological lens, noting two primary problems. First, Van Gennep's (1960) rites of passage, on which Tinto's stages of student transition are based, were meant to theorize how ritual is used to transition individuals within a culture, not between cultures. Tierney (1992) argued that higher education is a component of mainstream American culture and faults Tinto's work for assuming that all students are part of that culture. Second, Tierney (1992) pointed out that Tinto's work "never questions who is to be integrated and how it is to be done (p. 611)," viewing student integration from an individualist perspective. This perspective, Tierney (1992) argued, fails to recognize that successful integration, especially successful social integration, may look differently for students based on their socioeconomic status, race, gender, or cultural background. It is important to be aware of these shortcomings, particularly in a study examining the experiences of students traditionally underrepresented in higher education, when applying Tinto's (1993) model to findings.

Conclusion

Previous research (e.g., McCorry-Andalis, 2013; Outlaw, 2017) suggests that despite the unique structure of early colleges that incorporates college coursework throughout the high school curriculum, leaving an early college and matriculating at a four-year institution can be a significant transition for ECHS graduates, one about which we have limited knowledge. The experiences of early college graduates transitioning to university life described in this study can assist faculty and staff at early colleges and four-year institutions to better support the population as they continue their pursuit of a bachelor's degree. Tinto's (1988, 1993) student integration framework provides a useful lens through which to examine the academic and social experiences of these students as

they seek to integrate into a new—and potentially very different—postsecondary

environment. The chapter that follows describes this study's methodology for

investigating those student experiences at one university.

CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

Despite the growing prevalence of early colleges and their goal of increasing postsecondary achievement, research on the experiences of graduates after they leave the ECHS and matriculate at a university is limited (Howley et al., 2013; Miller et al., 2013; Outlaw, 2017). The purpose of the present study was to understand how early college attendance contributes to the transition to university life by exploring the academic and social experiences that ECHS graduates have as they matriculate at a large, public university in North Carolina. In addition to adding to the developing body of ECHS literature, knowledge gained from this study can be employed by secondary and postsecondary educators to better prepare early college students for and support them in the transition to university enrollment. It can also be utilized in efforts to understand and evaluate the effectiveness of the ECHS model. The methodology for investigating ECHS graduates' transition experiences in this dissertation is outlined in the sections that follow.

Research Design

Qualitative inquiry allows researchers to explore phenomena and establish detailed understandings of complex issues. According to Creswell (2013), "talking directly with people, going to their homes or places of work, and allowing them to tell the stories unencumbered by what we expect to find" (p. 48) is the most effective way to develop these understandings. A qualitative design was selected for this study as it sought to explore the postsecondary academic and social experiences of individuals with unique backgrounds, personal characteristics, and academic and professional intentions. Because

undertaking such an inquiry with only statistical analysis would be challenging, a qualitative strategy is a better fit (Creswell, 2013).

This qualitative research utilized a case study design. Yin (2014) describes case study research as an investigation into a bounded phenomenon as it is situated in its "real-world context, especially when the boundaries between the phenomenon and context may not be clearly evident" (p. 16). Case study research involves triangulating data from multiple sources and utilizing theory or prior knowledge to drive the data collection and analysis process. According to Yin (2014), case study research allows researchers to understand complex social issues and is appropriate when (1) "how" and "why" questions are being asked (e.g., how attending an ECHS impacts the university experience); (2) the phenomenon being investigated is current (e.g., the contemporary experiences of ECHS graduates enrolled at a university); and (3) the researcher has limited or no control over events in the case.

Because this study explored the experiences of ECHS graduates enrolled at one university, a single-case study design was chosen with those collective experiences—and the institutional environment in which they occur—treated as one case. A single-case design was also appropriate because of the longitudinal nature of data collection in this study, with students participating in multiple interviews over the course of a semester in an attempt to capture changes in their perspectives over time (Yin, 2014).

Research Questions

The research questions of a study are derived from its purpose but outline the researcher's goals in more specific terminology. Research questions in qualitative inquiries should be "open-ended, evolving, and nondirectional" (Creswell, 2013, p. 138).

The researcher found the middle descriptor to be especially true and revised the research questions that follow throughout the study's design process. Three research questions guided the design and implementation of this qualitative, single-case study of the experiences that ECHS graduates have as they transition to a university. These research questions also shaped the subunits of embedded investigation and analysis within the case and are listed below:

1. How do ECHS graduates make meaning of their academic experiences as they transition to a large, public university?

2. How do ECHS graduates make meaning of their social experiences as they transition to a large, public university?

3. How do ECHS graduates perceive the interaction between their high school experiences and their transition experiences at a large, public university?

Setting

The setting for the present study was a large, public research university in an urban setting that is referred to as "Urban University" or "UU" throughout this dissertation. Urban University was selected as the research site for several reasons. First, UU is located in North Carolina, a state with one of the highest concentrations of ECHSs in the nation, potentially increasing the overall number of eligible participants. Second, the admissions office at UU tracks entering students who graduate from ECHSs, thus simplifying the participant selection and recruitment process. Third, the student body at UU is large (over 20,000) and diverse. In the fall of 2017, according to a publication from UU's undergraduate admissions office, 35% of incoming first-year students and 44% of incoming transfer students were from underrepresented racial minority populations. UU

is the top transfer-serving institution in the state, with 44% of new students entering with transfer status. This, combined with over 100 available undergraduate majors offered at UU, allowed for the selection of participants with a variety of backgrounds and interests that ultimately resulted in a more comprehensive understanding of ECHS graduate transition experiences. Fourth, the selectivity level of UU's undergraduate admissions—the first-year acceptance rate in the fall of 2017 was approximately 66% according to UU's undergraduate admissions office—differed substantially than that of the sites of past studies (e.g., Outlaw, 2017) on ECHS transition, resulting in a potentially different campus environment and study population. UU's access orientation and large population of transfer students—both of which result in a less homogenous student body, culture, and experience—may shape the transition experiences of early college graduates in ways not documented by previous research. Finally, UU was selected because it is familiar to the researcher, and the existing knowledge of institutional structure and systems was advantageous in conducting the study. The researcher acknowledges the potential dangers of backyard studies and took action, described later in this chapter, to mitigate them.

Participants

There is no one answer to the question of how many participants a single-case study should include (Creswell, 2013; Yin, 2014). Larger sample sizes are more conducive to generalization, though this is not often the objective of qualitative research (Creswell, 2013). The present study involved 12 ECHS graduates in their first semester of enrollment at UU, a number selected in an effort to strike a balance between achieving a well-rounded understanding of ECHS alumni transition experiences and not exceeding the resources and time available to the researcher. Participant selection occurred in two

phases as suggested by Yin (2014). First, the researcher sought and received approval for a waiver of consent from UU's Institutional Review Board (IRB) for the purpose of identifying potential participants. UU's reporting system was then used to generate a report of all ECHS graduates admitted to and first enrolled at the institution in the Fall 2018 semester. The report identified 280 potential participants.

Creswell's (2013, p. 100) "purposeful maximal sampling" technique was utilized to select 140 potential participants—half of the total number eligible—to receive a recruitment email. The researcher planned to email the second half of potential participants should recruitment from the first prove unsuccessful, but doing so was not necessary. Potential participants were selected based on available quantitative data (e.g., the number of college credits earned prior to enrolling at UU, the type of postsecondary institution with which their ECHS was partnered, their program of study at UU, and their gender and race/ethnicity) to ensure that diverse perspectives were represented in the sample. The recruitment email summarized the study and participation requirements and offered a small incentive in the form of a $10 Amazon gift card for participation. The next phase of participant selection occurred as potential participants responded to the recruitment email with interest. While the researcher originally intended to use the same criteria with the same goal (i.e., having diverse perspectives in the sample) during the second phase of participant selection, doing so was not necessary because the number of responses was limited. After sending two recruitment emails—the original and one reminder—17 potential participants eventually responded with interest. The researcher replied to each of the 17 but was only able to schedule interviews with 12. Fortunately, the 12 created a sample that met the original goal of having (a) at least 50% of

participants identify as underrepresented racial minorities; (b) all participants enter with

some college credit and at least 50% enter with junior standing; (c) liberal arts and

professional majors from multiple colleges be represented; and (d) at least 25% of

participants graduated from an early college associated with a four-year institution. A

detailed participant summary and individual participant profiles are provided in Chapter

4.

Data Collection

According to Yin (2014), case studies do not have obvious end points, but data

should be collected until "confirmatory evidence" (i.e. evidence from multiple sources) is

obtained for all research topics. Yin (2014) outlines six commonly-used sources of

possible evidence in case studies that include documentation, archival records,

interviews, direct observations, participant observations, and physical artifacts. Data in

this study was collected through the first three, with two rounds of participant interviews

being the primary source. Observations were not part of the data collection process as this

study intended to focus on student experiences as they were perceived by the students

themselves.

Each participant engaged in one initial interview approximately 60 minutes in

length during the second month of their first semester at UU. Initial interviews were not

conducted until the second month of enrollment to allow participants time to have

academic and social experiences on which they could reflect. Initial interviews followed

a semi-structured protocol (see APPENDIX A) that progressed from experiences at the

ECHS and expectations of university life before enrollment to students' academic and

social experiences at UU. A second round of interviews with 11 of the 12 participants

was conducted near the conclusion of their first semester at UU. Though all participants were invited for a second interview, only 11 were available for one. Follow-up interviews were shorter (approximately 30 minutes) and more loosely structured (see APPENDIX B) with the goal of creating longitudinal data by providing space for participants to revisit their previous responses and reflect on how their experiences have or have not changed as the semester progressed (Yin, 2014). Interviews took place on the campus of UU and were audiotaped and later transcribed verbatim.

Additional evidence was gathered from non-participant sources and used to triangulate interview data (Creswell, 2013; Yin, 2014). In order to further develop an understanding of the institutional environment at UU, informal requests for information related to ECHS graduates at UU were made to representatives of offices across campus. Via email or phone, the researcher communicated with officials in UU's undergraduate admissions office, career center, centralized academic support office, and largest academic advising center. These communications did not seek their perspectives but rather were aimed at gathering information on policy and practice regarding early college graduates on campus. Publications, both print and electronic, from UU's undergraduate admissions office were also reviewed to gather data about the student body. Finally, de-identified aggregate data from the Beginning College Survey of Student Engagement (BCSSE), administered to entering first-year students the previous academic year at UU, was gathered from an institutional report produced by UU's student affairs division in order to gain insight into the perspectives of enrolled ECHS graduates who did not directly participate in the study. While BCSSE results from the current academic year would have been preferable, the survey is not administered at UU every year, so results

from the most recent administration were used. BCSSE is a national survey developed by

the Center for Postsecondary Research at Indiana University that gathers data about

entering students' high school and expected college experiences as well as the supports

and opportunities they expect their colleges to provide them (BCSSE, 2018). When

BCSSE was administered at UU the previous academic year, 694 first-year students

completed the survey including 45 that had graduated from an early college. Only

responses from the 45 early college graduates were utilized. Though data generated by

BCSSE is quantitative and differs from the overall qualitative nature of the study, case

study research allows the incorporation of both types of data as it can contribute to a

fuller understanding of the case (Creswell, 2013; Yin, 2014). Non-participant data was

collected during the summer and early fall semester.

Data Analysis

Yin (2014) argues the data analysis process in case studies is less formalized than

it is some other types of research. That, coupled with the large amount of data often

collected in case studies, makes it imperative that researchers using this design enter the

analysis process with a clear strategy (Yin, 2014). Due to the exploratory nature of this

study, the general strategy used in the analysis process was to work the data from the

ground up. Yin (2014) highlights the benefits of "playing with the data" and argues that

the inductive strategies employed in grounded theory research are often applicable to case

studies (p. 136).

Following that approach, data analysis in this study occurred in three phases.

First, non-interview data (e.g., information from key personnel, BCSSE results) was

reviewed early in the fall semester. Memo writing (Yin, 2014) and the compilation of

descriptive statistics (BCSSE results) occurred during this process and was used to begin developing a description of the case context and, later, to triangulate with interview findings. In the second phase, interview transcripts were be analyzed using Atlas.ti (v. 7) software. The constant comparative technique (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Lincoln & Guba, 1985) guided the process. Each transcript was closely read and coded in its entirety at a precise, instance-by-instance level, resulting in 435 unique codes. These initial codes were placed into developing categories that were adjusted, refined, and added to as additional codes were introduced. Category names and rules were gradually solidified throughout the process, with some initial categories collapsing into others as the relationship between codes and categories was further understood. This constant comparative analysis continued until all categories were sufficiently saturated and additional codes did necessitate the formation of new categories (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Ultimately, the 435 initial codes were grouped into 20 total categories, 10 related to academic experiences at UU, five related to social experiences at UU, and five related to early college experiences (see APPENDIX C for examples). Once categories were finalized, connections between the categories were examined and seven themes related to the research questions were identified. The third phase of data analysis included writing a thorough description of the entire case that included institutional context, identified themes, and supporting quotes (Creswell, 2013; Yin, 2014). This description, the study findings, is presented in Chapter 4.

Trustworthiness

Several strategies were employed to maintain quality in this case study. A subjectivity statement is included in this chapter to acknowledge and be transparent about

possible researcher bias (Creswell, 2013; Stake, 1995). In an effort to minimize the impact of that bias, maximize accuracy, and ground the findings in the data, data analysis began with complete interview transcription and granular coding before progressing to a more thematic approach. Charmaz (2014) suggests that beginning analysis in this way allows the researcher to see the data in a new light and helps to reduce the impact of preconceptions.

Following Yin's (2014) recommendations, (1) analysis of interview data was triangulated with evidence from other sources to increase the validity of the findings; (2) member checks were conducted, allowing participants to review key findings from their interviews for accuracy; (3) raw data (e.g., direct quotations) are included in descriptions of relevant themes to establish a "chain of evidence" (p. 45); (4) a case study protocol is outlined in this chapter and was followed to increase reliability; and (5) Tinto's (1993) theory of institutional departure guided the inquiry to increase the generalizability of its findings. While statistical generalization is not possible with case study research, analytical generalization is. Findings can be applied in efforts to understand other cases, shape policy, and refine theory (Yin, 2014).

Finally, because this study was conducted by a novice researcher, guidance was sought throughout the design, implementation, and analysis process from a team of supervising faculty members with expertise in research on postsecondary students.

Ethical Considerations

This study posed minimal risks for participants. The intent of the study, time commitment, voluntary nature of participation, and ability to withdraw at any time was explained in writing to potential participants during the recruitment process. Students

with whom the researcher had directly worked as part of his position at UU were excluded from the recruitment process. Though participants shared personal thoughts and experiences, interview questions centered on academic and broad social experiences and did not address obviously sensitive topics. As an extra precaution, the researcher was prepared, but did not need, to refer participants to appropriate resources (e.g., UU's counseling center) during the interview process. Only the researcher had access to data collected, all of which was securely stored on password-protected networks. Before sharing findings, the names of all people and places in the study were replaced with pseudonyms. Finally, the study protocol presented in this chapter was vetted and approved by UU's IRB during the summer before data collection began. Research procedures did not vary from those that were specifically approved.

Subjectivity Statement

I earned my bachelor's degree in history from a flagship public university with a largely residential student population. A second-generation college student, I was raised in a family that placed priority on—and provided support for—educational performance and attainment. Though I did not take courses at a postsecondary institution prior to my first year at the university, I matriculated with 20 college credits earned from taking Advanced Placement courses during high school. This allowed me, with some summer coursework, to finish my undergraduate work in three years and immediately enroll in an education master's program that resulted in a secondary teaching license. Because of my accelerated degree path, I was often the youngest person in my graduate courses, a situation in which ECHS students often find themselves both while taking college classes while still in high school and after enrolling in advanced classes at a university.

After earning a master's degree, I spent five years teaching social studies in two public high schools. I taught standard, honors, and Advanced Placement level courses and was struck by the at times significant differences in classroom atmosphere, academic engagement, and cultural backgrounds and experiences of students in my classes. I left the secondary classroom to begin work as an academic advisor. As an advisor, I have worked with traditional first-year college students, nontraditional transfer students with a variety of backgrounds, and early college high school graduates matriculating as sophomores and juniors at the age of traditional first-year students. My experiences as a student on an accelerated pathway, teacher to a variety of secondary students, and advisor to both traditional and nontraditional postsecondary students—some on their own accelerated education pathways—has made me interested in the myriad ways in which students experience their education. I include this section on my background in an effort to fully disclose to the reader the mindset with which I approached the study. I acknowledge that this background potentially influenced the way in which I interpreted the experiences of study participants.

Conclusion

This chapter discussed the methodology utilized by the researcher when conducting the present study of early college graduates transitioning to UU. The qualitative nature of the study and case study design was explained along with a description of the setting, participant selection process, data collection and analysis techniques, and strategies for ensuring quality. Plans to minimize risks to participants and other ethical considerations were also described. Lastly, a subjectivity statement was provided so that the reader can better understand the place of the researcher in this study

and consider that information when interpreting the findings presented in the following

chapter.

CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS

The goal of this case study was to understand the academic and social experiences of a small group of early college graduates as they transitioned to a large, public university in the southeastern United States. The researcher also sought to understand how students perceived the influence of their early college attendance on those transition experiences. Three research questions guided the study:

1. How do ECHS graduates make meaning of their academic experiences as they transition to a large, public university?

2. How do ECHS graduates make meaning of their social experiences as they transition to a large, public university?

3. How do ECHS graduates perceive the interaction between their high school experiences and their transition experiences at a large, public university?

Participant interviews served as the primary means of data collection. Twelve participants were initially interviewed during the second month of their first semester at UU. Eleven of the twelve participants were interviewed again in the last several weeks of the same semester (a follow-up interview was unable to be scheduled with one participant). Other data were gathered from non-participant sources for use in triangulating interview data, developing an understanding of the institutional environment, and creating a more robust description of the case.

The following findings are presented in this chapter.

- First, non-participant data—e.g., institutional policies and practices, BCSSE results of other early college graduates enrolled at UU—are summarized to establish context.

- Next, brief profiles are provided for each participant as an introduction.

- Lastly, themes that were generated from analysis of interview data are presented with supporting excerpts from participant interviews.

While three research questions guided this inquiry, as the analysis unfolded, findings related to the third question addressing perceived influence of early college attendance and transition experiences greatly overlapped with findings related to the first two. Experiences described later in this chapter (e.g., understanding information systems, using academic support services, building relationships with faculty) were often directly attributed by participants to attending an early college. Therefore, in an effort to avoid redundancy and to present results logically, themes are organized as they relate to the academic (research question one) and social (research question two) experiences of early college graduates in their first semester at UU. Results related to the third research question are addressed within these themes. Table 2 contains a summary of findings.

TABLE 2

Summary of Findings

Research Question	Themes	Subthemes
#1: Academic Experiences of Early College Graduates Transitioning to UU	Exceptional Preparation	• Knowing the Landscape • Academic Skills and Perspective
	Academic Adjustment	• Unrealistic Expectations • Challenges and Successes
	Connecting with Faculty	
	Impact of Advanced Standing	• Challenging Courses When it Matters • Transfer Complications • Sense of Urgency
#2: Social Experiences of Early College Graduates Transitioning to UU	Unique Status	
	Connecting with Others	• Influence of Early College • Residency Matters
	Ahead on Academics, Behind on Experience	

Non-Participant Data Summary

Publications from UU's undergraduate admissions office revealed participants in this study matriculated alongside over 6,000 other new undergraduates, slightly less than half of which transferred from other institutions. The 280 early college graduates identified as potential participants comprised less than five percent of those new students. UU's access orientation and significant transfer population meant its students' experiences did not universally mirror those of traditional students—if such a descriptor can be used—who matriculate immediately after high school graduation and enroll full-time. The early college graduates who participated in this study were not alone in entering UU after having previously attended college elsewhere, and this, as well as the infrastructure that existed at UU to support transfer students, potentially shaped their

transition experiences. The researcher learned from a series of conversations with a representative in UU undergraduate admissions that early college graduates were primarily admitted under first-year student standards and classified as such, regardless of the number of college credits previously earned. However, at the time of the study, North Carolina legislation mandated that graduates of in-state early colleges be given special consideration when applying to public universities in the University of North Carolina system. If ECHS graduates did not meet institutional admission standards for first-year students, they had the option to be evaluated under transfer standards. At UU, students with 24 or more hours of earned college credit could be admitted under transfer standards and were not required to take standardized college entrance exams. They also, according to the admissions official, did not need to demonstrate a college GPA as competitive as the one required for first-year students. As a result of the policy, ECHS graduates were potentially being admitted to UU who have otherwise not been qualified had they attended traditional high schools.

Outside of the admissions process, early college graduates at UU did not receive special consideration. Officials from the campus career center and centralized academic support office reported that neither unit offered programming targeted at early college graduates or maintained record of the population's use of services. The career center representative noted, though, that the unit offered programming specific to transfer students and such services likely met the needs of early college graduates, as well, due to their advanced academic standing.

Academic advising at UU was decentralized, and procedure varied by college and major. Some majors were advised entirely by professional staff in advising centers, while

others had assigned faculty advisors within their program. Several colleges at UU offered an approach that blended the two, with students starting in advising centers and transitioning to faculty advisors after meeting set criteria. An official from the academic advising center for students with undeclared majors, the largest advising center on campus, indicated that early college graduates there were treated as traditional first-year students and required to meet with an advisor each semester and enroll in a first-year seminar aimed at orienting students to college life. Several study participants described—and at least one lamented—also having required meetings with their academic advisor and enrolling in seminars intended for first-year students. Participant interviews revealed that other advisors or centers at UU approached academic advising based on the number of credits earned, regardless of high school type. One participant, for example, reported being able to opt-out of advising due to her junior standing, and another described taking a seminar designed for new transfer instead of first-year students. In short, the major and college of ECHS graduates at UU affected their requirements related to advising and new-student support seminars.

While early college graduates at UU did not receive special consideration outside of admissions, it should be noted that UU had two early colleges on its campus, formed in partnership with a local school district. The early colleges opened only several years prior to this study and had not yet produced graduates of their five-year curriculums at the time it was conducted. As a result, no study participants attended one of the early colleges on UU's campus. Having the early colleges on campus, however, made student support professionals generally more aware of the population. When asked about services

provided to ECHS graduates, nearly all campus officials initially assumed the question referred to students actively enrolled at one of its partnering early college high schools.

Select results from the Beginning College Survey of Student Engagement (BCSSE), administered to 45 early college graduates who matriculated at UU the year prior to those participating in this study, provide additional context for the participant data later presented in this chapter. Results described here represent only the 45 early college graduates who completed the survey, not UU's entire entering class. Nearly all—98 percent—of respondents reported As and Bs as their primary grades earned during high school. While a significant portion (68%) said they spent 10 hours a week or less preparing for class, 95 percent reported never coming to class unprepared or doing so only sometimes. The majority, almost 70 percent, earned credit for 11 or more college courses during high school. These responses suggest that some ECHS graduates at UU experienced academic success at their early colleges with somewhat limited preparation outside of class.

Still, survey completers generally felt prepared for academic life at UU, and 90% had decided on a major. On a six-point scale, with one indicating students are not at all prepared and six indicated they are very prepared, over 80% of respondents selected a four or higher on their perceived preparedness to write and speak clearly and to analyze numerical and statistical information. Over 90% of respondents selected a four or higher on their perceived preparedness to think critically and analytically, work with others, use technology, and learn on their own. Table 3 displays respondents' perceived academic readiness, anticipated challenges, and anticipated academic perseverance at UU. Note

that only 30 of the total 45 ECHS graduates who completed the BCSSE responded to

these three sections.

TABLE 3

Select BCSSE Results from Non-Participants

Perceived Academic Readiness	% of Responses					
	Not at all prepared	2	3	4	5	Very prepared
Write clearly and effectively	-	-	16.7	30.0	36.7	16.7
Speak clearly and effectively	-	-	13.3	40.0	26.7	20.0
Think critically and analytically	-	-	6.7	36.7	36.7	20.0
Analyze numerical and statistical information	-	3.3	6.7	53.3	23.3	13.3
Work effectively with others	-	-	3.3	26.7	46.7	23.3
Use computing and information technology	-	-	3.3	30.0	36.7	30.0
Learn effectively on your own	-	-	6.7	36.7	30.0	26.7

Anticipated Level of Challenge at UU	% of Responses					
	Not at all difficult	2	3	4	5	Very difficult
Learning course material	3.3	13.3	16.7	33.3	33.3	-
Managing time	-	13.3	26.7	23.3	23.3	13.3
Paying expenses	6.7	13.3	20.0	13.3	23.3	23.3
Getting help with schoolwork	10.0	36.7	20.0	20.0	13.3	-
Making new friends	10.0	16.7	20.0	20.0	16.7	16.7
Interacting with faculty	16.7	33.3	20.0	26.7	3.3	-

Anticipated Academic Perseverance at UU	% of Responses					
	Not at all certain	2	3	4	5	Very certain

Study when there are other interesting things to do	-	6.7	10.0	40.0	26.7	16.7
Find additional information when needed to understand material	-	3.3	16.7	23.3	33.3	23.3
Participate regularly in course discussions	-	13.3	16.7	30.0	26.7	13.3
Ask instructors for help when struggling	-	6.7	26.7	10.0	40.0	16.7
Finish something you have started when challenged	-	3.3	16.7	23.3	33.3	23.3
Stay positive after poor performance	3.3	13.3	10.0	33.3	26.7	13.3

Though they felt academically prepared, the majority of respondents also expected academic challenge. On a six point scale, with one indicating the task would not be difficult and six indicating it would be very difficult, over 60% of students selected a four or higher on their expected level of challenge learning course materials and managing their time. Responses of four or higher were halved on questions regarding expected challenges getting help and interacting with faculty, suggesting that most early college graduates felt comfortable in their ability to seek support at UU when needed. In addition to seeking support, BCSSE respondents expected themselves to demonstrate perseverance in the face of academic challenge at UU in other ways. Over 80% responded with a four or higher on the six point scale that they would be able to study when other interesting activities were available, and nearly 80% indicated at a four or higher they would finish something challenging they had previously started. Also encouragingly, almost three quarters of ECHS graduates who completed the survey responded with a four or higher than they could stay positive after performing poorly on an assignment or assessment.

In addition to academics, the BCSSE addresses social experiences and expectations of new college students. During their first year at UU, two-thirds of early college graduates completing the survey reported they lived on-campus or within walking distance to campus. They also planned to be involved, with 87% expecting to spend at least one hour per week and over half expecting to spend more than six hours per week in campus organizations or activities. Though 50% of respondents expected to spend more than 10 hours per week relaxing and socializing, approximately half also anticipated difficulty making friends and responded with four or higher on the six-point challenge scale (see Table 3). Admittedly limited by the small number of early college graduates who completed the BCSSE, these results help to capture the perspectives of ECHS alumni who did not directly participate in the present study and can be used to triangulate interview data.

Participant Profiles

The following section introduces each of the twelve participants in the present research. As previously mentioned in Chapter 3, a call for participation went out via email to 140 potential participants, half of the total number of early college graduates who matriculated at UU that fall. A goal of including diverse perspectives in the sample drove the recruitment process, and students' race/ethnicity, gender, credits earned prior to enrolling at UU, academic major, and early college institutional partner type (i.e., two-year or four-year) were considered when selecting the 140 to receive a recruitment email. All respondents who expressed an interest in taking part in the study were invited to do so. The three males and nine females participating ranged in age from 18-20 years. Two participants identified as Asian or Pacific Islander, three participants identified as Black

or African American, three participants identified as Hispanic, and four participants identified as White or Caucasian. Three participants attended an early college partnering with a four-year college or university—two with historically Black universities and one with a large public research university—and nine participants attended an early college partnering with community colleges. All participants were in their first semester of enrollment at UU and brought with them previously earned college credit, with five matriculating as sophomores (30+ semester hours) and seven matriculating as juniors (60+ hours). Eight majors from six academic colleges on UU's campus were represented in the sample. Table 4 summarizes this data for participants, all of whom are identified with pseudonyms.

TABLE 4

Participant Demographic Summary

Names	Age	Gender Identity	Race/Ethnicity	ECHS Affiliation	Class at Admission (by credit hour earned)	Declared Major at UU
Anthony	18	Male	African American	Two-Year	Junior	Architecture
Carla	18	Female	Hispanic	Two-Year	Junior	Health Systems Management
Charlotte	18	Female	Caucasian	Two-Year	Junior	Psychology
Emma	19	Female	Caucasian	Two-Year	Junior	Art
Gabby	19	Female	Caucasian	Two-Year	Junior	Business
Jordan	19	Female	African American	Four-Year Public, Large Research	Sophomore	Biology
Justin	18	Male	Asian/Pacific Islander	Four-Year Private, HBCU	Sophomore	Mechanical Engineering
Lucas	19	Male	Hispanic	Four-Year Public, HBCU	Sophomore	Biology
Makayla	19	Female	African American	Two-Year	Junior	Psychology
Myra	20	Female	Asian/Pacific Islander	Two-Year	Junior	Business
Taylor	18	Female	Caucasian	Two-Year	Junior	Education
Victoria	20	Female	Hispanic	Two-Year	Sophomore	Psychology

Note. All names are pseudonyms. Gender identify and race/ethnicity are as reported by participants to UU.

Anthony

Anthony was an 18-year-old Black male majoring in architecture. He had attended an early college on a community college campus, earning his high school diploma and associate degree in four years. Although he entered UU with junior standing, Anthony planned to remain on campus for five years because the architecture curriculum

could not be accelerated due to required studio sequences. He accepted this and was not in a hurry to graduate. His associate degree left room for electives in his schedule, and he intended to use those to complete a minor in sociology. In addition to being an architecture student, Anthony was also part of UU's honors program. He noted that work in both his honors seminar and architecture classes involved high levels of collaboration between students and that his instructors pushed him to think critically and creatively.

Anthony had developed relationships with students in majors across campus, but his closest bonds were with other architecture students who he worked alongside in studio courses. The studio courses included first year and more advanced architecture students, who served as a source of guidance and reassurance to their new counterparts. Anthony lived in campus housing with other first-year students at UU and appreciated the personal freedom and "grown up" atmosphere that he perceived as different from that of his early college.

Carla

Carla was an 18-year-old Hispanic female majoring in health systems management. She had earned a high school diploma and associate degree in four years from her early college and the affiliated community college. Carla originally planned to pursue a pre-medical track but changed her major before the semester began to avoid the large number of advanced science courses required. She found her classes at UU manageable—attributing this to their foundational level—but was disappointed in the amount of instruction that involved "reading off the PowerPoint." Carla experienced intense pressure to perform well academically because she planned to apply to an early-entry graduate program and needed to establish a strong GPA from the onset. She also

felt pressure to acquire relevant professional experiences because her graduation was only two years away. Concerned she may be less competitive for those experiences in the urban UU region, she planned to apply for internships in her small hometown several hours away next summer.

Carla was eager to make the storied "forever friends" of college but found herself refusing social opportunities so that she could focus on academic and professional pursuits. She lived in an off-campus apartment with roommates ranging in age from 20-22. Her roommates were involved in Greek life, something she had little interest in exploring, and that, combined with the gap in their ages, made connecting a challenge.

Charlotte

Charlotte was an 18-year-old White female majoring in psychology. She considered herself to be more mature than her same-age peers and choose to attend an early college against the urgings of her parents who wanted her to have a more traditional high school experience. Charlotte had earned a high school diploma and associate degree in four years. She planned to graduate from UU in an additional two and, after taking a semester off to get married, enroll in a psychology graduate program with the intention of working with veterans as a mental health professional. Charlotte appreciated being able to take courses that directly applied to her major but had to adjust her performance expectations due to the perceived increase in academic rigor and challenges related to online class and assessment formats.

Though she felt more similar to other juniors and initially was not pleased with her on-campus housing situation, which she described as being "stuck in a village of freshmen," she developed relationships with students of all ages and appreciates the

support offered by her resident advisor (RA). She was regularly involved in a faith-based campus organization and maintained a connection to home by visiting most weekends.

Emma

Emma was a 19-year-old White female art major with plans for a career in graphic design. She had earned her associate degree and high school diploma in five years. Emma had positive experiences with her professors, who she described as caring more about her personal and artistic development than college instructors at her ECHS. Though she appreciated being able to take courses towards her major, she had to adjust to the unique nature of art classes because she was not able to take any at her early college and missed out on artistic experiences afforded to students at traditional high schools. Emma noted that the art curriculum was very much designed with traditional first-year students in mind. She was unable to graduate in two additional years due to course sequencing restrictions but expected to graduate early and was reasonably satisfied with the timeline.

Emma saw other students at UU as friendly and approachable. She lived off campus and felt this limited her social involvement but not to a significant degree. Emma attended art events on and off campus, often at the recommendation of her instructors. She commented that her experience at UU had been "not as scary" as she anticipated.

Gabby

Gabby was a 19-year-old White female majoring in business who had matriculated at UU after five years at her early college, where she earned an associate degree and high school diploma. She was interested in working in international business and originally declared that major before changing it to business due to the shorter

timeline to graduation. Gabby described her professors and advisors as passionate and helpful but also noted that her personal connection with them was weaker than the one she enjoyed with instructors and staff at her early college. She perceived courses at UU to be both faster in pace and heavier in content than college courses at her ECHS, and she made a deliberate effort to use campus resources. The prospect of applying for corporate jobs in two years made her feel pressure to start building social and professional experiences that she could add to her resume. She planned to join a sorority in the spring, one semester before she had originally intended, to build those experiences.

Gabby described most of her classmates as juniors and regretted not being in courses with other students in their first year at UU, who she thought might be more eager to make new friends. Her efforts to connect socially were further complicated by her housing arrangement, an on-campus apartment-style dorm occupied mostly by older students she considered to be "pretty set" in their peer groups.

Jordan

Jordan was a 19-year-old Black female majoring in biology with the goal of working as a genetic counselor. Academic achievement was expected in her family. Her parents were educators with graduate degrees, one a terminal degree, and her brother was enrolled at a selective university. Jordan was unique among the study sample in that she had attended an early college on the campus of a large, four-year public research university with an admissions process more selective than that at UU. She matriculated at UU after five years at her early college with sophomore standing. Jordan described her courses at UU as being similar to those at her early college but experienced some redundancy of content when the curriculums did not align. She saw enrolling at UU as a

fresh start and increased the effort she puts into coursework. In addition to more strongly

emphasizing academics, she also felt the need to begin quickly building relevant

professional experiences.

The small graduating class at her early college gave Jordan an "automatic" group

of friends for five years, and the process of meeting new people in a large and unfamiliar

setting proved to be an adjustment. She felt she has accomplished this over the course of

her first semester at UU, however, by developing relationships with roommates in on-

campus housing, with classmates in a small transition seminar for transfer students, and

through involvement in multiple student organizations.

Justin

Justin was an 18-year-old Asian male who had attended a leadership-focused

early college located on the campus of a small, four-year private historically Black

college/university (HBCU). He transferred to UU with sophomore standing, though he

noted that many of those credits did not directly apply to his current mechanical

engineering major and wished he had had more guidance selecting them. The large class

sizes at UU were a change for Justin, and he expressed an initial reluctance to speak up

and call attention to himself as a result. While an ECHS student, Justin often worked

alone and without utilizing academic support services. He began to utilize campus

resources at UU after failing two exams in "weed out" engineering courses early in the

semester.

Justin described himself as an "antisocial person, kind of." He enjoyed close

relationships with his ECHS classmates but admitted that the significantly scaled-up

environment at UU was initially overwhelming. Living on campus in first-year student

housing and taking introductory engineering courses allowed him to connect with other students new to UU. He made friends over the course of the semester but observed that some traditional first-year students viewed him as smarter and more capable than they are because of his early college attendance, a characterization with which he did not agree or appreciate.

Lucas

Lucas was a 19-year-old Hispanic male who had attended an early college on the campus of a four-year, public HBCU. He noted that being on a four-year campus allowed him more freedom in course selection as he was not tied to meeting the requirements of an associate's degree. The decision to enroll at UU was a difficult one, and he refused a full scholarship at the HBCU to change institutions. Lucas entered UU with sophomore standing and was majoring in biology. He was also a cadet in the campus ROTC program and planned to join the US Air Force before attending medical school. Though he found his courses at UU to be manageable, he admitted that they were more rigorous than those he had taken before. Some of his biology classes had been particularly challenging because previous coursework did not address all content he was expected to know at the beginning of the semester. Still, he believed that attending an early college made him better able to manage academic stress and experienced less anxiety than he saw in his peers.

Lucas's social experiences at UU were largely positive. He did not perceive any substantial impact from attending an ECHS and described everyone as being "in the same boat" when it comes to making friends. Participating in ROTC gave him an immediate and close-knit network of friends. He had also developed other relationships through

living on campus and attending campus events. Lucas did not expect but welcomed the extensive social opportunities associated with dorm life.

Makayla

Makayla was a 19-year-old Black female majoring in psychology with a biology minor. She had plans to pursue a career in pediatric health care and entered UU with an associate degree earned while in early college. Makayla had high academic expectations for herself and felt that she was mostly meeting them. Doing so had not been without challenge, though. In addition to adjusting to larger class sizes, Makayla had to navigate multiple math and science courses at the same time because her electives were already satisfied. She perceived this experience as being very different from that of her roommates who were traditional first-year students. She felt family pressure to graduate in only two years but was reluctant to overload herself and earn lower grades.

Though Makayla reasoned that attending an ECHS helped her to be more outgoing, she did not believe it had any tangible impact on her social experiences at UU. Most of her close friends were traditional first-year students even though her classmates were often sophomores or juniors. She was cognizant of her shortened path to graduation and felt "kind of rushed" to build friendships and make connections.

Myra

Myra was a 20-year-old Asian female majoring in business with a focus on marketing. After earning an associate degree at her early college, she took one year to attend a local film school and another to pursue her pilot's license before enrolling at UU. Myra's ideal career was in film, but, recognizing the competitive nature of the industry, she was completing a business degree as a more practical, if only temporary, professional

pathway. Myra was purposeful about using academic support services on campus and developing relationships with her professors, who she saw as a valuable network even after graduation. She attributes these skills to her experience as an early college student. Myra enjoyed taking courses towards her major but felt she was missing the "fun classes" offered at UU because she had entered with an associate's degree. Taking all major courses also caused her to reevaluate her first-semester GPA expectations.

Because she delayed enrollment two years and was the same age as other juniors at UU, she perceived the impact of attending an early college on her social experiences to be negligible. She was an active member in business clubs and volunteered as a videographer for UU's student news outlet. Myra did not feel pressed to graduate early and was instead most interested in gaining experience. She planned to study abroad while at UU and was investigating graduate programs.

Taylor

Taylor was an 18-year-old White female majoring in elementary education and was only able to be participate in an initial interview. She had attended the same early college—in close proximity to UU—as her older siblings, earning her associate degree and high school diploma in four years. Her family expected that achievement, and she felt pressure to quickly complete her bachelor's degree as well. Towards this effort, she had examined UU's catalog while still an early college student and selected courses that would transfer directly to her program. Taylor explained that attending an ECHS instilled within her an intense academic focus. She had high expectations for herself and felt pressure to establish a strong GPA so she could meet admission requirements for her

major. Paying for school required her to work full-time, however, and she was concerned that those expectations might not be realistic.

Taylor believed that having attended an early college heavily influenced her social experiences at UU. Though she was surprised at the level of activity on campus, her ingrained focus on academics, work obligations, and living at home left her with little time to participate. She had trouble connecting with first-year students in her introductory education course, a prerequisite for admission to her major, because she would start major coursework next semester and would not be part of the cohort they were establishing. Taylor also felt traditional first-year students believed she thought she was "so much better" because of her advanced standing, and her friends remained her classmates from early college who also attended UU.

The expressed weight of self and family-imposed pressure to perform academically, progress towards graduation, and work to pay for school, along with her lack of perceived connection to the campus social climate, made Taylor stand out from other participants. Her decision to forgo the second interview may have resulted from these at times negative feelings and a general dissatisfaction with her situation. Though she did not expressly decline the invitation, her decision to forgo the second interview appeared to be intentional.

Victoria

Victoria was a 20-year-old Hispanic female who attended an early college on a two-year campus and entered UU with sophomore standing. Interested in pediatric medicine as a future career, she was majoring in psychology with a minor in biology. Victoria had a challenging time as an early college student but felt experiencing academic

pressure early helped her to develop perspective and better navigate the demands of university life. Unique among other study participants, she reported feeling less academic-related stress at UU than she did before enrolling. She described her professors as generally supportive and willing to help, though she did have to adjust to more lecture-focused lessons and essay-based assessments in some classes.

Victoria choose to live at home her first year to save money, and she commuted an hour each way to and from UU. She arranged her schedule so that she did not need to be on campus every day and primarily only visited for class. Before enrolling at UU, she had not given much consideration to college life outside of academics and was excited about the social opportunities that existed. She joined a service club but described her social life as "essentially on hold" until she could move to campus next year.

Early College Graduate Transition Experiences at UU

The first-semester academic and social experiences of study participants varied. For some, the nature of courses and assignments proved challenging and required substantial academic adjustment. For others, academic life at UU was similar to that at their early colleges. Some participants successfully connected to the other students and integrated into UU's social systems, while others struggled to make friends and find their place on campus. Still, data analysis generated distinct themes. Themes related to the academic transition of participants included a perceived exceptional level of preparation, academic adjustment, connecting with faculty, and impacts of matriculating with advanced standing. Themes related to first-semester social experiences included a perceived unique status, connecting with students, and being ahead on academics but

behind on experience outside of class. These seven themes and their connected subthemes are described in the section that follows.

Research Question One: Academic Transition to UU

Exceptional preparation. Participants universally expressed that attending an early college and having, as Myra described it, a "little taste of college before I actually go to the university," made them better prepared for academic life at UU than they would have been had they attended a traditional high school. They viewed this preparation as easing their transition. Participants reported a greater level of academic self-efficacy than they perceived in many of their peers resulting from their previous experience with collegiate-level academic coursework. Lucas noted:

> Academically, I feel like I have more confidence than a lot of people coming into their first semester in college. I'm just not as stressed as my roommates. I know time management and how to prepare for classes and all of that.

This heightened level of confidence stemmed from participants' familiarity with the college landscape and the resulting academic skills and perspective.

Knowing the landscape. Participants perceived their familiarity with the college environment to be one of the most important benefits of attending an early college. It lessened, as Emma described, the stress associated with the unknown:

> It took a lot of stress out of it because I wasn't worried about what the environment was going to be like. Obviously, a community college is different than a university but it's still more similar to a university than it is to a high school.

Being familiar with the college landscape helped participants more quickly adjust to the structure and systems of UU. Participants voiced their ability to locate information about courses and academic requirements, navigate student information systems on campus, build a course schedule that suits their preferences and needs, and, as Myra explained, have a "general feel of how college operates on a basic level." It also allowed them to begin their enrollment at UU already knowing the expectations of faculty and norms of college classrooms. Taylor observed:

> I learned a lot about what a professor expects and I think that's the biggest thing. I know what expectations are with a professor and what's acceptable in the college classroom, how to act in a college classroom, how professors grade, stuff like that.

Perhaps the most significant impact of being familiar with the college landscape was having already experienced the level of autonomy and personal responsibility needed to be successful. Participants noted this element of their high school experience was distinct from that of students attending traditional high schools. Emma perceived the level of autonomy at UU as a challenge for "real college freshmen," who she described as being "still sort of weirded out by amount of freedom they have." Gabby echoed her comments:

> I came in with a lot more confidence knowing how to be on the level with the professors. A lot of the freshmen are struggling. My freshmen friends are struggling. They're not use to just fending for themselves. They're used to someone holding their hand and having that safety net. I don't expect that.

BCSSE results supported Gabby's sentiment. Over 90% of respondents indicated they perceived themselves as being, at a level of four or higher, prepared to learn on their own

at UU without the "safety net" she describes. ECHS graduates at UU felt their previous experience with college coursework while in high school familiarized them with the college environment—including its structure, sources of information on campus, and expectations of faculty—and the amount of personal responsibility needed to excel in it.

  Academic skills and perspective. In addition to possessing a more developed understanding of the college environment, participants also perceived that the academic skills and perspective gained during their time at an early college made their transition to UU more manageable. Jordan summarized this sentiment:

> I can 100 percent for sure say that the early college has made my experience in the classroom 1000 times easier. I know how to talk to professors. I know how to go to office hours. I know college isn't high school, and you have to study for a college test."

Specific academic skills participants attributed to their time in early college included developing a studying routine, actively participating in class, preparing for presentations, researching and writing, working collaboratively, and, as Charlotte mentioned, "just being able to speak on your feet when a teacher randomly calls on you." BCSSE results regarding perceived academic readiness echoed participant responses. At least 80%—and for some skills, 90%—of ECHS graduates who completed the survey indicated at a level of four or higher on a six-point scale that they felt prepared to write and speak effectively, think critically and analytically, and work with others. Nearly 70% of respondents also reported at a level of four or higher that they were likely to seek help from instructors when struggling. This, knowing when and how to seek academic support, was the skill most universally described by study participants during interviews.

Victoria noted that she "learned how to not just count on myself," and Lucas described the perceived exceptional nature of this knowledge among students new to UU:

> If I'm struggling, I know where to go. A lot of students that just come from a traditional high school, they freak out about something, maybe a bad test grade. They are like, "Where do I go? What do I do?" I feel like I'm always able to tell them.

> Attending an early college also allowed participants to develop academic

perspective by experiencing school-related stress early, helping them to more effectively cope with it at UU. Participants had already learned the pace of collegiate academic semesters and knew to anticipate busy times in the middle and at the end of semesters when major assignments and exams are scheduled. Victoria described seeing traditional first-year students encounter the academic demands of college for the first time:

> It was a little bit before midterms and we would always see freshmen crying because they were so stressed and so sad because they weren't passing and thought that was the end. You would see multiple freshmen just crying and we knew it was normal. We just know it was that time of year and that everything was piling up.

BCSSE results also showed the academic perspective discussed during interviews as 73% of respondents expected at a level of four or higher they would remain positive after performing poorly on an assignment or exam. ECHS graduates' previous experience with college level coursework afforded them a more developed understanding of the ebbs and flows of the postsecondary academic experience and equipped them with skills, particularly the ability to seek assistance when needed, they perceived as contributing

positively to their success. Though participants felt better prepared for academic life at UU as a result of attending an early college, their first semester was still characterized by a level, significant at times, of adjustment.

Academic adjustment. The academic adjustment reported by participants was a result, at least in part, of a mismatch between their previous academic experience in early college and their courses at UU. While participants generally felt they had successfully adapted to these new academic demands, they encountered a variety of challenges along the way.

Unrealistic expectations. Multiple participants observed of their courses at UU an increase in rigor over what they had previously experienced. Lucas recalled that he could "afford to slack off" in college classes at his ECHS, that the teachers were "more lenient," and that it "all felt a little dumbed down." Taylor seconded this, adding "the classes were really easy to pass without knowing the content…it was just knowing how to write an essay." Even though they were in college-level classes, some described extra attention from the instructors because of their status as high school students. Carla explained that the college instructors she had at her early college would inquire about early college student status at the beginning of each term and would "focus more, kind of keep an eye on" those that indicated their ECHS affiliation more than they would other students. Not all participants recalled the same special attention in past college classes, but multiple noted their instructors at a minimum made an effort to know who the ECHS students were.

The lower perceived level of academic rigor at their early colleges and, in some cases, additional support from instructors, contributed to unrealistic expectations of what

classes at UU would be like. Though ECHS graduates anticipated academic challenge—more than 60% of BCSSE respondents indicated a level four or higher expectation that learning course material would be difficult—the previous experiences most participants had with college courses did not match those in their first semester at UU. Charlotte commented:

> I guess my expectation was that the course load was going to be lighter. At my community college, you can usually pass classes if you don't study. Here, even though I know how to study, if I don't then I fail. You don't do good on one assignment and you're failing because everything is weighted so strongly. I feel like that's what I wasn't prepared for…I kind of wish I had taken a class like one here so I had an idea of what to expect before transitioning.

All participants expressed Charlotte's sentiment in some way except Jordan, who attended an early college associated with a four-year, public research university. Citing, for example, the inclusion of multiple-choice questions on mathematics assessments—something she says would have never happened at her early college—Jordan noted that academic expectations at UU were at times lighter that what she experienced before. For the majority of participants, however, transitioning to UU was marked by an increase in academic rigor over their previous postsecondary experiences that exceeded their expectations.

Challenges and successes. Participants described a number of academic challenges encountered during their first semester at UU. Larger class sizes was a common one. Gabby described how this affected her experience in calculus:

Calculus has gotten incredibly harder. I definitely noticed it's a lot easier at a

community college. Whenever I'm at a community college, it's one teacher, 15

students. But here, it's one teacher, 90 students. So there was this kind of

disconnect that was affecting me in a negative way.

Participants did not always view their larger classes negatively, however. Justin

appreciated the ability to form study groups with a greater variety of people, noting that

he had often studied with the same core group at his early college. Large classes were

also not what all participants experienced. Taylor, Jordan, and Anthony reported being in

smaller seminar or honors classes and appreciated the opportunity for more interaction

with faculty they afforded them. It is worth noting that publications from UU's

undergraduate admissions office advertised an average class size of 35, though this is

figure was likely reduced by higher level classes with smaller numbers than, for example,

Gabby experienced in calculus.

Other challenges described by students included a fast pace, lack of instructor-

provided study guides, an increase in essay-based assessments, and discrepancies

between the content covered in courses at their early college and the equivalents at UU.

This difference proved problematic when participants enrolled in more advanced classes

without the prerequisite background knowledge. Lucas, whose transfer credit placed him

in a higher-level biology course, explained:

I have to catch up on almost everything because they're learning about something

completely different than what I expected or what I learned before. I was a little

overwhelmed. Like, wow, this is completely new and different.

Participants in particular described online courses as a source of challenge. Some, unfamiliar with the format, expressed concern that they were not learning as much as they might in a face-to-face offering and that this could result in difficulty when they took more advanced classes on the subject later. Others, already familiar with online courses, noted that those at UU were more challenging. Charlotte, for example, had trouble keeping pace with the content in her online psychology course and described an anti-cheating mechanism that locked her monitor during quizzes and tests. Anxiety she experienced from her locked monitor and working against the clock that counted down visibly on her screen made it difficult for her to maintain focus. She described having previously made "perfect grades" in several online courses taken while an early college student but struggled at times to maintain a passing grade in her first one at UU.

These challenges motivated most participants to utilize academic support services. Only four reported not using supplemental resources, primarily because they did not yet find it necessary to do so. Others reported using a variety of resources on campus, including faculty office hours, supplemental instruction and tutoring offered through the centralized academic support office, and tutoring offered through individual colleges. For some, the use of support services was intentional from the beginning of the semester, a result of them perceiving their classes at UU as having more consequence than those at their early college. Makayla noted that while courses at her early college were free, "I'm paying for my classes now, so I know I have to pass." Jordan echoed this, adding that because she is paying tuition now, she "has to do a little better, like I can't keep getting Cs because it counts now." Others, like Justin and Charlotte, adjusted their study habits after initial difficulty. Justin explained:

I came in with this mindset of I can do it on my own, but after doing bad on some

tests, I knew I probably should probably use resources after that. My friends I

graduated [early college] with who are at other universities are doing the exact

same thing. They're like "Yeah, I can do it on my own," and then a few weeks

into it, "I should probably get some help."

Because academic support offices at UU did not provide resources specifically for early

college graduates or track the population's use of services, confirmatory data was not

able to be collected from their representatives. However, almost 70% of BCSSE

respondents reported low anticipated levels of difficulty (three or less on the six-point

scale) obtaining help with schoolwork. This, considered alongside the 75% of study

participants actively using academic support services on campus, suggests that ECHS

graduates at UU were generally capable of seeking and finding academic assistance when

needed.

Sources of academic challenge for participants in their first semester at UU

included large class sizes, rapid pace, online formats, essay-based assessments, and a lack

of background knowledge from previous coursework. Those that felt it necessary used

academic support services to help them acclimate. Although participants generally felt

they had adjusted to the academic demands of UU, the experience caused some to

reevaluate their expectations. Myra commented that "I was hoping to get all As, but now,

I don't know. Maybe get Bs and be happy with any As I have." It is also worth noting

that one participant, Taylor, had withdrawn from a class after falling behind, another,

Charlotte, was working at the time of her second interview to raise a failing grade to a D,

and four other participants expected at least one grade of C in their first semester courses.

Connecting with faculty. The connections participants established with faculty aided them in successfully adjusting to the academic environment at UU. Promisingly, participants described their professors as passionate, authentic, and genuinely caring about the success of their students. This came as a surprise to Taylor, who expected university faculty to not care about individual students and instead found that her instructors "all have the best interests of students in mind." Though Emma noted that her high school teachers in early college were the "most positively involved" teachers she had ever encountered, she described her instructors at UU as being more invested in her personal development than the college instructors she had while an ECHS student:

> My professors have just been very helpful and encouraging. One of my teachers specifically has been very good about telling you about specific artists and projects and things happening around campus to participate in, things to research on my own time. She's been very, very helpful in terms of growing as an artist and student.

The efforts of professors to connect helped some participants more easily transition to the larger classes at UU. Charlotte felt the one-on-one interaction emphasized by her instructors was "very personal" and softened the perceived impact of having more students in class. Not all participants had similar experiences, at least initially. Carla did not appreciate her professors' reliance on direct instruction and considered not attending class because she could "read the PowerPoint" at home. Her position changed over the course of the semester and she described her professors as being proactive communicators and taking time to address any concerns that arose.

The effort to connect came from participants as well. Deliberate outreach to professors with the intention of building relationships was voiced by nine of the 12 participants. Myra explained her motivation for doing so:

> The relationships I have with my professors, I think it's really important. I always go to their office hours and ask what I did wrong on my homework and stuff like that. I think since I've been doing that they actually remember me, which is pretty impressive since they have multiple classes of the same subject and a bunch of people in each class.

Participants widely credited their early college experience in demonstrating to them the importance of establishing relationships with faculty, and BCSSE results suggest comfort interacting with professors was not unique to the interviewed participants. Survey responses showed 70% of ECHS graduates expected low levels of difficulty (as indicated by a response of level three or less on the six-point scale) interacting with faculty at UU.

Impact of advanced standing. Matriculating at UU with sophomore (four participants) or junior (eight participants) standing affected their academic experiences in notable and often unexpected ways. Participants described having a limited—and sometimes challenging—course selection and its potential impact on their GPA, complications related to transferring credits, and a perceived sense of urgency to establish direction and graduate.

Challenging courses when it matters. Enrolling at UU with substantial previously earned credit limited the course options for participants who planned to continue making progress towards graduation. For some, this meant the inability to take electives they found interesting. Myra lamented:

I can't take any more electives, which sucks because now I'm at the point where I

only have to do the non-fun stuff. I want to take so many courses that you offer

that weren't available to me before because it was a smaller campus. I can't really

take them now unless I just pay for them without any credit towards my degree.

For others, the need to immediately focus on higher-level major courses overshadowed

the inability to take meaningful electives. Makayla, for example, recounted a

disappointing meeting with her advisor where she learned she needed multiple science

and math courses the following semester to stay on track.

Complicating more rigorous course schedules were concerns about their potential

impact on GPA. Carla noted that her remaining two years, "I'm working towards my

major, so I really have to stay on top of my grades." Student GPAs reset upon enrolling at

UU, and participants had mixed feelings about starting over. Jordan viewed the reset as a

clean slate, and Victoria appreciated being able to "come with this new mindset of I'm

going to do the best I can." For others, the GPA reset marked the loss of what Justin

described as a "cushion" for his GPA. Makayla explained that "all my hard classes are

what really matters now" and noted "if I tank on them, my GPA is going to be horrible."

The perceived pressure to perform academically was perhaps most strongly expressed by

Carla, who planned to apply for early entry into a master's program and would only have

her first semester's GPA to list in the application. Gabby, who intended to apply to a

sorority the following semester, was concerned that her GPA would be compared with

that of traditional first-year students:

Of course everybody else coming in is like, "I have a 4.0 GPA". And it's like,

okay, but what classes are you taking? If you're taking a student skills class,

obviously you're going to do well. It's just the easy peasy stuff. But now that I'm into my major the classes are getting more specific and difficult. I'll have a lower GPA to put on my resume, and I hate having to explain it and say that I had different circumstances. Some people don't get it. I just wish that I could take my old college GPA and incorporate it into my new.

Gabby was not the only participant to consider herself more challenged with coursework than traditional first-year students. Nearly all participants mentioned during interviews the realization that entering UU with most or all general education and elective requirements satisfied would result in a more rigorous, work-heavy, and high-stakes first semester.

Transfer complications. Participants also reported complications with transferring some of their credits. This was particularly true of the three participants who attended an early college associated with a four-year institution because course equivalents were not as clearly established as they were with those from in-state community colleges. The UU admissions office published a comprehensive list of transfer equivalencies for credits earned at North Carolina community colleges on its website. While the office also maintained records of transfer equivalencies from four-year or out-of-state two-year institutions in a publically accessible database, such records were less comprehensive in nature. As a result, more credits from these institutions initially transferred as electives until they could be further evaluated by academic departments. Lucas described his classes as "all jumbled up" during orientation, and Jordan had issues with her transferred biology credits not aligning to the course sequence

at UU, resulting in some redundancy of content. Carla, whose her major department required her to take a class intended for new students, also noted content redundancy:

> There's some classes they require you to take, almost like a prospect class. To me it's unnecessary. Why am I in a class for new students? I already know it. I feel like I'm sitting in a classroom wasting my time because they're just telling me things I already know. I mean, I know about plagiarism. And time management? How many times have I heard about that?

An official from the largest advising center on campus confirmed that early college graduates assigned to their advisors were grouped with traditional first-year students and required to enroll in college success-focused courses, though participant experiences revealed this process was not universal. Enrolling with advanced standing was not without benefit, however. Registration opened to students at UU based on their number of earned credits, and all participants appreciated being able to register earlier—and as a result, have access to more classes—than other first-semester students.

Sense of urgency. All participants in this study enrolled at UU with a generally identified field of study, though several expressed a perceived need to solidify their major immediately. Makayla commented that this process needed to start even while still an early college student:

> I'm not saying you have to go to early college knowing exactly what you want to do, but you have to want to know what you want to do because by the time you get to a university, it's a little too late to just be taking random classes. You're a junior and you're supposed to be going out and getting classes required for your major. That's a little hard if you don't know what you want.

Gabby echoed this and highlighted the challenge that lies with selecting a college major before high school graduation. She regretted that ECHS teachers and staff did not place more emphasis on the major selection process:

> Everyone's like, "Oh, you're in your junior year." And I'm like, okay, but I just got here! I feel an extreme urgency because the classes I'm taking right now work towards my degree. I kept being told, "You have time, you have time." Now it's like, you *had* time. I mean, I had that in early college, but I was also taking high school level classes, and it's different to combine those.

> Some participants also expressed a perceived pressure to graduate quickly. Gabby changed her major from international business to business because she had a greater percentage of her new major complete. Taylor and Makayla described family expectations to graduate early and struggled to balance that with a desire to do well academically. Makayla observed that she would prefer to graduate early, though she did not "want to say I graduated early, but with Cs and Ds."

It is important to note, however, that the sense of urgency to graduate was not universal. Anthony's architecture program, for example, was a five-year progression that could not be accelerated with an earned associate degree. He largely accepted this and planned to use the extra room in his schedule that would have otherwise been filled with general education courses to pursue a minor. Emma, whose art program also prevented a two-year graduation because of a limit on the number of studios students could enroll in each semester, planned to do this as well. She anticipated being about to graduate in "three-ish" years. Myra was another a counterexample and less interested in graduating quickly than she was in maximizing her experiences at UU. She planned to study abroad

and "go and a pace I'm comfortable with" rather than hurrying to graduate in only two additional years. Still, some participants intensely experienced the pressure to solidify a major and begin progressing towards an early graduation.

Summary of Academic Transition Experiences

Analysis of participants' first-semester academic experiences generated four themes. First, participants perceived themselves as being better prepared for the transition to university life as a result of attending an early college. Their ECHS experience afforded them greater confidence because they were familiar with the college landscape and had developed academic skills and perspective that made transitioning to UU both easier and less stressful. Second, participants experienced a need, to varying degrees, to adjust to academic life at UU. This adjustment was necessary because of a mismatch between courses at UU and the college courses they had previously experienced regarding rigor, content, and format. Three quarters of participants utilized academic support services on campus to ease their adjustment, a skill they learned in early college. Third, participants were able to connect with faculty at UU as a result of their own efforts—learned in early college—and those of their instructors. They described faculty as caring and with the interests of students in mind. Lastly, participants' advanced standing impacted their academic experiences. The sample described concerns around re-establishing a GPA with primarily advanced major courses, having to take multiple challenging courses at the same time, issues that resulted from transferring credits, and a perceived sense of urgency to solidify a plan of study and, for some, graduate.

Research Question Two: Social Transition to UU

  Unique status. Participants perceived themselves as being unique from other students at UU as a result of having attended an early college. Summarizing this sentiment, Gabby commented "I'm not quite a junior, but I'm not quite a freshman. I'm awkwardly in the middle." The perceived difference caused social angst in some participants when describing their status to other students. Makayla commented that she did not think of herself as a junior even though her credit hours afforded her that status. She also did not consider herself a transfer student because she lacked a "real college experience," and was unsure how to convey her status to peers. Carla experienced a similar dilemma. Having advanced academic standing but, as she described, "missing certain things" caused her to feel different that her peers. She elaborated:

    You don't even know how to explain. They're like, "What are you?" And I tell them I came from an early college, but I don't want to go into my backstory. So at one point I told them I was a transfer and they said "I'm a transfer too, a sophomore." I said I was a junior, and they asked how old I was and I said 18. It makes it weird. You feel weird…I mean I'm proud of it, but at the same time I'm not on the same level.

For Taylor, having previous experience with college and preparing to begin major coursework the following semester limited her ability to relate to traditional first-year students in her introductory education course who were experiencing it for the first time. She described their difference in perspective:

    I'm the same age as all the first-semester students, but most of them are super excited, like this is new, it's going to be fun. Which it is. I am excited. I'm just

not *as* excited because this isn't brand new to me. And I don't feel like I connect

with them that much because I'm not going to be taking classes with them from

now on.

While some participants perceived their unique status as a source of challenge,

others viewed it as an asset. Having previous college experience and at the same time

being new to campus helped Emma to relate to both upperclassmen and traditional first-

year students, to "kind of know both sides of the coin." It also caused several participants

to be viewed as a source of advice by other students in their first semester at UU.

Charlotte, Emma, and Justin reported that other new students asked them questions about

course content and college logistics. Emma was careful not to describe herself as a leader

to other students but recounted being asked questions by classmates who were afraid they

might "look dumb" had they posed them to their instructors or in front of the class. She

enjoyed those occasions and the opportunity to apply her advanced awareness of the ins

and outs of college. However, participants did not always respond positively to their

peers viewing them as more knowledgeable. Justin described his perception that students

view ECHS graduates as more academically capable than others, something he did agree

with or appreciate.

> I think there's a stereotype for early college students that they're generally
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> smarter than normal students, but I think that's not true. We have an opportunity
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> to get ahead, but that doesn't make us smarter. If I say I'm from an early college,
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> they get that I'm smart, and I don't really like that.

Taylor perceived her classmates as having a negative view towards her advanced

standing and considering it a mark of unwelcome elitism. She explained, "What I get a

lot here is that she thinks she's so much better than us because she's got two years of college done." Taylor, who was preparing to begin major coursework the following semester with other juniors, feared her future classmates would have the same perception of her.

Connecting with others. Participants' experiences connecting to other students at UU were inconsistent and characterized by both successes and struggles. Attending an early college was described by some as having a significant influence on their social interactions and by others as having none at all.

Influence of early college. Similar to the academic challenges caused by their advanced standing, entering UU with significant numbers of earned credits created first-semester social struggle for some participants. Taylor was not the only participant who experienced challenges relating to other students as a result of attending an early college. Gabby viewed her self-described status of being "awkwardly in the middle" as directly influencing her connections on campus. Finding herself in classes populated primarily by older juniors resulted in a different experience than she might have had with classmates new to UU. She elaborated:

> I just feel like I'm not making friends at the same rate that I thought I would because I'm in junior classes. I'm not involved with other people because they're not involved with me, and it's hard to make friends that way. They're established, they're pretty set in their friend group and not all "Let's all just get to know each other and exchange numbers," like in freshmen classes that everyone has to take. So I definitely feel like I've missed that.

Gabby felt that students in higher-level classes did not have the same amount of free time as first year students, observing "no one has time to hang out." Others echoed her difficulties connecting to advanced classmates, citing instead that they relate more to traditional first-year students. Makayla, for example, reasoned that she felt more connected to other students in their first year at UU because they shared the similar experiences that accompany being new to an institution. Jordan, age 20, agreed and reasoned that she had connected with first-year students even though she was two years older than most because "they're new to campus and looking for the same thing." In order to build relationships with students in their first year at UU, however, participants needed to be exposed to them. Jordan found that opportunity in a small seminar course designed for transfer students, Anthony in his introductory architecture studio and honors seminar, Lucas through ROTC, and Justin in an engineering course restricted to first-year students.

Aside from class composition, attending an early college influenced participant experiences with building relationships on campus in other ways. One was mindset. For Taylor, the mindset of "school, school, school, always thinking about school" that was instilled in her at early college left limited room for social experiences. Another was the dramatic size difference between UU—which Justin described as having "a ton, a ton of people"—and their former early colleges. Jordan discussed needing to adjust and be intentional in her efforts to meet friends:

> I feel like I've struggled to make friends mostly because at early college, I automatically had 100 plus friends. It was such a small high school and I knew them and they were my friends. There was never a time I couldn't be with

someone. I didn't have to make an effort, you know? But here, it's like I have to put myself out there, which is difficult because for the past four or five years I've known the same people and all of the sudden I have to say, "Hi, my name's…"

Still, half of the participants felt that attending an early college had minimal to no influence on their ability to connect with other students, regardless of their class standing, on campus. According to Lucas, "everyone is kind of on the same boat with making friends," and Emma described students on campus as "very positive and friendly and approachable." Some, like Makayla, enjoyed the increase in institutional size, describing it as "big and easy to find someone just walking around." BCSSE results regarding the anticipated level of challenge making new friends mirror this split. Early college attendance was impactful socially for some participants, but not for all.

Residency matters. Living on campus positively influenced participant experiences. Anthony appreciated his ability to "walk out of my room and say let's go eat somewhere or let's go downtown," and Gabby, who lived in apartment-style campus housing, felt residing there "makes you so much more attached and involved with events that are happening." Even Charlotte, who lamented being "stuck in a village of freshmen" as a junior, later recalled the social benefits it entailed and learned of opportunities through residence hall bulletin boards. In addition to being in close proximity to events, living on campus also provided an opportunity to receive support from housing personnel. Charlotte recounted a time when her resident advisor comforted her when she was upset over a test grade:

> I had just had a complete meltdown after my test and I was out in the resident
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> hall. I was crushed. The RA where I was said, "Let's talk about it." That was

really sweet. She took time out of her day to talk to me and tell me it's going to be okay.

Three-quarters of study participants lived on campus, a proportion of the sample resembling BCSSE data that showed two-thirds of early college graduates resided on UU's campus or within walking distance. Publications from the UU undergraduate admissions office reported 78% of new first-year students and 19% of new transfer students choose to live on campus in the fall term before this study was conducted, demonstrating that its participants more closely resemble first-year students at UU in that regard than transfers. However, four participants—Emma, Carla, Taylor, and Victoria— chose to live off campus for various reasons. Emma felt connected to others through a fellow graduate of her early college who was living on campus and through whom she made new friends, but off-campus living arrangements negatively influenced the ability of the remaining three to develop relationships. Carla's roommates in her off-campus apartments were juniors who had pre-existing social networks through their involvement with Greek life, something with which she was reluctant to get involved and considered doing so to be "paying for your friends." Taylor stated that since she commuted and works nearly full-time hours at her job, she only visited class and the library on campus and did not feel she was having "the college experience." With an hour commute each way to UU, Victoria reasoned that she was essentially "putting her social life on hold" until she could afford to move to campus housing next year. Residing on campus was viewed as favorably influencing the social transition experiences of participants, while off-campus living arrangements, at least for some, were perceived to be a notable barrier to connecting with the campus community.

Ahead on academics, behind on experience. Jordan described coming to UU as "learning the whole other half of college." While participants felt ahead of their peers academically, some, especially those with the intention of graduating in two years, felt behind and as if they were running out of time to have experiences outside of class. Makayla described feeling "rushed" and believed that it was going to be difficult for her to connect to others and campus in the same way as students who enter with first-year standing and have four years until graduation. Multiple participants expressed experiencing pressure to begin having relevant professional experiences given their relatively short time before entering the job market. Gabby explained that while her early college student status felt like an accomplishment before matriculating at UU, it was no longer enough. She now had "to get a move on" to acquire and demonstrate extracurricular skills. Carla seconded this concern of needing to catch up:

> Everyone here already has experience. All these kids are competing for the same thing I'm competing for. They have more on their resume. It's only one semester until my last year and this semester went by so fast and next semester is going to go by faster. And then what? Then I'm going to be graduating. I'm about to graduate and I have no experience. I need to work towards my career now.

Carla and Jordan, both interested in health care professions, expressed the need to begin applying for internships now that would increase their marketability. Because neither had previous experience in a health care setting or an established GPA at UU, they were concerned about being competitive for such internships. Jordan continued:

> I definitely feel like I need to catch up resume-wise. I have friends who are juniors that already go here and they have all this stuff on their resumes. I started

looking at internships and you start looking at graduate schools and I feel like I

just got here and don't have anything I need.

Officials from UU's career center observed that concerns about being behind on relevant

professional experiences were often seen in advanced transfer students, suggesting that

matriculating at UU with large amounts of previously earned credit, a situation in which

many ECHS graduates found themselves, contributed to such feelings. Though anxiety

associated with not having enough experience was strong in some participants, it was not

present in all. Those on a lengthier track to graduation or whose professional goals did

not mandate extensive experience in college did not share the concern.

Summary of Social Transition Experiences

Analysis of participants' first-semester social experiences generated three themes.

First, participants perceived themselves to have a unique status. Attending an early

college provided them with advanced academic standing but without the traditional

experiences or age that typically accompanies that standing. This unique status caused

social angst in some, but others appreciated the ability to serve as a resource for

traditional first-year students. Second, participants had varying experiences connecting

with others on campus. Half of the sample did not feel that attending an early college

influenced their social experiences to any meaningful degree. Still, some had difficulty

connecting with students in their courses or meeting other new students at UU. For

students who lived on campus, doing so had a positive impact on their ability to connect

with others and their social experiences in general. Finally, for some participants,

pressure to aggressively build relevant professional experiences before entering the job

market accompanied their proximity to graduation. They perceived their early college

attendance to have placed them behind others at UU in this regard and were concerned about being competitive applicants for internships, jobs, and graduate programs. Not all study participants expressed this concern.

Conclusion

This chapter presented study findings, both from participant and non-participant sources, that addressed research questions regarding (1) the academic experiences of early college graduates transitioning to a public university in North Carolina; (2) the social transition experiences of those graduates; and (3) the influence those graduates perceived attending an early college to have on their transition. Though their experiences varied, seven themes were generated during analysis. Themes related to academic experiences included exceptional preparation, academic adjustment, connections with faculty, and the impact of advanced standing. Themes related to social experiences included a perceived unique status, connecting with others, and being ahead on academics but behind on experience. Chapter 5 of this dissertation will review these findings, outline key conclusions and implications, and make recommendations for future practice and research.

CHAPTER 5: SUMMARY, CONCLUSIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This case study explored the academic and social experiences of a small group of early college graduates as they transitioned to a large, public university in North Carolina. Additionally, the researcher sought to understand the student-perceived influence attending an early college had on those transition experiences. Data collection involved (1) two rounds of participant interviews; (2) a series of conversations with campus officials regarding ECHS student practice and policy; and (3) the examination of UU websites, publications, and results from the BCSSE administered to matriculating students the year prior to this study. Three research questions guided the inquiry:

1. How do ECHS graduates make meaning of their academic experiences as they transition to a large, public university?

2. How do ECHS graduates make meaning of their social experiences as they transition to a large, public university?

3. How do ECHS graduates perceive the interaction between their high school experiences and their transition experiences at a large, public university?

This chapter provides a summary of the study and its findings, a discussion of their implications and significance, and recommendations for future practice and research.

Summary of Study and Findings

The goal of this study was to understand (1) the transition experiences of a small group of early college graduates as they matriculated at one North Carolina university; and (2) the influence on those transition experiences the students attributed to attending an early college. Because the study sought to explore the complex phenomena of how students made meaning of their first-semester academic and social experiences, and

because the scope of investigation was limited to a single semester at a single institution, a qualitative, single-case study design was selected (Creswell, 2013; Yin, 2014). The single-case study design also allowed the interpretation of participant transition experiences within the context of institutional characteristics, policy, and practice. Tinto's (1993) work on college student integration, part of his model of institutional departure, served as a theoretical framework. Theorizing the college environment as two distinct yet connected systems into which students integrate—or do not—provided a lens through which to explore academic and social transition experiences of participants.

The researcher chose to explore the ECHS graduate transition experiences at Urban University (UU) due to the institution's large and diverse student body, location in North Carolina—home of the most early colleges in the United States—and differences between it and the sites of past studies (e.g., Outlaw, 2017). Also notable, UU was the top transfer-serving institution in the state, had developed infrastructure to support students matriculating with previously-earned credit, and hosted two newly-established early colleges on its campus. After receiving a waiver of consent from UU's IRB for identifying potential participants, the researcher obtained an institutional report of all ECHS graduates in their first semester of enrollment at UU. In an effort to ensure the sample included diverse perspectives, available quantitative data (e.g., college credits earned at time of admission, two or four-year status of institution partnering with their ECHS, declared major at UU, gender, and race/ethnicity) and Creswell's (2013, p. 100) "purposeful maximal sampling" technique were used to select half of the 280 potential participants to recruit via email. Two recruitment emails prompted 17 potential participants to respond, 12 of whom agreed to join the study. Fortunately, those 12

participants created a sample—summarized in Table 4—diverse in race/ethnicity, ECHS

affiliation, academic classification, and field of study. Primary data collection took place

through two rounds of interviews, one in the second month and another near the end of

participants' first semester at UU. Additional evidence was gathered from non-participant

sources and used to triangulate interview data and develop a more comprehensive

understanding of the case. These sources included representatives from offices across

campus (e.g., UU's undergraduate admissions, career center, academic support office,

and an academic advising center), UU publications and websites, and BCSSE responses

from early college graduates during the last survey administration one year prior.

Following Yin's (2014) suggestion of applying grounded theory analytical

strategies in case studies, analysis of interview transcripts started at the granular level and

produced 435 initial codes. The constant comparative technique (Glaser & Strauss, 1967;

Lincoln & Guba, 1985) resulted in the organization of initial codes into 20 categories.

Further analysis of those categories, including the consideration of feedback from

participants, led to the development of seven distinct themes. The themes were refined

and solidified after being crosschecked against non-participant data to ensure they

robustly captured the case in its entirety.

Four of the seven themes related to participant academic experiences. The first

theme, exceptional preparation, described participants' perception that they were better

prepared for the academic transition to UU as a result of attending an early college.

Taking college courses while still in high school afforded them a familiarity with the

college landscape and allowed them to develop academic skills (e.g., time management,

test preparation, speaking and writing, knowing when and where to seek help) needed to

be successful. It also created within them a sense of academic perspective, and participants reported experiencing less stress than their peers who attended traditional high schools because they were accustomed to the ebb and flow of the collegiate academic cycle and had previously experienced academic challenge. The second theme, academic adjustment, described participants' need, to differing levels, to adjust to academic life at UU. For most, a mismatch between previous college coursework taken at their ECHSs and courses they enrolled in at UU mandated the adjustment. Differences in pace and rigor, depth of content, and delivery format were prevalent. Participants adjusted to the demands of UU coursework by utilizing a variety of academic support services on campus, a skill they attributed to their early college attendance. The third theme, connecting to faculty, captured participant successes building relationships with their professors. Describing the faculty at UU as caring and authentic, participants also understood from their experiences in early college the benefit of being intentional about connecting with instructors and made efforts to introduce themselves, be visible during class, and frequent office hours. The approachable and accessible nature of UU's faculty made their efforts easier. The last theme related to academic transition experiences was the impact of entering UU with advanced standing. Included in this fourth theme were participant concerns around establishing a new GPA in primarily advanced courses and without what ECHS graduates perceived to be a buffer provided by introductory or general education coursework. It also described participants taking multiple challenging courses concurrently, complications that arose from transferring credit—some of which were mitigated, and some not, by UU's transfer support infrastructure—and the

perception of some that the pressure to solidify academic direction and work towards graduation was pervasive.

The remaining three themes centered on participant social experiences. The first, unique status, described the perception of participants that they were unique from other students at UU. Attending an early college enabled them to matriculate with either sophomore or junior standing. They lacked, however, the age and traditional postsecondary social experiences held by other students at UU with those standings. Some appreciated their perceived unique status and the ability their experience afforded them to serve as a resource for traditional first-year students. For others, their perceived difference from both traditional first-year and advanced students resulted in social angst. The second theme, connecting with others, captured participant experiences meeting friends and integrating into social communities on campus. Experiences connecting with others varied considerably. Half of participants felt graduating from an early college had little to no substantive influence on their social experiences at UU. Alternatively, some participants struggled to break into established friend groups in class, especially if advanced students primarily occupied their courses. Some reported their academic focus carried over from early college made them reluctant to forgo those efforts to pursue social opportunities. For others, the dramatic size difference between their early colleges and UU's 20,000-plus student body was a source of challenge and required them to be more intentional about meeting friends than in the past. The large majority of new first-year students at UU lived on campus, and participants who also arranged campus housing felt doing so aided their efforts to connect to their fellow students and the general campus community. Being ahead academically but behind socially was the final theme that

related to social transition experiences. While not voiced by all, some participants experienced significant pressure to build relevant professional experiences before their accelerated graduation. Those experiencing the pressure felt their early college attendance placed them behind other students with similar academic standing at UU, and they perceived the need to catch up in order to be competitive applicants for internships, jobs, and graduate programs.

Discussion

Existing research on early college students focuses largely on their achievement and experiences at the early college and, to a lesser degree, their postsecondary enrollment and degree attainment after high school graduation. This case study on transition experiences at UU joins a limited number of existing studies in examining the experiences of early college graduates subsequently enrolled at four-year institutions, each of which featured unique settings and samples. Findings from this study support, contradict, and build upon existing literature.

Situating Academic Transition Experiences at UU in the Literature

Exceptional preparation. The exceptional level of preparation for academic life perceived by early college graduates transitioning to UU is similar to that found in past studies (Cerrone, 2012; McCorry-Andalis, 2013; Outlaw, 2017). Having experienced college-level coursework at the early college was beneficial in acclimating to the university environment, and the skills developed from those experiences continued to be useful. This finding also supports evidence that students develop scholarly self-images and confidence at their early colleges (McDonald & Farrell, 2012) and that they adapt to

collegiate coursework as high school students at levels similar to traditional first and second-year university students (Fichetti et al., 2011).

Academic adjustment. While participants at UU perceived themselves to be academically prepared, results align with those of other studies on early college to university transition experiences in suggesting that student perceptions do not necessarily translate to an easy transition or strong academic performance. Outlaw (2017) examined the university experiences of students who attended early colleges affiliated with two-year institutions and noted the increase in rigor students perceived in their coursework after transitioning. All participants in this study expressed the same sentiment of courses at UU with the exception of Jordan, who attended an early college affiliated with a selective university. The increase in rigor caused some participants to adjust their expectations regarding performance and earn grades lower than anticipated, a finding also seen in other ECHS transition research (McCorry-Andalis, 2013; Outlaw, 2017; Woodcock and Olsen Beal, 2013). Participants adjusted to academic life at UU using academic support services, crediting their early college attendance with equipping them to do so and demonstrating an enduring benefit of the extensive support structures widely present at early colleges (see, e.g., Ari et al., 2017; Born, 2006; Vargas & Miller, 2011).

Connecting with faculty. Contrary to the experiences described by Outlaw (2017) in which early college graduates felt pressure not to speak up in class at their university, participants in this study perceived their professors at UU as welcoming such interaction. They successfully connected with faculty at UU because of both their own efforts and those of their professors, continuing the positive relationships with instructors emphasized at early colleges (Ari et al., 2017; Edmunds et al., 2013).

Impact of advanced standing. In conflict with Webb and Gerwin's (2014) assessment that less than one third of early college students earn an associate degree or two years of college credit at the time of graduation, three-quarters of participants in this study entered UU with junior standing. Generalization to a larger population is, of course, not possible with results from a case study and sample size of 12, but it is worth noting that the participants in this study earned more college credit in high school than averages reported in literature. Existing research aligns with many of the impacts of entering with advanced standing reported in this study. Outlaw (2017), for example, also found early college graduates enrolled at a university experienced complications related to transferring coursework (e.g., content mismatches) and perceived their mandated participation in programming and academic success seminars targeted at first-year students as unnecessary and redundant. As in this study, some of Outlaw's (2017) participants found themselves challenged by taking multiple advanced or major courses simultaneously because credits earned during high school already fulfilled their general education and elective requirements. Finally, participant experiences in this study related to graduation timeline were similar to those in Outlaw (2017). While some early college graduates felt pressure to complete their degree in two years, others encountered programmatic barriers (e.g., course sequencing and prerequisites) to doing so and expected to remain at the university longer.

Situating Social Transition Experiences at UU in the Literature

Unique status. The few existing studies on early college to university transition experiences did not find that early college graduates perceived themselves as unique from other students at their new institution. This research adds that perspective to the

knowledge base. Participants felt different from both traditional first-year and advanced

students, and some experienced social distress as a result because they could not fully

identify with either population. The feeling of uniqueness may begin in early college.

Multiple studies (McDonald and Farrell, 2012; Valadez et al., 2012) indicate that ECHS

students perceive themselves as being different from and harder working than students

attending traditional high schools, with some identifying as academic leaders even in

their college courses (Heiten, 2016). Though not universally viewed in a positive light by

participants, the experience of leading was also evident in this study as several recounted

serving as sources of advice for traditional first-year students new to the college

environment.

     Connecting with others. Previous studies suggest that early college students

perceive taking college classes and interacting with older students while in high school as

beneficial in preparing them for the social interactions of college (Edmunds, 2012;

McDonald & Farrell, 2012; Woodcock & Olsen Beal, 2013). Existing transition research

supports this. Past studies found similar levels of social adjustment and engagement in

early college graduates and traditional first-year students enrolled at universities

(McCorry-Andalis, 2013; Outlaw, 2017). Social circles of early college graduates were

primarily composed of other first-year students who were similar in age and also new to

the institutions (McCorry-Andalis, 2013; Outlaw, 2017; Woodcock & Olsen Beal, 2013).

Findings from the present case study both support and contradict this notion. Half of

participants described their early college attendance as having little to no impact on their

social interactions at UU. They connected most with first-year students who attended

traditional high schools and entered UU without advanced standing. The other half,

however, experienced challenge integrating socially because of pre-established social circles in advanced classes, an academics-first mindset, and the size difference between UU's campus and that of their early colleges.

Ahead on academics, behind on experience. Several participants in Outlaw's (2017) study noted that taking longer than two years to graduate would allow them more time to gain relevant experience for jobs or graduate programs. However, the sentiment of being behind other advanced students in these areas was less prevalent than it was in this case study because only one of Outlaw's (2017) participants planned to graduate early. The experiences of early college graduates who transitioned to UU provides, if not a counter-example, at least an extension on the concern of lagging behind in extracurricular experiences hinted at by Outlaw (2017). They demonstrate that ECHS graduates who intend to pursue a shortened pathway to a bachelor's degree can perceive challenges outside of academics when doing so.

Situating ECHS Graduate Transition to UU in the Theoretical Framework

Findings of this study largely validate Tinto's (1993) work on student integration, part of his model of institutional departure, as one lens through which to view early college graduates' transition to the university. The separation stage is evident as participants left the small-scale environment of their early college and matriculated at UU. Tinto (1993) notes that the degree of separation influences the level of stress experienced during this phase. Participants felt they experienced less stress than their peers who attended traditional high schools because attending an early college exposed them to postsecondary coursework and norms, resulting in a smaller degree of separation. Transition, when students have separated from their previous communities but are still

acclimating to their new environment, is reflected in participant accounts during the initial interview of needing to adjust to the academic demands and social climate at UU. All participants reached the third stage, integration, into UU's academic systems by the second interview and had, even if performance expectations were sometimes altered, learned the norms of academic life at UU and the actions needed to be successful. The same was not true for all participants in UU's social systems. While most had overcome initial challenges and integrated socially, several participants continued to struggle to find their place, supporting Tinto's (1993) notion that academic and social integration are two interrelated but distinct processes. Finally, the influence of pre-enrollment characteristics on student transition acknowledged in later iterations of Tinto's (1993) work are observable in the varying experiences of participants. Taylor, for example, described needing to live with her family and work nearly full-time hours to save money and pay tuition. These actions, necessitated by her family background, influenced the level to which she was able to integrate socially on campus. The influence of pre-enrollment factors was evident in every participant and helpful in understanding their transition experiences.

Conclusions and Implications

Though college enrollment and degree attainment in the United States continues to grow, especially for racially minoritized and first-generation students, these populations remain underrepresented in higher education (MacFarland et al., 2017; Snyder et al., 2017). Early college high schools were designed to reduce this discrepancy by providing students a head start on college coursework before high school graduation.

Existing research shows ECHSs have been largely successful in doing this (Berger et al., 2010). However, most early college graduates do not leave high school with a postsecondary credential (JFF, n.d., a; Webb & Gerwin, 2014), and those that do must subsequently enroll at a four-year institution if they plan to pursue a bachelor's degree. The experiences of early college graduates as they transition to four-year institutions remain largely undocumented apart from less than a handful of studies (e.g., McCorry-Andalis, 2013; Outlaw, 2017) focused on specific cases. This research contributes to extant literature by exploring early college graduate transition experiences at a public university in North Carolina with a diverse student body, large transfer population, and differing (i.e., lower) level of selectivity than some sites of past studies. It also includes the perspectives of participants who earned less than two years of college credit prior to graduation and who attended early colleges affiliated with four-year institutions, making it unique among existing transition studies. Conclusions drawn from the study and their implications for the field are as follows.

Conclusion #1: Academic Skills Learned at ECHSs Are Applicable to UU

Participants experienced academic challenge in their first semester at UU, citing large class sizes, fast pace instruction, depth of content, online delivery formats, and essay-based assessments among the causes. These challenges resulted in multiple participants reevaluating their performance expectations—and, for some, their field of study—over the course of the term. However, early college graduates in the sample generally felt they had successfully adjusted to the academic demands of UU coursework by the end of the semester. They acclimated by utilizing the academic preparation and time management skills acquired while enrolled in college classes at their early college.

When encountering setbacks (e.g., an early failing test grade), they persevered (1) in part because they had been challenged academically before enrolling at UU and were able to keep those experiences in perspective and (2) in part because they had been previously equipped with the academic skills to do so. Participants understood how and when to utilize the variety of academic support services at UU, and they intentionally connected with their professors to enlarge their support network.

These findings are promising. They complement those of other transition studies (McCorry-Andalis, 2013; Outlaw, 2017) in suggesting that despite at least some level of adjustment that inevitably accompanies the transition to a new institution, early colleges are equipping their graduates to be successful in higher education. Though the majority of early college graduates do not leave high school with a postsecondary credential (JFF, n.d., a; Webb & Gerwin, 2014), this study suggests they graduate with skills and experiences—beyond those often acquired at traditional high schools—that can aide in the continued pursuit of a degree. The effectiveness of EHCSs in developing these academic skills is particularly important considering the relatively high percentages of students who have been traditionally underrepresented in higher education enrolled at early colleges (Berger et al., 2010; JFF, n.d., a). It serves as evidence that the early college model is fulfilling one of its core missions (see Berger et al., 2009).

Conclusion #2: ECHS Graduates Do Not Fully Understand the Impact of Advanced Standing

Early college graduates experienced a variety of—sometimes unexpected—consequences when they transitioned to UU with advanced standing. Multiple participants were surprised to learn they would need to establish a new GPA at UU and were concerned that they would do so while enrolled primarily in advanced coursework.

Some experienced complications when transferring credit and, because of those difficulties and course-sequencing restrictions, learned early in the semester that their junior standing would not translate to a two-year timeline to graduation. Others experienced content redundancy when their programs classified them as traditional first-year students and mandated their enrollment in academic success seminars. Matriculating at UU with advanced standing also produced a sense of urgency—to establish an academic and professional direction and begin deliberately preparing for graduate programs or the job market—in some participants who recognized upon transitioning that their post-undergraduate lives were in greater proximity than they had previously imagined.

While early colleges appear to be developing in their graduates the academic skills needed to be successful in higher education, this research suggests alongside Outlaw's (2017) study that they are less successful in facilitating students' understandings of the potential consequences associated with earning substantial amounts of college credit during high school. Understanding those consequences and taking action to mitigate them prior to early college graduation may result in a smoother and more efficient transition experience. The impacts of advanced standing experienced by participants in this and Outlaw's (2017) study indicate that early college graduates transitioning to universities may more often face challenges similar to those encountered by transfer rather than traditional first-year students. The policy of some colleges and programs at UU to group ECHS graduates with traditional first-year students in terms of support services and programming runs counter to this finding. Opportunities that exist to

provide additional or more appropriate support for early college graduates both before and after their transition to the university are discussed later in this chapter.

Conclusion #3: ECHS Attendance Can Influence Social Transition Experiences

Existing research (McCorry-Andalis, 2013; Outlaw, 2017; Woodcock & Olsen Beal, 2013) supports the notion that attending an early college has little to no impact on social integration at four-year institutions. Notably, the experiences of half of the sample in this study align with that conclusion. Perhaps more notable, though, are the ECHS graduates at UU who described challenges integrating to social life on campus. Sources of these challenges included a perceived uniqueness that complicated efforts to relate to other students, established friend groups in advanced classes that were difficult to join, a focus on academics that emphasized performance at the expense of social experiences, and a larger campus social environment participants perceived to be less connected than that of their early colleges. Admittedly, graduates of traditional high schools likely also experience some of these challenges when integrating to university social life. This study provides evidence, however, that early college graduates who struggle to transition socially at a university attribute at least some of those struggles to their ECHS attendance.

Tinto (1993) argues that while social integration is not mandatory to student success at an institution in the same way as academic integration, it is still beneficial. Academic and social integration are intertwined, and successful social integration can positively influence academic investment and performance (Tinto, 1993). When conducting initial interviews in this study, for example, the researcher observed differences in participant satisfaction with and attitude towards their overall experience at

UU between those who reported struggles to connect socially to campus and those who did not. Early experiences of students are critical for their long-term development and success, and institutional actions aimed at bettering those experiences can have lasting impacts (Tinto, 2006). Though only six participants in a single case study expressed, to varying degrees, challenge when connecting socially to the university, their experiences provide campus officials potential complications to consider and seek to avoid.

Conclusion #4: ECHS Institutional Affiliation Can Influence Transition Experiences

Three participants in this study—Jordan, Justin, and Lucas—graduated from early colleges located on the campuses of four-year institutions. The one quarter of the sample they represent is reflective of the 28% of early colleges nation-wide that affiliate with four-year colleges and universities (JFF, 2009). Their experiences transitioning to UU were in some ways unique from those of other participants because of the affiliation of their ECHS. Jordan, whose early college was on the campus of a large, selective public research university, did not need to adjust to the large class sizes at UU and described them as smaller than the college classes she took during high school. She was also unique among the sample in her perception that her courses at UU were in some aspects less rigorous than the college courses to which she was accustomed, a significant difference in light of the level of academic adjustment required of some participants. The experience of transferring credits was also different for these three. UU had a significant transfer student population, most of whom previously attended community colleges in North Carolina. As a result, UU published a comprehensive list of transfer equivalencies for courses taken at in-state, public community colleges. While UU publicly maintained a database of transfer equivalencies for four-year institutions as well, it was less

comprehensive in nature and individual evaluations by departments were required of some courses after transfer. Jordan and Lucas experienced either content redundancy or a content gap because of imperfect transfer credits and their resulting placements, and Justin noted that many of his credits earned during early college were not specifically applicable to his engineering program.

Because this case study on early college to university transition is unique in its inclusion of participants who graduated from ECHSs affiliated with four-year institutions, Jordan, Justin, and Lucas's perspectives are new to the knowledge base. With 28% (JFF, 2009) of over 80,000 students enrolled in early colleges across the United States on four-year campuses (JFF, n.d., b), however, their perspectives are not alone. Important to consider is the fact that UU was the top transfer student destination in North Carolina and had developed dedicated infrastructure to serve that population. At other universities without this infrastructure, graduating from early colleges affiliated with four-year institutions might have an even greater impact on student transition experiences.

Recommendations for Future Practice

Tinto (2006) observes that actions taken by institutions to improve the first-year experiences of students can have positive and enduring impacts on their success in higher education. Recommendations for practice drawn from the conclusions of this study, both at the early college and university levels, are presented below.

Academic Advising and Career Counseling

Participants in this case study expressed the importance of having a generally established, if not solidified, academic direction upon matriculating at UU given their

advanced standing and, for some, desire for an accelerated graduation. In order for the credits earned during early college to contribute towards a bachelor's degree as efficiently as possible, early college teachers and staff should be intentional about engaging students in meaningful exploration around academic majors and career options early. Feelings around both areas will undoubtedly shift as ECHS students gain experience and exposure to new disciplines, but they should be made aware of the importance of entering a four-year institution with a direction in mind. Ideally, ECHS students will establish this early enough to orient their college courses taken before high school graduation towards their intended field of study and avoid the situation in which some participants found themselves of having a large number of credits inapplicable to their undergraduate degree. It would also allow for the exploration of professionally relevant volunteer experiences or internships before high school graduation.

At four-year institutions, academic advisors should at a minimum be made aware, either though publications or trainings, of the sometimes unique needs of early college graduates. An understanding of their transition experiences can help advisors anticipate academic and social challenges and be proactive in offering assistance. If resources permit, they might also make themselves available to students currently enrolled in area early colleges as a resource for long-term academic planning. Connecting university-based academic advisors with current early college students and their counselors could smooth the transition process by helping students refine their academic trajectories and have accurate expectations of their progress towards degree. Campus career centers should consider creating programming specifically targeted at early college graduates

who, at relatively young ages, may require services more similar to those intended for advanced and transfer students than traditional first-year students.

Customized Support for Early College Graduates

Participants in both this and Outlaw's (2017) study indicated that classifying early college graduates as first-year students by default, regardless of advanced academic standing, at times resulted in irrelevant or redundant activities and requirements. Four-year institutions should reconsider this practice. While early college graduates likely benefit from their first-year status in some regards (e.g., being eligible for new student housing and other student affairs programming), requiring them to, for example, take seminar or other introductory classes designed for students enrolling in collegiate-level coursework for the first time is not always appropriate.

Instead, four-year institutions should explore creating seminar courses designed specifically for newly enrolled early college graduates. Such a course could connect ECHS graduates with similar peers and potentially lesson the social challenges some participants experienced because of their perceived uniqueness or from being in large classes with primarily continuing advanced students. It could also provide a vehicle for the delivery of early college graduate-specific programming from the campus career and academic advising and support centers. If resources and interest exist, an early college graduate living learning community that allowed students to live together on campus could accompany and act as an extension of the seminar.

Recommendations for Future Research

The findings and conclusions of this study should be considered alongside its limitations. Based on the academic and social experiences of early college graduates

transitioning to one North Carolina university, they represent the perspectives of twelve students in a single bounded case, and there is considerable room for further research. The results of this study and the few others that address early college to university transition (McCorry-Andalis, 2013; Outlaw, 2017; Woodcock & Olsen Beal, 2013) establish a foundation for that. An extension of existing studies might involve participants at multiple institutions, each representing a case, to allow for the comparison of experiences within unique institutional contexts. Such a study could begin to shed light, though not in a causal nature, on effective practices and policies regarding early college graduates in varying types of institutions. Future research on early college graduate transition should (1) investigate student experiences beyond the first semester; (2) further examine any differences that exist between the experiences of students who attended early colleges on two-year campuses and those who attended early colleges associated with four-year institutions; (3) review practices, policies, and programming for early college graduates at different institutions; and (4) capture the perspectives of faculty and staff who work closely with early college graduates new to universities.

Aside from transitions, additional research is needed on early college graduates enrolled at four-year institutions in general (Howley et al., 2013; Miller et al., 2013). A number of studies show that attending an early college positively contributes to the likelihood of earning a college degree in the six years following ninth grade (see, e.g., Edmunds et al., 2017; Haxton et al., 2016; Lauen et al., 2017; Unlu & Furey, 2016), but the college graduates reported in those studies overwhelmingly earned associate degrees. The impact of early college attendance on four-year degree attainment remains largely unknown. Future quantitative research should investigate this and explore differences in

graduation rates and timelines that exist, if any, between graduates of early colleges affiliated with two and four-year institutions. Existing qualitative research (Outlaw, 2017) and this study suggest that attending an early college, for many students, does not equate to matriculating at four-year institutions with only two (or three) years to graduation. Opportunity for future research also exists around career development of early college graduates. Such inquiry could explore the prevalence and validity of concerns expressed by several participants in this study about their competitiveness for internships, jobs, and graduate programs. It might also shed light on the experiences of students who potentially enter the workforce at a younger age than do most college graduates.

Conclusion

This qualitative case study examined the academic and social experiences of twelve early college high school graduates transitioning to a university. Seven themes were developed during analysis that supported, contradicted, and added to the limited body of existing early college to four-year institution transition research. From the findings, the researcher concluded that (1) academic skills acquired at early colleges were applicable at the university; (2) early college graduates did not fully understand the impact of entering the university with advanced standing; (3) attending an early college influenced the social experiences of some participants at the university; and (4) the type of institution (i.e., two-year or four-year) with which participants' early colleges were affiliated influenced their transition to the university. The number of ECHS graduates in the United States and especially in North Carolina, the location of this study, continues to grow. For this reason, ongoing research that addresses early colleges and their impact on the postsecondary achievement of students is imperative. It is the researcher's hope that

results of this study constitute a valuable contribution towards that effort and that they are useful to both early college and university faculty and staff in improving the experiences, and ultimately the success, of their students.

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APPENDIX A: INITIAL INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

1. Tell me a little bit about yourself.
2. What are you studying at UU? *Potential follow-up prompt:*
    a. What are your career plans?
3. What was it like to attend an early college high school? *Potential follow-up prompts:*
    a. What are some reasons you attended an ECHS?
    b. Tell me about your classes.
    c. Tell me about your experiences at the ECHS outside of class.
    d. What were the best and most challenging parts of your ECHS experience?
4. What did you expect about university life before coming to UU? *Potential follow-up prompts:*
    a. Tell me how you felt about starting classes.
    b. What were your expectations about non-academic life on campus (e.g., student organizations, sporting and cultural events)?
    c. How do you think attending an ECHS affected these expectations?
5. What are your impressions of your classes and professors at UU so far? *Potential follow-up prompts:*
    a. Tell me a story about a memorable experience you have had in class or with a professor at UU.
    b. How do you feel about your assignments at UU?
    c. How would you compare them to those you had at your early college?
6. Have you utilized academic support services on campus (e.g., advisors, tutors, career center, office hours)? If so, talk about your experiences.
7. How has attending an early college affected your academic experiences so far at UU?
8. What are your impressions of social activities at UU? These may be formal (e.g., student organizations and UU-sponsored events) or informal (e.g., gatherings of friends). *Potential follow-up prompts:*
    a. Tell me a story about a memorable experience you have had outside of class.
    b. In what ways have you gotten involved on campus (e.g., student organizations, Greek life, volunteering)?
    c. How (i.e., in what settings) have you met new people?
9. How has attending an early college and entering UU with advanced academic standing affected your social experiences here? *Potential follow-up prompts:*
    a. Do you feel connected to other students in your academic class (e.g., sophomore, junior)?
    b. Do you feel connected to other first-year students at UU?
10. Is there anything else you would like to share about your experiences so far at UU?

APPENDIX B: FOLLOW-UP INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

1. Tell me about your academic experiences this semester, both inside and outside of class. Have they changed since we last met? If so, how?
2. Tell me about your social experiences this semester. Have they changed since we last met? If so, how?
3. In what ways did attending an early college contribute positively to your academic and social experiences during your first semester at UU?
4. In what ways did attending an early college contribute negatively to your academic and social experiences at UU?
5. Knowing what you know now, if you could give advice to another early college graduate on their first day of class at UU, what would you tell them?

APPENDIX C: CATEGORIES AND EXEMPLIFYING CODES

Topic	Categories	Exemplifying Codes
Academic Transition Experiences	Registration	• Art program designed for four-year path • Early registration due to earned credits
	Campus Resources	• Attending study sessions • First-year seminar unnecessary
	Grades	• High expectations • GPA reset not expected
	Faculty	• Good communication from professors • Authentic, excited faculty
	Pressure to progress	• Pressure to choose career and major • Changing major based on time to graduate
	Class Size and Rigor	• Study skills needed to be enhanced • Essay-based assessments
	Transfer Challenges	• Transfer credits do not align • Multiple major classes in first semester
	Advising	• Less oversight than at ECHS • Advisor able to customize plan of study
	Academic Attitude	• Taking courses more seriously now • Emphasis on academics over social
	Academic Expectations	• More challenging courses • Less connected faculty
Social Transition Experiences	Housing	• Living off campus to save money • Friends with suitemates
	Interactions with Classmates	• Missing friendliness of first-year classes • Source of advice to others
	Making Friends	• Learning the other half of college • Concern about making forever friends
	Campus and Community Involvement	• Community through ROTC • Planning to participate in Greek Life
	Social Expectations	• Opportunities exceed expectations • More independence and responsibility
Early College Experiences	ECHS College Access	• Explore subjects for free • Head start on college and career
	ECHS College Landscape	• Understanding academic process • Control over schedule

ECHS Academic Confidence	- Experiencing stress early - Self-advocacy
ECHS Academic Rigor	- Extra support from professors - College classes easier than expected
ECHS Social	- Close bonds from small classes - Interaction with older students