UNDERSTANDING THE COLLEGE-GOING PROCESS OF LATINX/A/O STUDENTS ATTENDING EARLY COLLEGE HIGH SCHOOLS: A CRITICAL NARRATIVE STUDY

By

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ABSTRACT

Early college high schools (ECHSs) have been proposed as a high school reform solution to improve college access and success among underserved and underrepresented students in higher education; however, little to no research has centered the experiences of Latinx/a/o students in ECHS. In response, I used critical narrative methodology to better understand students' ECHS experiences in relation to college going. Specifically, through in-depth interviews with eight students in one ECHS in south Texas, I asked: How do Latinx/a/o students describe their early college high school (ECHS) experience? And what do Latinx/a/o ECHS students' experiences reveal about the factors that facilitate or hinder their college-going process?

Based on students' experiences and reflections, I identified various factors that impacted their college-going process, which I organized into three major themes. Each of these themes represents experiences I found in students' stories, starting with their experiences as they transition from middle school to ECHS (Getting In), then on their adjustment to ECHS (Getting Through), and finally on their transition out of ECHS to a higher education institution (Getting Across). I used a temporal order to (re)tell participants' ECHS experiences as a way to acknowledge the past, present, and implied future of students. Grounded in the voices and experiences of students most affected by high school reforms like ECHS, I offer recommendations for policy, practice, and future research.

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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY

A Reflection of My College-Going Story

Growing up, I viewed education as the golden ticket to achieving the American Dream—or the belief that anyone, regardless of race, class, and gender can achieve upward mobility through hard work. My parents—both Mexican immigrants and migrant farmworkers—played an important role in fostering this educational belief. Not having the opportunity to attend college themselves, they viewed education as the golden ticket to a better life. To communicate the importance of having *una carrera* (a career or college education), my parents would use *dichos* (proverbs) to stress the value of an education. Among one of the many *dichos* that has stayed with me over the years is the one that reminds me that education is a lifetime gift.

> *Cuando muera, no te puedo dejar dinero, ni bienes de valor. Lo único que te puedo dejar es una educación. Nadie puede quitarte tu educación* [When I die, I cannot leave you money nor any valuable goods. The only thing I can leave you with is an education. No one can take your education away from you].

My college aspirations were particularly fueled by my mother's *consejos* (advice) to delay marriage until I was educated and self-reliant: "*Si un día te deja el hombre, al menos tienes tu educación* [If one day he leaves you, at least you have your education]." Seeing both of my parents work back-breaking jobs in triple-digit temperatures with little pay solidified my *ganas* (desire) to honor my parents' sacrifices and go to college.

Determined to have *una carrera*, I navigated my educational journey thinking that my success was dependent on my good choices and, most importantly, my hard work. I spent my childhood and most of my college career not fully understanding how being a Latina from a migrant farmworking family in south Texas affected my access to opportunities. Although I lived and grew up in one of the poorest counties in the nation, I never considered my upbringing as an impediment to my future successes. My access to college-related opportunities as a high school student through the Gaining Early Awareness and

Readiness for Undergraduate Program[1] (GEAR UP)—a federal grant program designed to increase the number of low-income students in postsecondary education—placed me in a position of privilege that I did not quite understand at the time. Moreover, listening to my family's *historias* (stories) about growing up in Mexico and their lack of educational opportunities helped me put hardships into perspective. I assumed that hard work and being able to take college-level courses—a privilege that was not afforded to my parents—was more than enough to earn my golden ticket to success.

It has been nearly 10 years since I went through the college-going process as a high school student. Since then, I have navigated the language and culture of higher education and reflected on the mindsets that shaped my upbringing and prior experiences. My doctoral preparation, specifically, has helped me understand college access at a deeper level, giving me the space, knowledge, and skills to identify and challenge the structural barriers that students and their families encounter as they navigate the K–20 pipeline. Learning about the historical (and current) inequities[2] that students and families face as they try to access and succeed in higher education has shifted how I view education.

Reflecting on my personal experience and engaging with the college-going literature has made me realize that social mobility through education is a product of access. However, as I have come to understand, access is mediated by power structures and brokers[3] (Gildersleeve et al., 2015) that can create, maintain, and/or restrict students' access to educational resources and opportunities, inherently enabling or constraining the educational pathways of students and families. From this point of view, the story of education as an engine of equal opportunity—one that I wholeheartedly believed in as a child and

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[1] Through GEAR UP I was provided with multiple access opportunities that enhanced my college-going process. For example, I had the opportunity to take advanced college-level courses with professors, visit different college campuses across Texas, and participate in college-related workshops and college entrance exam preparation courses. GEAR UP played a tremendous role in my access to college information and opportunities, and I remain grateful for the educational leaders who explicitly worked to address issues of equity among low-income students.

[2] Inequities are exclusionary practices, policies, and/or unspoken rules that do not take into consideration the unique needs and challenges that students and families experience as a result of power asymmetries and structural racism (Witham et al., 2015).

[3] Power structures and brokers (also used interchangeably with systems of power) are rules, norms, practices, and/or social roles within a system (e.g., federal, state, local, and/or institutional) that result in an imbalance of power between people. These systems create and/or maintain differential access to resources and opportunities.

teenager—is now, I believe, a fabricated idea that disregards the structural barriers found in students' educational pipelines.

Power structures and brokers have long blamed social inequities on individual failures and/or students' social, cultural, and educational backgrounds, inevitably harming groups located outside structures of privilege (Milner, 2012; Sundquist, 2002). Although I still think that my parents' greatest gift to my siblings and me was paving a road for us to earn an education, I no longer believe in the American Dream ideology nor do I believe that making right choices and working hard are the key ingredients to a success story.

The Power of Storytelling

I begin this chapter by sharing my college-going story and a reflection of it because it provides context into how I approach my research and demonstrates the power of storytelling through narrative. My family's *consejos*, *dichos*, and *historias*—all forms of cultural wealth[4]—were integral to my college-going process. In reflecting on my story, I acknowledge that not all students will have the same level of financial and emotional support as I did and that, for many students, financing college, even with scholarships or loans, remains a legitimate and overwhelming concern (Martinez et al., 2018). I also realize that programs like GEAR UP, while invaluable, rely on the mythic language of equal opportunity as they provide educational services to only selected cohort of students (Sundquist, 2002). As such, I do not assume that my college-going process is generalizable to other Latinx/a/o[5] students. Instead, I believe that each student has their own college-going story—based on their unique aspirations, lived experiences,

[4] Yosso (2005) defines cultural wealth as an "array of knowledge, skills, abilities, and contacts possessed and utilized by Communities of Color to survive and resist marco- and micro-forms of oppression" (p. 77).

[5] I use the term "Latinx/a/o" as an inclusive term for people who self-identify as having racial or ethnic roots in Latin America, South America, Mexico, and parts of the Caribbean. The order of the letters following "Latin-" are intentionally placed to disrupt the Spanish binary gender of the term "Latina/o" (Salinas et al., 2020). I also intentionally opted to use "Latinx/a/o" over "Latinx" when specifically referring to groups of people in an effort to not dilute the experiences and realities of gender-nonconforming individuals who self-identify as "Latinx" (see Salinas & Lozano (2017) for a comprehensive review on the term "Latinx" and Salinas (2020) for further discussion on the term "Latinx/a/o"). When referring to participants, I use the gendered identifying forms they selected as their personal preference (e.g., Latina, Latino, Latinx, Hispanic, Mexican American, etc.). When discussing literature, I use the same terms that authors used (e.g., "Hispanic," "Latina," "Latino," "Latina/o," and "Latinx") to maintain the integrity of the literature being referenced.

and access to opportunities. Indeed, throughout the years, scholars have documented the various college-going pathways that Latinx/a/o students take.

In an effort to understand the college-going process of students, scholars, for example, have attempted to highlight students' experiences with college access and preparation (e.g., Allen et al., 2020; Marrun, 2020; Martinez et al., 2018). These studies have been foundational for understanding Latinx/a/o students' college aspirations (Ceja, 2004), the important role family plays in students' college-going process (Ceja, 2006; Liou et al., 2009; Kiyama, 2010, 2011), and the significance of students being able to access and make sense of college information (Alvarez, 2010). However, only a handful of scholars have explored the perceptions of Latinx/a/o students who specifically attend early college high schools (ECHSs) (e.g., Duncheon, 2020; Schaefer & Rivera, 2016; Woodcock & Beal, 2013).

The ECHS model is of particular interest in the investigation of college going because it was designed to reduce barriers to college access and promote college readiness through structural changes of opportunity, such as establishing a direct and intentional pathway for underserved students to earn college credit and offering students specific guidance and resources on how to navigate these courses (Hall, 2013; Vargas et al., 2017). An underlying assumption of the ECHS model is that students will—with the resources and guidance provided—be motivated and prepared to earn a postsecondary degree. Missing from the general college-going and ECHS literature, however, is a deeper understanding of how Latinx/a/o students attending an ECHS navigate their college-going process.[6]

In this study, I used a qualitative research design to address this noticeable gap in the higher education literature. Specifically, I used critical narrative methodology to understand students' ECHS experiences in relation to college going and asked:

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[6] For this study, I reconceptualized the notion of college going to include the lived experiences of ECHS students who constantly *cross borders* given their dual identities as both high school and college students (Brooks, 2013). Borrowing from the work of Acevedo-Gil (2017) and Cox (2016), I specifically defined the college-going process as the negotiations, decisions, and actions that students engage in when planning and preparing for a postsecondary education or career.

1. How do Latinx/a/o students describe their early college high school (ECHS) experience?
    a. What do Latinx/a/o students' ECHS experiences reveal about the factors that facilitate or hinder their college-going process?

To set up the context for this study, in this chapter, I provide key background information on Latinx/a/o students, outline the problem this study aimed to address, and explain the purpose of the study. I follow these sections with an overview of my research design and the significance of the study to the field of higher education. Lastly, I conclude with an overview of how I organized my dissertation (see Appendix A for a description of key definitions used throughout the dissertation).

Background of the Study

In this section, I discuss key information needed to understand the nature, purpose, and significance of the study. I start by first providing an overview on the status of Latinx/a/o students in the educational pipeline, which includes a snapshot of the educational progress Latinxs/as/os have made over time and the opportunity gaps that continue to exist. I then describe the barriers that Latinx/a/o students face as they navigate their college-going process. I close with an overview of the ECHS model, which was designed specifically to address college access barriers and to prepare students for a postsecondary education. Together, this information points to the importance of and need for understanding the ECHS experiences and perceptions of Latinx/a/o students in relation to college going.

The Status of Latinx/a/o Students in the Educational Pipeline

In 2019, Latinxs/as/os were the largest non-White ethnic group in the United States, totaling nearly 61 million, or about 18% of the population (Noe-Bustamante et al., 2020). In the last 20 years, Latinxs/as/os have made steady progress in many areas of the educational pipeline.[7] For example, the overall high school dropout rate among Hispanic youth decreased from 21.0% in 2006 to 8.2% in 2017

[7] The educational pipeline is often viewed as a key avenue to increase the social and economic opportunities of Latinxs/as/os (Liu, 2011, p. 4).

(NCES, 2019a) and, in 2018, the college enrollment rate among Hispanic students between the ages of 18–24 increased to 36%, compared to 22% in 2000 (NCES, 2020).

While Latinx/a/o students have made significant strides toward closing the college enrollment gap, recent data from the National Student Clearinghouse (NSC, 2021) shows that Latinx/a/o students are no longer going to college at the same rate as before the pandemic. Between fall 2019 and 2021, undergraduate enrollment rates among Latinx students decreased by 5.1% (NSC, 2021). This decline in college enrollment not only threatens to halt the tremendous progress Latinxs/as/os have made throughout the educational pipeline but could also widen the persistent equity gaps[8] that exist between Latinxs/as/os and other racial/ethnic groups in the United States. For example, Latinx/a/o students are more likely than their counterparts to delay their entry into college after high school (O'Connor et al., 2010); less likely to take out loans to fund their postsecondary education (Kim, 2004; Lopez, 2013; McDonough & Calderone, 2006); and more likely to apply to fewer postsecondary institutions (Hurtado et al., 1997; Martinez & Cervera, 2012). Latinx/a/o students who attend college are also more likely to be first-generation college-goers when compared to their racial/ethnic peers.

Educational trends also show that a majority of Latinx/a/o students remain underrepresented in selective 4-year institutions (Carnevale & Rose, 2003) and overrepresented in 2-year institutions (or community colleges) when compared to other racial/ethnic student groups (Carolan-Silva & Reyes, 2013; Fry, 2011; Ma & Baum, 2016). For example, in 2014, over half of Hispanics (56%) were enrolled in 2-year institutions compared to 44% of Black, 39% of White, and 40% of Asian students (Ma & Baum, 2016). Even when controlling for socioeconomic status (SES), prior academic achievement, degree intention, and state demographic differences, scholars have found that Latinx/a/o students are still more likely than their peers to choose a 2-year institution over a 4-year institution (Gonzalez, 2012; Kurlaender,

[8] I use the term "equity gap" or "opportunity gap" instead of "achievement gap" to draw attention to the unequal and inequitable allocation of resources and opportunities among minoritize students (e.g., Darden & Cavendish, 2011). In using "equity gap" or "opportunity gap" instead of "achievement gap," I hope to draw attention to the power structures and barriers that lead to the perceived achievement gaps between racial/ethnic groups.

2006; O'Connor et al., 2010; Person & Rosenbaum, 2006). Because more Latinxs/as/os tend to opt for community colleges, researchers have conducted studies to better understand this phenomenon and have found various leading factors contributing to Latinxs/as/os community college choice including low-cost, proximity to home, geographic accessibility, programmatic flexibility, and access to social capital (Gonzalez, 2012; Lopez, 2013; McDonough & Calderone, 2006; Morest, 2013; O'Conner et al., 2010). For many Latinx/a/o students, community colleges serve as a critical entry point to higher education (Martinez & Fernandez, 2004; Sullivan, 2007). Flexible schedules, evening classes, and open admissions at community colleges help facilitate the college-going process of students who have familial and personal responsibilities outside school (Martinez & Fernandez, 2004).

However, a "rise in access to higher education" does not mean that students' educational journeys will be "matched with equal access to a high-quality experience" or high-quality opportunities (Teranishi & Bezbatchenko, 2015, p. 246). Scholars have argued that earning only a certificate or associate degree does not equalize the educational pipeline among student groups and may actually lead to further stratification between racial/ethnic student groups (Teranishi & Bezbatchenko, 2015). This is because bachelor degree holders, who are disproportionately White, not only earn more than those with only a credential or an associate degree[9] (Ma et al., 2019), but they are also "trained for a lifetime of jobs in a rapidly evolving economy" (Teranishi & Bezbatchenko, 2015, p. 245).

In many cases, Latinx/a/o students enroll at community colleges seeing it as a stepping-stone to a 4-year institution and bachelor's degree (Crisp & Nora, 2010; Martinez & Fernandez, 2004; Zarate & Burciaga, 2010). However, scholars have found that only 7 to 21% of Latinx/a/o students enrolled at 2-year colleges have actually transferred to 4-year universities (Ma & Baum, 2016; Zarate & Burciaga, 2010). Even when Latinx/a/o students start their college experience at a 4-year university, just over half

[9] Although an associate degree may be faster to attain and less expensive to acquire than a bachelor's degree, research shows that bachelor degree holders enjoy higher median salaries (a $15,300 difference at age 25 and older) and higher employment rates (a 5 percentage point difference among adults between the ages of 25 and 64) than associate degree holders (Ma et al., 2019).

earn a degree within six years. For example, in 2014, only 54% of first-time, full-time bachelor's degree-seeking Hispanic students at 4-year postsecondary institutions earned a degree within six years, compared to 63% of White and 71% of Asian students (Musu-Gillette et al., 2017). In terms of college attainment, equity gaps continue to exist. For example, in 2018, only 18.3% of Hispanics had earned a baccalaureate degree or higher compared to 25.6% of Blacks, 38.8% of Whites, and 55.6% of Asian Americans (NCES, 2019a). These equity gaps are a reflection of the various barriers that Latinx/a/o students face along the educational pipeline.

Institutional Barriers in Students' Educational Pipelines

Although Latinxs/as/os have high educational and career aspirations (e.g., Ceja, 2004; Ovink, 2014), access to essential college-going opportunities along the educational pipeline can influence the maintenance of these aspirations (Engberg & Wolniak, 2010; Oakes et al., 2006). A review of the literature reveals that among some of the most pressing roadblocks that Latinx/a/o students face throughout their college-going process are concerned with inequitable institutional processes that are not within the control of the student or their family (Engberg & Wolniak, 2010; Oakes et al., 2006). Inequitable institutional processes can include, for example, low-quality teaching, a lack of rigorous academic offerings, low expectations from counselors, and high-stakes testing[10] (e.g., Acevedo, 2020; McDonough, 1997; Oakes et al., 2006). Among some of the most cited institutional barriers that hinder Latinx/a/o students' college-going opportunities include inequitable access to: (a) academic resources; (b) college knowledge; and (c) school-based social networks.

Inequitable access to academic resources can hinder a students' academic preparation and academic achievement—two important indicators of college readiness[11] (Cabrera & La Nasa, 2000; Perna, 2006; Perna & Titus, 2005). Researchers have found that many Latinx/a/o students do not always

[10] High-stake testing refers to Advance Placement (AP) course exams, college entrance exams (e.g., ACT and SAT), and state high school exams.
[11] College readiness has traditionally been defined as a students' accumulation of knowledge and experiences needed to succeed in a postsecondary institution without remediation (Conley, 2007).

have access to high-quality academic preparation resources such as Advanced Placement (AP) courses, a rigorous curriculum, and quality instruction, which hinders students' ability to adequately prepare for college (Welton & Martinez, 2014). Other scholars have found that Latinx/a/o students often do not have access to college preparatory exam courses or other resources such as tutoring and mentoring to improve their academic achievement and preparation (Contreras, 2005; Kimura-Walsh et al., 2009; Perna, 2000). Often this lack of resources is due to schools being inequitably funded (Alemán 2007, 2009) and/or is a result of deficit notions about Latinx/a/o students' academic abilities (e.g., González et al., 2003; McDonough, 1997; Pérez & McDonough, 2008). In addition to having inequitable access to academic resources, many Latinx/a/o students also do not often have access to reliable college knowledge—or the awareness and familiarity with the procedural steps, norms, and processes needed to successfully apply and enroll in college (Tornatzky et al., 2002).

In order for students to successfully prepare for and enroll in college, researchers have argued that students need to be equipped with college knowledge (e.g., Sanchez Gonzales et al., 2018; O'Connor et al., 2010; Roderick et al., 2009). Research, however, shows that Latinx/a/o students do not access college information and school agents for college guidance at the same rate as their peers (Martinez & Cervera, 2012; Martinez et al., 2018). Scholars have found that gatekeeping norms regarding college knowledge can play a role in Latinx/a/o students' perceptions regarding college accessibility and accessibility, which, in turn, shapes their decisions and preparation throughout high school (Chlup et al., 2019; Liou et al., 2009; Martinez & Deil-Amen, 2015; O'Connor et al., 2010; Vega, 2018). Because college knowledge is often mediated through social networks (Hill et al., 2015; Kiyama, 2010, 2011; Liou et al., 2009; Martinez, 2012; Ovink, 2017), inequitable access to individuals with college knowledge can also serve as a barrier in students' preparation for college.

Many Latinx/a/o students (and their families) depend on school-based social networks like counselors, teachers, and peers for college information, emotional support, and guidance on enrolling and financing college (Carolan-Silva & Reyes, 2013; Ceja, 2004, 2006; González et al., 2003; Hill et al., 2015). Despite the positive role that school-based networks play in supporting students' college pathways,

counselors and school staff are not always easily accessible to students (Chlup et al., 2019) and/or well trained to help students navigate the college-going process (Venegas, 2006). College information and guidance from counselors, teachers, and other school staff is also not always neutral and varies depending on the students' achievement levels, with high-achieving students often having greater access to resources and information (Kimura-Walsh et al., 2009; McDonough, 1997; Pérez & McDonough, 2008). Moreover, despite the key position that parents and families play in Latinxs/as/os' college-going process, many school personnel continue to ignore familial contributions by not effectively working with families nor drawing from students' cultural assets to facilitate their transition from high school to college (Cabrera & La Nasa, 2001; Kolluri, 2020). Other scholars have also found that Latinx/a/o students who rely heavily on their peers for college information are less likely to apply or enroll in selective higher education institutions (Hill et al., 2015; Kim, 2004).

Altogether, these institutional barriers signal a need to improve the kinds of academic and college resources, information, and social networks available to students as they prepare for a postsecondary education. Many scholars argue that addressing these barriers entails improving the college preparation of minoritized students through *structural changes* (Conklin & Sanford, 2007; Haxton et al., 2016; Knight & Duncheon, 2019; Moreno, 2019). Most recently, policymakers and educational stakeholders such as the Lumina Foundation, the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, and the National Governors Association have developed innovative policies and programs to reduce college access barriers, address college readiness, and facilitate college enrollment and degree attainment (Duncheon, 2020; Kirst & Usdan, 2009; Zinth & Barnett, 2018). One innovative program that has been proposed is the early college high school (ECHS) model, which is the focus of this study.

The Early College High School Model

The ECHS model was created specifically with the intention to serve underserved and underrepresented students including low-income students, students of color, first-generation college-goers, and English Learners (ELs) (Duncheon, 2020). The ECHS model is built on the assumption that exposing students to a rigorous curriculum will successfully equip them with the knowledge and skills

needed to apply, enroll, and successfully persist in higher education. More specifically, the ECHS model provides students with the opportunity to simultaneously earn a high school diploma and up to two years of college credit (or 60 credit hours) for free or at a very low cost (Woodcock & Beal, 2013; Zalaznick, 2015).

Although the literature on the ECHS model is nascent, recent studies suggest that attending an ECHS can have positive impacts on students' college preparation, as measured by their scores on state achievement exams (Lauen et al., 2017); number of advanced college preparatory courses taken (Berger et al., 2013); college enrollment patterns (Song & Zeiser, 2019); college credit accrual (Haxton et al., 2016); and degree attainment (Edmunds et al., 2020). Research also shows that the ECHS design encourages student engagement and learning, as teachers have high expectations for students (Ari et al., 2017; Duncheon & DeMatthews, 2019; Edmunds et al., 2013; Ongaga, 2010; Thompson & Ongaga, 2011). Despite these positive findings, scholars have noted continuous challenges in the implementation of ECHSs, including concerns over students' developmental emotional readiness and maturity to undertake college-level courses (Brooks, 2013; Calhoun et al., 2019; McDonald & Farrell, 2012), poor class attendance and course failure as a result of transitional difficulties (Alaie, 2011), and lower matriculation rates when compared to dual enrollment and traditional high school students (Moreno et al., 2019).

More research is, thus, needed to understand how varied factors embedded in students' ECHS experiences work for or against their college-going process. In this study, I attempt to fill this research gap by understanding the ECHS experiences of Latinx/a/o students in relation to college going. I focus particularly on Latinx/a/o students because of their large and growing population in the United States and most notably in the K–12 public education system (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2019b).

Statement of Problem

In spite of the tremendous progress Latinxs/as/os have made in the educational pipeline, scholars have continuously found that students of color, first-generation college students, and students from low

socio-economic backgrounds—characteristics of the Latinx/a/o community—remain disproportionately underrepresented in postsecondary education (Cabrera & La Nasa, 2000; Kurlaender, 2006; Núñez et al., 2011; Sáenz & Ponjuan, 2009). These educational attainment disparities are highlighted in the state of Texas where only 21% of Latino adults, ages 25 and older, have earned an associate degree or higher, compared to 47% of White non-Hispanic adults (*Excelencia* in Education, 2021). Degree attainment among Latinxs/as/os in Texas remains an especially critical issue to address given the growing enrollment of Latinx/a/o students in public schools. In 2019, Hispanic students accounted for 52.6% of the total K–12 student population in Texas—making them the largest racial/ethnic group of students to enroll in the public education system (Texas Education Agency [TEA], 2019b). Although Latinxs/as/os in Texas (and the nation more generally) are transforming the student demographics in public K–12 education, the proportion of students in higher education have not increased at the same rate (Fry & Taylor, 2014). Moreover, college completion rates among Latinxs/as/os continue to trail behind when compared to their White peers (NCES, 2019a). These gaps come as no surprise given the persistent barriers found in the educational pipeline of Latinx/a/o students and the percentage of Latinx/a/o students who are not college ready in Texas. For example, in the 2017–2018 academic school year, TEA (2019c) reported that only 44.3% of Hispanic high school graduates were "college-ready"[12] compared to 61.3% of White graduates and 83% of Asian graduates. Educational disparities in Texas, however, are not a new phenomenon.

[12] In Texas, TEA (2019a) defines college-ready graduates as the percentage of annual graduates who meet or exceed the *college-ready and career/military readiness criteria* on any one of the following ways: 1) met the Texas Success Initiative (TSI) college readiness standards in reading and mathematics; specifically, met the college-ready criteria on the TSI assessment, SAT, ACT, or by successfully completing and earning an approved credit for a college prep; 2) completed 9 or more hours of postsecondary credit in any subject or 3 or more hours of English/Language Arts and mathematics; 3) scored 3 or more on Advanced Placement (AP) exams or 4 or more on International Baccalaureate (IB) exams; 4) earned an associate degree while in high school; 5) completed an OnRamps course and received at least three hours of university or college credit in any subject area; 6) earned an industry-based certification; 7) graduated with completed individualized education program (IEP) and workforce readiness; 8) career and technical education (CTE) coursework aligned with industry-based certification; 9) enlisted in the armed forces; 10) special education students graduate under an advanced degree plan; and 11) earned a Level 1 or Level II certificate in any education area. A student is *only college-ready* if they meet criteria 1–5 (but not criteria 6–11) and *only career/military read*y if they meet criteria 6–11 (but not criteria 1–5).

In 2015, the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board [THECB] launched the *60x30TX* strategic plan, outlining several state goals in an effort to prepare more students for an educated workforce (THECB, 2015). Of all the goals and targets in the *60x30TX* strategic plan, the direct high school-to-college enrollment rate has made no progress since 2015, indicating a need for higher education and K–12 stakeholders to "step up efforts to accelerate progress" (THECB, 2019, p. 8). The ECHS model could serve as an academic and social bridge to college for Latinx/a/o students in Texas as it provides them the opportunity to take college-level courses for free—increasing the number of high school students who graduate with college credit, while simultaneously reducing their time to degree completion (Locke & McKenzie, 2016). Although the ECHS model was specifically designed to facilitate students' high school-to-college transition, little to no research has examined the ECHS experiences of Latinx/a/o students in relation to college going.

Purpose of Study and Research Questions

While scholars have documented the college-going process of Latinx/a/o students in traditional school settings such as Chlup et al., (2020) and Martinez (2013), less research has been done to understand the college-going process of students in ECHSs. As such, the purpose of this study is to understand how Latinx/a/o students describe their ECHS experiences and how varied factors embedded in students' experiences facilitate or hinder their college-going process.

Much of the existing ECHS literature has focused on the implementation process of ECHSs (e.g., Hall, 2013), the role of ECHS administrators and teachers (e.g., Duncheon & DeMatthews, 2018; Duncheon & Muñoz, 2019), or the association between ECHS student participation and college readiness as measured by traditional indicators such as students' grade point average (GPA) and number of college credits earned (e.g., Berger et al., 2010; Edmunds et al., 2017). Less research has been done to understand students' ECHS experiences in relation to college going. This study, therefore, fills this gap by exploring the following two research questions:

1. How do Latinx/a/o students describe their early college high school (ECHS) experience?
    a. What do Latinx/a/o students' ECHS experiences reveal about the factors that facilitate or hinder their college-going process?

Research Design Overview

To capture the ECHS experiences of students, I used a critical narrative methodology (Clandinin & Rosiek, 2007; Iannacci, 2007). A critical narrative methodology enables researchers to attribute meaning and intention to individuals' stories as a way to disrupt taken-for-granted assumptions that perpetuate power structures and social inequities (Iannacci, 2007; Moss, 2004). To guide my work, I used Tierney and Venegas's (2009) cultural-ecological framework and Iloh's (2018, 2019) ecological model of college-going decisions and trajectories. Tierney and Venegas' (2009) nonlinear model emphasizes the important role that social entities in various environments can play in enhancing or hindering students' college-going process. They specifically proposed four fluid environments to consider when understanding students' college-going process: educational, out-of-class, familial, and community. Iloh's (2018, 2019) conceptual model highlights three dimensions that impact students' college-going: information, time, and opportunity. These dimensions are codependent and nonlinear and can be applied throughout students' college-going process. I combined both models to further understand how students' college-going processes are shaped by the interplay of students' environmental forces and the information, time, and opportunities embedded within.

Because critical narrative research entails understanding individual's lived experiences, I chose to conduct a qualitative research study. A qualitative approach enabled me to capture the complexities of students' ECHS experiences and gave way for me to gather rich data. Specifically, I conducted one-on-one, semi-structured interviews with eight Latina/o students attending an ECHS. Before interviewing students, I reviewed relevant ECHS documents to gain insight into students' school contexts. These contextual documents served as additional sources of information, allowing me to "step outside" of the participants' narratives in an effort to more fully identify and understand how broader social aspects mediated students' lived experiences (Gubrium & Holstein, 2009, p. 23). After all interviews were

conducted, I invited students to participate in a follow-up, open ended questionnaire via email. I used this questionnaire to ensure I was capturing their experiences as accurately as possible. For my data analysis process, I combined coding with narrative techniques to both understand the content of the interviews and the embedded stories (Riessman, 2008).

Significance of Research

Earning a postsecondary education is associated with economic and social mobility[13] (Ma et al., 2019). However, the Texas Latinx/a/o K–20 pipeline is "leaking" as a result of inequitable policies in the public education system, "making academic access and preparation for college more difficult" (Santiago & Calderón Galdeano, 2018, p. 69). According to Alemán and colleagues (2019) who traced the educational attainment of students across the state of Texas "Latinas/os and Chicanas/os in Texas have the lowest levels of educational attainment at every educational benchmark for all ethnic groups [i.e., Native American, Asian American, African American students]" (p. 8). Addressing this serious and persistent leak in the K–20 pipeline is especially imperative at a time when the demand for a college-educated workforce and the cost of college have both been increasing. According to projections made in 2018, 65% percent of the estimated 165 million jobs in the U.S. economy are expected to require some postsecondary education or training beyond high school by 2020 (Carnevale et al., 2018). Reductions in state and local governments funding has led to rising tuition at many public institutions of higher education (College Board, 2019), making it increasingly difficult for many students to afford a postsecondary education (Hossler, 2014). Average tuition and fees, for example, have nearly tripled at public 4-year and more than doubled at 2-year and private nonprofit 4-year institutions from 1989–90 to 2019–2020 (College Board, 2019). Designed to address these problems, the ECHS model offers students a direct and intentional pathway to earn both a high school diploma and an associate degree (or up to 60

[13] A report on the benefits of higher education found that individuals with higher levels of education earned more and were more likely than others to be employed. Bachelor's degree holders, for example, enjoyed higher median salaries (a $24,900 difference for full-time year-round workers ages 25 and older—before taxes) and higher employment rates when compared to those with only a high school diploma (83% and 69%, respectively) (Ma et al., 2019).

transferrable college credits) for free. As such, this study could contribute to the existing literature on Latinx/a/o students and the ECHS model in several ways.

First, although there is robust literature examining the college-going process of Latinx/a/o students in traditional high schools, there is less research that investigates Latinx/a/o students ECHS experiences in relation to college going. Understanding how the ECHS model facilitates students' college-going process can help inform ECHS policies and programming. Specifically, an understanding of the factors that facilitate or hinder students' college-going process can provide ECHS leaders and educators with information on how to better aid students' high school-to-college transition by proactively reassessing the types of targeted interventions, embedded supports, and student resources available to students and their families. Second and related to the first point, this study can also inform statewide policies and plans aimed at closing equity gaps. Because the ECHS model has been adopted in over 280 states, with Texas being one of the leading states with the most schools (Webb & Gerwin, 2014), it is important to understand the model through the perspectives of Latinx/a/o students—who, despite being the fastest-growing segment of Texas' student population, continue to be classified as not college ready.

Organization of the Dissertation

My dissertation is organized into several chapters. In Chapter 2, I provide a review of the literature on college going, including the characteristics associated with students' college-going process. I also include background information on the creation, structure, and purpose of ECHSs in the nation and then focus on ECHSs in Texas. I follow these sections with a review of key research findings on ECHSs. I then provide a rationale for my theoretical and conceptual frameworks. In Chapter 3, I discuss my methodology and methods in greater depth. Specifically, I explain my onto-epistemological foundations of social constructionism and critical theory and discuss why critical narrative methodology was appropriate for this study. I also include a detailed description and rationale for my research design and discuss my positionality and role as a researcher, as well as the assumptions, delimitations, and limitations of the study. In Chapter 4, I describe my findings based on my analysis of students' interviews. Before discussing findings, I first provide background information on the ECHS that

participants attended and then include individual profiles of each participant, detailing their thoughts about college before they started ECHS, as well as their reasons for attending an ECHS. In Chapter 5, I use my conceptual frameworks to interpret my findings, discuss the implications of my study, and provide directions for policy, practice, and future research.

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

While existing literature documents the college-going process of Latinx/a/o students in traditional school settings, less research has been done to understand the ECHS experiences of students in relation to college going. To address this research gap, this study was guided by the following research questions:

1. How do Latinx/a/o students describe their early college high school (ECHS) experience?
    a. What do Latinx/a/o students' ECHS experiences reveal about the factors that facilitate or hinder their college-going process?

In this chapter, I provide a review of the college-going and ECHS literature and describe the conceptual frameworks that grounded this study. I specifically organized this chapter into six main sections.

In the first section, I review the college-going literature and specifically define and reconceptualize the notion of college going. I then discuss the theoretical approaches scholars have traditionally used to examine college going and specifically focus on Hossler and Gallagher's (1987) college choice[14] model—one of the most widely used conceptual frameworks to understand students' decision-making process (Holland, 2014). I then share the critiques of scholars who have questioned the applicability of Hossler and Gallagher's (1987) model.

In the second section of my literature review, I discuss, in detail, the characteristics associated with students' college-going process with an emphasis on Latinx/a/o students. These key characteristics—college readiness, college knowledge, social networks, and college proximity and geography—have been widely documented as influencing students' college-going perceptions, experiences, and outcomes. Throughout this section, I prioritize studies that specifically document the college-going process of Latinx/a/o students, who are the focus of this research study.

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[14] I use the term *college choice* in reference to researchers' descriptions of the college-going process. Although I have reconceptualized the notion of college going for this study, it is important to note that scholars continue to interchangeably use college choice and college going to refer to students' experiences and decision-making processes. To maintain the integrity of the existing literature, I do not substitute the phrase "college choice" with "college going": instead, I refer to the process as the original authors have described it in their work.

In the third section, I provide an overview of the ECHS model broadly, and in the fourth section, I specifically focus on ECHSs in the state of Texas. In both of these sections, I cover the history, structure, and purpose of the ECHS model. In the fifth section, I provide key research findings on ECHSs, including students' ECHS perceptions and experiences, as well as secondary and postsecondary outcomes, respectively.

Informed by these bodies of literature, in the sixth section, I then describe the conceptual frameworks that ground this study: Tierney and Venegas's (2009) cultural-ecological framework and Iloh's (2018, 2019) ecological model of college-going trajectories. These frameworks challenge dominant discourses on college going and enable a more full-bodied understanding of how students navigate the non-linearity of postsecondary planning given their various environments. I conclude with a summary of the chapter.

A Review of the College-Going Literature

In this review of the college-going literature, I first define and situate college going in relation to the existing literature and argue that there is a need to reconceptualize how college going is described, especially as it relates to ECHS students. I then identify and describe four theoretical approaches that scholars often use to guide their research on college going. I follow that section with a description and critique of Hossler and Gallagher's (1987) 3-stage college choice model—one of the most widely used models to understand students' transition from high school to college (Holland, 2014). The critiques I present are from scholars who have questioned the applicability of Hossler and Gallagher's model and are not meant to be exhaustive, but rather meant to highlight a critical and shifting point in the literature about the need to consider students' varied realities and contexts.

Reconceptualizing College Going

Scholars often use the terms "college going" and "college choice" interchangeably to describe students' movement from college aspirations to postsecondary matriculation (e.g., Fann et al., 2009; Griffin et al., 2012; Jez, 2014). Other scholars have also used terms such as *college planning* (Hurtado &

Gauvain, 1997), *college-conocimiento*[15] *(*Acevedo-Gil, 2017) and *college-linking* (Hill, 2008) to describe the decision-making process that results in students' decisions to apply and enroll (or not) in college. Although college going and college choice are more frequently used in the literature to describe a student's decision-making process as they transition from high school to college, scholars often do not define the process in their studies, or they define it narrowly. For example, Hossler, Braxton, and Coopersmith (1989) defined student college choice as "a complex, multistage process during which an individual develops aspirations to continue formal education beyond high school, followed later by a decision to attend a specific college, university or institution of advanced vocational training" (p. 234). Hossler, Schmitt, and Vesper (1999) defined the process as the pathway in which "traditional-age students go about realizing their [postsecondary] educational aspirations" (p. 9; see Hernández, 2015, for a similar definition). Borrowing from Hossler and Gallagher's (1987) work on college choice, Kim (2004) defined it as a "complex and multistage process" that is "interrelated and consequential" (p. 46).

These definitions, although helpful, carry several assumptions that call for a need to reimagine how the decision-making process of students is conceptualized. First, the traditional conceptualization is often focused on understanding how institutional and individual factors influence students' college choice rather than on how students make sense of their options, opportunities, and choices and how they negotiate these factors as they navigate the college-going process (Acevedo-Gil, 2017; Holland, 2014). In other words, these traditional definitions are focused more on the outcomes of every stage in the process rather than on the actual *process* itself. Second, often these definitions assume that students are engaging in a process that will eventually lead them to achieve their postsecondary aspirations. However, because of greater K–16 collaboration and integration efforts (Martinez & Klopott, 2005), many high school students are achieving their postsecondary aspirations, while simultaneously navigating the college-going

[15] Borrowing from Anzaldúa's (2002) theory of *conocimiento* (i.e., a theory of epistemological development), Acevedo-Gil (2017) defines college-*conocimiento* as a "a serpentine process where Latinx students reflect on the college information that they receive, in relation to their intersectional identities when preparing for college" (p. 829).

process. For example, many high school reforms such as the ECHS model enable students to complete dual-credit coursework that aligns with students' postsecondary or career aspirations. In many cases, these students may be completing their associate degree in high school, while simultaneously applying to colleges to further their education (Leal, 2020). Third, the framing of choice in the process assumes that students are free and able to choose from a variety of colleges and does not take into consideration the unequal and highly stratified playing field in which students are afforded opportunities and are able to make decisions (Iloh, 2018, 2019; Locke & McKenzie, 2016). As Cox (2016) noted, "in much of the extant research, a student's college 'choice' is conceptualized as *the* enrollment decision" without taking into consideration the "complicat[ed] conditions and moments of non-choice that shape the loops, detours, and stop-outs of some students' postsecondary paths" (p. 22). Because of these assumptions, I argue that there is a need to move away from the use of and focus on "choice" as an outcome and reconsider what is meant by college going. As Iloh (2019) noted, "moving away from choice allows for understanding the role of prior decisions and experiences on future decisions (if any)" (p. 4). When college choice and college going become conflated, it minimizes the complexities, realities, and inequities that students experience as they navigate important postsecondary decisions.

For this study, I have intentionally chosen to examine the *college-going process* of students rather than students' *college-choice process*. Given that ECHSs offer students an established pathway to earn an associate degree by the time they graduate high school, students who enroll at ECHSs straddle between two education systems since their ninth-grade year. As a result, college going, for the purposes of this study, has been reconceptualized to include the lived experiences of ECHS students who constantly *cross borders* given their dual identities as both high school and college students (Brooks, 2013). Borrowing from the work of Acevedo-Gil (2017) and Cox (2016), I specifically defined the college-going process as the negotiations, decisions, and actions that students engage in when planning and preparing for a postsecondary education or career. These negotiations, decisions, and actions are informed by overlapping environments (Tierney & Venegas, 2009) and intersecting structures of opportunity,

information, and time[16] (Iloh, 2018, 2019). Although students' postsecondary decisions are taken into account in the college-going process, the focus is more on understanding how students negotiate, navigate, and make sense of their college-going (in)opportunities. This reframing of college going enables me to explore how students' (in)opportunities are mediated by multiple actors (e.g., teachers, counselors, families, peers) in students' multiple environments (e.g., educational, out-of-class, familial, and community) at various times. Although I have reconceptualized the notion of college going for this study, it is important to note that scholars continue to interchangeably use the terms college choice and college going to refer to students' decision-making processes. As a result, in the following sections, when I describe the college-going literature, I use the exact terms that scholars have used to identify the process.

Theoretical Approaches to Studying College Going

Generally, scholars who study college going use one or a combination of the following theoretical approaches: (a) economic, (b) sociological, and (c) information processing (Cabrera & La Nasa, 2000; Hossler et al., 1989; Park & Hossler, 2014; Perna, 2006; Serna, 2015). The economic approach draws from human capital theory to examine students' college choices (Perna, 2006). Embedded in the human capital theory is the notion that students make rational decisions by comparing the lifetime costs and benefits associated with investing in an education (DesJardins & Bell, 2006; Park & Hossler, 2014). Scholars who follow an economic approach tend to focus on financial factors such as cost of attendance, financial aid availability, and the opportunity costs of foregone earnings to understand students' decisions (e.g., Avery & Hoxby, 2004; Long, 2004; St. John, 1990). Although the economic approach highlights the effects of variables on students' college choices (Perna, 2006), it treats college as a one-time decision (Klasik, 2012), places greater emphasis on the later stages of college choice (Park & Hossler, 2014), and

[16] Borrowing from the work of Iloh (2018, 2019), opportunity refers to both the real and perceived notions students have about college access as they navigate the college-going process; information refers to the quality, quantity, and delivery of messages students receive and interpret as they navigate the college-going process; and time refers to students' moments, events, and memories that have transpired during the course of their time.

does not consider "sources of differences in college choices across [student] groups" (Perna, 2006, p. 107; see also DesJardins & Toutkoushian, 2005).

The sociological approach emphasizes the socioeconomic background characteristics of students and draws from cultural and social capital constructs to explain differences in students' college-going processes (Cabrera & La Nasa, 2000; Hossler et al., 1989; Park & Hossler, 2014; Perna, 2006; Serna, 2015). Cultural capital refers to a system of attributes such as "cultural signs, signals, ways of knowing, behaviors, and attitudes" that are acquired through one's upbringing (Holland, 2014, p. 1194). Cultural capital is "institutionalized and privileged" and influenced by dominant cultural norms, values, and beliefs in the education system (Holland, 2014, p. 1194). Social capital refers to networks of people and community that provide students with access to opportunities (Stanton-Salazar, 1997; Yosso, 2005). High levels of social capital can help students acquire college information and other forms of capital as they navigate the college-going process (Stanton-Salazar, 1997). Scholars who follow a sociological approach tend to focus more on students' earlier stages of college going such as students' postsecondary aspirations and academic preparation (e.g., Alvarado & Turley, 2012; McDonough, 1997; Welton & Martinez, 2014). Although useful for understanding the ways in which context influences college going, the sociological approach does not offer a useful framework to understand students' ultimate college decisions (Perna, 2006).

The information processing approach focuses on how students gather and process information sources to make college decisions (Park & Hossler, 2014; Serna, 2015). This approach "accounts for the differential access to college information as well as the lack of information" (Park & Hossler, 2014, p. 51). Researchers who use this approach are focused on the various types of information that students receive and process (e.g., Alvarez, 2010; Avery, 2010; Ceja, 2006). Information can be channeled from parents and siblings; high school teachers, counselors, and peers; and college admissions personnel. More recent scholars like Serna (2015) have noted the importance of understanding the messages (or signals) that students encounter regarding higher education, and how these messages are filtered through students' personal identities. Serna (2015) calls for the need to better understand how recruitment materials, college

guidebooks, and college fairs relay information to students and how students interpret those messages. Park and Hossler (2014) note that better access to "quality college information (that is accurate, reliable, and relevant information" can increase students' chances of applying to and enrolling in college (p. 54). Although useful for understanding how students make sense of college-related information, it does not consider all conditions that influence students' decisions and does not fully explain differences in how students access information (Park & Hossler, 2014).

Given the complexity of the college-going process, many scholars have used a combination of these theoretical approaches to understand students' experiences and decisions (e.g., Chapman, 1981; Hossler & Gallagher, 1987; Jackson, 1982; Perna, 2006). According to Park and Hossler (2014), these theoretical frameworks are useful but "often fail to yield sufficient insights into the pragmatic decisions that institutional administrators must make" (p. 50). As such, many scholars often opt to use a combined approach to inform their work (e.g., Hossler et al., 1989; Park & Hossler, 2014; Perna, 2006; Pitre, 2004; Serna, 2015; Stage & Hossler, 1989). These combined models of college choice largely focus on the sequential phases or procedural steps that students take to transition from high school to college. The most widely accepted college choice model is Hossler and Gallagher's (1987) 3-stage model (Holland, 2014; Park & Hossler, 2014).

Hossler and Gallagher's 3-Stage Model

Hossler and Gallagher's (1987) linear model of college choice consists of three phases: predisposition, search, and choice. In the first phase, students determine whether or not they would like to pursue a postsecondary education. In the second phase, students seek and gather information about institutions and create a list of potential places to attend. In the final phase, students evaluate available information and decide which college or university they want to enroll in. At any point during the process, students may choose not to pursue a postsecondary education, and at each phase of the student's process, individual (e.g., students' race/ethnicity, SES, and perceptions) and organizational factors (e.g., high school culture and college and university courtship activities) interact to influence the student's decision-making process.

Hossler and Gallagher's (1987) college choice model enables researchers to focus on specific stages of students' college-choice process. However, this model assumes that all students are afforded the same opportunities at every stage and, thus, masks the vast inequalities that students experience when navigating the college-going process (Acevedo-Gil, 2017; Cox, 2016; Engberg & Wolniak, 2010; Hurtado et. al., 1997; Perez & McDonough, 2008; Tierney & Venegas, 2009). Moreover, the model's focus on the temporal sequence of the college-choice process undermines the role that other factors like geography plays in students' access to college opportunities (Hillman, 2016; Turley, 2009). As a result, many contemporary scholars have been critical of Hossler and Gallagher's (1987) model, arguing that it more appropriately reflects the processes of traditional aged, mostly White, and middle- and upper-class students (Holland, 2014; Iloh, 2018, 2019; Yamamura et al., 2010). As more colleges and universities seek to meet the needs of an increasingly diverse student population (Bontrager & Hossler, 2014), there remains a need to better understand students' college-going processes from a less linear and more critical perspective. As Bontrager and Hossler (2014) note, this can help campuses prepare "for changing student characteristics" (p. 26).

As previously mentioned, the framing of choice in this model is particularly problematic because it "minimizes the role of privilege in shaping [students'] college-going 'options' and realities" (Iloh, 2019, p. 4). In other words, it fails to consider the complex realities and environmental push-pull factors that create "conditions and boundaries" in students' decision-making process (Alvares, 2015). What is more, it "obscures [students'] past decisions" and events that have shaped and continue to influence students' perceptions and experiences about their future (Iloh, 2018, p. 239). Relatedly, Serna (2015) points to the limitations of choice, when considering the limited opportunities often afforded to certain student groups, stating: "in terms of educational choices, students from families with fewer resources, who are more likely to be non-white and less educated, are categorically limited in the choices they can make" (p. 26). As Iloh (2018) asserts, the framing of choice can "skew complex narratives" (p. 239).

In addition, scholars have further argued that Hossler and Gallagher's (1987) model conceptualizes the choice process from an individualistic standpoint and thus "neglect[s] to fully

interrogate the larger macro-system in which students and families prepare for college" (Yamamura et al., 2010, p. 129). More specifically, scholars have challenged the notion that students bare the sole responsibility of college aspirations and readiness by highlighting the multi-dimensional and inter-connected roles that stakeholders (Yamamura et al., 2010) and ecosystems (Hillman & Weichman, 2016; Iloh, 2018, 2019; Turley, 2009) play in preparing, informing, and guiding students toward a postsecondary education. Recent work on students' college-going patterns and behaviors has pushed the field to consider how institutional structures and opportunities in students' environments and geographic context impact college opportunity and their postsecondary decisions and trajectories (Acevedo-Gil, 2017; Iloh, 2018, 2019; Serna, 2019; Yamamura et al., 2010; Tierney & Venegas, 2009; Turley, 2009). In the next section, I review key characteristics associated with students' college-going process. Many of these characteristics derive from combined theoretical approaches and conceptual frameworks like that of Hossler and Gallagher's (1987). As such, when I describe the characteristics influencing students' college-going process, I adopt the terminology that scholars have used in their research.

Characteristics Associated with the College-Going Process

Research on college going has been foundational for understanding how students arrive at their postsecondary aspirations (Ceja, 2001, 2004), how they obtain and utilize information to make decisions (Alvarez, 2010; Hill et al., 2015), and how they experience and negotiate tensions as they navigate the college-going process (Martinez, 2013; Ovink, 2017). Scholars in particular have shed light on a multitude of characteristics associated with Latinx/a/o students' college-going process, including their academic achievement (Cerna et al., 2009; Chen & Zerquera, 2017); level of college knowledge (Sanchez Gonzalez et al., 2018; Welton & Martinez, 2014); access to social networks (Carolan-Silva & Reyes, 2013; Ceja, 2004; Kiyama, 2010, 2011; Liou et al., 2009; Pérez & McDonough, 2008), and proximity to higher education institutions (Hillman, 2016; Sansone et al., 2018). In this section, I present and describe four key characteristics associated with students' college-going process. The first three characteristics—academic achievement and preparation; college knowledge; social networks—are more closely related to the preparation and social/cultural capital possessed by students as they navigate the college-going

process. The last characteristic—college proximity and geography—is more closely related to the (in)opportunities in students' residential location. Throughout my review of the literature, I prioritize studies that specifically document the college-going process of Latinx/a/o students.

Academic Achievement and Preparation

Within the college-going literature, the focus on college readiness—defined as the accumulation of knowledge and experiences needed to prepare a student for college (Conley, 2007)—is often conceptualized within two broad categories: academic achievement and academic preparation (e.g., Berbery & O'Brien, 2017; Chen & Zerquera, 2018; Cerna et al., 2009; Hill et al., 2015; Hossler & Stage, 1992; Perna, 2006). Although some studies use the terms interchangeably, academic achievement is often measured by a student's high school grade point average (GPA) (e.g., Lopez, 2013; Posselt et al., 2012) and achievement test scores such as end-of-course assessments or college preparatory exams (e.g., Perna, 2000), while academic preparation is often measured by students' advanced course-taking patterns (e.g., Adelman, 1999; Perna & Titus, 2005) and college admissions test scores (e.g., Contreras, 2005; Posselt et al., 2012).

Research on college readiness suggests that students with high academic achievement are more likely to enroll in college after high school (Sanchez et al., 2015), enroll in a 4-year higher education institution rather than a 2-year institution (Arbona & Nora, 2007; Engberg & Allen, 2011; Gonzalez, 2012), and pursue admission at selective colleges and universities (Hill et al., 2015). Research on academic preparation also shows that taking rigorous courses like college-level courses, dual credit, and Advanced Placement (AP) courses can help students make progress toward their postsecondary education by increasing their likelihood of attending college after graduation (Fink et al., 2017), decreasing their likelihood for remediation (An, 2013a), and increasing persistence and graduation rates (Morgan et al., 2018). Cabrera and La Nasa's (2001) study on the college-choice process of a 1988 nationally representative sample of 1988 8th graders reveals that "students who secure college qualifications while in high school have a higher chance of enrolling in college than those who do not" (p. 120). Planning for

college early and parental involvement played a key role in students' ability to secure college qualifications.

Equating college readiness with only academic achievement or academic preparation is problematic as it fails to recognize the broader systemic structures and power dynamics that play a role in students' decision-making process (Acevedo-Gil, 2017; Perna, 2006; Roderick et al., 2009). For example, Berbery and O'Brien (2017), who studied the contributions of school performance and college-going support and barriers in predicting the college-going self-efficacy and educational goals of 119 Latina/o students, found that GPA was the most important contributor to both students' college-going self-efficacy and educational goals. However, the relationship between GPA and college-going self-efficacy was moderated when college-going support from family was low, suggesting that academic achievement alone cannot explain students' college-going process. In another study examining the decision-making process of high-achieving Latinas, Hernández (2015) found that despite being high-achieving, students were still choosing to stay close to home for college, citing familism or *familismo* and the financial glass ceiling as rationales for their decisions. Regarding academic preparation, Allen, Thompson, and Collins (2020) found that dual credit participation did not substantially contribute to Latinx undergraduates' decision-making process. Instead, family, peers, and financial aid resources influenced students' aspirations and college choices (Allen et al., 2020). Given these discrepancies in students' college-going patterns, scholars have advocated for the use of multiple measures (Duncheon, 2015; Maruyama, 2012), while other researchers have recommended a greater consideration of the contexts and structural conditions in which students make decisions (Rodriguez & Núñez, 2015; Yamamura et al., 2010; Welton & Martinez, 2014). To further this discussion, next I outline other noncognitive[17] and contextual characteristics that may explain students' college-going process beyond academic achievement and preparation.

[17] Noncognitive skills "include a range of behaviors [skills, attitudes, and strategies] that reflect greater student self-awareness, self-monitoring, and self-control" associated with academic performance (Roderick et al., 2009, p. 190; see also Nagaoka et al., 2013). These skills are not readily measured by standardized tests or other quantitative measures and often cannot be directly taught as content.

College Knowledge

According to Roderick et al. (2009), "if educators are to use college readiness as a strategy for accomplishing the goal of college access and success, they must couple academic preparedness [and achievement] with the knowledge and skills students need to navigate the college-going process" (p. 200). As such, scholars have also noted the importance of college knowledge in students' college-going process (Alemida, 2016; Chlup et al., 2019; O'Connor et al., 2010; Tierney & Venegas, 2009). College knowledge refers to an individual's awareness and understanding of the "prerequisites, paths, processes, and milestones" needed to successfully apply and enroll in college (Tornatzky et al., 2002, p. 9). When students have access to timely and quality college knowledge they "have an understanding of the complex admission and selection processes, the options available to help for postsecondary education, the academic requirements for college-level work, and the cultural differences between secondary and postsecondary education" (Hooker & Brand, 2010, p. 77). In a quantitative study on 307 Latinx students in Central Texas, Sanchez Gonzales et al. (2018) found that college knowledge increased students' college enrollment by 30%.

While the benefits of college knowledge have been well documented, studies have also shown that Latinx/a/o students and parents do not always have easy access to college knowledge (Chlup et al., 2019; Cox, 2016; Kimura-Walsh et al., 2009; Martinez et al., 2013; Person & Rosenbaum, 2006; Welton & Martinez, 2014). For instance, Martinez and Cervera's (2012) study on students' college information seeking patterns revealed that access to college resources was positively associated with applying to more institutions; however, Latina/o students were not accessing college representatives and college materials to the same extent as their White peers. This may be because college knowledge is not always equally and systematically distributed to students of color or low-academic achievers, with counselors and teachers often acting as gatekeepers determining who gets access to college preparation courses and information (Chlup et al., 2019; Contreras, 2005; Kimura-Walsh et al., 2009; Welton & Martinez, 2014). Researchers also suggest that even when information is relayed, Latino students may not find the information "meaningful, informative, or memorable" in a way that will help them navigate challenging decisions and

barriers (Sanchez et al., 2015, p. 196, see Chlup et al., 2019 for a similar finding). Because college knowledge is often formally and informally transmitted through social networks (Hill et al., 2015; Kiyama, 2010, 2011; Liou et al., 2009; Martinez, 2012; Ovink, 2017), I now turn to a discussion of the role of social networks in the college-going process.

Social Networks

Latinx/a/o students' college-going process is mediated by interactions and relationships with others (McDonough, 1997; Pérez & McDonough, 2008; Yamamura et al., 2010). These social networks, which often include parents, siblings, peers, high school personnel, and extended community members, can act as ideal sources of college knowledge, often providing students with encouragement, guidance, emotional and financial support, and extended social resources (Cabrera & La Nasa, 2001; Carolan-Silva & Reyes, 2013; Ceja, 2004; González et al., 2003; Hill et al., 2015; Kiyama, 2010; Pérez & McDonough, 2008; Stanton-Salazar, & Dornbusch, 1995; Yamamura et al., 2010). According to Cabrera and Nasa (2001), "among the factors predicting students' early educational plans, parental encouragement is the strongest" (p. 7). They describe two dimensions of parental encouragement: the first being parents maintaining high expectations for their children and the second being parents proactively being involved in their children's school matters. Some scholars have found that parents' *consejos* (or words of wisdom) and *buen ejemplos* (or good examples) are foundational in motivating Latinx/a/o students to pursue a postsecondary degree (Ozuna et al., 2016; Paugh, 2018; Sáenz et al., 2020; Welton & Martinez, 2014). For example, in a qualitative study with eight college-bound Latino high school seniors, Carolan-Silva and Reyes (2013) found that parents served as important role models for their children despite their low educational attainment levels, while siblings and cousins influenced some students' career aspirations. Latinx/a/o students' college-going process is also influenced by their peers (Liou et al., 2009; Kiyama, 2010; Pérez & McDonough, 2008). Using chain migration theory within a social capital framework to examine the college choice process of 106 high school juniors and seniors, Pérez and McDonough (2008) found that students were applying to or selecting postsecondary institutions based on older friends or older peers and acquaintances who were attending those institutions.

Although family and peers are important sources of information and support, they are not always well versed in college knowledge[18] (Carolan-Silva & Reyes, 2013; Kiyama, 2010; Park & Hossler, 2014). Scholars have noted that an over reliance on family members and peers can increase the likelihood of misinformation and misconceptions about the process (Carolan-Silva & Reyes, 2013; Kiyama, 2010; Mwangi, 2015; Ovink, 2014; Pérez & McDonough, 2008). As Park and Hossler (2014) note, "the college guidance from [parents and extended family members] is not always neutral" (p. 58). In a quantitative analysis examining the relationship between social networks and selective institutions, Hill et al. (2015) found that students who relied heavily on their peers for college information were less likely to pursue admission to selective colleges. Farmer-Hinton (2008) explained that spatial isolation and network homogeneity among people of color, especially in poor communities, can limit students' access to quality and extensive information and resources, which are needed to successfully navigate the college-going process.

Because Latinx/a/o students are more likely to come from households with lower socioeconomic status and/or families where neither parent has attended college (Santos & Sáenz, 2014), extended social networks in the community and high school personnel play an important role in facilitating the college-going process for students (Liou et al., 2009; McClafferty et al., 2009; Núñez & Bowers, 2011). Highlighting the importance of extended social networks, Liou, Antrop-González, and Cooper (2009) found that some students turned to athletic teams and religious and community-based organizations for social and navigational capital when they could not rely on other social networks. High school personnel such as administrators, teachers, and counselors can also play an important role in structuring postsecondary opportunities for students (Hill, 2008; McDonough, 2005; Yamamura et al., 2010). Existing studies, for example, show that teachers and counselors can help students prepare for college

[18] Although family and peers are not always versed in college knowledge, I agree with Kiyama (2010) that a "lack of information does not mean [a] lack of interest, nor does it mean lack of value for education" (p. 352). Preexisting social orders, norms, and perceptions within society about who belongs in higher education have long contributed to the unequal distribution of college attainment among racial/ethnic groups (Kinzie et al., 2004), which has, in turn, contributed to intergenerational gaps in college knowledge within minoritized racial/ethnic groups.

through authentic relationships and college-going efforts (Martinez et al., 2018). Conducting focus groups with African American and Latino high school seniors to explore key school-based supports and resources, Farmer-Hinton (2008) found that school networks offered students an opportunity to explore and reinforce their college aspirations through enrichment programs/activities, high expectations, and interpersonal advice and care.

However, research also shows that teachers and counselors can act as gatekeepers to college opportunities, influencing the kind of courses, resources and preparatory information students have access to (González et al., 2003; McDonough, 1997; Welton & Martinez, 2014). Other studies examining students' perceptions also reveal that students often do not have as much access to or individualized guidance from counselors as they would like (Farmer-Hinton & McCullough, 2008; González et al., 2003; Martinez et al., 2018). Using data from descriptive case studies of 15 high schools in California, Florida, Georgia, Maryland, and Pennsylvania, Perna and colleagues (2008) found that college related counseling was limited for a number of reasons including high student-to-counselor ratios, competing counselor responsibilities and priorities, and a lack of training and knowledge about college types and college entrance requirements (Perna et al., 2008). Previous studies on Latinx/a/o students' college-going process have focused on academic achievement and preparation, as well as college knowledge and social capital, to understand students' decision-making process. Although these characteristics can influence student' college-going process, contemporary scholars have argued that it is equally important to recognize the influence that external factors like college proximity and geography can have on students' educational opportunities (Turley, 2009; Hillman, 2016).

College Proximity and Geography

College proximity and geography are often under addressed in the college-going literature (Dache-Gerbino, 2018; Hillman, 2017). More recently, scholars have argued for a need to consider the college-going process within the geographic context in which students negotiate realities and make decisions (Turley, 2009). In the past, scholars have attributed familism, or the tendency to privilege family goals over individual goals, as a reason for students choosing to attend a college near home

(Desmond & Turley, 2009; Hernández, 2015; Martinez, 2013; Ovink & Kalogrides, 2015). Researchers have reasoned that some Latinx/a/o students' choose to stay close to home because of their desire to continue benefiting from their family's financial and emotional support (Ceja, 2001; Martinez, 2013). In her study with 20 Latina/o high school students from South Texas, Martinez (2013) finds that *familismo* (or familism) is not only a reflection of the Latina/o culture, but also a reflection of social and economic constraints imposed on Latina/o families through marginalization.

More recently, scholars have started to explore the structural forces surrounding college opportunity as it relates to students' proximity to colleges (Dache-Gerbino, 2018; Klasik et al., 2018; Hillman, 2016; Hillman & Weichman, 2016; Turley, 2009). Turley (2009), who explored students' geography of opportunity (or the extent to which youth in various geographic regions are exposed to postsecondary institutions in proximity), found evidence that each additional college within commuting distance increased students' likelihood of applying to college. Turley (2009) poised that college proximity functioned through a convenience mechanism, meaning that college proximity may have influenced students' college choice as it made the transition to college "logistically, financially, and emotionally easier" (p. 142). However, scholars have found that low-income, rural, and minoritized racial/ethnic communities often have fewer available postsecondary options. For example, Hillman's (2016) study on geography and college opportunity revealed that communities with large Latina/o populations tend to reside in education deserts, or places with few or zero postsecondary options. Similarly, Dache-Gerbino (2018) who used a critical geographic college access framework for her study found that fewer college options were found in proximity to working-class communities. This limited number of postsecondary options among minoritized communities can impact students' college-going process. As Hillman and Weichman (2016) noted, "not all students have the luxury of shopping around, and in many cases…there are no alternatives from which to choose. From this vantage point, college choice may be less a function of students' 'college knowledge' and more a function of proximity and place" (p.1). Using the narratives of 28 rural Latina/o high school seniors, Sansone and colleagues (2018) found that living in a rural community impacted the kinds of educational opportunities that students had access to during their

college-going process. Specifically, students noted the underrepresentation of highly selective college representatives at their college fairs and the overrepresentation of community college representatives, which made students feel like they had less options to choose from. Altogether, these studies on college proximity and geography highlight the important role that access, location, and affordability continue to play in students' narrow range of institutions (Park & Hossler, 2014). In the next section, I describe the ECHS model—a high school reform model designed to address college access barriers and increase college readiness among historically underserved students.

Background: Early College High Schools

Because my study will focus on Latinx/a/o students' ECHS experiences in relation to college going, in this section of my literature review, I provide background information on the ECHS model. Early college high schools (ECHSs) blend high school and college work to provide students the opportunity to earn a high school diploma and up to two years of college credit (or 60 credit hours) for free or at a very low cost (Woodcock & Beal, 2013; Zalaznick, 2015). The ECHS model is meant to increase the number of students who graduate high school and enroll in college, while simultaneously reducing their time to degree or credential completion (McDonald & Farrell, 2012). ECHSs differ from other high school reforms such as dual credit in that ECHSs are specifically designed to serve students who do not have quality access to academic preparation for college success and who have been traditionally underrepresented and underserved in postsecondary education. As such, targeted student populations for ECHSs include first-generation college-goers, low-income students, English learners, and minoritized students (Kisker, 2006).

ECHSs offer college credit through dual enrollment courses and integrate academics with social and emotional support systems like tutoring, counseling services, testing preparation sessions, and mentoring to help students understand the academic rigor and cultural norms of higher education (Hall, 2013; Vargas et al., 2017). Although earlier ECHS models presumed all students should attend college (Hall, 2013; Vargas et al., 2017), more recent models have started to combine early college models with career pathways to expand postsecondary options such as career-oriented and vocational training (e.g.,

Texas Education Agency [TEA], Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board [THECB] & Texas Workforce Commission [TWC], 2016; THECB, 2015). To provide greater detail on ECHSs, in the following sections I discuss the history of the ECHS Initiative, the creation of ECHSs, and their core principles and design.

ECHS History: Integrating High School with College

The ECHS model was originally created as part of the Early College High School Initiative (ECHSI) in 2002 by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation in partnership with the Carnegie Corporation of New York, the Ford Foundation, and the W.K. Kellogg Foundation (Nodine, 2009). The ECHS model, however, is not a novel idea and actually draws on previous high school to college integrated or acceleration models, including Leonard Koo's 6-4-4 plan of public school organization, a variety of college credit-based programs, and the establishment of Middle College High Schools (MCHSs) (Kisker, 2006; Lerner & Brand, 2007; Kirst &Venezia, 2001). Although the idea of the 6-4-4 model did not originate with Koo, his scholarly work (see Koos, 1925, 1946) helped push this model forward. Leonard's 6-4-4 plan of organization proposed a realignment of public education in which grades 1 through 6 were offered in elementary school, grades 7 through 10 in junior high school, and grades 11 through 14 in junior college (Kisker, 2006). Koo (1925, 1946) argued that coursework in grades 11 through 12 overlapped with the first two years of junior college and that reorganizing the public education system would lead to administrative and cost savings. The idea to integrate high school and community college lost momentum by the 1950s but different variations of college integration have emerged over the years including Advanced Placement (AP) programs, dual credit and dual enrollment programs, and the establishment of MCHSs (Born, 2006; Cunningham & Matthews, 2007; Kisker, 2006).

The ECHS model draws from variety of credit-based programs like the AP program established in the 1950s (Nodine, 2009), which enables students to earn college credit if they score high enough on an AP exam. It also draws from the dual credit or dual enrollment program established in the 1970s, which enables students to receive both high school and college credit for a college-level class successfully completed (i.e., dual credit) or allows them to earn college credit for a postsecondary course successfully

completed either in high school or college (i.e., dual enrollment) (Andrews, 2004; Fincher-Ford, 1996; Hoffman, 2003). Dual credit or dual enrollment programs, which are often embedded in ECHS models, were specifically designed to provide early college access to students as a way to shorten their time to degree completion, potentially saving students and families money (Hoffman, 2005). The idea was and continues to be that students will earn college credit for free, or at discounted tuition and fee rates, so they can then transfer their college credits to earn an associate or bachelor's degree at a higher education institution (An, 2013b; Andrews, 2004).

Following this dual credit model, the first MCHS opened in 1974 on the campus of LaGuardia Community College in New York. This dual credit program was opened as an alternative to the traditional high school model and was specifically designed for students in grades 9 through 12 who were at risk of not completing high school (Kisker, 2006). Key features of the MCHS model included a flexible and rigorous curriculum through which students could take high school and college courses at their own pace; an opportunity to expose students to the college environment in a small-school setting; a variety of coordinated support services such as counseling and tutoring to help students; and the opportunity to earn both a high school diploma and college credit (Born, 2006; Kisker, 2006; Nodine, 2009). In 2002, the first MCHS that opened in 1974 became the first MCHS school to reinvent itself as an ECHS with the help of the Ford Foundation and other private philanthropic foundations such as the Kellogg Foundation and the Carnegie Corporation (Born, 2006; Lieberman, 2004). Although the ECHS model draws upon several key aspects of the MCHS model and credit-based programs, ECHSs differ from these programs in important ways.

The ECHS model differs from the MCHS model in that ECHSs are not necessarily located on college campuses like MCHSs are—while some ECHSs are located on college campuses, others are located within other school districts, and some are stand-alone schools (Nodine, 2009). Although both MCHSs and ECHSs are intended to serve underrepresented students in postsecondary education, "extensive college course taking was not necessarily an objective of [MCHSs]" (Nodine, 2009, p. 4). That is, while students at MCHSs are given the opportunity to earn up to 60 college credits or more (much like

credit-based programs), this school model does not necessarily follow an established pathway that enables students to earn an associate degree (Villalobos, 2019) the way ECHSs are designed to do.

ECHSs also differ from credit-based programs in other ways, too. For example, even though dual credit and dual enrollment programs expose students to college-level courses, students' "patterns of course taking are often incoherent and de-contextualized...rather than comprising an intentional program of collegiate study" (Hoffman, 2003, p. 47). That is, unlike credit-based programs (and MCHSs), ECHSs have a more structured curriculum that enables students to graduate with both a high school diploma and either an associate degree or transferable college credit. Moreover, given the support structures embedded in the model, ECHSs are designed to offer students specific guidance on how to navigate college-level courses (Zinth, 2016). Further, while many credit-based programs require students to demonstrate academic potential through teacher recommendations, student GPA, or class ranking, ECHS are specifically designed to enroll and serve underrepresented students who have been historically underserved by the traditional high school system (Griffith, 2008; Zinth, 2016). Moreover, in the ECHS model, students begin their rigorous curriculum in 9th grade, while in dual credit or dual enrollment programs, students typically begin in grades 11 and/or 12 (Zinth, 2016). It is important to note, however, that many ECHS models embed a mix of AP courses and dual credit and dual enrollment programs to expose students to college-level courses. Essentially, credit-based programs differ from ECHSs in the students they serve, how they serve that population, and how long they do it for. These distinctive features of the ECHS model led to the creation and expansion of ECHSs across the nation.

The Creation and Expansion of the ECHS Model

In 2002, the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation instituted the Early College High School Initiative (ECHSI), which was inspired largely by Bard High School Early College (BHSEC) in New York City (Berger et al., 2010). BHSEC was initiated in 2001 as a partnership between Bard College and various New York public schools to provide students the opportunity to earn an associate degree and a high school diploma in 4 years (Brody et al., 2004). Although BHSEC is often cited as the first public ECHS, this early college adopted its model and teaching philosophies from Bard College at Simon's Rock, which

opened in 1966 as a women's residential program that combined the last two years of high school with the first two years of college in small class sizes (Brody et al., 2004).

The primary goal of the ECHS model is to increase the secondary and postsecondary opportunities of traditionally underrepresented students in postsecondary education, broadly defined as low-income students, students who are English learners, students whose family obligations keep them at home, and first-generation college-goers (American Institutes for Research [AIR] & SRI International [SRI], 2008b; Atchison et al., 2019; Smerdon et al., 2005). To achieve their goals, the Gates Foundation funded seven partner organizations[19] to broker local partnerships between high schools and higher education institutions (Berger et al., 2010). These local partnerships between school districts and higher education institutions continue to be the bedrock of the ECHS model (Berger et al., 2010).

Although the Gates Foundation stopped funding ECHS initiatives in 2009, Jobs for the Future (JFF) and 12 partner organizations[20] (also referred to as intermediaries) (JFF, n.d.) continue to play a key role in providing startup and ongoing technical support, guidance, and professional development for ECHS partnerships across the nation (Berger et al., 2010). These partner organizations also work with state and local governments to enable the implementation of such programs through grants and other support initiatives. In 2013–2014, the most recent year for which data are available, over 80,000 students were enrolled in 280 ECHSs across 32 states (Webb & Gerwin, 2014). Of those, 41% were Latino students, 27% were White students, and 22.5% were Black students. Moreover, 61% of those students were from low-income families and 56% were first-generation college-goers (Webb & Gerwin, 2014).

[19] The seven founding organizations included the Center for Native Education at Antioch University in Seattle, the KnowledgeWorks Foundation, the Middle College National Consortium, the National Council of La Raza, the Southeast Consortium for Minorities in Engineering, the Utah Partnership for Education, and the Woodrow Wilson National Fellowship Foundation (Berger et al., 2010).

[20] As of 2020, the 12 partner organizations include Google, the US Department of Education, the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, Walmart, the Nellie Mae Education Foundation, The California Endowment, Salesforce.org, the ECMC Foundation, the US Department of Labor, The James Irvine Foundation, the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation, and Social Finance (JFF, n.d.).

ECHSI Core Principles and Design

In 2008, after a prolonged discussion on shared objectives, partnered organizations ratified five ECHSI core principles that have since driven the implementation of ECHSs (AIR & SRI, 2007). These principles direct ECHSs to (a) serve traditionally underrepresented students in postsecondary education; (b) establish joint partnerships with a local education agency, higher education institution, and the community for student success; (c) jointly develop an integrated academic plan that enables students to graduate with transferable college credits; (d) provide a comprehensive support system for students to develop academic and social skills necessary for college completion; and (e) create conditions and advocate for supportive policies that advance the early college movement (Berger et al., 2010). These core principles have been loosely adopted by state-level policies governing ECHSs (Duncheon & Muñoz, 2019). For example, Texas, a nationwide leader in implementing ECHSs, developed a blueprint with benchmarks and program requirements in 2019 that closely align with these five core principles (Texas Education Agency [TEA], 2020b). As outlined by AIR and SRI (2005c, 2007, 2008a) and promoted by the Gates Foundation, the ECHS model is also driven by the 3Rs—*rigorous* academic coursework, *relevant* learning opportunities, and meaningful *relationships* among students and ECHS affiliated stakeholders including teachers, counselors, and faculty who enhance student experiences. A *rigorous academic curriculum* is intended to prepare students for college; thus, the ECHS model stresses in-depth learning and analytical thinking through small learning communities. *Relevant instruction* is designed to keep students engaged and informed about why they are learning a topic and how it relates to the real-world. Finally, *meaningful relationships* with instructors, counselors, and teachers are expected to support student engagement, persistence, and success in such programs.

The ECHS model is sustained through unique partnerships with local school districts, community organizations, and postsecondary institutions. Given these unique partnerships, ECHSs can be located on property owned by the local school district (oftentimes serving as a school-within-a-school model), at a third-party location, or located on a college campus (either at a 2- or 4-year institution). Each program has its own admission practices, ranging from lottery systems to open-ended applications and in-person

interviews. While the structure and funding of ECHSs vary from state to state and even among local districts, a common goal for these programs is to reduce inequality in higher education and increase access to opportunity (Zalaznick, 2015). As such, the ECHS model uses smaller learning environments (approximately 100 students per grade level) and is meant to "replace[s] remediation with acceleration" by providing students the opportunity to earn both a high school diploma and up to 60 college credits (or an associate) (Williams, 2015, p. 4). This direct pathway between high schools and colleges is meant to increase the number of students who graduate high school and enroll in college, while simultaneously reducing their time to degree completion.

The ECHS model is driven by the ECHSI Theory of Change conceptual framework (Berger et al., 2013; see also Edmunds et al., 2017; Haxton et al., 2016; Song & Zeiser, 2019, for a similar framework). This framework has various components that are theorized to most likely impact students' enrollment and success in college. The main components of the framework are the ECHSI core principles, early college experiences, high school outcomes, college outcomes, educational attainment, and student background characteristics. Guided by the ECHSI core principles, students' ECHS experience should include a supportive environment that exposes them to rigorous, college-level coursework tied with academic and social supports (Edmunds, 2016; Johnson & Mercado-Garcia, 2020). Given adequate support in an ECHS environment, students' high school outcomes, which include academic achievement and graduation rates, are expected to improve (Edmunds et al., 2017; Lauen et al., 2017). The framework suggests that students' ECHS positive experiences and improved high school outcomes will then either influence students' enrollment in and performance at a postsecondary education institution, lead them directly to earn a college degree if the student completes sufficient postsecondary credits while in high school, or both (Lauen et al., 2017; Nodine, 2009). The framework also considers student background characteristics, acknowledging that these characteristics may affect student high school and college outcomes (Haxton et al., 2016). An underlying assumption of this framework is that exposing high school students who have been traditionally underrepresented in higher education to a rigorous and supportive

academic environment with the opportunity to earn free or low-cost college credit will increase their access to and success in postsecondary education (Song & Zeiser, 2019).

In an effort to increase college access and educational success for traditionally underserved students, many educational leaders in states like North Carolina, Michigan, Tennessee, and Texas have established variations of the ECHS model across many school districts (Zinth, 2016). Texas, in particular, is a leading state in ECHS programs with 182 campuses currently opened and another 12 campuses expected to open for the 2019–2020 academic school year (TEA, 2020a). Given the increasing number of ECHS campuses across the state of Texas, I selected this state as the site of my study. As such, I follow this section with a discussion on the creation and structure of ECHSs in the state.

Early College High Schools in Texas

Texas's public policy environment, coupled with state-level funding, has made it a national leader in creating, sustaining, and expanding ECHSs (Ahmed, 2014; Goldberger & Santos, 2009). In 2005, 15 ECHSs existed across the state. By 2015, 106 ECHSs were operating with a total enrollment of 35,375 students (Legislative Budget Board Staff [LBBS], 2016a,b). As of 2020, 182 ECHSs exist, serving 65,000 students across the state (TEA, 2020a). To provide greater detail on ECHSs in Texas, in the following sections, I describe the creation, structure, and purpose of ECHS programs in Texas.

The Creation of ECHSs in Texas

In 2003, Texas created the Texas High School Project (THSP), now formally known as Educate Texas, as a statewide effort to prepare students for college and the workforce (Educate Texas, n.d.). To support the project, the state allocated $65 million to fund high school reform efforts, coupled with an additional $65 million from private investors such as the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation (SRI, 2008). This unique public–private partnership enabled the THSP to provide "programs and supports to high-need schools and districts statewide, with an emphasis on urban areas and the Texas-Mexico border" (SRI, 2008, p.3). Among one of their four priorities was to create new high school models that provided students with a small, rigorous, and personal learning environment. This priority in particular emphasized

partnerships between high schools and postsecondary institutions. One of the models that stemmed from the THSP was the ECHS model.

In 2005, as part of the THSP, the Texas Legislature enacted the Early College Education Program to provide students an opportunity to simultaneously enroll in high school and college. The objective was for students to earn an associate degree or at least 60 hours of college credit toward a bachelor's degree in 4 or 5 years while attending high school (Senate Bill [SB] 1146, 2005; Texas Education Code [TEC] §29.908, 2005). The program was designed for students "who are at risk of dropping out of school or who wish to accelerate completion of the high school program" (TEC §29.908, 2005, para. 1). As an extension of previous initiatives to promote college and career readiness, in 2007 the Texas Legislature passed House Bill (HB) 2237, which created the High School Completion and Success Initiative Council (TEA, 2008). The Council was tasked with developing a strategic plan aimed at improving high school completion rates and identifying strategies to better align funding with other programs dedicated to improving the workforce and college readiness of high school graduates (House Bill [HB] 2237, 2007; TEA, 2008). In their adopted 2008 strategic plan, the Council identified ECHSs as a priority program for dropout prevention and college and workforce readiness across the state (High School Completion and Success Initiative Council, 2008). Their report cited first-generation college students, low-income students, students of color, and English language learners as the target group for ECHSs. To support the Council, the state allocated a total of $28.71 million per year for 2008 and 2009 to fund high school reform efforts. An additional $25 million per year for the same years were allocated for programs targeting "at-risk" students (TEA, 2008). This funding assisted the expansion and creation of many high school reform programs across the state, including ECHSs.

Structure and Purpose of ECHSs in Texas

In order to understand the structure and purpose of ECHSs in Texas, I need to first provide background context. In the 2016–2017 school year, Texas Education Agency [TEA] partnered with JFF—national experts on ECHSs—to seek guidance and recommendations on developing a concise ECHS designation process (Schwinn, 2017). This redesign was meant to outline specific procedures and key

design elements (Schwinn, 2017). JFF made five recommendations based on 47 interviews with high school and college practitioners. The five recommendations were reviewed and approved by Commissioner Morath in 2017 and became effective in the 2018–2019 school year. This collaboration between TEA, JFF, and other ECHS stakeholders, led to the revision of the ECHS Blueprint. This blueprint, monitored by TEA, integrates outcome-based measures (OBMs) and outlines a roadmap of six benchmarks that all ECHS must embed into their school structure. Broadly, these benchmarks evaluate ECHSs based on whether they are able to recruit their target student population, successfully partner with higher education institutions, and develop and maintain P–6 leadership initiatives. Other benchmarks include providing students with a rigorous course of study that enables a student to receive college credit, administering and preparing students to take the Texas Success Initiative (TSI) college placement exam, and providing professional development plans for teachers and staff (Schwinn, 2017). All ECHSs must annually demonstrate that they can implement and accomplish all of the design elements and OBMs for each benchmark. OBMs indicators are related to *access* (i.e., 80% or greater of the student enrollment in ECHS must be at-risk),[21] *achievement* (i.e., student performance on various measures of college readiness while enrolled in ECHS), and *attainment* (i.e., student completion of ECHS programming) (TEA, 2020b).

School districts and charter schools interested in becoming an ECHS must first submit an application in the fall (Texas Commissioner's Rules, §102.1091, 2007). TEA then reviews each application and eligible districts are notified of their status in the spring. Each eligible district is then given 12–18 months of ECHS planning. Over the planning period, ECHS candidates must work with a technical assistance provider, funded by TEA, to ensure they meet all the design elements outlined in the ECHS Blueprint (JFF & TEA, n.d.). At the end of the planning period, after meeting all of the elements, the ECHS is allowed to serve students and may apply for a Provisional designation.[22] New ECHSs remain

[21] Although ECHS are required to provide outcome-based measures for African American, Hispanic, and male students, these data are not used to determine an ECHS's designation status (TEA, 2020b).
[22] According to TEA (2020b), Provisional ECHSs are "new ECHSs that demonstrate they can implement all design elements for each benchmark and meet the Provisional Early College OBMs" (p. 1).

Provisional for four years. During this time, TEA provides technical assistance. At the end of the 4th year, ECHSs with Provisional status must then apply for Designation status.[23] ECHSs with a Designation status must renewal annually (TEA, 2020b).

According to TEA (n.d.a), the goals of ECHSs are to

> enroll historically underrepresented students…provide dual credit at no cost to students; offer rigorous instruction and accelerated courses; provide academic and social support services to help students succeed; provide students with highly personalized attention; increase college readiness; [and]…reduce barriers to college access; partner with Texas institutions of higher education. (para 1)

To meet these goals, each ECHS must have its own principal or program director, a college liaison, a counselor, and highly qualified teachers (LBB, 2016a,b). Like many ECHSs across the nation, ECHSs in Texas can be located on a college campus, a distinct high school campus, or a school-within-a-school campus. College-level courses can be taught by a college faculty or a qualified high school teacher. ECHSs must provide participating students with a course of study that combines high school courses and college-level courses during grade levels 9 through 12 (TEC §29.908, 2005). ECHS must also provide students with a flexible class schedule and an academic mentor (TEC §29.908, 2005) and pay for students' tuition, fees, and required textbooks, to the extent those charges are not waived by the partnered higher education institution (Texas Commissioner's Rules §102.1091, 2007). Altogether, the goals and structure of the ECHS model signal that ECHS campuses in Texas are committed to providing underrepresented and underserved students with opportunities that give them access to college credit and college knowledge. Given the role that ECHSs play in Texas and the nation more generally, in the next section, I cover key research findings on ECHSs.

[23] According to TEA (2020b), ECHSs with a Designation status must "maintain designation by demonstrating they can implement each of the design elements for each benchmark and meet the Early College OBMs" (p. 1).

ECHS Key Research Findings

Because ECHSs are intervention programs designed to prepare underrepresented and underserved students for a postsecondary education, scholars have studied them and their related outcomes. Research on the effectiveness of the ECHS model has shown variation, but findings generally show positive experiences and outcomes for ECHS students. In this section, I review the emerging body of literature on ECHSs, focusing first on students' perceptions and experiences and then on students' secondary and postsecondary outcomes.

Students' ECHS Perceptions and Experiences

An underlying assumption of the ECHS model is that students' access to and success in a postsecondary institution will be improved by combining a rigorous academic program with relevant learning opportunities that emphasize real-world connections, supported by positive and meaningful relationships. Scholars' research on ECHS students' reported perceptions and experiences have overwhelmingly aligned with the ECHS model's emphasis on the 3Rs—rigor, relevance, and relationships (Berger et al., 2013; Thompson & Ongaga, 2011). Across several studies on ECHSs, students believed that the level of rigor and support they received enabled them to acquire the social and academic skills needed to persist and transition into a postsecondary education (Adams et al., 2020; Duncheon, 2020; Ongaga, 2010). Several studies have also highlighted students' ECHS perceptions and experiences, noting various drawbacks of the ECHS model. Students, for example, have described their struggle to adapt to the rigorous culture of their ECHS and have noted their feelings of stress and anxiety as they struggle to balance high school and college work (Calhoun et al., 2019; Ongaga, 2010; Sáenz & Combs, 2015). These mixed findings in the literature suggest that the advantages of the ECHS model depend on the quality of instruction, embedded supports, and targeted interventions offered to students. In this section, I review the literature on students' descriptions of their learning environment, including the benefits and challenges they have experienced. I first describe the literature on students' perceptions and experiences using the 3Rs framework of rigor, relevance, and relationships. Then, I review the challenges ECHS students have described.

Rigor

To ensure students are college- and career-ready, ECHS are expected to offer students a rigorous curriculum tied with opportunities to earn transferable college credit (Thompson & Ongaga, 2011). Rigor, in the ECHS context, implies exposing students to high quality instruction and advanced coursework, as well as support services, to build their content knowledge and learning habits (Duncheon & DeMatthews, 2019; Edmunds et al., 2013; Ongaga, 2010; Thompson & Ongaga, 2011). Scholars have found that students believe their ECHS experiences have increased their confidence to navigate college spaces and coursework and helped them gain independence and become more self-aware of their hopes, abilities, and future goals (Calhoun et al., 2019; Duncheon, 2020; McDonald & Farrell, 2012; Sáenz & Combs, 2015; Schaefer & Rivera, 2016; Valadez et al., 2012). Findings in the literature, for example, show that exposure to college courses made some ECHS students more aware of their learning styles (Schaefer & Rivera, 2016), while for others it was a "reality check" about what college would be like (Calhoun et al., 2019). In some instances, it helped ECHS students identify areas of academic and professional interest (Duncheon, 2020; Woodcock & Beal, 2013). In a qualitative study conducted in Texas with 111 traditionally underrepresented students, Duncheon (2020) found that ECHS students liked taking college classes with "actual professors" because they were not only exposed to varying pedagogies and levels of instructional difficulty, but they were also able to take classes in different fields, enabling them to determine which major(s) they wanted to pursue at the university.

Given the rigor of courses, many students have also reported a sense of increased maturity and confidence in their abilities to overcome obstacles (McDonald & Farrell, 2012; Valadez et al., 2012). Using focus group interviews with 31 ECHS students, McDonald and Farrell (2012) found that students' acclimation to college-level work made them feel like it had improved their social and academic abilities and helped them formulate a collegiate identity. In addition to acquiring academic skills including better studying habits, students have also expressed how taking college classes has "exposed them to some of the unspoken rules or tacit knowledge" needed to succeed in college such as learning how to interact with college faculty (Calhoun et al., 2019, p. 319). Indeed, several scholars have noted that because

minoritized student groups have historically been denied access to college, they often do not have the cultural capital needed to understand the unwritten rules of accessing and attaining a postsecondary education (Dumais & Ward, 2009; Welton & Martinez, 2014; Yee, 2016). Because students are expected to take rigorous courses to prepare them for a postsecondary education, their rigorous curriculum is tied with support programming to help them stay on track. Scholars have found that students perceive support programming such as tutoring, advising, and counseling, as helpful (Adams et al., 2020; AIR & SRI, 2009; Ari et al., 2017; Berger et al., 2013; Duncheon & DeMatthews, 2019; Ongaga, 2010).

Relevance

The ECHS model combines rigorous coursework with relevant instructional practices. In the ECHS context, relevant instructional practices include learning opportunities that enable students to relate assignments and projects to their personal lives and beyond high school (Edmunds et al., 2010, 2013; Thompson & Ongaga, 2011). Scholars have cited practical learning opportunities, such as community service projects (Ari et al., 2017; Thompson & Ongaga, 2011) and cooperative projects focused on real-world scenarios (Adams et al., 2020; AIR & SRI, 2005c; Edmunds et al., 2010, 2013; McDonald & Farrell, 2012) as relevant instructional practices used by teachers to engage ECHS students in their learning. Adams et al. (2020), Ongaga (2010), and Sáenz and Combs' (2015) studies suggest that students working with each other on homework assignments or projects can provide students with invaluable strategies that help them navigate the ECHS environment and beyond. Group work also seems to promote sense of belonging among students (Adams et al., 2020; Ongaga, 2010; Sáenz & Combs, 2015). Using preliminary data from a survey of 52 students at one ECHS, Edmunds and colleagues (2010) asked ninth-grade students to identify the frequency of participating in relevant instructional practices. Over 60% of students reported participation in the following practices at least half of the time: having students work with peers, having students work on projects related to real life, and letting students decide how to work on their assignments (Edmunds et al., 2010). Using focus group interview data to contextualize their survey findings on the facilitators and indicators of engagement in ECHSs, Edmunds and colleagues

(2013) found that ECHS students cited their teachers' varying instructional practices as engaging and more meaningful as it required them to think about the applicability of the concepts they were learning.

Scholars have also found that students feel their participation at an ECHS has enhanced their time-management, communication, problem-solving, and goal-setting skills (Calhoun et al., 2019; Duncheon, 2020; McDonald & Farrell, 2012; Sáenz & Combs, 2015). In a qualitative case study with five Black students, Adams and colleagues (2020) reported that students felt their coursework was not only preparing them for college, but also for the workplace, citing the school's connection with the Business Alliance—a group of industry professionals—as an opportunity to meet professionals connected to the community and learn about job shadowing and internship opportunities. These findings are similar to that of Schaefer and Rivera (2016) who interviewed nine students and found that their participation with the Career Institute made them more aware of their career goals, which helped drive their education.

Relationships

In addition to a rigorous and relevant academic program, meaningful relationships with instructors and peers are also a central characteristic of the ECHS model. Relationships, in the ECHS context, implies strong, supportive instructor-student and peer relationships that can inspire students both academically and personally (AIR & SRI, 2005a, 2005b; Edmunds et al., 2010). Researchers have consistently found that students perceive their relationships with peers, instructors, and administrators as positive (Adams et al., 2020; Calhoun et al., 2019; Hall, 2013; Kaniuka & Vickers, 2010; McDonald & Farrell, 2012; Ongaga, 2010; Sáenz & Combs, 2015; Schaefer & Rivera, 2016; Valadez et al., 2012; Woodcock & Beal, 2013). Some scholars, for example, have found that students perceive their high school and college instructors as caring, encouraging, and respectful (Cravey, 2013; Hall, 2013; Kaniuka & Vickers, 2010; McDonald & Farrell, 2012; Ongaga, 2010), which students report is encouraging and motivating (Ari et al., 2017; Calhoun et al., 2019). Students have also cited the individualized attention they get from their teachers as helpful (Locke & McKenzie, 2016) and have described their ECHS as an emotionally and physically safe place as a result of the nurturing relationships they have with teachers and peers (Cravey, 2013; McDonald & Farrell, 2012; Sáenz & Combs, 2015). These interpersonal relations

have been particularly marked by teachers' high expectations of students and peers' high expectations for one another (McDonald & Farrell, 2012). These communal expectations have helped enhance students' academic attitudes and levels of engagement and confidence and have helped establish a sense of belonging among students (Kaniuka & Vickers, 2010; McDonald & Farrell, 2012; Ongaga, 2010).

Given the small school setting of ECHSs, many students have used the term "family" to describe their relationships with instructors and peers (Adams et al., 2020; Ari et al., 2017; Cravey, 2013; Edmunds et al., 2013; Valadez et al., 2012). These positive family-like relationships and experiences with teachers and peers have made many students feel like their enrollment at an ECHS was "worth it" (Sáenz & Combs, 2015, p. 111). Students in ECHSs have also drawn a distinction between teachers and college professors. For example, Valadez et al. (2012) and Duncheon (2020) both noted how students appreciated being treated "like adults" by their professors. Students valued having the freedom to make their own choices and viewed this as critical for their growth academically and socially (Duncheon, 2020). Although scholars have consistently noted students' positive ECHS experiences and perceptions, they have also documented the challenges that students experience and must navigate.

Challenges of Attending an ECHS

Although the aforementioned studies note positive student perceptions and experiences, many scholars have also captured the challenges that students experience at their ECHS. For example, multiple researchers noted how difficult it was for some students to adapt to the rigorous culture of their ECHS and the high expectations of their teachers and administrators (Calhoun et al., 2019; Ongaga, 2010). The fast-paced curriculum and rigorous course load left many students feeling overwhelmed, stressed, and anxious (Calhoun et al., 2019; Locke et al., 2014; Locke & McKenzie, 2016; McDonald & Farrell, 2012) and many also reported not being able to sleep (Calhoun et al., 2019). Alaie's (2011) observations of ECHS students in a college-level biology course revealed that many students were having transitional difficulties which led to poor attendance and course failure. Of the 37 students who took the biology course their senior year in high school, Alaie (2011) found that only nine matriculated to college and none of them chose to enroll in biology courses once in college. Students instead enrolled in courses traditionally taken

by students interested in pursuing disciplines outside of the sciences, suggesting students might have lost interest in pursuing majors or careers in these fields (Alaie, 2011). These challenges reveal that access to rigorous courses must be accompanied with support services and targeted interventions that help students adapt and transition to college courses. However, the availability of supports or resources is not sufficient. Researchers have pointed to the need for targeted interventions at ECHS to also take students' needs and responsibilities outside of the ECHS context into consideration. For example, Locke and McKenzie (2016) provided the critical perspective of eight Latina students who were underperforming in an ECHS. Findings revealed that students were aware of the resources available to them but were not able to take advantage of these opportunities because of outside obligations like work and family responsibilities. Thus, interventions and supports offered at ECHSs must also consider the complexities of students' lives and must have a plan in place to help students negotiate these different environments. As Brooks (2013) noted in his polyphonic narrative, "each day [ECHS] students *cross borders* of socioeconomic status and educational status; they live in two distinct worlds" (p. 231, emphasis added). Given these challenges, ECHSs and partnered postsecondary institutions must recognize the holistic lives of students and take the necessary steps to bridge transitional gaps (Born, 2006).

Despite the positive relationships reported in the ECHS literature, some students perceived that their teachers offered "too much handholding" as compared to professors in college (Duncheon, 2020, p. 11), while other students felt frustrated with and micromanaged by administrators and college readiness interventions (Duncheon, 2020; Sáenz & Combs, 2015). Adams and colleagues' (2020) qualitative case study with five Black male students also found that diversity in the teaching staff was missing, which echoed Ongaga's (2010) point that ECHSs need a diverse teaching staff to reflect their diverse student body and enhance interpersonal relationships. Multiple studies on ECHSs have also revealed that students missed socializing with friends who were not in their ECHS and participating in extracurricular activities like sports and homecoming (Sáenz & Combs, 2015; Woodcock & Beal, 2013). Because of their demanding academic program, many ECHS students would forgo hanging out with friends and participating in extracurricular activities (Calhoun et al., 2019; McDonald & Farrell, 2012). Using

qualitative data on 28 ECHS students, Calhoun and colleagues (2019) noted how changes in friendship and differing priorities created an "existential crisis" for ECHS students who wanted to hang out with friends, but also wanted to do well in their studies. In many instances, students reported deferring gratification in exchange for succeeding academically and being able to accomplish their personal and professional future goals (Calhoun et al., 2019; McDonald & Farrell, 2012). Altogether, scholars have found that although students have positive perceptions and experiences, challenges related to the institutional structure of the ECHS model are still evident. In the next section, I describe, in detail, the high school and postsecondary outcomes discussed in the ECHS literature.

ECHS Students' High School and Postsecondary Outcomes

The ECHSI Theory of Change conceptual framework suggests that students' early college experiences will improve students' high school and college outcomes. High school outcomes, such as student attendance, academic achievement, academic preparation, and high school graduation rates are often used as intermediary indicators to evaluate the early effects of students in an ECHS (Berger et al., 2013; Lauen et al., 2017). College enrollment and degree attainment, by contrast, are often used as long-term indicators to determine the impact of the ECHS model on students (Edmunds et al., 2012, 2013, 2020). In this section, I first review the literature on ECHS students' high school outcomes, which includes findings on student attendance rates, academic achievement, college credit accrual, and high school graduation rates. I then review the literature on postsecondary outcomes, which includes students' college enrollment rates, college enrollment by institution type, and degree attainment.

Student Attendance Rates

Higher attendance rates have previously been cited as a prerequisite, though not a guarantee, for a student's progress, engagement, and success in K–12 (Appleton et al., 2008; Gottfried, 2010; Rumberger & Thomas, 2000). In 2002, the American Institutes for Research (AIR) and SRI International partnered to

evaluate the ECHSI for the Gates Foundation.[24] Evaluation data from 2003–2009 revealed that the average daily attendance rates at ECHSs remained high across time, consistently averaging 94%, suggesting ECHSs were successfully keeping students in the classroom—an important precursor for learning (AIR & SRI, 2006, 2007, 2008a, 2009; Berger et al., 2010). Earlier research on the ECHSI also showed that start-up ECHSs (i.e., new schools that specifically implement the ECHS model) had higher attendance rates when compared to redesigned schools (i.e., existing schools that adapted the ECHS model) (AIR & SRI, 2006). This difference in attendance rates between start-up ECHSs and redesigned ECHSs could be attributed to the various challenges of having to transform and redesign an existing school culture and organization with largely the same population of students (AIR & SRI, 2005a). Other research also revealed that attendance rates were higher for students attending an ECHS located on a college campus (AIR & SRI, 2009), pointing to the "power of place"—an idea that suggests exposing students to authentic college environments will build their college-going identity (Cunningham & Matthews, 2007). More recently, scholars examining the impact of ECHSs reveal that students attending an ECHS have higher attendance rates, fewer suspensions rates, and higher engagement levels when compared to students in traditional high schools (Edmunds et al., 2012; Edmunds et al., 2013; Lauen et al., 2017; SERVE Center, 2010). In Edmunds and colleague's (2013) study on student engagement, ECHS students reported that their teachers had used different types of instruction to engage their learning. These various teaching strategies were also coupled with support, which further facilitated students' learning. In general, findings on student attendance rates at ECHSs have been positive, suggesting, at the very least, that students are in the classroom, which may indicate higher engagement in learning (Edmunds et al., 2013).

[24] The AIR and SRI partnership was a multi-year evaluation of the ECHSI, which was initiated by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. Between 2002 and 2009, AIR and SRI produced annual descriptive reports on the characteristics and outcomes of ECHSs and students. This multi-year evaluation project followed students from ninth grade through up to four years after high school. In 2010, AIR and SRI started measuring the *impact* of ECHSs rather than documenting just the development and implementation of the ECHSI as they had done in previous years (Berger et al., 2010).

Academic Preparation and Achievement

Scholars have previously cited academic preparation and achievement as strong predictors of college enrollment and success (Adelman, 2006; Arbona & Nora, 2007; Engberg & Allen, 2011; Engberg & Wolniak, 2010; Núñez & Kim, 2012; Sanchez et al., 2015; Warburton et al., 2001). Using a number of indicators like state standardized exam scores, grade point average (GPA), and advanced course-taking patterns in mathematics, science, and English to measure academic achievement, researchers have shown that students in early college typically outperform students in traditional schools on state achievement exams (AIR & SRI, 2009; Berger et al., 2013; Edmunds et al., 2010; Kaniuka & Vickers, 2010; Lauen et al., 2017) and take more advanced college preparatory courses than students in traditional schools (Berger et al., 2013; Edmunds et al., 2010, 2012; SERVE Center, 2010). However, some scholars have also found that enrolling higher proportions of ECHS students in more rigorous high school courses is not sufficient (Muñoz et al., 2014). Hall's (2013) mix-method study examining student outcomes and program implementation at four North Carolina early colleges found that although students at a particular ECHS had the highest number of completed college courses, their GPAs were also the lowest when compared to the other three ECHSs in the study. Hall's (2013) findings suggest that while students were given the opportunity to take advanced courses, they were still struggling to manage the rigor of high school and college courses simultaneously. In another study, Edmunds et al. (2010) compared students who were randomly selected to attend two ECHSs through a lottery system with students who had applied but were not selected and instead attended a traditional high school. They found that ninth-grade students at ECHS were progressing more rapidly through advanced courses like Algebra I, Algebra II, English I, and Geometry when compared to students in the control group; however, ECHS students had lower passing rates in some classes. Although these lower passing rates may be associated with ECHS students taking more advanced courses at an earlier point and/or more frequently, it also signals "the need for a strong academic support to accompany increased enrollment in more rigorous courses" (Edmunds et al., 2010, p. 349).

Academic preparation and achievement outcomes for underrepresented ECHS students in particular have been mixed (AIR & SRI, 2009; Fischetti et al., 2011; Hall, 2013). For example, a study evaluating high school outcomes for ECHS students revealed that female students and students from non-English-speaking homes reported higher high school GPAs when compared to other students, while minority, first-generation college-going, and low-income students, reported lower GPAs in their high school courses than White students (AIR & SRI, 2009). Reporting on the impact of 12 ECHSs in North Carolina, Edmunds and colleagues (2012) found that ECHS students in all subgroups (i.e., minority students, first-generation college-goers, and low-income students) were outperforming students in college preparatory math courses when compared to students in the control group (i.e., students who had applied to the ECHS but were not selected through the lottery system). However, only first-generation college-goers and low-income students were successfully completing college preparatory math courses at a statistically significant level. These mixed findings reveal that continued practices at ECHSs must work to address academic achievement gaps among underrepresented student groups—the targeted population for which the ECHS model was designed.

College Credit Accrual

Scholars have shown that college exposure through academic preparation is a key determinant for college entry and success (Adelman, 2006; Allen & Dadgar, 2012; An, 2013a, 2013b; Kim & Bragg, 2008). College course-taking (different from advanced college preparatory courses) and credit accumulation as well as AP course-taking and exam passage in high school have been previously used as indicators to measure a student's academic preparation (Haxton et al., 2016; Song & Zeiser, 2019). Researchers conducting descriptive studies to examine the outcomes of ECHSs have found that students are graduating high school with college credit accrual (AIR & SRI, 2009; JFF, 2011; Song & Zeiser, 2019; Webb & Mayka, 2011). For example, in 2010, of the 900 graduates from 11 ECHSs in Texas, about 95% had already earned at least some college credit by graduation, with many accumulating an average of 24 college credits during high school (JFF, 2011). Using a survey to measure the ECHS impact on students' high school experiences, Song and Zeiser (2019) found that 69.3% of ECHS students had

accrued college credit compared to 35.5% of students in the control group. In some instances, ECHS graduates earn enough college credit to receive an associate degree (AIR & SRI, 2009). In 2009, of the 3,000 students graduating from 64 ECHSs, 25% had earned an associate degree (Hoffman & Vargas, 2010). In another study examining the impact of 10 ECHSs across five states between 2005–2006 and 2007–2008, Berger et al. (2013) found that 19.8% of ECHS students by Year 4, which would represent the final year of high school, had earned a postsecondary degree (most likely an associate degree or certificate). In contrast, very few students in the comparison group had earned a college degree by Year 4 (0.7%) (see Song & Zeiser, 2019, for similar findings). However, this finding is not surprising, given that the ECHS model has a built-in curriculum purposefully tailored at enabling students to earn both a high school diploma and an associate degree (or transferable college credit).

Scholars conducting impact studies have found that ECHS students earn college credits at a higher rate than students who attend traditional high schools (Edmunds et al., 2017, 2020). For example, in a longitudinal lottery-based experimental study, Edmunds et al. (2017) found that by 12th grade ECHS students had earned an average of 21.6 transferable college credits compared to an average of 2.8 credits earned by students who had applied to an ECHS but did not get accepted through the lottery system. Similarly, Berger et al. (2013), Haxton et al. (2016), and Song and Zeiser (2019) found that ECHS students were significantly more likely to earn college credits during high school than students in the control group (i.e., lottery applicants who were not offered enrollment at an ECHS). Findings from Berger et al. (2013) and Haxton et al. (2016), in particular, revealed that nearly half (49.1% and 49.5%, respectively) of ECHS students earned at least one year of college credit when compared to students in the control group (5.5.% and 5%, respectively). As mentioned earlier, these findings are not surprising given that the ECHS model was purposefully designed to enable students to accelerate their path towards a postsecondary degree. Haxton and colleagues (2016), however, found that students in the control group enrolled in AP courses and passed AP exams at significantly higher rates than ECHS students, but AP courses, in general, did not lead either group to substantially earn college credit. Building on Berger and colleagues' (2013) impact study, Song and Zeiser (2019) conducted a study examining the longer-term

impacts of early colleges on students' postsecondary outcomes. Using various high school experiences (i.e., college credit accrual, instructional rigor, college-going culture, and student supports) as potential mediators of early college impact, they found that credit accumulation during high school was the strongest mediator for degree completion outcomes, particularly bachelor's degree completion (Song & Zeiser, 2019). Students' college credit accrual, for example, explained 59% of the total early college impact on completing any type of degree and 86% of the early college impact on bachelor's degree completion 6 years after expected high school graduation (Song & Zeiser, 2019). Altogether, these findings suggest that college credit accrual during high school may play an important and significant role in facilitating ECHS students' college degree completion.

High School Graduation Rates

Although graduating from high school does not ensure a student will be college ready (Greene & Winters, 2005; Roderick et al., 2009; Venezia & Jaeger, 2013), having a high school degree has its benefits. Research shows that earning a high school diploma increases personal and societal benefits when compared to individuals who have less than a high school diploma (Ma et al., 2019). In general, scholars have found that ECHS graduation rates fare better than the national high school graduation averages (Berger et al., 2013; Haxton et al., 2016; Nodine, 2009; Webb & Gerwin, 2014). For example, in 2012, despite ECHSs enrolling a majority of low-income students and students of color, the 4-year graduation rate for ECHSs was 90% compared to the national average of 78% (Webb & Gerwin, 2014). Haxton and colleagues (2016) conducted an impact study to compare ECHS students across 10 sites with students who had applied to an ECHS but were not selected. They found that "being admitted to an [ECHS] did not have a statistically significant impact on the likelihood of graduating from high school" (p. 418). Haxton et al. (2016) results also revealed that the graduation rates of ECHS students and control group students were about the same, 88.0% and 86.1%, respectively, for the 2008–2009 academic year

(Haxton et al., 2016; see Berger et al., 2013 and Edmunds et al., 2017 for similar findings).[25] However, the graduation rates for both groups were higher than the national graduation rate of 75.5% for the same academic year (Haxton et al., 2016). When considering impact for student subgroups, Berger et al. (2013), who compared ECHS students across 10 sites with lottery applicants who had not been admitted across 62 different traditional high schools, found that the ECHS impact on high school graduation rates did not differ based on students' background characteristics (i.e., minority status, gender, low-income status, and first-generation college attendance). In general, research on the high school graduation rates of ECHS students shows positive effects, but its impact remains small and mostly nonsignificant, which is consistent with previous research on whole-school reform impacts on high school graduation rates (Herlihy & Quint, 2006; Kemple & Scott-Clayton, 2004).

College Enrollment

A long-term goal of the ECHS model is to increase students' postsecondary attainment through academic preparation, student supports, and college exposure (Woodcock & Beal, 2013). A growing body of research shows that ECHS students were significantly more likely to enroll in college during high school when compared to students in the control group, suggesting that ECHS students were being exposed to college (Berger et al., 2013, 2014; Edmunds et al., 2017; Haxton et al., 2016; Song & Zeiser, 2019). A study reporting on ECHSs from multiple states found that, by Year 4, which traditionally reflects the final year of high school, 63.5% of ECHS students had enrolled in college, compared to 24.3% of students in the control group (i.e., students who had applied to the ECHS but were not selected through the lottery system) (Berger et al., 2014). By Year 6, which was 2 years after students graduated high school, Edmunds and colleagues (2017) found that 89% of ECHS students in North Carolina had enrolled in postsecondary education at least once between the start of ninth grade and the time of the study, compared to 74.3% of students in the control group. This was a slightly higher percentage than

[25] Haxton et al.'s (2016) study examined the impact of ECHSs on students enrolled in Grades 9 to 12 in 2005 through 2011. The 2008–2009 academic year was the year in which the study's oldest cohort was expected to graduate.

reported by the Berger et al. (2013) and Haxton et al. (2016) studies, which found that 80.9% and 80.7% of ECHS students across multiple states, respectively, had enrolled in college at least once since starting ninth grade by Year 6, compared to 72.2% and 70.7%, respectively, of the control group. Although the impact of ECHSs on rates of college enrollment by Year 4 and Year 6 have been reported to be statistically significant in multiple impact studies (e.g., Berger et al., 2013, 2014; Edmunds et al., 2017; Haxton et al., 2016), these findings are not surprising given that the ECHS model is designed to expand the advanced course-taking pipeline to more students than traditionally done (Edmunds et al., 2010).

To further understand the impact of ECHSs on college attendance, scholars have analyzed ECHS students' college enrollment patterns on an annual basis, excluding college enrollment rates while students were in high school. In doing so, they were able to determine whether or not ECHS students' enrollment outcomes were being driven primarily by the ECHS design. Edmunds and colleagues' (2017) study found that college enrollment in postsecondary education by Year 5, although positive, became statistically insignificant, and by Year 6, more students in the control group (i.e., lottery applicants who had not been offered enrollment at an ECHS) had enrolled in college when compared to ECHS students (Edmunds et al., 2017). This decline in college enrollment among students after leaving their ECHS is supported by other more recent studies too (e.g., Johnson & Mercado-Garcia, 2020; Moreno et al., 2019). For example, Johnson and Mercado-Garcia (2020) found that although English Learners (ELs) in ECHSs were significantly accruing college credits in 12th grade, equivalent to two semester-long courses, they were not continuing college after high school at significant levels. Similarly, Moreno and colleagues (2019) found that ECHS students in Texas were less likely to matriculate to a postsecondary institution after graduating high school when compared to traditional high school students (with no college credit) and dual enrollment students (with some college credit). Among some of the rationales scholars have proposed to explain this phenomenon include: (a) students have completed their associate degrees or technical credentials and joined the workforce directly after graduating high school (Edmunds et al., 2017; Moreno et al., 2019); (b) students "tested the waters" of college while in high school and found it was not for them (Bahr, 2010; Edmunds et al., 2017); (c) students perceived college-level courses to be

difficult and thus were discouraged from continuing their postsecondary education (Johnson & Mercado-Garcia, 2020); (d)) students felt disconnected from school staff and perceived their ECHS environment to be less supportive regarding their postsecondary education (Hutchins et al., 2019); (e) students had plans to work after high school or join the military (Hutchins et al., 2019); and/or (f) students may not know what they want to do and have decided to delay their postsecondary education until they have more concrete plans (Hutchins et al., 2019). Altogether, research shows that ECHS students are positively and significantly more likely than students who applied but were not admitted to an ECHS to be exposed to college (as measured by the number of college credit accrual and college enrollment rates during high school).

College Enrollment by Institution Type

Although the ECHS model was not designed to funnel students into a particular postsecondary institution type (i.e., 2-year or 4-year), findings on where students enroll after graduating warrants a discussion given the outcomes associated with enrolling in a particular sector (Arbona & Nora, 2007; Dowd, 2003; Dougherty, 1994; Pascarella et al., 1995; Sáenz & Ponjuan, 2009). Scholars, for example, have found that students who begin at a 4-year institution are more likely to earn a postsecondary degree than those who begin at a 2-year institution (Alfonso, 2006; Arbona & Nora, 2007). For underrepresented students like Latinxs/as/os, research also shows that Latinas/os are less likely than their White counterparts to transfer to a 4-year institution (Fry, 2004; Swail et al., 2004). Given these statistics, understanding not only *when* students enroll, but *where* is important.

Findings on ECHS students' college enrollment by institution type have been mixed. Most studies, for example, reveal that being admitted to an ECHS had a statistically significant positive impact on attending a 2-year institution (Berger et al., 2013, 2014; Edmunds et al., 2017; Haxton et al., 2016; Song & Zeiser, 2019). These rates, however, are not surprising given that many ECHSs partner with 2-year institutions (AIR & SRI, 2009). However, whereas some researchers have found a positive and statistically significant impact on overall enrollment rates in 4-year institutions (Berger et al., 2013; Edmunds et al., 2017; Lauen et al., 2017), other researchers have not (Berger et al., 2014; Haxton et al.,

2016; Song & Zeiser, 2019). Interestingly, the Berger et al. (2014), Haxton et al. (2016), and Song and Zeiser (2019) studies have found that by Year 6, ECHS students were more likely to be enrolled in 4-year institutions (approximately 53%) than comparison students (approximately 46%)—only the Berger et al. (2014) and Song and Zeiser (2019) studies yielded statistically significant rates though. Although available data cannot explain these trends, scholars have suggested upward trends in 4-year enrollment may reflect ECHS students' transitions to a 4-year institution (Berger al., 2014) and data from Song and Zeiser's (2019) study may support this explanation, finding that ECHS students are significantly more likely to transfer from 2-year colleges to 4-year colleges over time.

Findings on ECHS students' college enrollment by institution type also varies among underrepresented groups. Using difference-in-difference (DiD) estimates of ECHS impact on English Learners'(ELs) academic outcomes, Johnson and Mercado-Garcia (2020) found that the probability of attending a 4-year college significantly decreased for ELs (by -6.0 percentage points). Moreno and colleagues (2019), by contrast, found that among ECHS students (mostly who were Hispanic and economically disadvantaged), 47% had enrolled at a 4-year institution, compared to 2% at a 2-year institution; however, ECHS students in this study also had the lowest postsecondary matriculation rates when compared to dual enrollment students (with some college credit) and traditional high school students (with no college credit). In general, research on institutional type remains scant, but warrants further analysis, especially given the outcomes associated with 2-year and 4-year postsecondary institution enrollment.

Degree Attainment

A primary goal of the ECHS model is to help students, particularly students who are underrepresented, achieve a postsecondary credential including a bachelor's degree, associate degree, or technical credential (Atchison et al., 2019; Woodcock & Beal, 2013). The underlying assumption is that exposing students to a rigorous high school curriculum tied with accelerated courses and student supports will increase students' college readiness, reduce institutional barriers to college access, and motivate students to earn a postsecondary degree (Berger et al., 2014; Haxton et al., 2016). In doing so, students

will be able to successfully join the workforce, which predictions have shown will increasingly require a postsecondary degree (Carnevale et al., 2018). In general, scholars' research shows that being admitted to an ECHS had a significant positive impact on students' degree attainment (Berger et al., 2014; Edmunds et al., 2017, 2020; Haxton et al., 2016; Lauen et al., 2017; Song & Zeiser, 2019). This significant positive impact on ECHS students' degree attainment held for associate and bachelor's degrees, but not for technical certificates (Berger et al., 2013, 2014; Edmunds et al., 2017; Haxton et al., 2016). As mentioned previously, given the design of the ECHS model, it is not surprising that ECHS students are more likely than students who did not attend an ECHS to graduate with a postsecondary degree (mostly likely an associate degree or a technical credential) by the time they graduate high school (Berger et al., 2013; Song & Zeiser, 2019). However, even after students graduate high school, scholars have found that ECHS students continue to significantly fare better in degree attainment when compared to control group students (i.e., students who applied but did not get into an ECHS) (Berger et al., 2014; Edmunds et al., 2017, 2020; Haxton et al., 2016; Song & Zeiser, 2019). Although students in the control group do begin to "catch up" to ECHS students over time in terms of degree completion, a significant difference between the two groups remains 6 years after their expected high school graduation: Edmunds et al. (2020), for example, found a 11.3% percentage point difference between the two groups, and Song and Zeiser (2019) found a 11.9% percentage point difference. However, when analyzing the mutually exclusive categories of degree attainment (i.e., only a technical credential, only an associate degree, only a bachelor's degree, and both an associate and bachelor's degree), Edmunds et al. (2020) found that 15.3% of ECHS students had earned both an associate and bachelor's degree when compared to 3.8% of students in the control group (i.e., those who had applied but didn't get offered enrollment at an ECHS), while 9.6% of ECHS students had earned only a bachelor's degree compared to 20.2% of the control group. These differences suggest that the associate degree route is the primary mechanism for increased degree attainment among ECHS students.

Degree attainment outcomes for underrepresented ECHS students have been positive, but mixed. For example, Edmunds and colleagues (2017, 2020) found that subgroups in their studies (i.e., minority

students, first-generation college-goers, low-income students, and underprepared students) showed positive and significant impacts on postsecondary credential attainment. However, differential impacts among subgroups revealed that those who were academically prepared and did not identify as being underrepresented minorities, first-generation college-goers, and economically disadvantaged were benefiting at higher rates[26] (Edmunds et al., 2017, 2020). These findings differ slightly from Haxton et al. (2016) and Song and Zeiser's (2019) study, which found that degree attainment outcomes did not significantly differ by gender, race/ethnicity, low-income status, or first-generation college-goers. When looking at the results for degree attainment by subgroup, Edmunds et al. (2020) found there was a statistically significant positive impact on 4-year degree attainment for economically disadvantaged students, but not for first-generation college-goers, underprepared students, and minority students. Despite these varying outcomes, research generally shows positive degree attainment outcomes associated with being admitted to an ECHS, which suggests that ECHSs are helping students achieve a postsecondary degree.

Theoretical and Conceptual Frameworks

In an effort to understand Latinx/a/o students' ECHS experiences in relation to college going, I used a combination of the sociological and information processing approaches. These theoretical approaches informed the selection of my two conceptual frameworks: Tierney and Venegas's (2009) cultural-ecological framework and Iloh's (2018, 2019) ecological model of college-going decisions and trajectories. Before I describe these conceptual frameworks in detail, it is important that I first discuss my rationale behind using a sociological and information processing approach.

[26] Only non-minority and academically prepared students for ninth grade had statistically significant higher rates, though (Edmunds et al., 2017, 2020).

Theoretical Frameworks

According to Grant and Osanloo (2016), a theoretical framework serves as a "blueprint" or a guide to inform the phenomenon under study (p. 21). The theoretical framework is based on existing theories and concepts in a field of inquiry, and it is used to "link one's research study with the work of other researchers" (Jones et al., 2014, p. 161). Theoretical frameworks also guide the study's research design, data analysis plan, and discussion of the problem under study (Grant & Osanloo, 2016). Without a theoretical framework, a study lacks direction and scope (Jones et al., 2014).

Earlier in my review of the college-going literature, I discussed, in detail, the theoretical approaches that scholars have used to understand students' college-going experiences and decisions. These theoretical approaches are economic, sociological, and information processing approaches (Park & Hossler, 2014). The economic approach draws from human capital theory, suggesting that students make college choices by comparing the lifetime costs and benefits associated with investing in an education (Perna, 2006). The sociological approach emphasizes the socioeconomic background characteristics of students and considers the cultural and social capital of students and their families to understand students' college-going process (Park & Hossler, 2014). Finally, the information processing approach focuses on how students gather and interpret information sources to navigate their decision-making process (Park & Hossler, 2014).

My study was guided by a combination of the sociological and information processing approach. The sociological approach helped me understand the ways in which context influenced students' ECHS experiences in relation to college going. Specifically, the concepts of social and cultural capital were particularly relevant and important for my analysis as it enabled me to understand which networks (i.e., social capital) played a role in students' college-going process and how their perceptions and ways of knowing (i.e., cultural capital) shaped students' negotiations, decisions, and actions throughout the process. The information processing approach helped me understand what kind of information students had access to (or not), how they gathered that information, and how they interpreted it. Because information is often channeled through students' various social networks (e.g., Welton & Martinez, 2014)

and interpreted differently depending on their values, norms, and beliefs (e.g., Alvarez, 2010), it made sense to use these two theoretical approaches.

Conceptual Frameworks

Although theoretical frameworks are often referred to as conceptual frameworks, the two serve different purposes. A conceptual framework is the "researcher's understanding of how the research problem will best be explored, the specific direction the research will have to take, and the relationship between the different variables in the study" (Grant & Osanloo, 2016, p. 17). Unlike the theoretical framework, the conceptual framework offers a logical and integrated way of looking at the research problem through a "visual display of how ideas in a study relate to one another within the theoretical framework" (Grant & Osanloo, 2016, p. 17). In this study, I employed Tierney and Venegas's (2009) cultural-ecological framework and Iloh's (2018, 2019) ecological model of college-going decisions and trajectories to examine the ECHS experiences of students in relation to college going. The cultural-ecological framework and the ecological model of college going (hereinafter) are both rooted in the importance of context; however, they differ in slightly key areas, which I discuss. Although both frameworks have not been widely used when compared to other contemporary models, I intentionally chose these frameworks because they challenge dominant discourses that perpetuate linear and narrow ways of understanding Latinxs/as/os' college-going pathways. In combining both frameworks, I was able to explore the college-going processes of students in a more holistic and critical way.

Cultural-Ecological Framework

Tierney and Venegas (2009) proposed the cultural-ecological framework as a corrective to the rational choice theory (or the economic approach) of college choice models. In their study, Tierney and Venegas (2009) offered a cultural-ecological framework to understand the role of context in aid availability and students' experiences and interpretations related to financial aid access. Tierney and Venegas's (2009) model proposes four particular environments: educational, out-of-class, familial, and community. Although these environments are fluid, each has its own "social, historical, and cultural structures that serve to enhance or hinder an individual's progress toward a given outcome" (Sapp et al.,

2016). These environments and the social networks within each environment overlap to influence students' opportunities and access to resources. To this end, researchers who use Tierney and Venegas's (2009) framework must consider how power structures, social contexts, and histories within students' environments shape the ways in which they act and react to social forces as they navigate their college-going process.

The cultural-ecological framework suggests that a student's college-going process is nonlinear and dependent on the student's multiple environments (Tierney & Venegas, 2009). Four major assumptions underlie this framework. First, students have agency to make decisions regarding their postsecondary education, which is consistent with more recent asset-based models (e.g., Yosso, 2005). Second, these decisions are made in dialogue with a multitude of social actors like families, peers, teachers, and counselors, which is consistent with the literature on the importance of social networks in the educational pathways of Latinx/a/o students (e.g., Carolan-Silva & Reyes, 2013; Kiyama, 2010; Sáenz et al., 2020). Third, student decisions are nonlinear and complex, which is also consistent with existing studies that highlight the complex conditions of students' lives and trajectories (e.g., Acevedo-Gil, 2017; Cox, 2016). Finally, the various environments in which students live and engage have a direct impact on "how they receive, interpret, and act on messages" of access and opportunity during their college-going process (Tierney & Venegas, 2009, p. 384). In using a cultural-ecological framework, I focused on the college-related opportunities, resources, and information available to students in their various environments. Understanding students' perceptions, which are influenced by different social actors in different environments, is key to understanding their decisions and actions as it relates to their college-going process (Cox, 2016; Locke & McKenzie, 2016).

Ecological Model of College-Going Decisions and Trajectories

Iloh (2018, 2019) proposed the ecological model of college-going decisions and trajectories as an alternative to previous college choice framework. Although this model was specifically designed to understand the college-going pathways of post-traditional students, I intentionally chose to include it given that ECHS students are in many ways different from traditional students given their dual identities

as both high school and college students. Iloh's (2018) model has three main components: information, time, and opportunity. All three components are codependent and nonlinear and can be applied at different stages in students' lives (Iloh, 2018).

The information component focuses on the quality, quantity, and delivery of messages (Iloh, 2019). According to Iloh (2018, 2019), there are two types of information: general and institutional college information. General information focuses on objective college facts, while institutional college information is more subjective and comes in the forms of recommendations and warnings. In many occasions, the *who* and *how* of the message and the platform in which the message is delivered may also be more significant than the message itself. Iloh (2018) also describes the notion of information deserts, which suggest a lack of information. Information deserts contribute to information asymmetry in higher education and perpetuate inequities. Iloh (2018, 2019) is clear to note that information deserts do not mean that communities are not rich in information, but rather that society has failed to make college information accessible. This gap in college information aligns directly with the literature on college knowledge, which finds that students and their parents do not always have easy access to college-related information (Cox, 2016; Kimura-Walsh et al., 2009; Person & Rosenbaum, 2006; Welton & Martinez, 2014).

The time component can be understood in both a basic form (individual's chronological age) and a more advanced form (moments and events that occur throughout the individual's life). Iloh (2018, 2019) proposes three variations of time: micro-time, meso-time, and macro-time. Micro-time refers to immediate activities or interactions around the person, such as finding out their scholarship application was rejected. Meso-time refers to activities or interactions that happen in the person's environment consistently, such as saving money for college. Macro-time refers to the activities and events that happen in the larger society, such as high school reform. Given these different time frames, Iloh (2018) noted how the context of opportunity and information may look different for individuals over time. For example, if a student once thought that college was hard, they may have a different viewpoint after taking a few college-level courses. For my study, I referred to time in a more basic form—the students'

chronological passings of ECHS. The notion of time is consistent with the ECHS literature, which shows that students over time acquire skills that help them navigate college courses and other challenges (Calhoun et al., 2019; Duncheon, 2020; McDonald & Farrell, 2012; Sáenz & Combs, 2015).

The opportunity component considers both the real and perceived notions students have about opportunities as they navigate the college-going process. For example, a student's familial, educational, spatial, financial, political, technological, and community context can all place real barriers on what students are able to access and the kinds of options they have access to. However, their own perceptions about these contexts can also impact how they view opportunities. Taking a critical perspective, Iloh (2019) noted how "opportunities are cultivated in the context of hegemonic structures that limit opportunities on the bases of identity" such as race, gender, age, and ability (p. 7). As such, understanding the real and perceived notions of opportunity is vital. Students' beliefs and realities about what is possible and what is not aligns with the college-going and ECHS literature, which has found that students' perceptions and assumptions about choice and access are often contingent on a multitude of circumstances at school and beyond (Cox, 2016; Locke & McKenzie, 2016). In the next section, I explain how Tierney and Venegas's conceptual framework works together with Iloh's (2018, 2019). I include a visual display of how the components of each framework relate to one another (Figure 1).

Combining the Conceptual Frameworks

Tierney and Venegas' (2009) cultural-ecological framework and Iloh's (2018, 2019) ecological model of college going both aim to capture the multi-faceted realities of students. The ecological component of both models, in particular, "underscores processes, patterns, and relationships that might influence development and drive or thwart particular [student] decisions and actions" (Iloh, 2019, p. 234). Reflecting on this vantage point, both frameworks aim to understand the contextual and individual factors that influence students' ECHS experiences in relation to college going. Although Iloh's (2018, 2019) model highlights the importance of context, it does not outline specific contexts. Given that ecosystems can encompass many contextual layers, I used Tierney and Venegas's (2009) cultural-ecological model

because it specifically outlines four environments that influence students' college-going processes: educational, out-of-class, familial, and community.

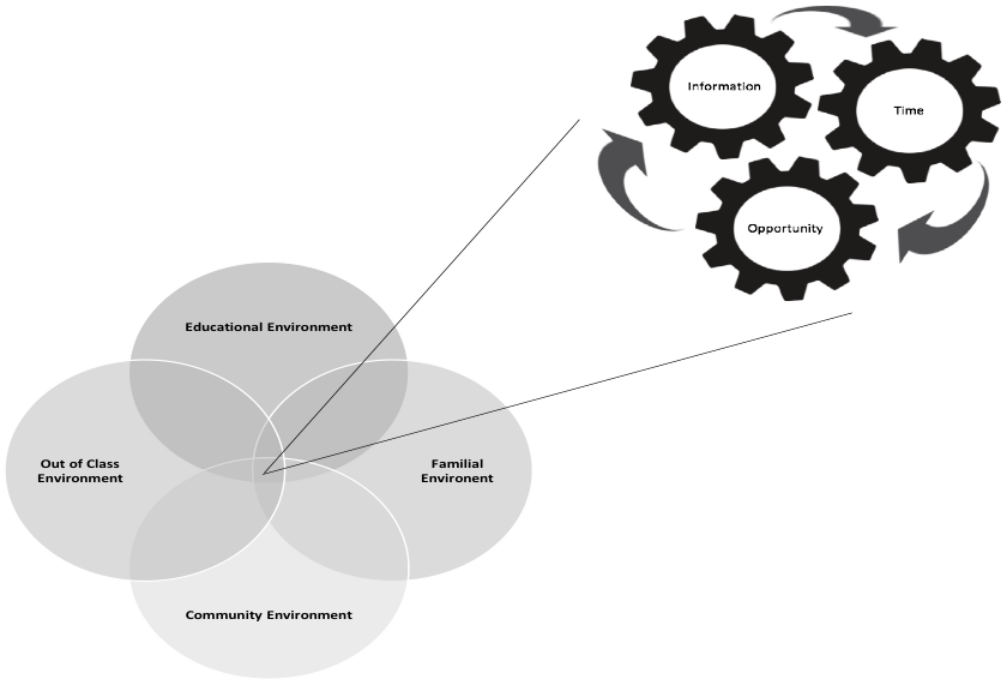
Iloh's (2019) model adds to the analysis of students' college-going process in two ways. First, it challenges the notion of choice, which Iloh (2019) argues is a privileged and limited term that does not fully consider the stratification of resources and opportunities required to enroll in different colleges. A move away from the term "choice" does not mean that researchers do not consider the postsecondary decisions of students. In fact, students' postsecondary decisions are taken into account; however, so are their prior perceptions and experiences. Second, Iloh's (2018, 2019) conceptual framework specifically highlights three dimensions that impact college going: information, time, and opportunity. These dimensions help address critiques of ecological models, which tend to be too broad and complex for in-depth analysis.

To illustrate how I used the two conceptual frameworks together, I created a visual representation that combines the elements of both models (Figure 1). This combined model depicts the four environments outlined by Tierney and Venegas (2009). In alignment with their framework, all four environments overlap, and each has its own social, historical, and cultural structures and social actors. At the center of the combined model are Iloh's (2018, 2019) three main components: information, time, and opportunity—each represented as a gear. The gears are not sequential. Rather, they are interconnected and depend on each other. The teeth of each gear are meant to mesh with other toothed parts, which then changes (either positively or negatively) the rotational force and direction of the students' college-going process. Ultimately, combining both of these frameworks into one enabled me to capture the ongoing interplay between students' environments and the types of information and opportunities they had access to (or not) at different points of time. My intent in combining these frameworks was to challenge dominant discourses that perpetuate linear and narrow ways of understanding Latinxs/as/os' college-going pathways. Tierney and Venegas' (2009) framework, for example, recognizes that students' decisions are made in dialogue with multiple social actors like families, peers, and counselors, while

Iloh's (2018, 2019) framework moves away from the notion of "choice" as it is a privileged and limited term that does not fully consider the stratification of resources and opportunities.

Figure 1

Combining Conceptual Frameworks



Note. Combined model of Tierney and Venegas (2009) and Iloh's (2018, 2019) conceptual frameworks.

Summary of Literature Review

In this chapter, I have reviewed the college-going literature, outlined the characteristics associated with students' college-going process, and offered an overview of the ECHS literature. In particular, I reconceptualized the notion of college going and defined the college-going process in an effort to better describe the college-going process of ECHS students who straddle between two education systems. I also discussed the theoretical approaches often used by scholars to examine students' college-going process and specifically focused on Hossler and Gallagher's (1987) college choice model. While useful and foundational for understanding a student's enrollment process, this model fails to consider the complex, often highly stratified, college pathways that underrepresented students take to get to higher education (Acevedo-Gil, 2017; Cox, 2016; Iloh, 2018, 2019).

For Latinxs/as/os, as well as other students of color, their college-going process is often not sufficiently explained by traditional models of college choice (Pérez & McDonough, 2008). Characteristics associated with students' college-going process, for example, reveal that students' decision-making process are not only impacted by their academic achievement and preparation, but also by their access to timely and quality college knowledge, social networks, and geographical opportunities (Cerna et al., 2009; Hillman, 2016; Kiyama, 2010; Sanchez Gonzalez et al., 2018). In an effort to address opportunity gaps among underrepresented students in higher education, many states have implemented the ECHS model, which helps students get a head start on attaining college credentials. The scant but growing literature on ECHSs suggests that students perceive their ECHS experience as positive (Adams et al., 2020; McDonald & Farrell, 2012). Scholars conducting impact studies have also found that ECHS students tend to fare better in most secondary and postsecondary outcomes when compared to students who do not attend an ECHS (Edmunds et al., 2017; Song & Zeiser, 2019).

Despite these promising findings, there is little qualitative work that explores Latinx/a/o students' ECHS experiences in relation to college going. With the exception of Duncheon's (2020) study, which used a socialization framework to understand how ECHS students are socialized into higher education, most studies have focused on students' experiences as they acclimate to a rigorous academic program. Less research has focused on how students are using their acquired college preparation, knowledge, and skills to navigate their college-going process. In combining Tierney and Venegas (2009) and Iloh's (2018) conceptual frameworks, I was better able to understand how varied factors embedded in participants' ECHS experiences worked for or against their college-going process. In the next chapter, I discuss, in detail, the elements of my research design.

CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY

Introduction

The purpose of this study was to better understand the ECHS experiences of Latinx/a/o students in relation to college going. In this study, I paid particular attention to how varied factors embedded in participants' ECHS experiences worked for or against their college-going process. To pursue this line of inquiry, social constructionism and critical theory served as my onto-epistemological foundations. These two onto-epistemologies informed the study's research design, including my chosen conceptual frameworks (outlined in Chapter 2) and the methodology of critical narrative inquiry, outlined in further detail in this chapter (Iannacci, 2007). For this study, I selected a critical narrative inquiry approach because it interrogates, exposes, and challenges how individual's understandings of experiences are mediated by context, time, and interactions with others. My study was guided by the following research questions:

1. How do Latinx/a/o students describe their early college high school (ECHS) experience?
    a. What do Latinx/a/o students' ECHS experiences reveal about the factors that facilitate or hinder their college-going process?

In this chapter, I elaborate on the methodology and research design of this study. I start by describing my onto-epistemological foundations and explain why I used social constructionism in conjunction with critical theory. I then expand on the study's methodology of critical narrative inquiry and follow this section with an overview of my research process, including details on the site selection, the methods I used for data collection, and the process I took for data analysis. I then discuss my positionality and role as a researcher, emphasizing its congruence with my onto-epistemological roots. I then provide an overview of the steps I took to ensure trustworthiness, discuss the assumptions, delimitations, and limitations of the study, and conclude with a summary of this chapter.

Onto-Epistemological Roots

Onto-epistemological foundations shape the research process of a study, including which questions are raised, who and how participants are selected, and how data is analyzed and reported (Jones

et al., 2014). An understanding of my onto-epistemological foundations first requires an understanding of the terms ontology and epistemology. Broadly, scholars have defined ontology as one's assumptions about the nature of reality or existence and epistemology as one's assumptions or beliefs about the nature and legitimacy of knowledge (Crotty, 1998; Jones et al., 2014). These sets of assumptions or beliefs about what counts as knowledge and how we come to obtain knowledge (i.e., epistemology) often intersect with the construction of reality (i.e., ontology) (Crotty, 1998). In other words, as Crotty (1998) explained, the construction of one's reality (for example, whether we believe in a single universal Truth or multiple truths) influences how one obtains and understands knowledge. Boveda and Bhattacharya (2019) conceptualized this hybridized way of knowing and being as onto-epistemology.

Understanding this confluence, I write about my ontological and epistemological roots as a unit because I believe that my understanding of reality cannot be written as separate from my knowing. A separation of the two would assume an inherent difference between my existence in this world and the ways I come to know and understand it (Barad, 2007). As Karen Barad (2007) noted, "we do not obtain knowledge by standing outside of the world; we know because we are *of* the world" (p. 185, original emphasis). Echoing the interconnectedness of ontology and epistemology is Gloria Anzaldúa's (1987,1999) scholarship, which further helped situate my work. Although Anzaldúa does not overtly use the term onto-epistemology, she addresses the entanglement of being and knowing in her work (Bhattacharya & Kim, 2018). For example, in describing the lived and colonized space of the *frontera* (or borderland), Anzaldúa (1987) proposed a 7-stage healing journey that starts from within:[27]

> The struggle has always been inner, and is played out in the outer terrains. Awareness of our situation must come before inner changes, which in turn come before changes in society. Nothing happens in the 'real' world unless it first happens in the images in our heads. (p. 87)

[27] These seven stages include *el arrebato* (the rupture); *nepantla* (a liminal space of transformation); the *Coatlicue* state (a process of self-awareness filled with despair and hopelessness); *el compromismo* (a process of rebirth); *Coyolxauhqui* (a reflexive process of active transformation and resistance); a clash of realities (a process of taking one's story into the world and testing it); and transformation and spiritual activism (a process of acting out the vision of spiritual activism after having worked out the difficult stages of one's being) (Anzaldúa, 1987).

This journey of self-reflection leads to a new *conocimiento*, or a "nonbinary, connectionist mode of thinking" (Keating, 2005, p. 8), which transforms thought into action. As further elaborated by Keating (2005), "*conocimiento* [one's epistemology] is profoundly relational, and enables those who enact it to make connections among apparently disparate events, persons, experiences, and *realities*" (p. 8, emphasis added). My understanding about the world is influenced by the knowledge I have and the knowledge I am able to obtain. In this light, I view reality as being fundamentally dependent on the human mind and informed by my cultural, socio-economic, linguistic, and political biases. My notion of reality is thus subjective and based on my lived experiences, which may differ from that of others' socially constructed realities (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). In understanding that multiple realities exist, I also "recognize that privilege influences what is accepted as real" and that "multiple versions of reality do not have equal legitimacy" in society (Hurtado, 2015, p. 291). This tension on how I know and come to know is why I situated my study within the onto-epistemological foundations of social constructionism and critical theory. This border-crossing of contradictory perspectives, which Abes (2009) drew from the work of Anzaldúa (1987, 1999), is conceptualized as "theoretical borderlands." Theoretical borderlands create a third space that allows researchers to embrace a "both/and" approach to research and data analysis (Abes, 2009, p. 143).[28] This third space tolerates contradictions and ambiguity as a way to uncover new ways of understanding participants and their ECHS experiences. Before I elaborate on how these two onto-epistemological traditions worked with one another, I first discuss social constructionism and critical theory in greater detail separately.

Social Constructionism

The basic contention of social constructionism is that reality is socially constructed and (re)constructed through interactions with others and the world (Burr, 2006; Crotty, 1998; Gergen, 1985,

[28] Theoretical borderlands, or theoretical hybrids, have been used in multiple studies including Abes and Kasch (2007); Duran (2019); Lange and Moore (2017); Tierney (1993); Tierney and Rhoads (1993); and Locher and Prügl (2001). The point of theoretical borderlands is not to create a new paradigm, but rather to embrace the multiple possibilities of interpretation to gain a deeper understanding of participants' lived experiences (Abes, 2009; Lather, 2006).

1999). This approach is not focused on "the mean-making activity of the individual mind but on the collective generation [and transmission] of meaning as shaped by conventions of language and other social processes" (Schwandt, 1994, p. 127). Social constructionism takes issue with the traditional, Western thought of individualism (Raskin, 2002) and instead centers the notion of meaning-making as a negotiation process between people within a given context and timeframe (Gergen, 1999). From a social constructionist perspective, individuals actively participate in producing meaning, and their interpretations of reality are mediated by the cultural, historical, political, and social norms of their particular context, time, and interactions (Gergen, 1985, 1999). When applied to the field of research, the interpreter (or the researcher) attempts to not only understand the participants' varied realities, but also seeks to point to the "historical and cultural location of that construction" (Young & Collin, 2004, p. 377). Further, the researcher and participant relationship is seen as "subjective, interactive, and interdependent" and as such, findings are presented as subjective and context specific (Broido & Manning, 2002, p. 436). Given its strong attention to social interactions, contexts, and time, social constructionism was a useful perspective to utilize as it allowed me to document the different realities that students described in relation to their social contexts and interactions with others and myself as the researcher.

Multiple variations of social constructionism exist and warrant a brief discussion given that each variation has different onto-epistemological groundings (Pascale, 2011). Some social constructionists research is grounded on critical realism, meaning that while reality is socially and historically constructed, an objective social world is still perceived. As an example, Pascale (2011) noted how some individuals may perceive gender as a socially constructed notion, but still *treat* it as real (p. 51). Other social constructionists research is grounded on relativism, meaning that no objective or universal Truth exists, instead multiple realities coexist in parallel, moving people toward interpersonal collaboration (Gergen, 1994; Pascale, 2011). My study adopts the latter version; however, as I detail in the next section, the

relativism of social constructionism is not enough to interrogate and challenge the power structures[29] embedded in students' ECHS experiences and their college-going process. This is because relativism maintains that no one reality (or knowledge) is better than the other, and it privileges agency over structure, meaning it overlooks how power structures can curb an individual's agency when constructing meaning. Nonetheless, social constructionism allows me to uncover the ways in which students come to interpret their ECHS experiences (in general) and college-going process (more specifically) (Burr, 2006). However, given the limitations of this perspective, I integrated critical theory as part of my onto-epistemological foundations.

Critical Theory

Broadly, critical theory provides the tools to name, critique, and challenge larger power structures that influence social inequities and injustices (Winkle-Wagner et al., 2019). Although critical theory is a broad category that includes a range of specific movements (e.g., critical race theory, queer theory, feminism, and Latcrit), Tierney and Rhoads (1993) proposed five general premises that guide critical schools of thought: 1) research efforts must interrogate the structures in which the study exists; 2) knowledge is not neutral or apolitical and must be contested; 3) difference and conflict are used as organizing concepts; 4) research is praxis-oriented and must attempt to confront the injustices; and 5) all researchers are positioned subjects (Jones et al., 2014). Like social constructionists, critical theorists also view reality as a social construct and reject the notion that there is an objective world or single Truth; however, critical theorists believe that there is one truth that overpowers all other truths as a result of inequitable political-social-economic power structures (Sipe & Constable, 1996). Thus, critical theorists claim that reality can also be socially reconstructed through the examination of structural inequalities. When applied to the field of research, critical theorists pay significant attention to how the experiences and realities of participants are influenced by and constructed within dominant systems of power (Jones et

[29] Power structures in ECHS and the college-going process, more specifically, can include, for example, standardized testing, which is known to be biased on race and class, yet it continues to be used as a measure of students' college-readiness.

al., 2014). Further, much like social constructionism, the social identities of both the researcher and participants influence the analysis and reporting of findings (Broido & Manning, 2002). Given its strong attention to the ways that social power is structured, maintained, and perpetuated in society, critical theory was a good fit for this study because it enabled me to identify social structures, norms, and practices in students' college-going process based on their ECHS experience descriptions. An understanding of these social inequities is needed to bring social change along students' educational pipeline.

Those who employ critical theories contend that research methods themselves can perpetuate and maintain power structures (Broido & Manning, 2002; Canella et al., 2015; Carspecken, 2019; McGuire, 2019; Winkle-Wagner et al., 2019). McGuire (2019) explained that "our [academic] institutions, modes of writing, thinking, studying, interpreting, critiquing and creating representations of life are implicated within colonial projects and white supremacist capitalist heteropatriarchal relations" (p. 77). As such, when employing a critical lens, many scholars have insisted on the importance of humanizing and decolonizing the research process by (re)centering people and their lives and histories (Paris & Winn, 2013). Other scholars who employ critical theories have also highlighted the importance of research reflexivity and transparency in the research process (Broido & Manning, 2002; Jones, 2002; Jones et al., 2014). As mentioned earlier, all researchers are positioned subjects, meaning that their experiences, points of view, demographics, and roles within society influence how they interact with participants and how they interpret data (Tracy, 2013). Thus, researchers need to consider how they are going to negotiate their biases and assumptions as they craft their research design and engage with participants and data (Jones et al., 2014). A common criticism of critical theory, however, is that it "pushes toward a predetermined outcome" (Freeman & Vasconcelos, 2010, p. 9). This is why social constructionism was also included—this approach encouraged me to first listen and learn about students' ECHS experiences and realities before incorporating a critical lens.

Blending Social Constructionism and Critical Theory in this Study

On their own, social constructionism and critical theory are incomplete lenses to understand students' ECHS experiences in relation to college going. Thus, my choice to interweave different research

onto-epistemological traditions was intentional and threefold. First, I wanted to better understand how Latinx/a/o students described their ECHS experience given their status as both high school and college students. Because I believe that knowledge is socially constructed, it was important for me to first listen to and understand how each participant described their own ECHS experience. This inquiry process, which aligns with social constructionism, was collaborative in that both the participant and I constructed meanings of college going through dialogue and inquiry. From a critical standpoint, I approached my work with an understanding that participants' ECHS experiences are mediated by power relations in their various environments, and thus understood the need to interpret their experiences in relation to their larger social contexts. When making sense of their ECHS experiences, I paid particular attention to the types of information and opportunities they had access to (or not), as well as the time frame and contexts in which these types of information and opportunities were available and accessible to students.

Second, based on participants' descriptions, I wanted to critically examine how varied factors embedded in participants' ECHS experiences facilitated or hindered their college-going process, which allowed me to pinpoint areas in the structure of the ECHS model that conformed with or deviated from students' college-going realities, needs, and interests. My reconceptualization of college going, as discussed in Chapter 2, allowed me to move away from simply capturing the college "choices" of students to capturing the complexities and realities that students experienced in relation to college going all throughout ECHS. Here, critical theory provided a crucial lens in helping me identify and analyze social norms, structures, and practices embedded in the ECHS model that hindered students' college-going process.

Third, and related to my second point, I wanted to share these insights with ECHS practitioners and policymakers and offer them suggestions on how to reimagine the college-going process for ECHS students. According to Rossman and Rallis (2017), "the ultimate goal of qualitative research is learning—that is, the transformation of data into information that can be used" to improve human conditions (p. 14). As such, my role as a critical researcher was not only to understand and interrogate students' ECHS experiences in relation to college going but also to inform ECHS stakeholders of students' experiences so

equitable practices could be created and implemented where needed. In essence, using bothof these onto-epistemologies allowed me to understand students' social construction of their ECHS experience (social constructionism) while also acknowledging the role that power and systems of oppression played in shaping their college-going realities and decisions (critical theory).

Critical Narrative Methodology

Methodologies are strategies of inquiry (Jones et al., 2014) designed to acquire knowledge about the world (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). Grounded on epistemological, ontological, and theoretical underpinnings, methodologies guide the research process and influence the choice of methods for the study (Jones et al., 2014). Given my onto-epistemological foundations of social constructionism and critical theory, I employed a critical narrative methodology for this study (Iannacci, 2007). An understanding of critical narrative methodology first warrants an understanding of narrative inquiry.

Overview of Narrative Inquiry

Narrative inquiry focuses on people's stories and, more specifically, on the structure and content of their stories (Rossman & Rallis, 2017). As a methodology, narrative inquiry entails understanding experience (Clandinin, 2006b; Connelly & Clandinin, 2006) and, more specifically, understanding how individuals (or the storytellers) make sense of these experiences. According to Bloomberg and Volpe (2019), "the assumption is that people construct their realities through narrating their stories" (p. 102). Experiences can be understood through observations, interviews, field notes, photos, text data, and other artifacts such as videos and journal entries (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019). Narrative researchers typically cluster experiences or stories into three primary areas of emphasis: a structured and sequential story with a plot (a beginning, middle, and end that reveals how the storyteller understands the experience or event in question); a story in which one person recounts an experience in the past (for example, biographies and autobiographies); and a story in which the storyteller provides a rationale, explanation, or justification for their actions in response to specific questions in an interview (this story is co-constructed with the interviewer and not necessarily structured and sequential) (Bazeley, 2013). From a social constructionist perspective, narrative inquiry entails understanding how individual's experiences are mediated in relation

to their social contexts and interactions with others (Clandinin, 2006a; Clandinin & Huber, 2002). Clandinin and Rosiek (2007) argue that while narrative inquiry starts with the individual's experience, it is important to understand the "social, cultural, and institutional narratives" that shape those experiences (p. 42). These stories, as Bazeley (2013) noted, "reveal an individual's perspective on self and on the wider social and cultural setting, including key social actors in the life of that person" (p. 202).

Clandinin and Connelly (2000) advanced three aspects of narrative inquiry that highlight the relational dimension of narrative inquiry. Specifically, they emphasized the importance of interactions, continuity, and place in narrative inquiry. Interactions refer to the personal and social aspects of experience such as the storyteller's feelings, intentions, and points of view. Continuity or temporality considers the past and present experiences of the storyteller, which are carried into future experiences. Place, such as the storyteller's spatial boundaries and physical settings, considers how locations or landscapes give meaning to a storyteller's experiences (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Because of the relational dimension in narrative inquiry, an important component of this methodology is the relationship between the storyteller and the researcher (Clandinin, 2006b). Contemporary researchers who use a narrative inquiry methodology recognize that storytellers are "not bound[ed], static, atemporal, and decontextualized" (Pinnegar & Daynes, 2006, p. 11) and that researchers, themselves, are not biased-free either. Because personal stories are shared, the storyteller and researcher relationship is characterized by "interpersonal communication and intersubjectivity" (Moss, 2004, p. 362). In this view, when storytellers share their experiences in the context of an interview, these stories become co-constructed with the researcher (Bazeley, 2013). In other words, because both the storyteller and the researcher bring their worldviews and experiences into the interview as they interact and learn from each other, this influences the construction and (re)construction of the social world (Jones et al., 2014; Pinnegar & Daynes, 2006).

In essence, narrative inquiry focuses on the rich stories of storytellers with an understanding that these experiences are influenced by context, time, and interactions with others. Narrative inquiry by design combines the views of the storyteller and researcher to extend meaning and understanding (Clandinin, 2006a). Although narrative inquiry enables researchers to collaboratively develop a deep

understanding of individuals' experiences, narrative inquiry on its own does not expose the power structures that influence these meaning-making constructs. For example, although a narrative inquirer is aware of the storyteller-researcher relationship and its importance, without a critical lens, the researcher can perpetuate power structures by retelling a story from their dominant point of view (Hickson, 2016; Moss, 2004). A critical approach, however, allows researchers to deconstruct grand stories that contain power-laden discourses (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). In the next section, I describe, in detail, the study's methodology.

An Understanding of Critical Narrative Inquiry

A critical narrative methodology draws from a variety of theoretical traditions, frequently border-crossing sets of theoretical orientations to get a fuller understanding of the structures and relationships of power within an individual's recounted experience (Clandinin & Rosiek, 2007; Iannacci, 2007). According to Moss (2004), the term "critical" is used to describe "culture, language, and participation as issues of power in need of critique with the intention of emendation or alterations in the direction of social justice and participatory democracy" (p. 363). As such, a critical approach to narrative inquiry is specifically designed to deconstruct a storyline by interrogating, exposing, and challenging how individual's understandings of events or experiences "have been mediated by power relations inherent in the metanarratives of society" (Bazeley, 2013, p. 212). That is, rather than a retelling of individuals' stories or experiences, a critical narrative researcher attributes meaning and intention to individuals' stories as a way to disrupt taken-for-granted assumptions that perpetuate power structures and social inequities (Iannacci, 2007; Moss, 2004).

In using a critical narrative methodology, researchers must call into question their own explicit biases through constant reflexivity (Iannacci, 2007; Moss, 2004). Reflexivity in critical narrative inquiry requires researchers to question how their values, perceptions, and understandings of the world influence their interactions with storytellers and their interpretations of their stories (Hickson, 2016; Moss, 2004). This process of self-awareness would ideally lead to a reconceptualization of what the storyteller intentionally or inadvertently communicated. According to Iannacci (2007), reconceptualization happens

through a three-way process: the construction, deconstruction, and reconstruction of meaning-making. To begin, critical narrative researchers first listen and present the story as it was narrated (construction). They then disentangle the storyline by uncovering the conditions that cultivated the experiences of storytellers (deconstruct). Finally, researchers present a reconceptualized story oriented toward social equitable change (reconstruction). Narrative researchers reconstruct these stories through an analytic-interpretive process that requires them to contextualize or situate their data in relation to the larger social contexts and literature (Iannacci, 2007). In contextualizing data, researchers look at the macro factors (economy, socio-cultural, political) to understand how they influence the micro factors of storytellers. These macro and micro factors are at the heart of Tierney and Venegas's (2009) cultural-ecological framework and Iloh's (2018, 2019) ecological model of college-going trajectories as both consider how different social actors in different environments influence the experiences of students. In the next section, I illustrate the study's research design, which is informed by my onto-epistemological roots of social constructionism and critical theory and by the study's methodology of critical narrative inquiry.

Research Design

Methodologically, critical narrative research entails understanding how storytellers make meaning of their experiences and examining how these experiences have been mediated by power relations and structures in society. Because I was interested in understanding how Latinx/a/o students described their ECHS experiences, I used a qualitative approach to center students' voices. More specifically, to elicit stories from students, I conducted one-on-one semi-structured interviews. After all interviews were completed, I then invited students via email to participate in a follow-up, open-ended questionnaire to ensure I was capturing their experiences as accurately as possible.

In qualitative research, onto-epistemological foundations inform methodology and methodological approaches influence the research design and process (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019; Jones et al., 2014). A solid rationale for a study's data collection procedures and analysis process is thus needed to signal methodological congruence and consistency between the study's research questions, problem statement, and onto-epistemological foundations (Jones et al., 2014). The positionality and role of the

researcher is also an integral part of the research design influenced by the study's onto-epistemological foundations, conceptual frameworks, and methodology. Given the importance of research alignment and transparency, in the next sections, I describe the different components of the study's research design and discuss how these components are congruent with the foundations of the study. I start by first describing the context of my site selection.

Site Selection

For this study, I drew data from one stand-alone ECHS in south Texas. I purposefully selected south Texas, and more specifically, the Rio Grande Valley region (also referred to as the RGV or The Valley), because of the state's growing Latinx/a/o population and the rise of ECHSs in the region. To determine which schools in the RGV region would be considered for the study, I first created a database outlining all the ECHSs per county in the RGV region. Then, I created a demographic and academic profile for each ECHS in the RGV region using data from the Texas Education Agency's (TEA) 2018–2019 school report card.[30] These report cards, which included data on student achievement and school progress for each campus, allowed me to familiarize myself with the number and type of ECHSs found throughout the RGV. Given the restrictions of the pandemic, I leaned on my professional networks to gain access to ECHS administrators and staff. These networks played a critical role in my ability to access participants as the pandemic made it physically impossible to visit ECHSs and connect with ECHS administrators and staff. Ultimately, I chose to recruit participants from one stand-alone ECHS, which I named "Southside ECHS" (pseudonym).

Before I describe my site selection in further detail, it is important for me to first discuss the larger context of the RGV region. From a social constructionism standpoint, an understanding of students' college-going process is not possible without also understanding the context in which students are situated (Crotty, 1998; Gergen, 1985, 1999). Further, a commitment to improve the educational

[30] Given the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, TEA announced it would not be rating districts and schools for the 2019–2020 academic school year.

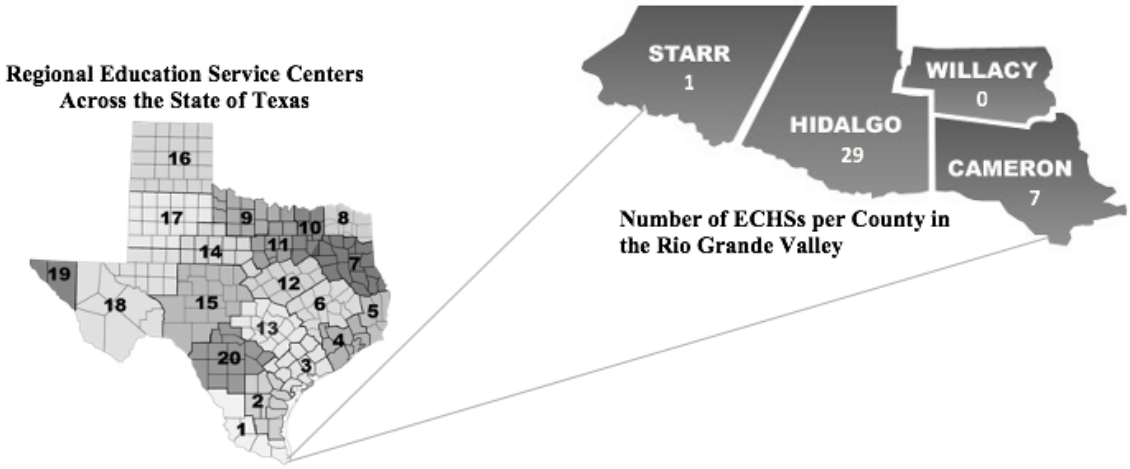
conditions of Latinx/a/o students, which aligns with critical theory, requires an understanding of how the power structures, dynamics, and practices embedded within students' context shape their experiences and perceptions. Because narrative researchers must construct, deconstruct, and reconstruct narratives, it is imperative that they contextualize such data in relation to the students' larger social contexts. A failure to consider the larger macro factors mediating students' experiences and opportunities could perpetuate the taken-for-granted assumptions embedded in grand narratives.

The Rio Grande Valley Context

The RGV region is located in the southernmost tip of Texas, along the U.S./Mexico border, and it is comprised of four counties: Cameron, Hidalgo, Starr, and Willacy. Nearly 1.38 million people reside in this region and between 88% and 99% of the population identifies as Hispanic or Latino, depending on the county (American Community Survey [ACS], 2018). The 4-county RGV area has the highest number of ECHSs in the state of Texas (37 out of 182) (see Figure 2) and one of the largest concentrations of Latinx/a/o students in public K–12 education (97%) (Tingle et al., 2017).

Figure 2

Number of ECHSs Across the State of Texas and the Rio Grande Valley, 2019–2020



Number of ECHSs Per Regional Educational Service Center (ESC)			
Region 1	43	Region 11	12
Region 2	11	Region 12	2
Region 3	2	Region 13	15
Region 4	24	Region 14	2
Region 5	3	Region 15	1
Region 6	3	Region 16	0
Region 7	6	Region 17	2
Region 8	0	Region 18	8
Region 9	1	Region 19	15
Region 10	16	Region 20	15

Note. Data derived from TEA (n.d.b; 2020a). ECHSs across the state of Texas are grouped into 20 Regional ECSs. These Centers provide services to districts across the state. When compared to other Regional ESCs, Region One, which is located along the Texas-Mexico border, has the most ECHSs (n=43). Over half of the ECHSs in Region One are located in the Rio Grande Valley (n=37).

Although the RGV is known for its rich cultural history, the region's historical underpinnings, proximity to the Mexico border, and differential power dynamics continue to shape the events and conditions of the region (Richardson & Pisani, 2012; Shapleigh, 2009). Richardson and Pisani (2012), in particular, argued that differential power dynamics between RGV residents and state and national leaders create a form of structural bias, producing negative side effects for some groups and positive effects for others. Recent examples include the growing militarization of the border (Aguilar, 2016), the rise of COVID-19 cases as a result of Texas Governor Greg Abbott's decision to unilaterally reopen the state

(Villarreal, 2020), and the persistent devaluation of property as a result of the Trump administration's pledge to build a border along the river (Burnett, 2019).

Table 1 includes the sociodemographic characteristics of Texan residents at the state and county level. As reflected on this table, residents, ages 25 and older, in the 4-county RGV area have lower educational attainment levels and higher poverty rates when compared to the overall educational and poverty levels of the state. The educational attainment of this region is of particular concern as only 10.1 to 18.4% of RGV residents, ages 25 and older, have a bachelor's degree or higher compared to 29.3% of all Texans in the same age group (ACS, 2018). Although there have been recent reports illustrating a generational shift toward better educational access among 18-to-24-year-olds (RGV Focus, 2019), the opportunity gaps in the region persist. For example, despite efforts to distribute funds more equitably across the state of Texas, property taxes continue to be a major source for funding K–12 public schools (Shapleigh, 2009). This is particularly problematic in the RGV region where the poverty rate ranges between 30.6% and 35.3%, nearly twice the rate of the state's overall poverty rate (15.5%) (ACS, 2018, see Table 1). This funding arrangement leaves "property-poor" school districts with little room to compete for high-quality teachers (Shapleigh, 2009). Alemán (2007, 2009) further found that this funding structure disproportionately disadvantages majority-Mexican American school districts, many of which lie along the Texas–Mexico border.

Table 1

Sociodemographic Characteristics of Texas and the Rio Grande Valley in 2018

	Texas	Cameron	Hidalgo	Starr	Willacy
Total population	27,885,195	421,750	849,389	63,894	21,754
Hispanic or Latino (%)	39.2 (+/-0.1)	89.8 (*)	92.0 (*)	99.1 (+/-0.3)	88.1 (*)
Educational attainment[a] (%)	29.3 (+/-0.2)	17.3 (+/-0.7)	18.4 (+/-0.5)	10.3 (+/-1.4)	10.1 (+/-1.8)
Population in poverty[b] (%)	15.5 (+/-0.1)	30.6 (+/-1.1)	31.2 (+/-0.9)	35.3 (+/-3.0)	33.0 (+/-3.9)

Note. Data derived from ACS 5-Year Estimates, Tables DP05, S1501 and S1701

[a] Depicts bachelor's degree or higher, percent of persons age 25 years and older.

[b] Population for whom poverty status has been determined. For more information on how the U.S. Census measures poverty, see U.S. Census (2021).

* Margin of error unavailable.

The unequal distribution of higher education resources and funding has also been a persistent issue in the RGV. In 1987, the Mexican American Legal Defense and Education Fund (MALDEF) filed a lawsuit (LULAC v. Richards) to address the underfunding of higher education in border regions like the RGV (Santiago, 2008). The suit claimed that the state of Texas had discriminated against Hispanic students along the south Texas border because it did not provide equal access to higher education opportunities and resources as it did to other residents in other parts of the state (Shapleigh, 2009). Specifically, the plaintiffs noted differences in the quantity and quality of undergraduate and graduate programs along the border as compared to other places in the state (Flack, 2003). Although the lawsuit did not result in a win, it served as the catalyst for the *South Texas Border Initiative*, a body of legislation aimed to improve the academic opportunities of Hispanics along the south Texas border (Flack, 2003). This body of legislation specifically provided millions of dollars to nine institutions across the Texas–Mexico border for program growth, degree attainment, and college accessibility (Flack, 2003; Shapleigh, 2009). While the initiative improved the higher education opportunities for many students in south Texas, including the RGV region, the funding reached its peak in 2000 and persistent opportunity gaps in degree completion continue to exist (Vega & Martinez, 2012).

Currently, four postsecondary institutions serve RGV residents: South Texas College (STC), Texas Southmost College (TSC), Texas State Technical College (TSTC), and University of Texas Rio Grande Valley (UTRGV). Although all of these schools play a foundational role in providing border residents with higher education opportunities, only the latter institution offers a diverse set of programs at the bachelor's, master's, and doctoral levels, including a new School of Medicine. In 2020, Texas government officials directed higher education institutions to cut their budgets by 5% given the economic shock and financial strain caused by the COVID-19 pandemic (Office of the Texas Governor, 2020). Only community colleges across the state were exempt from the governor's directive. The potential for multiple years of severe state budget cuts as a result of the pandemic means that the educational opportunities of many students, especially those who reside in the RGV—a region historically underfunded—will be disproportionately impacted. These persisting opportunity gaps in the RGV, coupled with the region's historical and current context, suggest there remains a need to further explore the college-going experiences and perceptions of Latinx/a/o students who are transitioning from high school to college.

ECHS Setting

I recruited participants from a stand-alone ECHS in the RGV. This ECHS, which I have named Southside ECHS, opened in 2016 with a STEM focus-curriculum offering students the opportunity to earn an associate degree in biology, engineering, computer science, mathematics, and interdisciplinary studies. As reflected in Table 2, Southside ECHS serves a population of 434 students in grades 9 through 12 and offers five associate degree options for students to choose from: biology, computer science, engineering, interdisciplinary studies, and engineering. Consistent with the makeup of the region and other surrounding school districts, 100% of the student body is Hispanic, nearly 89% of students are economically disadvantaged,[31] 29% are classified as English learners, and over a majority (59%) are

[31] TEA (2019a) defines economically disadvantaged students as those who are eligible for free or reduced-price lunch or other public assistance.

classified as "at-risk." Southside ECHS is a high-performing ECHS as reflected by their college readiness score.

Table 2

Profile of Southside ECHS

	Southside ECHS
Total students, 2019–2020[a]	434
Total students in Grade 12	80
Hispanic students[b] (%)	100
Economically disadvantaged (%)	88.7
English learners[c] (%)	29
At-risk	58.8
College readiness score, 2018–2019[d] (%)	100

Note. These data were derived from the Texas Education Agency Texas Academic Performance Reports, 2019–2020 Campus Student Information. I do not cite the direct source to maintain the anonymity of the ECHS.

[a] Total number of students in Grades 9–12. [b] Total number of Hispanic students in Grades 9–12. [c] English learners are students whose primary language is one other than English and who are in the process of acquiring English. [d] Due to the pandemic, TEA did not measure college readiness for the 2019–2020 cohort. The score reported in this table is for the 2018–2019 graduating cohort and has been included for context.

Participant Criteria and Selection

According to Jones et al. (2014), "the quality of the data collected by the researcher is largely dependent upon the participants in a study," which in turned is linked to the study's purpose and research questions (p. 106). Because I was specifically interested in understanding the ECHS experiences of Latinx/a/o students in relation to their college-going process, I developed a list of characteristics to ensure the participants I selected had first-hand experience with the research topic. I specifically employed

purposeful sampling, meaning I "strategically select[ed] information-rich cases to study, cases that by their nature and substance [would] illuminate the inquiry question being investigated" (Patton, 2015, p. 264). Patton (2015) defines information-rich cases as those "from which one can learn a great deal about issues of central importance to the purpose of the inquiry" (p. 264). This sampling technique was appropriate for this study because I was intentionally looking for participants who could speak about their ECHS experience and who had insights about the college-going process specifically.

To participate, students had to meet three main criteria: 1) identify as Latinx/a/o or Hispanic (defined as a person of Cuban, Mexican, Puerto Rican, South or Central American, or other Spanish culture or origin regardless of race); 2) identify as a graduating senior either in their 4th or 5th year of ECHS; and 3) must have attended an ECHS for at least three years in the Rio Grande Valley region by the time of their ECHS graduation. I chose these criteria for various reasons. To begin, the first and second criteria explain the sample population of interest for this study (i.e., Latinx/a/o students who are in their final year of ECHS). Because Latinx/a/o students continue to trail behind in postsecondary attainment when compared to their peers in other racial/ethnic groups, it was important for me to understand their ECHS experience from their perspective directly. My focus on senior ECHS students was also intentional as it allowed me to capture students' college and career plans after they graduate from their ECHS. Capturing how students are making meaning of this process is an important step in understanding how well the ECHS model is aligning with students' needs, interests, and realities, and, if in fact the ECHS model is facilitating their high school to college transition.

The third criterion in this study required student participants to have attended an ECHS for at least three years in the RGV region by the time they graduated. The rationale to only interview these students is important for two reasons. First, it is important to recruit student participants who can speak to their ECHS experience, including the school's culture, practices, and supports. Thus, interviewing students who can discuss formative events based on their 3-year ECHS experience was vital, especially as these experiences can shape their college-going process. Second, given that students do not make decisions and choices in silos, it is important to understand the context in which students are making

decisions. Because the setting of my study was the RGV region, it was important to recruit student participants who could speak about their experiences in an ECHS in the RGV. To ensure interested students meant these three criteria, I utilized a participant interest form (see Appendix B: Participant Interest Form). In the next section, I discuss my participant recruitment process.

Participant Recruitment

Given the pandemic, I leaned on a colleague who had a personal connection with an English teacher at Southside ECHS. My colleague shared my recruitment email and flyer with her connection who, in turn, shared the flyer with students in her class (see Appendix C: Recruitment Email and Flyer). The recruitment email and flyer included a link to a consent form and all participants meeting the criteria were encouraged to complete the form.

Interested students who were not 18 years or older were asked to turn in a consent form with their parents/guardians' signature, along with their signature as well (see Appendix D: Parent/Guardian Permission/Assent Form). If they were 18 years or older, they could sign their own consent form (see Appendix E: Student Participant Consent Form). Consent forms were distributed through Qualtrics, which allowed students and parents/guardians to sign electronically. Once students completed their consent form, Qualtrics would redirect them to a secured link to complete the Participant Interest Form.

In addition to the recruitment email and flyer, I also employed snowball sampling to recruit potential participants. According to Patton (2015), the process of snowball sampling "begins by asking well-situated people, 'Who knows a lot about [topic of discussion]? Whom should I talk to?'" (p. 298). Thus, I asked students who had participated in the study to share the link with peers from their ECHS. This method helped me reach students who I would not have otherwise had access to because of the pandemic. Given social distancing policies, my opportunities to interact and build *confianza*[32] (or mutual trust) with potential participants were often limited; thus, snowball sampling through peers was, thus, an

[32] Stanton-Salazar (2001) referred to *confianza* (or trust) as an important social construct that allows individuals to make "themselves vulnerable to the other, to share intimacies without fear of being hurt or taken for granted" (p. 31).

efficient and practical strategy for me to recruit more students to submit a consent form and complete the participant interest form.

A total of 12 Latina/o students completed the Participant Interest Form, and all 12 were invited to participate in the study (see Appendix F: Email to Selected Participants). Once I heard back from students who had been selected to participate, I worked with them to confirm an interview time. To compensate participants for their time, I offered them a monetary incentive in the form of a $50 Amazon gift card.

Sample Size

While 12 students indicated interest in my study, only eight participants committed to participate in an interview. According to Patton (2015), "sample size depends on what [the researchers] want to know, the purpose of the inquiry, what's at stake, what will be useful, what will have credibility, and what can be done with [the] available time and resources" (p. 244). A sample size of eight participants enabled me to focus fully on the participants' experiences—a goal of the narrative approach (Connelly & Clandinin, 2006). This sample size is also consistent with the narrative inquiry literature on Latinx/a/o students navigating the college-going process (see Carolan-Silva & Reyes, 2013—8 students) and with ECHS student experiences (see Schaefer & Rivera, 2016—9 students; Woodcock & Beal, 2013—3 students).

Moreover, my use of narrative inquiry, one-on-one interviews with participants, and several rounds of data analysis provided me with the opportunity to garner rich and in-depth data about each student's unique ECHS experience in relation to college going—the purpose of this study. It is also worth noting that I did not seek to generalize the experiences of students. From a social constructionist perspective, my goal was to document the different realities that students were experiencing as they navigated ECHS. Therefore, I was more concerned with obtaining thick descriptions of students' experiences rather than data saturation (or sampling to the point of redundancy) (Jones et al., 2014). Relatedly, from a critical theory perspective, my goal was to deconstruct students' ECHS narratives in order to identify and analyze social norms, structures, and practices embedded in the ECHS model. A

sample of eight participants enabled me to attend to the details of each student's narrative with the criticality needed to deconstruct and reconstruct their narratives.

Data Collection

Data collection is inherently linked to the onto-epistemological foundations of the researcher and the study's research questions, conceptual frameworks, and methodology (Jones et al., 2014). The process of data gathering is, thus, a deliberate and conscious process that requires researchers to constantly reflect on the purpose of their study and the techniques needed to achieve that goal (Rossman & Rallis, 2017). To recap, the purpose of my study was to better understand students' ECHS experiences in relation to college going. To fully grasp students' stories, I first gathered context information and then conducted one-on-one interviews with participants.

Contextual Documents

Given the important role that context plays in students' lived experiences, I gathered contextual documents related to students' ECHS at the state and district level. Specifically, I reviewed publicly available and relevant documents, such as the state's ECHS blueprint and Southside's ECHS renewal application, to gain a general understanding of practices, programs, and policies in place (see Table 3 for a record and summary of these contextual documents). In the absence of ECHS personnel interviews, these contextual documents, to some extent, enabled me to understand the interplay between students' narratives and the narrative environment—or "the settings in which narrative work transpire[d]" (Gubrium & Holstein, 2009, p. 123). To understand the narrative environment, I had to "step outside of the [participants'] narrative texts [or stories]" (Gubrium & Holstein, 2009, p. 23). This process allowed me to better understand how the distinctive characteristics of the students' ECHS setting, such as the resources available and the opportunities offered influenced their ECHS experiences (Holstein & Gubrium, 2011). In essence, these documents provided me with important contextual information to understand how participants' stories were being mediated by the larger environment.

Table 3

Record and Summary of Contextual Documents

Type of Document	Title	Description
ECHS Benchmarks	Benchmark 1 – Target Population	Links to Southside ECHS's student recruitment plan, enrollment application, admissions policy, communication, and marketing plans.
	Benchmark 2 – Partnership Agreement	Southside ECHS's MOU between the school district and the partner higher education institution.
	Benchmark 3 – P–16 Leadership Initiatives	A list summarizing Southside ECHS's leadership team, which they explain consists of district and higher education institution key stakeholders. The names and roles of these individuals are included in this list.
	Benchmark 4 – Curriculum	Links and PDFs showcasing Southside ECHS's rigorous course of study and academic, social, and emotional support. Some of the PDFS include, for example, note taking skills, test preparation, classroom etiquette, and goal setting.
	Benchmark 5 – Academic Rigor and Readiness	PDFs to the TSI testing calendar and summer bridge outline, curriculum, and schedule.
	Benchmark 6 – School Design	Links to district staff development.
ECHS Website	Principal's Journal	A series of publicly available journal entries written by the ECHS principal. These brief journal entries included topics on the mission and vision of the school and "special features" of the ECHS.
	Counselor's Corner	A resource webpage for students seeking college readiness information like the ACT, FASFA, and scholarships. It also included a list of "important links" for students to navigate.
	Clubs	A list of all the available clubs and extracurricular activities that students can participate in.
	Virtual Instruction Schedule Fall 2020	Summary of students' online learning schedule and tutoring/office hours.

Table 3 (cont'd)

	2020 College Success Award	A brief announcement of the school's College Success Award—an award that uses college readiness and postsecondary data to recognize public high schools that excel in preparing students for college.
School District Policies	Online Instruction for 2020–2021 School Year	A family support information packet created by the school district to provide students and families with instructional materials and virtual learning information and resources. The packet was created for K–12 grade levels.
	Student Handbook	The student handbook outlined parental rights and other important information for parents and students related to matter like bullying, homelessness, and learning difficulties.
	Student Code of Conduct	The code of conduct handbook provides methods and options for managing students in the classroom and on school grounds. It also provides parents and students information on standards of conduct and consequences of misconduct.
Texas Education Agency	The Early College High School Blueprint	This blueprint breaks down each of the benchmarks that ECHS are required to meet annually.
	Application for T-STEM Designation 2016–2017	Southside ECHS's application to earn T-STEM designation. Throughout the application, Southside ECHS describes how they would be working to meet the required components (now "Benchmarks") to be designated a T-STEM ECHS.
	Renewal Application 2020–2021	Southside ECHS's application to renew their ECHS designation. Throughout the application, they outline the different ways they are meeting the benchmarks required by TEA to earn designation.
Higher Education Partner	Commencement Booklet May 2021	List of all associate graduates (used this list to verify that participants had earned their associate degree in their respective discipline).

Note. TEA requires all designated ECHSs to publicly share how they are meeting each benchmark. These resources and documents can be found in Southside's ECHS website; however, for clarity purposes, I placed them in their own category.

To gather information about students' context, I first reviewed relevant ECHS documents to gain insight into students' school contexts. Among some of the documents I reviewed were the school's website, the school's publicly available memorandum of understanding (MOU) letter with the higher education institution, and other publicly available college-related materials such as scholarship deadlines. These documents helped me understand the context in which students were situated and signaled to me what the ECHS valued and prioritized regarding students' postsecondary preparation and success.

Participant Interview and Questionnaire Data

After reviewing contextual documents and gaining a better understanding of students' ECHS, I conducted one 60–90-minute, semi-structured, one-on-one interview with each participant. In a semi-structured interview, the researcher develops a loose (or flexible) interview protocol with several open-ended questions to solicit participants' stories (Jones et al., 2014). Because narrative inquiry researchers are concerned with understanding and exploring experiences and perspectives as narrated by those who live them, broad, open-ended interviews were appropriate for this study (Chase, 2011; Rossman & Rallis, 2017). This data gathering technique enabled each participant and I to engage in deeper reflection regarding their ECHS experiences and gave them leeway in responding to questions that resonated with them the most. This, in turn, allowed me to capture the subtle and nuanced perspectives articulated by participants (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Jones et al., 2014; Rossman & Rallis, 2017) and provided me the space to share some of my own thoughts and experiences—a component of social constructionism (Broido & Manning, 2002). Semi-structured interviews also enabled me to center students' voices through dialogue, which served as an important vehicle for me to understand their constructed college-going process experiences (Puig et al., 2008).

I used my conceptual frameworks to frame my line of inquiry; however, my use of a critical narrative methodology meant that I had to adopt a more imaginative approach to render meaningful

stories from students. Said differently, my method to elicit stories required me to open my questions and, when appropriate, to move beyond the protocol to deepen the richness of description in students' experiences. For example, rather than asking what kind of relationships they had with peers, I asked participants broader questions like: "can you describe what it is like to be an ECHS student? What does a typical day look like for you? Who do you interact with the most during a typical day at your ECHS?" This type of inquiry helped me overcome a rigid adherence to any framework, while striving to meet the goals of narrative inquiry.

Prior to each interview, I shared with students a sample of the questions I would be asking (see Appendix G: Sharing Interview Protocol with Students). I purposefully shared these questions in advance to give students time to think and reflect about their experiences. All interviews were scheduled over Zoom. At the beginning of each interview, I introduced myself, reiterated the purpose of the research project, and informed participants they could withdraw from the study at any point without penalty. I then asked participants if I could audio record our interview and if they had any questions or concerns about the process. Recorded interviews with student participants were transcribed verbatim.

The first half of the interview was designed to align more with the social constructionist perspective, meaning I was interested in understanding how students described themselves and their interests to enroll at an ECHS. In the second half of the interview, I was more attentive to issues of power in students' ECHS experiences and paid particular attention to how information, time, and opportunity played a role in their decision-making process.

After my interviews with students, I reviewed the transcripts looking for any points of clarification and invited students to participate in a follow-up, open-ended questionnaire via email. Each student received about 10–12 questions in a Word document, asking them to either expand or clarify a point of discussion from our interview. Of the eight participants to whom I sent follow-up questions, only six responded. The main purpose of this follow-up questionnaire was to ensure I was capturing their experiences as accurately as possible. Among some of the follow-up questions included their experiences

with taking the ACT, clarification on how they paid for college applications, and whether they had participated in an internship.

After I received their responses, I then synthesized each participant's transcribed interview into a participant profile and shared their respective profiles with them. These synthesized narratives were my interpretation of participants' experiences *before* they enrolled in ECHS. I then gave each student the opportunity to add, clarify, or comment on anything I might have misinterpreted or misrepresented. Of the eight participants, only six students responded to my email, each confirming their profiles were accurate representations of their stories.

Throughout the interview protocol, I embedded questions related to students' social contexts and more specifically the four environments outlined by Tierney and Venegas's (2009) conceptual framework: familial, community, educational, and out-of-class. I began my interview by asking participants to describe the kind of student they were before enrolling at their ECHS. Each student was also asked about their reasons for selecting an ECHS, what their application process looked like, and what their ECHS experience had been so far. Students were then asked to reflect on their college and career aspirations. During my interview with each participant, I paid particular attention to the opportunities and information students had access to and the role that power dynamics played in students' college-going process. This gave me the opportunity to capture any "complicated conditions and moments of non-choice that shape[d] the [progress], loops, detours, and stop-outs" of students' college-going paths (Cox, 2016, p. 22). I also intended to capture what decision, if any, students had made regarding their postsecondary paths (see Appendix H: Student Interview Protocol).

Data Management Procedures

Because narratives contain highly sensitive and personal accounts of students' experiences, I took several steps to ensure my participants' confidentiality. First, all participants were given pseudonyms—these names were either selected by participants or assigned by me with their approval. Second, all identifying information in transcribed interviews like names of their school, friends, and family members were also replaced with pseudonyms or redacted when used in quotes. In situations where the contextual

identifiers in students' narratives were too unique or specific that it would reveal their identity, I decided to leave data unpublished in order to protect participants. Third, access to the master code list, recruitment records, contacts lists, and consent forms were all saved and kept on a protected, encrypted laptop that only I used. Fourth, all my participants received a copy of their narratives, which were my interpretations of students' experiences, after each interview, which created a space for us to discuss how I could use their data. Participants could question, comment, and/or add details to the narrative by letting me know directly via text, email, or phone.

Data Analysis Process

For my data analysis process, I used a number of analytical tools to help me construct, deconstruct, and reconstruct participants' college-going stories. In an effort to make sense of students' lived experiences regarding their ECHS experiences, I combined coding with narrative techniques (Riessman, 2008). Specifically, I completed three main cycles of coding, which required multiple sets of analytical readings.

It is important to note that I only coded the transcribed interviews of student participants and not the context-gathering documents. Because I specifically wanted to explore the ECHS experiences of students, it remained important for me to center and amplify their voices throughout my data analysis. Aligned with my onto-epistemological foundations of social constructionism and critical theory, I recognize that students' lived experiences do not exist in isolation and that their stories are mediated in relation to their social context and interactions with others. As such, I took time to reflect on and process my thoughts on the context-gathering documents I reviewed. Although I did not directly code these documents, I did use them to further understand how students' experiences were influenced by their context—or narrative environment. In the next paragraphs, I explain the analytical tools I employed in more detail.

Jotting

According to Miles et al. (2014), researchers can use jottings, or marginal notes, to capture their own "feelings, reactions, insights, and interpretations" of the data (p. 94). I used jottings to capture my

initial thoughts on both my interviews with student participants and the context-gathering documents (Miles et al., 2014). For example, I used jottings to document college-related practices that stood out during my review of ECHS documents. I also jotted my initial reactions to students' experiences after my interviews with them. Jottings were particularly useful when I listened to and read through the transcribed interviews of students; jottings helped me identify initial chunks of data in need for further analytical attention. Some of my initial jottings later served as analytic memo topics.

Analytic Memo Writing

Analytic memo writings are like "self-reports" about the study's participants, processes, and/or phenomena under investigation (Miles et al., 2014; Saldaña, 2016). These reflective writings occur concurrently with other qualitative data analytic activities and serve to "synthesize [data] into higher level analytic meanings" (Miles et al., 2014, p. 94). Analytic memos are open-ended in nature and can focus on a wide range of topics, including coding definitions, emergent patterns, and personal or ethical dilemmas with the study (Saldaña, 2016). All my analytic memos were kept in a Word document, dated for reference, and given an appropriate title for easy access. Like jotting, I also used analytic memo writing to reflect on my interviews with student participants and the context-gathering documents. Because I did not code the ECHS documents I collected, analytic memos were particularly useful in helping me make sense of the information as it related to students' ECHS experiences. Analytic memos also helped me refine my initial codes and connect my research questions to emerging patterns.

First Reading

After each interview was transcribed, I read through and reflected on each interview, while listening to the audio. This step allowed me to identify any non-verbal sounds during the interview, such as laugher, the student's tone of voice, and any pauses or hesitations. According to Holley and Colyar (2009), "reflecting on our reading brings us to a deeper understanding of what we bring to texts, both as readers and as writers" (p. 684). Reading through each transcribed interview first enabled me to get a "global" understanding of my data and more specifically, a general idea of what students had to say about their college-going process. When reading their transcripts for the first time, I took marginal notes of my

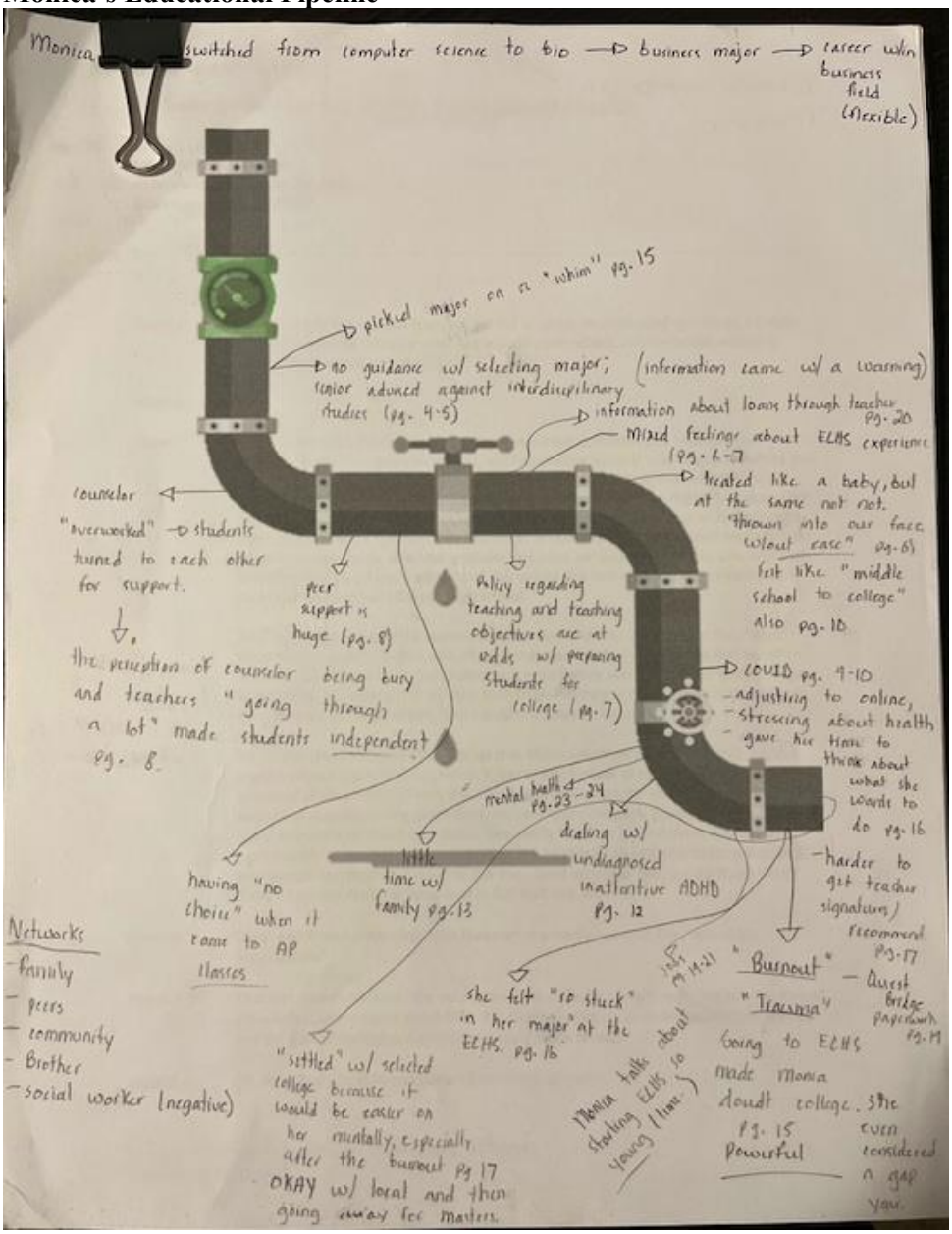
initial reactions to their responses and jotted any ideas or topics I wanted to circle back on. After this initial read, I created an analytical memo detailing my reactions to participants' remarks, any surprises I had over their experiences, and my overall feelings about the data.

Second Reading

I used my analytical memos and marginal notes to then create educational pipelines for each participant. These educational pipelines allowed me to visually picture the stories and events that I found interesting, striking, and/or odd in relation to participant's college-going process (see Figure 3). This exercise also helped me identify emerging codes and patterns throughout other participants' pipelines.

Figure 3

Monica's Educational Pipeline



Coding

Codes are words or phrases attached to chunks of data that trigger a "symbolic meaning" (Miles et al., 2014, p. 71). Through coding, researchers are able to identify and make better sense of the data. In an effort to construct, deconstruct, and reconstruct students' stories, I engaged in two main cycles of coding (Saldaña, 2016). Aligned with social constructionism, in the first cycle, I attempted to understand participants' varied realities in relation to their various environments and social networks. In this analytical process, I leaned on Tierney and Venegas' (2009) cultural-ecological framework to identify the environments and social networks that were influencing students' actions and emotions as they navigated the college-going process. I also leaned on Iloh's (2018) framework to identify statements in students' college-going stories related to information, opportunity, and time. I specifically used process coding, emotion coding, and provisional coding in my first cycle of analysis.

I used process coding to capture the ECHS experiences of students. Process coding uses gerunds ("-ing" words) to identify the actions of participants. These actions can be "intertwined with dynamics of time, such as things that emerge, change, occur in particular sequences, or become strategically implemented" (Miles et al., 2014, p. 75). Process codes helped me identify moments in participants' stories that slowed, impeded, or accelerated the steps they were taking to prepare for college or a career (Saldaña, 2016). For process coding, I labeled data such as "balancing workload," "speaking to peers," and "asking for extensions." These action-based descriptions all represented process codes that reminded me of how students were navigating their competing educational environments as both ECHS and college students. I also engaged in emotion coding to capture any emotions students might have expressed as they navigated ECHS. Because this type of coding "provides insight into the participants' perspectives, worldviews, and life conditions," I specifically used emotion coding to identify students' perceptions as they navigated and negotiated their aspirations and postsecondary opportunities (Miles et al., 2014, p. 75). Finally, I used provisional (or deductive) coding to identify transcript data related to the study's conceptual frameworks. Provisional codes are predetermined lists of codes generated by the researcher (Saldaña, 2016). Some of the provisional codes I used included Tierney and Venegas's (2009) four

environments (educational, out-of-class, familial, and community) and Iloh's (2018) conceptual components of information, time, and opportunity. For example, if students expressed receiving financial aid information from counselors, I would use a process and provisional code to flag that students were "receiving" (process code) "financial aid information" (provisional code) from their "counselor" who is part of their educational environment (provisional code).

Before I conducted a second cycle of coding, I engaged in code mapping to organize and enhance my understanding of the data (Saldaña, 2016). I did this by first conducting a vertical analysis of my codes and then a horizontal analysis. Vertical analysis helped me identify common codes within single cases and horizontal analysis helped me identify common codes across all cases. Because I am a visual learner, during my vertical analysis of codes, I listed all the codes I identified in a separate piece of paper for each student. After identifying all the common codes for each student, I then identified common codes across students' stories in another piece of paper. During this process, I used the educational pipelines I created for each participant to identify common or contradicting stories. I drew arrows to map (or identify the connections) between codes, if any. This process enabled me to better understand the similarities and differences in participants' narrated stories and facilitated my transition to the next cycle of coding.

In the second cycle, I engaged in pattern coding—or categorical labeling—to attribute meaning to my codes and generate themes (Miles et al., 2014). Specifically, I pulled together material from my first cycle of coding and my code mapping to group together patterns I was finding in my analysis of students' college-going process. In creating these groups or categories, I paid particular attention to how information, time, and opportunity (Iloh, 2018, 2019) were described (or not) in students' stories. For example, students shared stories of how they picked their ECHS major, and this reminded me of information gaps along students' college going process. To generate categories and themes, I then asked myself, "how are these components being mediated by larger societal factors in students' different environments?" Here, I employed a critical lens and linked my analytic notes regarding the context-gathering documents I collected to make sense of students' holistic college-going experiences and perceptions. For example, my review of TEA documents revealed that ECHS were not required to include

any links or information on how to help students select a major or explore careers related to their major. In the absence of reliable information, some students relied on subjective information, hindering their ability to make informed choices.

Positionality and My Role as a Researcher

Integral to critical narrative inquiry is the ability to reflect on one's biases, assumptions, and experiences as a way to understand how these aspects impact the research design and process, including one's interactions with participants and the data (Hickson, 2016; Pillow, 2010). As a critical narrative researcher, it is important for me to acknowledge and discuss my positionality, which informed my role as a researcher. As a Latina now studying college access within a higher education institution, I recognize my insider–outsider status in relation to the student participants (Baca Zin, 1979; Chavez, 2008; Villenas, 1996). For example, as a first-generation college Latina, I recognize how difficult it can be to navigate the expectations and hidden agendas of higher education. Moreover, having been born and raised in the Rio Grande Valley, I also recognize that I have an ascribed closeness to the community that allows me to understand the larger historical, political, social, and cultural context of the region not always accessible to outsiders. At the same time, I recognize that I am a doctoral student who, despite encountering challenges, has successfully navigated much of the educational pipeline. I further recognize that, although I took dual enrollment courses as a high school student, I was not exposed to the same rigorous curriculum or expectations like that of ECHS students. It is for this reason that I approached my research as a *learner*. According to Rossman and Rallis (2017), a learner is someone who is "actively engaged in constructing deeper understandings (knowledge) about their topics, the participants, the research process, and themselves as inquirers" (p. 24). Although I have insider status, I also recognize that I am an outsider. This dual status led me to be vigilant in both the data collection and analysis process so as to not let my personal experiences (or lack thereof) obscure my understanding of how students experienced and perceived their college-going process. As a learner engaging in critical narrative inquiry, I further recognize that I have a "responsibility to critically interpret [students'] narratives with care" (Espino, 2020, p. 144)—this requires an understanding of my role as a researcher as well.

According to Jones and colleagues (2014), the interpretation of participants' stories places "the researcher in the role of a narrator" and "requires great trust between the researcher and participant" (p. 85). The re-storying or reconstruction of narratives through analysis and interpretation means that as a researcher I have a great responsibility to ensure that my subjectivity in the research process does not overshadow the students' realities. At the same time, as a critical scholar, I have a responsibility to disentangle power dynamics that continue to perpetuate educational inequalities—even if the storyteller did not directly point to this oppression. This tension made balancing the role of researcher/narrator difficult. However, engaging in reflexivity helped ease this tension.

According to Pillow (2010), "the doing of reflexivity is linked with and only as deep as our methodological and [onto]-epistemological knowledges" (p. 275). Thus, as a researcher/narrator I read "widely, deeply, and critically" (Pillow, 2010, p. 275) and continually interrogated my onto-epistemology foundations of social constructionism and critical theory. This process led me to question how I was addressing *voice* in the narratives of students and how I was addressing *power* in the restorying of these narratives (Jones et al., 2014). By power, I meant my interactions with participants rather than the power structures that mediated their ECHS experiences. In considering voice and power in narratives, I employed my onto-epistemological foundations of social constructionism and critical theory to make decisions about how I was going to represent the voices of participants. I specifically borrowed from Chase's (2005) work on different narrative strategies—supportive voice and interactive voice—to make meaning of students' stories. For example, from a social constructionist perspective, my goal was to retell the stories of students' college-going process, taking into consideration the socio-cultural, political, and economic conditions in which their processes were situated. My analytical tools of global reading and broadening, which aligned more closely with social constructionism, were used to foreground the participants' voices. In doing so, I used a "supportive voice," which aimed to articulate the participant's voices as originally as it could be represented through direct quotes. Although I still made decisions about what experiences I considered to be key throughout my global reading and broadening analytical process, I placed the participant's voice at the center, "creating a self-reflective and respectful distance between

myself and students' (Chase, 2005, p. 665). According to Chase (2005), "the goal of this narrative strategy is to bring the narrator's story to the public—to get the narrator's story heard" (p. 665). From a critical theory perspective, however, I knew this could lead to "romanticiz[ing] the [participant's] voice" (Chase, 2005, p. 665). Thus, when I employed burrowing and restorying in the analytical process, I used an "interactive voice" to display the intersubjectivity between the participant and myself (Chase, 2005). According to Chase (2005), through the interactive voice, researchers "examine their voices—their subject positions, social locations, interpretations, and personal experiences—through the refracted medium of [participants'] voices" (p. 666). Analytical memos were particularly helpful in this process, as I was able to reflect on issues of power, privilege, and oppression in relation to students' experiences. Although participants' voices were still heard clearly through extensive quotation of their own words, my interpretation of their experiences was also evident and made explicit.

Rather than trying to disentangle my role of researcher from narrator, I embraced the complexity and messiness of these positions and engaged in reflexivity to come to terms with these colliding roles. In using an *interactive voice* for my analysis and representation of narratives, I not only uncovered the power dynamics embedded in students' experiences, but I also emphasized the agency of students by amplifying their voices and experiences (Hurtado, 2015). For me, reflexivity was not a method or a static tool that I incorporated for validity, but rather it was a process that pushed me to "question and deconstruct what is most hegemonic in [my life]" (Pillow, 2010, p. 278). This reflexivity process started when I asked myself what my onto-epistemological foundations were and why I had come to these conclusions. Understanding my biases, assumptions, and personal experiences further helped me understand and identify my researcher/narrator voice when restorying students' experiences (Connolly, 2007). Because these subjectivities inevitably influenced how I interpreted students' narratives, I used various trustworthiness strategies.

Trustworthiness

In this section, I outline the principles associated with trustworthiness, or the rigor of a study, and discuss how I worked to address these throughout my study. These principles included credibility,

transferability, confirmability, and dependability (Morrow, 2005). Jones et al. (2014) contend that "credibility occurs through prolonged engagement in the field and the use of others to confirm findings" (p. 36). First, I attended to prolonged engagement in the field by employing multiple analytical tools to help me read, reread, and critically understand students' ECHS experiences in relation to college going. Using analytical memoing, for example, enabled me to sit with the data and reflect on my interpretations of students' stories in relation to their contexts and time. Moreover, my extensive review of ECHS documents helped me gain a better understanding of students' situational context. I also participated in peer debriefing (Rossman & Rallis, 2017). A peer debriefer "serves as an intellectual watchdog for you as you modify design decisions, develop possible analytic categories and build an explanation for the phenomenon of interest" (Rossman & Rallis, 2017, p. 56). The peer debriefer helped me make sense of my research design, making sure that my onto-epistemological foundations and methodology aligned with the rest of my research design and process. I also engaged in participant validation through "member-checking" (Jones et al., 2014; Rossman & Rallis, 2017). However, rather than using transcripts for participants to review, I gave them a participant profile for them to review to ensure that my interpretations reflected their story. Participants could correct or add to the summary if they wanted to. These narrative summaries were shared instead of transcripts in an effort to build interpersonal communication and trust with participants (Moss, 2004) and as a way to ensure that their voice was still present in my restorying of their experiences (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000).

Transferability is another principle associated with trustworthiness. Transferability, according to Morrow (2005) "refers to the extent to which the reader is able to generalize the findings of a study to her or his [or their] own context" (p. 252). To ensure transferability, I employed thick description (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). Thick description is a "highly descriptive, detailed presentation of the setting and in particular, the findings of a study" (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015, p. 257). As such, I gathered context information on the ECHS that students were attending and provided a thick description of each school to document the larger context in which students were situated.

Lastly, dependability and confirmability are other forms of trustworthiness that I also employed in my research process. Dependability requires the researcher to be explicit about their inquiry process and activities, whereas confirmability requires the "researcher to tie findings with data and analysis" (Jones et al., 2014, p. 37). To ensure dependability, I kept an audit trail of all my procedures and processes as I moved my research forward. For example, after reading ECHS documents to get a better sense of the context, I jotted my initial thoughts and impressions of the ECHS. To contribute to the credibility of my work, I also engaged in peer debriefing, or analytic triangulation. A peer debriefer "serves as an intellectual watchdog" for researchers as they "modify decisions, develop possible analytic categories, and build an explanation for the phenomenon of interest" (Rossman & Rallis, 2017, p. 56). Peer debriefing provided me the opportunity to process my initial codes, emerging categories, and final findings. In addition to peer debriefing, I also gave each student a copy of their narratives and invited each to provide feedback and recommendations. This process created space for participants and I to renegotiate meaning. Further, the different analytical tools I employed also led to the study results, securing the confirmability of the study. My analytical memos were particularly helpful in this case helpful, as I was able to track my thought process as I tried making sense of students' narratives.

Assumptions, Delimitations, and Limitations

Every research study comes with its own set of assumptions, delimitations, and limitations (Rossman & Rallis, 2017). According to Leedy and Ormrod (2010), a researcher should delineate what the assumptions, delimitations, and limitations of a study are in order to "eliminate any possibility of misunderstanding" (p. 56). Without a clear articulation of these components, questions regarding the credibility of the research process and findings can arise. In the following sub-sections, I provide a description of my study's assumptions, delimitations, and limitations.

Assumptions

Rossman and Rallis (2017) define assumptions as "fundamental propositions that [researchers] take for granted" (p. 26), while Leedy and Ormrod (2010) describe them as "self-evident truths" (p. 5). Because assumptions can explicitly and implicitly shape a study, it is important for me to explicitly share

the assumptions that drove my research. First, I assumed that students' college-going process would be complex, nonlinear, and multilayered. This assumption derived from my review of the college-going literature, which has previously documented the various barriers that Latinx/a/o students face as they navigate the college-going process. Given this context, I approached my research with an understanding that students' college-going pathways would be diverse and partially depended on the types of opportunities, social networks, and information offered (or not) within their environments.

Second, and related to my first assumption, I believed that each student had their own college-going story and that their interpretations of these events were based on their environments and interactions with others and the world. This assumption aligned with my social constructionism perspective, which assumes that understandings are socially constructed. From this standpoint, I viewed students' interpretations of the college-going process as subjective and context specific.

Third, I assumed that in order to learn about the college-going experiences and perceptions of students, I needed to engage directly with participants to understand how they were making sense of their college-going process. Based on this assumption, I chose to conduct a qualitative study—a research design that researchers often use to understand how people experience the world. Fourth, although I assumed that each student had their own college-going story, I also believed that their college-going narratives were influenced by and constructed within dominant systems of power. This assumption derived from my onto-epistemological foundations of critical theory and the existing literature on Latinxs/as/os and their college-going processes.

Finally, in conducting a qualitative study, I assumed that participants answered my interview questions in an honest and candid manner. I made this assumption because I made an effort to explain to each participant the steps I would be taking to keep their identity confidential and informed them that their participation was absolutely voluntary and that they could withdraw from the study at any time and with no ramifications.

Delimitations and Limitations

Delimitations are the characteristics (or boundaries) of a research design that limit the scope of a study in order to make it more manageable. Limitations, by contrast, are the conditions, usually beyond the researcher's control, that may place restrictions on the results of the study or how the results can be interpreted (Rossman & Rallis, 2017). In order to be transparent about my research design and process, I find it important to outline the delimitations and limitations of this study.

First, I intentionally chose to interview 12th grade ECHS students as opposed to ECHS students in earlier grades because I wanted to capture students' experiences and reflections now that they were approaching graduation. I specifically decided to only include 12th grade ECHS students in this study because they have been exposed to their school's culture, practices, and supports for a longer time. Moreover, because many seniors are thinking about what they want to do after they graduate high school, I wanted to capture their college-going process, as they planned and prepared for this transition (e.g., completing the FASFA, applying to colleges or jobs). I recognize that this is a delimitation that offers a partial and an incomplete view into how students experience the college-going process (Elbaz-Luwisch, 2007). However, my goal was not to capture the experiences of ECHS students from start-to-end, but rather to understand a critical point in time in which ECHS seniors were making sense of their college-going options and opportunities.

Relatedly, another delimitation concerns my intentional focus on students' *college-going processes* rather than their *college-choice process*. While I recognize the value of understanding and documenting student outcomes, such as college enrollment, I was more interested in "the impact of the experience itself" (Bell, 2002, p. 209). Concerned with students' ECHS experiences in relation to college going, I intentionally set my study within a timeframe (during students' last semester at their ECHS). However, this timeframe prevented me from confirming whether (or not) their intended college-going plans and decisions were actualized. Further, because of time and funding limitations, I was also not able to follow-up with students to see how their college-going plans and decisions had changed since their interview with me. As such, students' postsecondary decisions during the interview cannot be

conceptualized as their final decision. Because students' paths to college continue beyond high school, I was careful to not conceptualize students' college "choice" as *the* enrollment decision, especially when scholars have found that high school students experience ongoing life changes after graduation that can lead to interruptions in their original college-going plans (Cox, 2016). As such, I tried to narrate the experiences and perceptions of students in a way that was still compelling and illuminating to how they experienced college going (Elbaz-Luwisch, 2007).

Third, employing a critical narrative methodology for this study also served as a delimitation. In this study, I examined the experiences and perceptions of eight Latina/o students who attended ECHSs in the Rio Grande Valley (RGV) region. I remain aware that a broader, more diverse sample of students and ECHSs could have yielded more distinctive perspectives; however, a narrative methodology enabled me to garner rich and in-depth data on each ECHS students' college-going process. Relatedly, this study was limited in that students were my sole data source. My inability to conduct context-gathering interviews with ECHS administrators and educators as a result of the pandemic meant that I was unable to triangulate some of the experiences students shared with me. The opportunity to interview ECHS representatives would have enabled me to garner a richer and deeper understanding about the college-related information, resources, and opportunities available to students. Nonetheless, understanding the experiences of ECHS students through their perspectives uncovered how they perceived and experienced access to information, opportunities, and resources.

Fourth, and related to the design of my study, by asking students to reflect on their college-going process during the COVID-19 pandemic, this study may have been limited in its capacity to fully capture students' college-going aspirations and plans. Given the disruptions the pandemic had on many communities, it is possible that students' original college-going plans might have changed and that, as a result, students may have been less transparent or unsure about their postsecondary plans. Additionally, at the time of the interview, all participating students expressed an interest in attending college. This means that the ECHS experiences represented in this study may not be applicable to the experiences of students seeking different postsecondary pathways (e.g., workforce, military, undecisive). While this is certainly a

sampling limitation, the experiences of students from this study provide contexts as to how the college-going process could be improved to ensure a smoother transition from the beginning.

Fifth, while I ideally would have liked to share my final findings with participants, due to timing, I was unable to solicit their feedback and thoughts. They, however, did have the opportunity to provide feedback on their profiles. While this does not negate my findings, it did require me to support my findings with direct and rich quotes from participants. As I made meaning of their stories, I ensured their voices, along with their experiences, continued to be centered.

Finally, because many seniors in high school are not 18 years or older, I had to first collect the consent forms of all students and their parents/guardians, if needed. To avoid confusion, all students, regardless of their age, had to first submit a consent form if they were interested in participating. This meant that many students who might have been interested in participating may not have shown interest because a consent form had to be filled out first. Completing a consent form during the COVID-19 pandemic was challenging because many students and their parents/guardians did not have reliable access to WIFI, did not have reliable technology, and/or were not familiar with using technology. Student and parent/guardian nonresponse on the consent form as a result of the disruptions brought upon the COVID-19 pandemic could have been a primary factor contributing to a nonrepresentative sample.

Conclusion

The purpose of this chapter was to articulate my study's research design, which provided the necessary tools to examine the ECHS experiences of Latina/o students. I began this chapter by first explaining my onto-epistemological roots of social constructionism and critical theory. I then expanded on my use of critical narrative inquiry, highlighting how this approach was appropriate for interrogating, exposing, and challenging taken-for-granted narratives on college-going. Together, my onto-epistemological roots and methodological approach informed my research design, which included details on the site selection, the methods I used for data collection, and the process I took to analyze my data. Finally, aligned with my critical narrative inquiry, I discussed my positionality and role as a researcher

and ended with an explanation of the steps I took to assure the trustworthiness of my study. In the next chapter, I describe my study's research findings.

CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS

Introduction

The underlying purpose of this study was to better understand students' early college high school (ECHS) experiences in relation to college going. Specifically, through in-depth interviews with eight students in one ECHS in south Texas, I sought to understand how varied factors embedded in participants' ECHS experiences worked for or against their college-going process. My study was particularly guided by the following research questions:

1. How do Latinx/a/o students describe their early college high school (ECHS) experience?
    a. What do Latinx/a/o students' ECHS experiences reveal about the factors that facilitate or hinder their college-going process?

In this study, factors refer to the people, activities, and interactions that facilitated or hindered participants' preparation for, transition to, and engagement with the college-going process. Because participants started taking college-level courses for their associate degree in ninth grade, I framed their *college-going process* as having started their first year of ECHS. Therefore, in seeking to understand students' ECHS experiences in relation to their college-going process, I focused on capturing their perceptions, decisions, and experiences since their first year in ECHS rather than just their senior year. My framing of the college-going process means that I considered participants to simultaneously be high school and college students and that any college plans after ECHS were considered as continuing their postsecondary education rather than just having started.

In describing their ECHS experience, participants largely praised their ECHS for affording them the opportunity to earn both a high school and an associate degree. When asked, participants shared they would recommend the ECHS program to prospective students; however, they also noted that the program was not for everyone. Through my inductive analysis of participant interviews, I identified several ECHS experiences that shaped students' college-going process, including their perceptions about college and where they enrolled in college. I specifically used a temporal order to (re)tell students' ECHS experiences: first describing their *transition from middle school to ECHS* (Getting In), then their

adjustment to ECHS (Getting Through), and finally their *transition out of ECHS to a higher education institution* (Getting Across). Before discussing these findings in more detail, I first provide an overview of Southside ECHS, and then segue into the individual profiles of each student participant. This section is then followed by a detailed description of my findings and a conclusion that summarizes my findings.

Contextualizing Findings

As a critical narrative researcher, I approached my research with an understanding that students' upbringings, prior experiences, and varied environments can influence how they describe their ECHS experiences. Thus, before outlining my findings, in this section, I first provide background information on the ECHS that participants attended and include an overview of my participants. Then, to further contextualize and situate my findings, I include a descriptive profile of each participant. These descriptive profiles detail their thoughts about college before starting ECHS and their reasons for attending an ECHS.

Overview of Southside ECHS

I recruited participants for this study from one stand-alone ECHS in south Texas, which I have named Southside ECHS (pseudonym). Southside ECHS enrolled its first cohort of students in 2016 with a mission to enable students to graduate high school with a STEM endorsement while earning an associate degree in a STEM field. According to publicly available records I reviewed, Southside ECHS strives to "close learning gaps where they exist" and to "develop students' self-esteem as learners and productive members of a global society." The school's philosophy is to ensure that all their students are "college, career, and life ready."[33]

Southside ECHS is partnered with Texas Technology College (TTC) (pseudonym), a regional higher education institution located about 30 minutes from campus. Southside ECHS's partnership with TTC enables students to take college courses with the benefits of free tuition and transportation. Southside ECHS students can complete their associate degree credits through dual credit courses taught by qualified high school teachers on campus and with college professors at TTC. The Memorandum of

[33] I do not cite the source of these direct quotes to maintain the anonymity of the ECHS.

Understanding between Southside ECHS and TTC ensures all participating students have access to not only dual enrollment courses but also college facilities, resources, and services. Because ECHS students are college students, all receive a college campus identification card and have access to academic success services at TTC.

Over the years, Southside ECHS has been recognized as a high-performing ECHS, winning a number of awards, including an "A" rating from the Texas Education Agency for outstanding academic achievement. In 2016, a year after its inception, Southside ECHS was recognized for graduating the most students with an associate degree from TTC. Since 2020, the school has also been the recipient of both the National Best High Schools Award and the College Success Award—an award that uses college readiness and postsecondary data to recognize public high schools that excel in preparing students for college. This context is important to highlight as I seek to understand the factors that facilitated or hindered students' college-going process.

Overview of Participants

A total of 12 Latina/o students indicated interest in participating in this study. However, only eight students participated in the one-on-one interview. In Texas, high school students typically graduate in late May, or possibly early June, while college students completing their requirements in spring semester typically graduate in early May. Thus, when I interviewed participants in mid-May 2021, all participants had already earned their associate degree from TTC and were two weeks shy of receiving their high school diploma. Before I conducted interviews, I asked participants to complete and submit a consent form and a participant interest form on which they voluntarily disclosed some of the demographic and educational information represented in Table 4. The presentation of Table 4 is an at-a-glance tool for readers to understand students' backgrounds and education aspirations.

Table 4

Overview of Participants

Student	Gender	Race/ ethnicity	Associate degree	High school rank	First-generation	Educational aspirations
Alexa	Female	Latina	Biology	25%	Yes	Medical Degree
Alyssa	Female	White, Latina	Biology	25%	Yes	Bachelor's Degree
Destiny	Female	Latina	Biology	10%	Yes	Medical Degree
Gregory	Male	Latino	Computer Science	25%	Yes	Master's Degree
Jocelyn	Female	Latina	Interdisciplinary	75%	Yes	Master's Degree
Monica	Female	Latina	Biology	10%	Yes	Master's Degree
Rose	Female	Latina	Interdisciplinary	50%	Yes	Master's Degree
Scarlett	Female	Latina	Biology	5%	Yes	Master's Degree (maybe PhD)

Note. All names are pseudonyms.

All participants were admitted to Southside ECHS through an open-access lottery system regardless of academic performance. Each student was required to attend a 3-week summer bridge camp program before starting ECHS. The bridge program served as an orientation to ECHS and included preparation for the Texas Success Initiative Assessment, known as the TSI test. The TSI test, which all ECHS students are required to take before enrolling in college-level courses, determines if a student is ready for college-level course work in reading, writing, and mathematics. All participants identified as first-generation college-going students and majored in various STEM or related fields including biology (n=5), interdisciplinary studies (n=2), and computer science (n=1). Students' class ranking ranged from top 5% to top 75%. Seven of the eight participants had aspirations to attain more than a bachelor's degree. Specifically, two students aspired to attend medical school and five indicated interest in pursuing graduate school. While all students expressed an interest in attending college at the time of the interview, two students—Gregory and Jocelyn—shared that, prior to starting ECHS, they did not have plans to pursue a postsecondary education beyond an associate degree.

Participant Profiles

I wrote the descriptive profiles for each of my participants using interview data and then shared corresponding profiles with each student via email in an attached Word document. Students were offered the opportunity to review the profiles and to provide suggestions or clarifications. Only six participants

responded to my email, and all six confirmed that their profiles were accurate representations of themselves and the stories they had shared with me. In each of my participant's profiles, I described the kind of student they were before starting ECHS, what they enjoyed doing, and the extracurricular activities in which they were involved. I also shared when and how participants learned about ECHSs and why they chose Southside ECHS in particular. Additionally, I included any preconceived notions students may have had about college before enrolling at their ECHS. Here I introduce each of my participants in alphabetical order.

Alexa. Alexa is the oldest of three sisters and a first-generation college-going student. She graduated from her ECHS with an associate of science degree in biology. Prior to starting early college, Alexa enjoyed playing orchestra and loved reading books. She described herself as the "type of student to always be stuck reading a book." Alexa credits her paternal grandparents, particularly her grandmother, for teaching her the value of an education at a young age. "After school, when I was in pre-K," Alexa explained, "my dad would drop me off [at my grandmother's house], and she had this stack of books and giant jumbo crayons with cursive writing books, and she was the one that got me into reading and learning." Alexa's passion for learning continued in middle school and high school, where she competed in the University Interscholastic League (UIL)[34] categories of calculator, math, number sense, and journalism. At some point, in middle school, Alexa felt like she was prioritizing orchestra and "detaching from [her] studies." She eventually realized she needed to refocus on school and "got back into [her] studies." For Alexa, doing well in school was important because she wanted to honor her grandparents who were the first to fuel her passion for learning.

Alexa learned about the ECHS program after her eighth-grade counselor told her and a group of other selected students about the opportunity:

[34] The University Interscholastic League (UIL) is an inter-school organization designed to provide students with educational experiences and activities through competition.

> I went to a middle school where a lot of kids were not bad, but they didn't really care about their education. So, our counselor grabbed a certain [number] of kids, me included, and told us, "Oh, you guys have good grades, great attendance, and you're really focused on your goals. There's a school that will help you further your education and save your parents a lot of money."

Ultimately, Alexa chose to apply to an ECHS because she wanted to further her education and save her parents money, especially since both of her parents did not have a formal education. She specifically chose Southside ECHS for three reasons: the school focused on STEM, provided a smaller learning community, and ensured students they would graduate with both a high school diploma and an associate degree.

Both of Alexa's parents supported her decision to enroll at the ECHS. However, her dad worried she would not enjoy her high school years if she committed to an ECHS: "He wanted me to be sure that I enjoyed my high school years because they're supposed to be the best years of your life." But that did not deter Alexa from applying to Southside ECHS as she was "willing to give up a social life" if that meant getting an associate degree, while saving her family money. For Alexa, her ECHS program served as a stepping-stone between high school and college:

> Ever since I was little, I knew college was a thing. I knew people would go away from home or stay home to learn more. So, my parents have always planned for me to be the one to get out of here and be the first one to get a degree and just have a really good career. So, college has always been in my plan.

Prior to enrolling at her ECHS, Alexa knew she wanted to attend college. College had been part of her plan, and her goal was "to get to the farthest point" she could reach with what she wanted to pursue. Alexa was told by her parents that earning a postsecondary degree would help her have a "brighter future," and she was determined to make that happen.

Alyssa. Alyssa is the middle child in her family and a first-generation college-going student. She graduated from her ECHS with an associate of science degree in biology. Growing up, Alyssa was a very "shy" and "introverted" kid. "I was not really open with anybody," Alyssa shared about herself, "I had

like basically three friends, so it was honestly just only the close group of people that I had." It was not until she joined band in middle school that she started to open up and make friends. By high school, Alyssa described herself as "way more social" and "friendly." Her favorite subjects were English and science, and she particularly had an interest in biology. Although Alyssa had enjoyed band in middle school, she decided not to participate in high school because she wanted to focus on her studies: "I was not going to take band to another level or do anything with it in the future, [so] I just chose to go to early college and focus on school mostly."

Alyssa learned about the ECHS program through her counselor and teachers in eighth grade. She explained that her middle school "would have students like seniors, juniors, [and other students in different grade levels] come to the middle school and talk to us and show us presentations about the school, what they did, and what they offered." Alyssa ultimately chose to attend Southside ECHS because she liked biology, and Southside ECHS was the only secondary school in the area that had a STEM-focused curriculum. "It was like a decision day kind of thing," Alyssa recalled,

> We had to have our [high school] choice ready and when I went to go see [our eighth-grade counselor], I told her, "I want to go to this school just because I want to focus on STEM and get my associate [degree] in STEM."

Getting accepted to Southside ECHS was a "big deal" for Alyssa and her family: "A lot of my family hasn't really been successful in high school in general. So, me applying to an early college, it was like, 'Wow, she's so smart like she's actually going to do this.'" Although Alyssa's family supported her decision to attend ECHS, she shared that her mom's friends were a little more skeptical:

> My mom's friends would tell my mom, "You know, my kids did not apply to [ECHS] because they said it was very hard and they did not like it, and it's too much work and they stressed out too much."

These remarks discouraged Alyssa at first and even made her doubt whether ECHS would be a good fit for her, but at the end, she decided she wanted to attend Southside ECHS because she wanted to earn an associate degree.

Prior to enrolling in her ECHS, Alyssa was interested in college, but she constantly worried about being able to afford this path. In middle school, she was told by her middle school friends and their parents that college would be "really hard" and "expensive." She worried about leaving her family behind, location, getting a job, and the steps she needed to take once she started college. Given these worries, Alyssa viewed ECHS as a good opportunity to get a head start in college.

Destiny. Destiny is the oldest of three sisters and a first-generation college-going student. She graduated from her ECHS with an associate of science degree in biology. Growing up, Destiny remembers being a "super dedicated" and "determined" student. Driven by her mom's high expectations, Destiny felt like she had little to no room for failure. "My mom," Destiny shared, "was one of those moms that if you got a "B," it was over. You were grounded." So, for Destiny, staying focused in school was important. But it was her Tía (aunt) who helped her stay motivated and who taught her how to read and write. "My Tía," she explained, "has always been someone that encouraged me and made me think that things were possible. And her dedication to me made me feel like I could do what I chose to do." Throughout elementary and middle school, she enjoyed making new friends, playing volleyball, and participating in UIL. Destiny especially enjoyed reading books and actively participated in the Millionaire's Club, a reading incentive program meant to encourage students to read one million or more words during the school year. Her involvement in extracurricular activities continued even after she began her ECHS program. In fact, in addition to playing volleyball and competing in UIL, Destiny was part of her school's robotics team and was a member of the Fellowship of Christian Athletes (FCA) and the National Honor Society (NHS). She also competed in research, persuasive speaking, and writing as part of HOSA-Future Health Professionals.[35]

Destiny learned about the ECHS program towards the end of her eighth-grade year. She attended a high school fair where she learned more about the program:

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[35] HOSA-Future Health Professionals, formerly known as Health Occupations Students of America, is an international student-led organization that strives to enhance the leadership and technical skills of students interested in the health industry.

> They invited several students from the early colleges to come present everything they have to offer. So, when [high school representatives] came, I knew I wanted to go to the early college. And my counselor played a big part in that, she was like, "Go here, go here, or go here."

Destiny shared that she ranked her top three schools but "didn't care at the time" where she got in. It was not until she participated in her Southside ECHS's Summer Bridge Program that she realized she was accepted to a school that fit her interests:

> When I was there, I was able to meet some of the teachers from [Southside ECHS]. And they were explaining to me that my school was the only one that would guarantee you an associate [degree] in whatever you wanted to pursue. Other schools weren't going to give you the associate of science in biology. They were only going to give you the associate of interdisciplinary studies in something else. And that wouldn't fit what I wanted.

Destiny's parents expected her to attend an ECHS and were thrilled when she got accepted. Although she had her family's support, she remembered her middle school friends discouraging her from applying:

> They'd be like, "No, don't go there, come to the high school, you'll have more fun. It's a real college experience." And I was kind of tempted, but then I [told] myself, my friends are not going be there forever. This is for me, this is what I want, this is what I need.

Even before attending ECHS, it had always been Destiny's dream to go to college. Her parents supported her dream, believing it would lead her to a "good life" in which she did not have to "worry about money." Although Destiny thought "college was possible," she was still a little scared. At first, she pictured herself attending college out-of-state, but after touring a college campus in Texas with her Tía and Tío (uncle), she changed her mind. She fell in love with the campus and immediately knew she wanted to attend that college. For Destiny, attending an ECHS served as a vehicle to make her dream come true.

Gregory. Gregory is the oldest of three siblings and shares a household with his cousin, niece, and nephew. He is also a first-generation undocumented college-going student. He graduated from his ECHS with an associate of science degree in computer science. Growing up, Gregory enjoyed reading and learning. He described himself as a "reserved" but "self-motivated" student. "I started looking for ways to solve [homework] my own way," he shared, recalling his studying habits:

> I would come back to school, and I would already know the idea because I would search [the learning topic] on the internet. I would look up tutorials [online], and that's a lot of what has spilled over into my personal traits now.

In middle school, Gregory's teacher, Mrs. Sandoval, introduced him to business information management classes where he learned how the internet worked and how to type, code, and use Word documents. It was through this experience that his love for and interests in computers first started. Gregory's involvement in business information management and modern oratory in middle school later led him to choose Southside ECHS.

Gregory first learned about ECHS programs when he attended a high school fair as an eighth grader. "They were basically trying to recruit for their school," Gregory remembers, referring to the ECHS students and teachers at the high school fair. Gregory was told he could "save a lot of money" by attending an ECHS. When he heard that, he became interested. He explained, "We're not the wealthiest family, especially down here in the South, so wherever I can save money, I'll take it." When he reviewed the flyer with the different programs, he learned that Southside ECHS was the only school that offered the most college credits. "I wanted the most I could get so I went for Southside ECHS with 70 hours," he added.

Gregory talked to his parents about the opportunity, and they supported his decision. However, at first, he felt a bit "intimidated" and started wondering if he really wanted to attend a "harder school," especially because he did not plan to attend college at the time. "By my own accord, I started weighing the pros and the cons of going to the normal [high] school or going to this ECHS," Gregory shared. "The normal school had a lower-than-average reputation, because my cousin went there and he said, 'Well,

there's fights regularly. There are maybe some drugs." Ultimately, Gregory chose to attend Southside ECHS, which would give him the opportunity to major in computer science—an area he was interested in pursuing.

Before starting ECHS, Gregory associated going to college with more schooling. He specifically thought that college was only for those interested in becoming doctors:

> The only way I knew about college back then was like for a doctor profession. My parents always said, "You want to be a doctor? You've got to go through all of high school, all of regular school, which is like 12 years, and then eight or nine more years." So, the only thing I knew about college back then was that it was just more school. I didn't even think about college as getting a degree, a better-paying job, or furthering your education. Never crossed my mind.

His parents and middle school teachers, in particular, had told him that college was expensive and hard. So, in Gregory's mind, he pictured college as a "big, scary place" that required additional years of schooling, something in which he was not interested.

Jocelyn. Jocelyn is the oldest of two siblings and a first-generation college-going student. She graduated from her ECHS with an associate of science degree in interdisciplinary studies. In elementary, Jocelyn remembers being a "very closed off" and "introvert" student with "no interest in making friends." By middle school, she realized that she needed to be more social and started to open up. Although Jocelyn's perspective on making friends had changed, her perspective about school stayed the same: it was enjoyable and something she liked. Throughout middle school and high school, Jocelyn tried being involved in extracurricular activities, but it was difficult for her because she had other responsibilities at home. As the eldest child, Jocelyn felt it was her responsibility to help her parents with her younger siblings—one of whom had autism. "They don't know how to do a lot of things for themselves," she explained referring to her younger brothers. "That's me and my mom's fault," Jocelyn shared and continued, "we never taught them how to do things for themselves. So, I have to be home; I have to clean; and I have to make food for them—make sure they are okay, and they stay out of trouble." Despite the responsibilities that Jocelyn had at home, she excelled in her studies and earned good grades.

Jocelyn first learned about ECHS programs in eighth grade through her middle school counselor. Jocelyn's counselor was able to convince her to select an ECHS after talking to her. Jocelyn specifically chose to attend Southside ECHS because it had the smallest learning environment when compared to other schools. "The regular high school that's next to us," Jocelyn elaborated, "has like 5,000 kids. So that just seems like really stressful to me to have all those kids around. And when they mentioned that in Southside ECHS there is only like 400 kids, I was like that sounds perfect!"

Although Jocelyn's parents were really supportive of her decision to apply to an ECHS program, her inner thoughts nearly discouraged her from applying:

> At the beginning I was like, "what if I can't, what if I'm not smart enough, what if I can't do this?—it's really college. There must be like really smart students there." And I was like, "what if I'm not good enough?"

Ultimately, Jocelyn decided to apply, describing herself as "independent" and "stubborn" and willing to challenge herself.

Despite her eagerness to attend ECHS, Jocelyn admitted that she did not really have an interest in attending college before starting her ECHS program:

> I was never a huge fan of the idea of college. I just never saw it as something that you needed to be happy and successful in life. So, I was never super interested in it…I've always thought as long as you're happy…that to me is success.

Monica. Monica is a first-generation college-going student who grew up with an older brother. She graduated from her ECHS with an associate of science degree in biology. Growing up, Monica was a "very shy" student who "kept to [herself]." She described herself as "those classic, nerdy kids" who "you would see sitting in the back, but [who] would get good grades." Her favorite subject was English, and she really enjoyed reading. In elementary school, she was placed in the Gifted and Talented (GT) Program and took many advanced classes in middle school like pre-algebra. Prior to starting ECHS, she participated in her school's choir program and was an active member of student council. In high school, Monica became more "outgoing" and was a member of her school's National Honor Society and Mu

Alpha Theta (a mathematics honors society). She competed in UIL and was also her school's student council president.

Monica knew about the ECHS program through her older brother who had graduated from Southside ECHS. Her brother, who passed away in an accident, was a "big inspiration" for Monica. Monica explained that even though her brother was diagnosed with dyslexia, he persisted in school. He would constantly tell her that Southside ECHS was fun and that teachers were great. Inspired by her brother, Monica knew for a fact that she wanted to attend ECHS. When all eighth graders were asked to rank their top three high schools, Monica ranked Southside ECHS as her top choice. In addition to being the school that her brother had attended, she was also attracted to the program's small learning community:

> It's like a small school. It's probably, I guess you can say maybe 20 students per teacher. So, it's really small environment. It's one hallway per grade level. You kind of know everybody. Everybody's there to help you. And so that was a lot of encouragement for me as a shy kid. I was like, "Oh, okay. I know that I'm going to be able to talk to the teacher." So, it was comforting.

Nobody tried discouraging Monica from applying to an ECHS. In fact, Monica was cheered on when she expressed interest in ECHSs: "A lot of the times, they were just like, 'Oh, good for you. You go ahead and do that.'" Getting accepted to an ECHS was particularly important for Monica because she wanted to honor her parents' wishes. "We used to be very, very poor when I was growing up," Monica explained, "so my mom kept telling me education was the number one thing. I have to get my education; I have to go to college." In Monica's mind, she "always knew" she would be going to college—she just needed to figure out the details because she "didn't know what to expect." So, for Monica, attending ECHS was a way to learn more about college.

Rose. Rose is the middle child in her family and a first-generation college-going student. She graduated from her ECHS with an associate of science degree in interdisciplinary studies. In elementary and middle school, Rose remembers being a "friendly person" who got along with everybody. She competed in UIL in the math and reading categories, and her favorite subjects were math and history.

Although she chose not to continue doing UIL in high school, all throughout elementary, middle school, and high school, Rose participated in book clubs. She would read 5–6 books during a certain time period and then read additional books that were required for her other classes. Rose did not mind all the reading because she enjoyed it.

Rose learned about the ECHS program towards the end of her eighth-grade year when representatives from ECHS programs and other high schools went to recruit students at her middle school. Rose was told that getting an associate degree in high school was "going to make it way easier in college" for her and that she would not have to "work as hard." This idea really attracted Rose because it was a way for her to experience college first-hand. She specifically decided to apply and enroll at Southside ECHS because it was the only school that had a focus on math, which was one of her favorite subjects at the time.

Although nobody explicitly discouraged her from applying to an ECHS, she worried about going to Southside ECHS because many of her middle school friends were applying to different high school programs. Rose was concern she would have nobody to interact with and talk to since not many of her friends were going to Southside. "I think that was like the hardest part," Rose shared, referring to ECHS being hard, "like, I'm not going to know anybody, and it's probably going to be so hard." She had also heard rumors from older students that taking advanced college-level courses would be hard, which scared her even more. Despite her worries and the fear of starting school in a new school without her friends, Rose made the decision to attend Southside ECHS because she was interested in pursuing a career in the STEM field.

Prior to starting ECHS, Rose had heard older students and even her eighth-grade teachers say that college would be "super hard." Although this worried Rose, she had plans to become an architect and was determined to attend college: "I don't think it was ever a doubt. I think I've always known 'Yeah, I have to do college.'"

Scarlett. Scarlett is the oldest of three siblings and a first-generation college-going student. She graduated from her ECHS with an associate of science degree in biology. From a young age, Scarlett had

an appreciation for the fine arts. She participated in plays and talent shows and enjoyed reading. Scarlett described herself as a "good student" and an "overachiever"—one who was not afraid of a challenge. In elementary, she participated in UIL and the Millionaire's Club and was selected to be part of the Gifted and Talented (GT) Program. In middle school, she joined band where she played the flute and continued to compete in UIL. Once in high school, Scarlett decided to continue her involvement with band and UIL and added theater to her schedule. As part of the National Honor Society (NHS), Scarlett also gave tours to middle school students interested in ECHS and assisted with the TSI summer bridge program for incoming freshmen. Overall, Scarlett excelled in her studies while remaining highly involved in school.

Scarlett learned about the ECHS program in eighth grade through her principal and assistant principal,

> They told us, "you have a variety of selections of different early colleges you can choose from." And they [gave] us a little pamphlet that said more or less what the early college was about. And then they told us to fill out a paper and it said which one do you desire the most, the middle, and then the least. And then we basically just had three options and that's how I heard about it.

Scarlett's middle school also took her cohort to tour several ECHSs in the district. During the tour, they had the opportunity to meet ECHS students who then shared their experiences. Scarlett was interested in attending an ECHS because she knew it would be a good way to save money for college. She specifically chose to attend Southside ECHS after her science eighth-grade teacher talked her into pursing the STEM field. Scarlett had also heard rumors that some of the teachers in the other ECHSs did not care about students and that students did not really learn anything, which made her decision to attend Southside ECHS easier.

Scarlett's parents were especially thrilled that she was able to get into Southside ECHS. They viewed education as a stepping stone to a better life and would constantly encourage her to work hard:

> My dad is an immigrant. For a while he did not live with us when I was a child. He was in Mexico, and then he got his papers, and he came [to be with us]. But [my dad] would actually tell me "always work hard" because he works in labor. So, he physically works extremely hard. He

always tells me, “Study, study, study, so you can get a good job and not do as much work as I have to do.”

Scarlett’s mom, in particular, did not want her to attend the regular high school because there were “gangs and fights all the time.” Although her parents supported her decision to attend Southside ECHS, her middle school friends tried convincing her otherwise. Scarlett, however, did not listen to them and chose to apply to and enroll in Southside ECHS.

Attending college was never a question for Scarlett. “In the immigrant household,” she explained, “you are told you’re going to college to do something with your life.” For Scarlett, earning an associate degree was especially important because she did not want to place the burden of paying for college on her parents who were already struggling financially. Growing up, Scarlett had seen two of her cousins drop out of college and feared the same would happen to her. “In my head, when I was an adolescent,” Scarlett explained,

> [I had] processed, if [my cousins] can’t do it then it’s going to be extremely difficult for me to do it. As I got older, I realized, [college] wasn’t for them. They didn’t want to go to college. But when I was young, I wondered, “if they can’t do it, how am I going to do this?”

Scarlett had also heard stories from her eighth-grade teachers about how much work and time they had to devote to earning their degrees. This instilled in Scarlett that college was hard. Despite these stories, she knew earning a postsecondary education was an important feat for her and her family.

Summary of Participant Profiles

In sum, all participants intentionally self-selected to attend an ECHS for varied reasons, and nearly all—with the exception of two students—arrived to ECHS with college aspirations. More than a majority of participants learned about the opportunity to attend an ECHS through their middle school networks, including counselors, teachers, and principals. Most of the information students received about attending an ECHS was positive and generally focused on the services and supports that the ECHS would provide students. In many cases, students considered and compared the opportunities that Southside ECHS offered to the regular high school, ultimately viewing ECHS as a better option and fit. In general,

when asked why they were interested in attending ECHS, participants would often share one, or a combination, of the following responses: to save money; take advanced college courses; earn an associate degree in STEM; learn in a smaller environment; and/or avoid gangs, fights, and drugs at the regular high school. Students' responses signaled that they not only perceived attending an ECHS as a tangible opportunity to take college credits at no cost to their families, but also as a space where they could learn and feel physically safe. In terms of college perspectives, all students arrived to their ECHS with preconceived notions about college. Some participants thought college was expensive, difficult, and stressful, while some described college as a pathway for social mobility. Participants often cited their families, including their parents, grandparents, and other extended family members, as sources of support and motivation to learn and pursue a higher education.

Understanding participants' rationales for attending an ECHS, as well as their preconceived notions about college, helps contextualize my findings—an important component in critical narrative inquiry. For example, in understanding students' rationales for attending an ECHS, I learned not only about their educational and career goals, which are tightly connected to the college-going process, but also about the type of messages, connections, and opportunities to which they had access. In the next section, I use this background information to contextualize the experiences students shared with me about their college-going process.

Findings

Scholars have used pipelines as metaphors to construct a visual representation of the educational attainment levels of Latina/o students as they progress from preschool through college (e.g., Alemán et al., 2019; Covarrubias, 2011; Solórzano et al., 2005). These educational pipelines have been useful for presenting educational outcomes and trends and revealing leakage points along students' educational journeys (Covarrubias, 2011). Rather than identifying outcomes and trends, I lean on participants' narrated experiences to identify factors along participants' ECHS pipelines. I argue that these factors can *cause* or *minimize* leakage points as students navigate ECHS and make postsecondary decisions. In this study, factors refer to the people, activities, and interactions in the ECHS that facilitated or hindered

participants' transition to and engagement with the college-going process. As explained at the onset of this chapter, I purposefully framed students' college-going process as having started their first year of ECHS. As such, I considered participants' ECHS experiences in relation to college going since 9th grade (as opposed to only 12th grade).

In the sections to follow, I (re)tell participants' stories using a temporal order focusing first on their transition from middle school to ECHS (Getting In), then on their adjustment to ECHS (Getting Through), and finally on their transition out of ECHS to higher education institution (Getting Across). I used a temporal order to (re)tell participants' ECHS experiences as a way to acknowledge the past, present, and implied future of students (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). A temporal order allowed me to narrate how students' present stories as seniors were shaped by their past experiences and how their (past and present) interactions with others had shaped (and were shaping) their educational and career aspirations. Although I use a temporal order to (re)tell participants' stories, their experiences should not be understood as seamless or mutually exclusive. Much like the literature on college going, participants' narrated experiences were interrelated, complex, and nonlinear.

Getting In – Transitioning from Middle School to ECHS

As I mentioned at the onset of this chapter, participants for the most part praised their ECHS for providing them with the opportunity to earn both a high school and associate degree. However, as I discuss in this section, participants also disclosed having a difficult time transitioning from middle school to ECHS. In this section, I discuss participants' transition from high school courses to advanced college-level courses, highlighting the shortcomings of the summer bridge program, as reflected by students' stories. I also discuss students' experiences in choosing a major for ECHS, highlighting the impact it had on them as they navigated ECHS. Below, I expand on these varying experiences.

"We Had No Preparation for the Courses We Were Going to Take"

In Texas, ECHSs are required to provide academic support to help students transition from middle school to ECHS. However, when describing their ECHS experiences, a few participants shared that their transition from middle school to ECHS was challenging. Participants had a difficult time

transitioning from high school to college-level courses, with some students admitting they felt unprepared and shocked by the workload. For example, Monica, a biology major, explained that the shift from taking regular high school classes her first semester of ECHS to taking college-level courses her second semester was "pretty big."

> I started taking my college classes second semester of freshman year. I had barely turned 15. I had barely had my *quinceañera*, and I was already worrying about taking my final for music appreciation and I was dealing with teachers that told me, "Oh, if you're absent for more than three days then I will dock a letter grade for every [additional] day that you are absent." And so it was a lot of stress very quickly. It was kind of thrown into our face without ease. And the middle schools, I know that they try to get us ready for high schools, but when you're going from middle school to early college it's a little different. So, I feel like the high school students were prepared for high school, like from middle school to high school. But for early college students, it's more like middle school to college. We didn't get that transition.

Monica was not the only student who had a difficult time with the transition. Gregory, a computer science major, shared that he felt like the "bridge" from middle school to ECHS was "two to three times harder" and questioned whether middle schools were "being kept updated" on the expectations of ECHSs. He also described the workload as "shocking" and expressed confusion over the college-level courses he was required to take:

> First semester of freshman [year], you don't do any college classes. And then second semester is where you get your college classes. I got humanities, music appreciation, and college algebra. And none of them were of my major yet. When I look back in my degree [plan], they're not required. So, I don't know if the school just did that to have people in the class or if they were like trying to get us ready because I will say second semester of freshman year is so much different from first semester. The learning curve is massive.

Gregory rationalized that if his ECHS teachers had been stricter his first semester of ECHS then maybe that would have helped with this transition into advanced courses:

> The first semester teachers were pretty lax about the work. Maybe if they had instituted a tighter schedule, maybe say, "Okay, you missed it, that's it." You could kind of get an idea for college classes, like, "Okay, she didn't take my work. I can expect this in the future." They were pretty lax about it.

Jocelyn, an interdisciplinary major, described her transition from high school classes to college-level courses as "challenging," and like Gregory, also noted how her teacher's expectations differed from that of her college professors'.

> It was really challenging because I did not start my college classes until my second semester of my freshman year. So, the first semester, I got really used to just having high school classes and then suddenly having to take college classes. It really put things in perspective for me because with high school teachers, you have them there with you all the time and you can submit work late. You can just turn it in late and it's okay and it won't really affect your grade a lot. But compared to college classes, it's making sure you turn in everything on time. It's just really different.

When describing his transition to ECHS, Gregory made it a point to discuss the importance of his school's summer bridge program—a 3–4 week-long program specifically designed to help incoming 9th grade students transition from middle school to ECHS. "I should mention something important," Gregory said and further elaborated:

> When moving from middle school to the STEM high school, the STEM high school has something called summer bridge where students go in and they work on the [Texas Success Initiative] tests.[36] Now, TSIs are super important for college. If you don't have your TSIs, you don't get into college. So that's why they had that summer bridge there. They wanted to make sure [students] were clear to start taking classes as soon as possible.

[36] As described in Chapter 2, the TSI assessment is required by the state of Texas to demonstrate college readiness in reading, writing, and mathematics. Unless exempt, all students interested in completing college-level work must take and pass the TSI assessments.

Gregory explained that the summer bridge program was an "important" program because it helped "the school kind of tell who's going to need more [assistance on the TSI] before starting college classes." In other words, the summer bridge program helped administrators determine which students were college eligible. Ironically, when I asked Gregory if his school had provided him with academic support to specifically help them transition, Gregory said, "no, not really. Nothing that stands out." He further elaborated that they were simply told it would be "hard:"

> I think it was just, "Okay, you have college classes now, go for it." The only thing that they did help us with is getting Chromebooks. That's the only assistance we got. They were like, "Okay, you're getting college classes, you're going to need a laptop, so we'll give you [a laptop]." But they didn't tell us "you have to expect this or anything else." They just told us, "it's going to be, it's going to get hard, get ready."

Sharing Gregory's view on the summer bridge program, Scarlett, a biology major, also described the program as a resource to help students pass the TSI tests:

> The early college high school offers [the summer bridge program] to incoming freshmen. They basically offer small mini courses to pass the TSI test because you need to pass the TSI to take college courses. So that's basically what it is…trying to prep kids and test them. They basically teach us how to pass [the TSI].

While participants mainly seemed to associate the summer bridge program with preparing for the TSI, the contextual documents I reviewed indicated that this program was intentionally designed to assist students to transition from middle school to ECHS. For example, in addition to TSI preparation, all students received "lessons on college readiness"[37] and had the opportunity to do team building activities with peers. Despite the intentionality of this program to bridge the gap between middle school and 9th grade, some participants still had a difficult time transitioning from high school classes to college-level

[37] I do not cite the source of this direct quote to maintain the anonymity of the ECHS. However, it is important to note that this quote was taken from Southside's TEA 2016-2017 application for STEM designation. In this application, Southside ECHS describes in detail the services and academic programs they will provide to students.

courses. For example, Alexa, a biology major, shared she felt the transition to college students happened "quickly."

> During my freshman year, we didn't take any [college classes] because they're trying to get us to transition into high school, but then we quickly transitioned to college students right away. Some of us were barely turning 13- or 14- [years-old]! We were really young. So, freshman year, they didn't have us take AP courses. We didn't take our first college class until sophomore year.[38] So that's when we were like, "Whoa! It gets harder." [laughs] We didn't understand that freshman year was a breeze. Well, not really, but we consider it the easy year. But sophomore year, when we got introduced to our first AP course, whoa, we had to take more exams and study harder!

This quick transition left Alexa feeling confused over the courses she was required to take.

> We didn't get to choose any of our classes. They were given to us. So, when me and my friend walked into our class, we're like "oh Spanish classes should be easy; we're great at Spanish!" And then the professor started talking about Spain, and Spanish in Spain, and we're like, "Okay, um, what's this?" [starts laughing] We were really confused.

Reflecting on her experience, Alexa shared she would have liked more information on the courses she was taking:

> I would have liked to have a course advisor like we get when we apply for classes at other universities, because we had to take classes that we had no idea were in our degree plan. Like I said earlier, [we had] computer science, government courses, and I had to take Spanish classes. It was Spanish literacy, but it wasn't the Spanish that we know of. So, I would have liked to have had an advisor that would explain to me the courses…give us a gist of what we're going to be having to take, because those Spanish classes during our freshman year were difficult. And we were fairly new to the high-school-into-college scene and then BAM you get a Spanish course

[38] Based on participants' stories, some took their first college-level course their second semester of their first year in ECHS, while other students began taking college-level courses their second year in ECHS.

> that has nothing to do with your major. So, it was a lot. We had no preparation for the courses we were going to take.

Through this example, Alexa illustrates how her ECHS could have assisted her in transitioning and preparing her for the college-level courses.

In short, while the summer bridge program was intentionally designed to facilitate students' transition from middle school to ECHS, participants' narratives reveal that they viewed this program more as a resource to help them pass the TSI but did not credit the program as helping them transition from high school courses to advanced college-level courses.

"A Lot of Us Picked Our Majors on a Whim"

A major component of ECHSs is the opportunity for students to earn both a high school and either an associate degree or 60 transferrable college credits. In theory, earning an associate degree (or college credit) is meant to serve as a pipe connector, helping students reduce their time to degree completion while saving them money. However, at the time of these interviews, four of the eight students disclosed they had either switched their major in ECHS or they would be switching to a different major once in college, potentially affecting their time to degree completion. Participants' experiences in choosing a major suggest that some participants would have benefitted from additional support and guidance when choosing an ECHS major. A closer analysis of students' narratives reveals that participants largely chose their major through three processes: a process of elimination, a process of career–major association, or a combination of the two. Table 5 summarizes each of these processes.

Table 5

ECHS Participants' Major Selection Process

Major Selection Process	Description	Participant
Process of elimination	Students selected their major after considering and rejecting other possible choices, ultimately choosing a major they believed they would be academically good at.	Alexa, Alyssa, Monica
Process of career–major association	Students selected their major by considering their career interests and goals.	Destiny, Gregory, Jocelyn, Rose
Combination of the two processes	Students selected their major after considering other options and thinking about their career interests and goals.	Scarlett

Alexa, who used a process of elimination, explained that she chose to major in biology because it seemed "easier" when compared to other majors:

> After I applied [to ECHS] and we had this summer camp to get ready for the transition to the early college high school, they asked us what major we would prefer. So, we had to choose between computer science, engineering, interdisciplinary studies, and biology. And I'm not good with computers. I wasn't going to be good at engineering and interdisciplinary studies. I don't know why it didn't interest me, so I chose biology.

After taking several classes in biology, Alexa realized that biology was not easy, but she "grew to love it." During our interview, I asked Alexa why she chose biology over math, especially since she had shared earlier that her favorite subject in middle school was math, and she had actively participated in U.I.L. calculator, math, and number sense. "My mom brought up the same thing," Alexa admitted.

> She's like, "You love reading but you didn't go into interdisciplinary studies so you could be a reading teacher. You were really good at math, but you didn't go into the math field so you can do something in math. Why did you [choose] biology if you never showed signs of loving biology?" She made a really good point. But I don't know. I didn't choose math. I was really good at math in middle school and elementary, but as soon as I got into high school, I was still good, but I would

> have trouble in some subjects like when we reached college algebra, that was when I was like, "I can't. That's enough." And I chose biology, because it seemed easier compared to the rest of the majors, but as I reached towards the end of my bio degree. I learned it wasn't!"

Although Alexa did not disclose whether she had sought help or whether any guidance was provided to her as she selected her major, her decision-making process reveals she made this decision on her own based on what she believed would be easier to do. Although it worked out for Alexa, the same was not the case for Monica.

Monica, a biology major, followed a similar process of elimination like Alexa. However, she switched from computer science her first year to biology her second year, and then her fourth year, considered switching to interdisciplinary studies. Monica's narrative on how she chose her major, in particular, reveals the messaging students received about majors at her ECHS:

> During the summer before our high school year starts, we take the TSI to check if we're college ready. After we finished the TSIs, they were telling me, "Oh, well, now you have to pick a major and you have to create an account." And so while we were filling it out, I was there with some seniors, and I was really nervous and I was just like, "I don't know what to put." And they were like, "Well, we offer several majors. So, we have the biology, we have the computer science, mathematics, engineering, and interdisciplinary." And, uh, I was like, "Oh well, I'm not sure what I'm interested in." And one of the seniors suggested, "Well, you could put interdisciplinary, but we highly suggest against it." The reason they were saying not to is not that the school discriminates against interdisciplinary majors at my school but because it is STEM based, [interdisciplinary studies majors] are kind of overlooked. So, their needs typically come last. And because of that, they told me, "Just pick another one. You basically have until you start second semester of freshman year to like fully decide." And so, I had noted down computer science first and during the first semester of high school when I took, a computer class, I was like, "Mm, I don't know if I like this so much." But I was really enjoying biology at the time, the freshman biology class. And I was like, "Okay, I'm going to switch to biology." And so that's what I did.

Although Monica followed a process of elimination, she later admitted that she chose her major mostly on a "whim."

> A lot of us picked our majors on a whim, like me, for example. I just kind of picked biology. And so, now that I'm older and I understand and I'm thinking more about my possibilities, I question, "Is this what I really want?"

Unlike Alexa and Monica, Jocelyn chose her major through a process of career–major association, which was driven by her aspiration to be a medical doctor:

> When I was in middle school, I wanted to be a doctor [laughs]. So [Southside ECHS] had the biology [associate degree]. You can get your associate's in biology so that's what I started off in. In freshman year and sophomore year, I was under biology. But then I realized I am not very good at biology [laughs]. And I realized being a doctor was going to be a lot of work and I'm not that great and I'm kind of squeamish. So, I figured that wasn't the right path. So, then I just transferred into interdisciplinary because I felt like that way I could get a little bit of every program. I could learn a little bit about everything and that way, once I transferred to, like, another college, I can expand my interests and actually decide on what I want to do.

Ironically, Jocelyn's decision to switch from biology to interdisciplinary studies was driven by a realization that she did not want to be a doctor. When I asked if someone had helped her pick her ECHS major, Jocelyn said, "Not really, we kind of just looked through [our options] ourselves and then you just let them know what you want to do and that's basically it." Using a similar career-association process, Destiny chose to major in biology because she "always knew she wanted to be a [medical] doctor." When asked if she received any guidance on how to choose a major, she said: "I don't think so, but I knew what I wanted to do." Both Jocelyn and Destiny chose their major based on the career path they had in mind, while it worked for Destiny in ECHS, it did not work for Jocelyn, suggesting that she would have benefitted from additional support and guidance when choosing her ECHS major.

Scarlett used a combination of the two processes to select a major. First, she used a process of elimination to choose her biology major:

> I did not choose math because I didn't want to be an architect. I didn't want to be an accountant or, you know, I know there's other things with math, but I didn't want to focus on that. I did not like math that much. So, I was like, "nope." Um, computer science, I took a class my sophomore year and I said, "no, I'm not good at this at all." Some people have natural talent. I've seen kids amazing at computers, and I said, "nope, not for me, either." Engineering…um, people made it seem really scary. So, I did not even give that a try. I feel like people influenced me on that decision about engineering.

In line with Jocelyn's experience, when asked if someone had helped her choose her major, Scarlett responded: "I don't think so. They told us 'you can decide now, but you can change it later,' but I knew I wanted biology, so I stuck with bio the entire time." Scarlett also admitted she chose biology because she was initially interested in becoming a doctor. However, she later realized that the medical field was not for her and instead would be switching to environmental science once in college:

> I did love biology, but then I was like I don't really want to focus on this in my life. Because when I chose biology, I said I wanted to be a doctor. But then I realized quickly that the medical field was not for me because I do not like touching people, and I do not like needles at all. So, I don't even know what I was thinking when I applied. But then I got more into environmental science, so I took environmental science this year, and I basically just learned more about the earth, climate change, global warming and we actually saw it here. I mean that intense winter storm was because of climate change and global warming. And it's like a huge issue.

Altogether, participants' experiences in choosing a major reveal they mostly navigated this process on their own. In some cases, participants' choices of what to major (or not) were influenced by messages they had received from other ECHS students. The decision-making processes students took when choosing a major suggest they would have benefitted from additional guidance and support, which I discuss next.

"I Need Somebody to Explain to Me How This Works or What's the Best Path"

Because graduating with an associate degree is a major component of the ECHS model, how students come to choose their major matters. Participants' narratives on how they chose their ECHS major signals that many of them lacked the information and guidance needed to make informed and intentional choices about their ECHS major. As mentioned at the onset of this section, four of the eight students disclosed they had either switched their major in ECHS or they would be switching to a different major once in college. Table 6 includes the major that students selected when they started ECHS (i.e., original major), the major students graduated with (i.e., associate degree), and their major of interest for college (i.e., intended college major).

Table 6

Participants' Changing Majors

Pseudonym	Original Major	Associate Degree	Intended College Major
Alexa	Biology	Biology	Biomedical sciences
Alyssa*	Biology	Biology	English
Destiny	Biology	Biology	Biology
Gregory	Computer Science	Computer Science	Computer science
Jocelyn*	Biology	Interdisciplinary	English and education
Monica*	Computer science	Biology	Business
Rose*	Engineering	Interdisciplinary	Political science
Scarlett	Biology	Biology	Environmental science

* Indicates participants who changed major in ECHS or who intend to pursue a different major once in college. While both Alexa and Scarlett's intended college major differs from their associate degree major, I chose not to include them as students changing majors because their intended majors are closely related to their STEM subject.

It is important to note that while switching majors is not inherently bad, the act of selecting and changing majors without proper guidance and information can impact students' college-going trajectories. Rose, for example, switched from engineering to interdisciplinary studies her senior year and intended to

focus on political science once in college. However, her decision-making process reveals that she was still debating whether she had made the right choice:

> At the beginning of [senior] year, I was really debating, like, "do I really want to do engineering? Is that what's really going to make me happy?" I don't know, like, I do enjoy it... I still don't know if I regret not taking engineering because I always wanted to do architect. I wanted to do engineering or architect, but at the end now, I decided I prefer political science way better. It's just more interesting and it's something that I can see myself in the future not getting bored of or discouraging myself of doing it. But I don't know what I want to do with my political science [major]. Hmmm…[Rose paused to think] I really want to do a certain topic, I want to do immigration. A certain field in immigration.

Rose indicated interest in attending either graduate school or law school down the road but remained unclear on what kind of career she would want to pursue. This lack of clarity, coupled with her experience of changing majors, influenced Rose's college decision. Reflecting on why she decided to stay close to home for college, Rose shared:

> I think I didn't want to make a switch that fast to like to go out-of-state and go to a law school and like do all that, that fast. Cause I feel like from here to there, there's still a time period where I could like totally change my major. And even though I'm like pretty positive, like I never know.

Although Rose had doubts about what to major in, she did not have doubts about going to college after graduating. However, her experience in changing majors made her hyperaware of the possibility of her interests changing down the road, ultimately influencing where she went to college.

Monica came close to switching her major her senior year because she felt her mental health deteriorating:

> I was experiencing burnout by second semester [of senior year]. I can definitely say that it was one of the hardest years of my life. So, I reached out to the counselor and the social worker and I let them know. I was just like, "Hey, I am thinking about switching my major to interdisciplinary

> studies and dropping my organic chemistry class because it is a lot of work on me. I don't feel very good."

Unlike Rose, Monica was unsuccessful in her attempt to change majors. Instead, her school's social worker discouraged her from switching to interdisciplinary studies, citing she needed to work harder and manage her time better. Monica was convinced that the reason the social worker did not want her to switch her major was connected to her school's yearning for legitimacy:

> I do believe that the reason why they didn't want me to change into interdisciplinary [studies] or to drop the class was because I am one of the highest ranking. I'm not the best ranking but I have one of the highest GPAs as a college student here at the school…So I believe that the reason why they were so adamant about not letting me drop a class or not letting me switch to interdisciplinary [studies] was because it might taint their name in some way. So, during that whole meeting on Zoom, [the social worker] just kept saying, "Oh, you need to wake up earlier. You need to work harder. You need better time management."

Feeling defeated, invalidated, and frustrated with her experience, Monica decided it was not worth going through the trouble of switching majors; however, not being able to switch her major in ECHS ultimately influenced Monica's decision to major in business once in college:

> I want to study something that gives me room to like change, to be flexible. I don't want to be stuck to one specific career, so I want to study business because that means I could probably even travel, you know, go from one city to another, work for one company and then maybe do public relations for another. Or maybe I will stick with accounting, and I'll get a job at the bank that I'm going to internship at. So, I like that flexibility where I don't have to worry about being stuck to one place, and again I think it's because I felt so stuck in my major at the early college.

Monica did her own research before making the decision to major in business. Specifically, she attended college information sessions, joined zoom fairs hosted by the college she would be attending, and spoke to professors at TTC to gain a better idea about her options. Noticeably absent from her decision-making process was guidance from ECHS personnel.

The lack of guidance and information on how to choose a major in ECHS means that students will not know what steps to emulate as they choose a major for their other postsecondary degrees. Destiny, for example, explained she needed help deciding her next major after ECHS:

> I wanted to minor in biochemistry, but I'm not sure yet. I want to talk to the student aids because I don't really know about college, if that makes sense. Like I have everything planned out [referring to her career interest], but I need somebody to explain to me how this works or what's the best path if I'm going into the medical field. And to me, like my high school hasn't really helped with that, and I haven't really had an aid or somebody tell me what to do. And I guess it's just really difficult, because you don't know what to major in or what to minor in that's going to help you do well in medical school.

In sum, participants' stories on choosing an ECHS major reveal they would have benefitted from additional support and guidance when choosing an ECHS major. If earning an associate degree during ECHS is intended to reduce students' time to degree completion, then proper guidance needs to be given to students from the start of their ECHS journey. This, in return, can help graduating ECHS students emulate the steps needed to make informed decisions about what major to choose for their next postsecondary degree(s).

Getting Through – Balancing the Expectations and Workload of ECHS

In addition to describing their transition from middle school to ECHS, participants also shared their experiences as both high school and college students. Specifically, when participants narrated their ECHS experiences, they would often describe the skills, lessons, and coping mechanisms they had learned and adopted to get through ECHS. In this section, I describe four overarching experiences participants shared as they described their adjustment to ECHS. I first detail participants' insights about the importance of noncognitive skills, which brings to light the lessons they learned as ECHS students and their beliefs about college going in general. I then describe participants' struggles with balancing the expectations and workload of ECHS, highlighting the emotions they felt along the way and the coping mechanisms they adopted to manage. I then center one of the coping mechanisms they all described—

peer support and accountability—and outline the different ways peers supported one another. Finally, I describe the ways participants leaned on their familial and community networks to help them get through ECHS.

"Preparing for College, I'd…Say Have Self-Discipline and Develop Time Management"

A major goal of ECHSs is to increase college readiness among students least likely to attend college. As discussed in Chapter 2, college readiness can entail the successful adoption of noncognitive skills—or sets of behaviors, skills, attitudes, and strategies needed to gain access to and succeed in college (Nagaoka et al., 2013). When describing what they had learned as ECHS students and what advice they would give other students, nearly all participants mentioned the importance of time management, self-discipline, and/or maturity. However, their stories indicate that they did not learn these skills from their ECHS directly—instead, through personal trial and error, participants learned these skills were important and necessary to balance the expectations and workload of high school and college. Rose, for example, reflected on the importance of making time to complete coursework after she realized that leaving deadlines to the last minute did not work:

> If we wouldn't do something at a certain time, we would be like, "Oh, I'm going to do it later." And that later was never. And we would always [pushed] it back. So, I think time was the most important, like, making time for everything.

Later in the interview, Rose indicated that her advice to her past self would be to "work harder." When I asked her to elaborate on what she meant by "work harder," she talked about the importance of time management:

> I think work harder in a way where it's, like, don't put things as last minute…Because you're always going to end up like, "Oh, I'm going to do it later," again and again.

Like Rose, Destiny also viewed time management as "key." When reflecting on her experience and the advice she would give a student preparing for college, Destiny stressed the importance of time management:

> Advice for preparing for college…I would say, first of all, the most important thing is time management. If you know what you have to do and when you have to do it, that's the key to everything. I would tell them that although college is hard, it's really not. It's possible. You just have to be dedicated, you have to manage your time well, and you have to be confident in yourself and in your knowledge.

Although all participants stressed the importance of noncognitive skills like time management, when asked how they had learned about these skills, students would rarely credit their ECHS. For example, when I asked Destiny what support her school provided students in terms of time management, she said she did not remember any particular assistance—only her school placing "pressure" on students to do better:

> They were always really pressuring you. I guess for them [referring to ECHS personnel] that was enough. But I guess they could tell which kids needed to be pressured because they would never pressure me. I guess they knew "this one's going to get her work done, this one's not." I remember them being really on kids. They would scream at them, "hey, turn in your work." So, I guess that was their way of making sure that everybody was caught up. But there was never workshops [on time management].

Destiny's remarks suggest that ECHS personnel promoted timeliness through reinforcement but did not specifically guide students on how to manage their time. Relatedly, when describing his school's culture, Gregory talked about the need for students to manage on their own:

> The school has a culture of "you are a college student right now." It's all up to you to manage your deadline, you have to enroll for classes, you have to do your work, and [ECHS personnel] leave you alone, and that's really, really noteworthy. It's all on your own. You cannot expect for teachers to guide you through every way, especially the college teachers, they don't have time for that, they make it very clear, "Like I don't have time for this. You guys have to do it by yourself."

As shared by Gregory's reflection on his school's culture, it appears that ECHS personnel implicitly expected proactiveness among students, placing the onus on students to manage responsibilities and

deadlines. This was particularly evident when Gregory shared his school's reaction after he complained about taking advanced placement (AP) classes in conjunction with college-level courses:

> We complained for sure, a lot of people complained, and the school was like, "Well, this is an early college life, deal with it." It's shocking. When I first heard that, I'm like, "You cannot possibly just have said that." And they were like, "This is what you signed up for, deal with it." And the only thing they told us was time management. That's the only thing they said, they're like, "Manage your time." Like, okay, but like we have a life, we have other responsibilities and people have to take care of their siblings. They're like, "Nope, deal with it." They would simply say, "This is an early college life, time management, good luck."

Gregory and Destiny's reflections seem to indicate that their school's method was to place pressure on students and/or leave students to manage on their own, suggesting that their understanding of noncognitive skills emerged out of necessity.

Some students like Scarlett talked about the importance of time management in conjunction with other noncognitive skills like self-discipline. When I asked Scarlett what advice she would give a student preparing for college, she responded:

> Preparing for college, I'd basically say have self-discipline and develop time management skills and communication is extremely important to get to things that you want to get to where you want. I definitely say work on that even if you're shy because I know in middle school I was shy, I did not want to speak. I did not want to call attention to myself, but I'd say work on that and develop communication, time management, and teamwork [skills], especially because you will be getting a bunch of group projects. And learn how to work with different types of people. I'll just say work on yourself basically. Get yourself to a mental state where you can take on all these vigorous, vigorous [starts laughing] courses. You know, work on yourself first before you take on this huge load.

For Scarlett, having self-discipline meant self-awareness and self-growth. Alyssa also alluded to the importance of self-discipline by holding inner conversations with herself about what needed to be prioritized.

> You know, some days I tell myself "get this assignment done so you don't have to do it later" or "don't procrastinate this time." And other days it was mostly just like, "can I relax? I'm going to just relax for myself and do something today, go invite my friends somewhere, let's go enjoy the day." [Starts laughing]. So, it was just a constant battle between I'll do my work or just try and relax have time for myself.

Being able to determine when tasks needed to get done and when it was time to "relax" was an important skill that Alyssa was working on as she tried to balance the rigor and expectations of her courses.

Other participants like Jocelyn and Destiny highlighted the importance of being socially mature in order to deal with the expectations and rigor of college-level courses in ECHS. Jocelyn particularly reflected on how she had to "mature very, very fast."

> I feel like entering high school—I entered when I was just 13 years old. So, I feel like I had to mature very, very fast because the first semester of my freshman year, we weren't taking college classes. It wasn't until my second semester that we started taking those classes and it was like, you have more responsibility now. So, it was very hard. It was very different compared to regular high school students, because a lot of our time, we didn't have a lot of time to ourselves. It was always homework, always stress, always something that we have to do…I guess I just had to mature a lot faster than I think regular high school students would've. The responsibility of being a college student at such at such a young age, it was just like so crazy and, well, I mean, I don't regret it. I like the person I am now because of that experience.

When asked what advice she would give to a prospective ECHS student, Jocelyn specifically said that ECHS students "would have to understand that it is hard [and] very challenging. [They] will have to mature faster than those…in regular high school." Jocelyn believed that students who attended regular high school had it "a lot easier" than ECHS students in terms of workload.

Destiny talked about the importance of maturity in terms of academic self-efficacy, indirectly highlighting how her teachers' high expectations required ECHS students to take coursework seriously:

> It takes a lot of maturity, because [ECHS] is not for everyone. Like if you come in and you're just playing around and you're not taking things seriously, you'll fail, like straightaway. The teachers don't care, they'll fail you.

Alexa echoed Destiny's emphasis on the importance of maturity, particularly describing how she had to adjust her maturity level and time management habits to fit the expectations and requirements of her ECHS:

> When I first thought about going to college I was in elementary school, I was a young kid, so I wasn't as grown. I was immature. I didn't have time management [skills], but now going through all this, you have to mature a lot, you have to be really responsible. You have to be really good at time management and keeping track of everything in order to go to college. So, there's a lot of growing up that a person has to do in order to be prepared for going out there and furthering your education. I had to grow up a lot—become more responsible, not that I wasn't responsible, but I had to really manage things to the "T," and it was a lot of changing to do. I feel like they gave us a trial run with getting our associates [degree], and I feel ready for the main thing. I feel I've had enough preparation to [go to college] and take more classes over there.

Placed in a situation where she had to manage more responsibilities, Alexa demonstrated self-growth and self-awareness as a means to navigate ECHS. Interestingly, Alexa described her associate degree as a "trial run," perhaps signaling that she did not see herself as a college student yet, which I discuss further in Chapter 5.

In sum, across all interviews, participants' narratives about what they learned as ECHS students and the advice they would give other students reveal that they understood time management, self-discipline, and maturity to be important skills needed to navigate ECHS and, more specifically, balance the expectations and workload of ECHS. While participants understood the importance of noncognitive skills, their experiences and reflections appear to signal that their understanding of these skills emerged

out of necessity. That is, students' experiences suggest that the rigor and expectations they were expected to navigate left them with no choice but to adapt if they wished to graduate high school and earn their associate degree. Participants' stories demonstrate that they engaged in self-growth and self-awareness as a means to manage the responsibility and expectations placed on them. However, as I discuss next, participants still found themselves overwhelmed by the amount of workload, often struggling to convert the noncognitive skills they found important into action.

"We Had to Balance Early College and AP [Courses]…It Was Not Easy"

In Texas, all ECHSs must provide dual credit at no cost to students and must offer students rigorous instruction and accelerated courses. When I asked participants to describe what it was like to take accelerated courses as both high school and college students, all participants talked about how they struggled to balance the expectations and workload of high school *and* college. Describing her ECHS experience, Alyssa shared:

> It was hard to navigate [high school and college classes] because there were certain [high school] assignments due the same day as college assignments. So, it was like, "oh, this day I have an assignment due for college. I also have an assignment for high school. Which one should I do?" It was a lot of choosing in between.

Alyssa further described the experience as a "constant battle," explaining:

> It was a battle because, you know, our high school teachers would always tell us, focus on high school more because you need to graduate high school, and our college [professors were] like focus on college because you need to get your associates. So, it was a constant battle, but mostly on days when we had college, important college assignments, we'd tell our high school teachers, "Hey, can you extend this assignment to the weekend or something?" Cause, you know, we always worked on weekends. We always wanted to prioritize weekends for high school assignments, mostly just because throughout the week it would be college classes. So, it was mostly just asking for extensions, hoping teachers were accepting, and being able to prioritize both at the same time, as much as we could.

Alyssa's reflection suggests she received mixed messages about which educational degree to prioritize, with her mostly resolving to ask high school teachers for extensions when she needed to prioritize college coursework. Alyssa was not the only participant to ask for extensions on high school assignments; other participants, including Alexa, Jocelyn, and Monica, also spoke about asking teachers and professors for extensions as a way to cope with the workload. Recalling a time she had to ask for an extension, Alexa shared:

> So, there was this one time where I needed an extension on a paper because I had to do a presentation for chemistry. And I couldn't juggle both of them at the same time because they had the same due date. And we also had the same for our history class so I had three different things do on the same day. The history [assignment] I finished quickly because it was easy, but the English paper was six pages long, and I needed to do a presentation for chemistry. So, I asked [my English teacher] for an extension, because the chemistry professor I had asked him already and he was like "No, I gave you a week to do it." I was nearly done but I needed the final touches, and I needed three more pages and I knew I wasn't going to finish. So, I asked [my teacher] for an extension and she's like, "No, I gave you two days to do this. You didn't take the two days to work." And I told her I had the chemistry thing and she's like, "Well, too bad you should have managed your time wisely."

Echoing similar sentiments to those of Alyssa and Alexa, Monica specifically talked about how she struggled to balance her AP classes in conjunction with college-level courses:

> If we fail a high school class, we can't get the associate degree because you need to have your high school degree to get the college diploma. And so, we can't fail high school either. And so, I didn't really have a choice when it came to AP classes. The school wanted us to all be in AP classes, and so even if I didn't want to be in them, I had to be in the class. Like, per my school's choice. And so, I was battling all these assignments at once [referring to her AP classes and college-level courses].

This constant battle left Monica feeling "burn out."

> Me and my friends struggled so much senior year. We would cry together. We put, like, our blood, sweat, and tears into this work. It was hard. It was very, very hard. I can definitely say that organic chemistry definitely burnt me out. I had to complete the homework for that [course] and the quizzes, the exams. And I had AP classes as well for high school. So, I had to complete those high school classes because this was something that they always stressed, "You will not get your certificate or your associate's for college if you do not pass high school." And so, no matter how much you may think, like, "oh, well high school isn't as important as college," we still have to pass high school with as high grades as possible. And plus, if we want scholarships, we have to rank high. So, [high school classes] were just as important.

Like Monica, Rose also reflected on the tension of balancing the expectations of both degrees, sharing:

> One of the most important things would be like putting back our high school classes and putting more importance to our college classes. So, we would be worried like "Oh, I'm going to fail this college class." And "It's going to look bad in my GPA." And this and that. And we wouldn't put attention to our high school classes that we still needed to graduate. And our ranking, and all of that. I think that was the hardest stuff like worrying more about college instead of classes that we still needed to graduate and all that.

Describing her experience as a high school and college student, Destiny disclosed she would "overwork" herself to meet deadlines:

> A lot of the times I would overwork myself, and it was really unnecessary. I remember in freshman year, I was okay. I was happy, and I would do my work. But sophomore year, I just hit like a really low point. Like I didn't want to get out of bed, I didn't want to go to school. It became just hard to get up and go to school and do the same thing over and over, when everybody else was living their life. I would tell myself, "Get up. It's not as hard as it feels. It's not as bad as it seems. You can do it."

Sharing what a typical day looked like for her, Destiny admitted she would stay up late to finish work:

> After I finished school, I would go to volleyball practice. And I would probably be there till 7:00, 7:30 [p.m.]. And then from there, I would go home, and I would do homework until 2:00 a.m. in the morning. Like I would stay up late, but it's because I've always been one of those people that everything has to be perfect. I can't sleep if it's not perfect, or if I'm not done. So yeah, I would go to sleep at 2:00 [a.m.], and then I would wake up at 8:00 [a.m.]. School starts at 8:45 [a.m.], I would get there at 9:00 [a.m.]. Every day like that.

Other participants like Gregory, Scarlett, and Monica also shared they would stay up late in an effort finish coursework. When asked how he balanced his coursework, Gregory admitted it was "not easy," sharing he often worked "massive amounts of hours."

> We had to balance early college and AP [courses]. And let me tell you, it was not easy, not at all. I can attest to having spent countless nights at 1:00, 2:00 a.m. in the morning, finishing up my work for AP class and then finishing up my work for early college. And my parents noticed, they were like, "Gregory, you're spending after 12 [a.m.] doing work. Why don't you go to sleep?" And I told them every single time, "I can't afford to." Like, I can't afford to not turn in one assignment. I can't afford either for college or for AP. Like this class is major. It definitely wasn't easy. And I talked to [my parents] as soon as we were told this was an AP class. I told them, "Okay, things are going to change for me." I said, "I can do two things, either slack and not do as well in AP, but focus on early college or I can sacrifice myself and do both, but I'm going to have to stay up late. I'm going to have to work massive amounts of hours.

Considering her experience as a high school and college student, Jocelyn admitted balancing the workload was "difficult:"

> I struggled a little bit because I am very on top of my grades. I know if I have to do something I'll be there and if it takes me the whole day, I'll be there the whole day. So, I don't really, I mean, I do talk to my family. Like, I'm just like not completely closed off on my homework [laughs]. But I try to finish my schoolwork as soon as possible and just be there with my family and go eat

somewhere, go out, go to the park or something. But balancing it is very difficult because as soon as I finish my high school homework, I'm like, "oh my God! Now I have college homework." And if I don't have college homework, I have high school homework. And it's just always the thought of "oh my God! If I miss this or I miss that." There's always something. I'm just a kid. [laughs]

Jocelyn clarified that being a college student meant missing out on "regular things" like going out:

> Being already in college is like so much work and so much stress and so much always having to do something…During these past four years, it's just always been homework, homework, homework, exams, tests, and making sure your GPA is okay and passing all your classes. So, it's like, after all that time, it does get to you. If you ask a lot of my peers, we're a little sad. Cause like we don't have time for regular things. We don't go out very often be we always have homework; we always have something to do.

A few other participants (e.g., Gregory, Monica, and Alexa) talked about missing out on family time to complete work. Alexa, in particular, admitted if she could do it all over again, she would make more time for her family. When responding to my question about what advice she would give her past self, Alexa, responded:

> It's going to be a tough four years, but once you reach the end, it's like you're taking a big breath. Right now, you may feel like you're slowly sinking but it's all worth it at the end. And also, at the beginning, don't shut out your family. I know it's a lot of work and you need to finish your work but make sure you make time for your family as well because they're the ones that are seeing you go through this. So, yes, that's what I would tell myself.

Collectively, participants' experiences reveal that they struggled to balance the expectations and workload of high school and college, with many participants sharing they felt burnt out, sad, and overworked. My review of Southside ECHS's website and archival documents reveals that the campus intentionally created an "advisory period" for "college preparatory activities." This advisory period was a dedicated space and time for students to meet with study groups, college representatives, and/or receive

additional instruction from teachers on topics like time management, note taking, and goal setting. Despite the intentionality of this space, students' experiences revealed that they struggled to adapt. The difficulty of balancing the workload led students to adopt several coping mechanisms to help them manage. For example, some participants asked teachers for extensions on high school assignments. Other students sacrificed sleep to catch up on assignments, while some participants described sacrificing family time to complete work. In addition to these coping mechanisms, participants also underscored the importance of peer relationships as a way to navigate the expectations and workload of ECHS, which I discuss next.

"In [ECHS], You Have to Make Sure That You Are Friends with People…[It] Will be a Great Help"

As laid out in Chapter 2, a goal of the ECHS model is to foster positive and meaningful relationships with adults and peers. Throughout all eight interviews, participants underscored the importance of peer relationships, with many students describing the ways they leaned on their peers for support and accountability. Participants' narratives revealed that students supported each other and held each other accountable in three particular ways: they shared notes, reminders, and information with one another; validated each other's emotions; and motivated each other to complete coursework. For example, Alexa shared how important it was to make friends with peers to navigate coursework:

> In early college high school, you have to make sure that you are friends with people in your major, because that will be a great help. They know what you're going through so we can help each other out during assignments and give each other pointers to be ready for exams and stuff like that.

Sharing Alexa's view, Rose expressed the importance of having "good friends" to share notes with as it made the process "less stressful." Similarly, Destiny shared that her and her classmates would "group up together" during advisory period to go over notes and study for tests.

In addition to sharing notes and studying for tests together, participants also supported each other by reminding one another about deadlines and offering peers additional guidance on assignments. Alyssa highlighted this practice best, explaining:

> We have a group chat on social media, on WhatsApp specifically. And we would communicate to each other like, “Hey, this is due this week if you guys need help, you know, we can help you or, you know, if someone needs help on this assignment, we’ll help you or something, you know.” And we’d remind each other like, “Hey, this is due this week, next week, or it’s due tomorrow.” You know, it was all just mostly support from each other and helping each other out, especially because of the pandemic and not being able to see each other [laughs].

Alexa, who was part of this group chat, shared that they had formed this WhatsApp group themselves their freshman year as a way to help each other out.

> We did that ourselves. It’s a group of 1, 2, 3, 4, 5 of us. And we’ve had this group since freshman year since we took our first college course, all the way to now. So, we really grew together, and we became a tight-knit group of people that understands what our struggles are. It’s like, “Okay, due date for this…here are some pointers or make sure you add this to your assignment, make sure you remember this, this, and this.” So, we really helped each other throughout the four years.

In addition to using WhatsApp, some participants also used FaceTime to help each other with courses. Scarlett, in particular, shared that during the pandemic they had to get “creative” with how they communicated with each other and started using Facetime to chat and catch up on work. Alexa who also used Facetime said her and her peers used this platform specifically during online lectures to keep each other informed when their internet connection was spotty:

> When we are in lectures, I have FaceTime on because sometimes we miss like what they are saying. So, I remind [my friend], “write this down” and then she’ll tell me [what I missed] because sometimes our WiFi is slow where we live.

Participants also held each other accountable by validating each other’s emotions as they navigated ECHS. Monica, for example, leaned on her friends for emotional support. During our interview, she explained she suffered from anxiety and was in the process of getting tested for ADHD. She explained that it would take her a very long time to get assignments done, and it was hard for her to concentrate. “It was the weirdest thing," Monica reflected as she shared her experience with me,

> I'm writing an essay and I'm thinking, "Oh, I need to finish this other assignment or I'm not going to get it on time," so I switch to a tab to do that assignment and now I'm like switching back and forth and back and forth between assignments to get them both on time.

Monica struggled to stay focused and became easily distracted by the overwhelming amount of work she had to do for her other classes. ECHS peers close to Monica knew what she was going through so they would check-in on her and help her manage her time:

> They would actually tell me, they're like, "Okay, Monica, I'm going to start this assignment right now, so you need to start it right now. And I'll let you know when I finish it. And you let me know when you finish it." So I was able to have a lot of communication with my friends on managing my time.

Like Monica, Alexa also leaned on her friends to keep her calm when coursework became too overwhelming. She particularly shared that she liked relying on ECHS peers outside her biology major:

> My best friend, she's an interdisciplinary studies major. She's the one that helps me with my high school classes because I'm too caught up with my college classes. She'll be like "okay you have an essay for English due in two days" or "we have some work for economics. Don't stress on it you can turn in late…" So, she keeps [me] calm about my high school classes and then I have my friend for my college courses so yeah.

In addition to validating each other's emotions, participants also leaned on each other for motivation. For example, when I asked Jocelyn who she interacted the most with at her ECHS, she said her friends because they "were always there for each other." Describing ECHS as "really stressful," Jocelyn further explained: "We're always stressed, we're always worrying, we're always thinking about something. So, we've just been really supportive of each other and keeping each other motivated." Jocelyn also shared that she relied on her friends for points of clarification on assignments:

> I don't email my professors a lot because, like I said, I mostly depend on my peers. Like [I ask them] "do you understand this? Do you know what we're doing? Do you know how we're supposed to do this?"

When asked why she did not email her college professors, Jocelyn explained that sometimes professors were very "blunt" or "difficult to understand," indicating she felt more comfortable reaching out to her peers for guidance.

In sum, participants understood the importance of establishing and sustaining relationships with their peers as a way to navigate ECHS. Creating informal, student-led, peer accountability practices, participants not only shared notes, reminders, and information with one another but also validated each other's experiences. Peers also motivated each other and pushed one another toward high academic achievement. In addition to peers, participants also relied on their familial and community networks to get through ECHS, which I discuss next.

"We Would Do It Together"

Researchers have continuously found that Latinx/a/o students often rely on their social networks for college-related information, support, and guidance. My analysis of participants' stories as they navigated through ECHS supports these findings. Specifically, through my conversations with participants, I found that their ECHS experiences were nurtured and affirmed by their familial and community networks. For example, a few participants talked about how their families' ordinary, everyday methods of support helped them get through ECHS. When describing a typical day as an ECHS student, Monica, for instance, shared that she relied on her dad to drive her to Texas Technical College (TTC), the regional college where Southside ECHS students took some college classes not taught by ECHS teachers. While her ECHS did provide transportation to TTC, Monica shared that "all of the students kind of had to figure out [transportation] on their own" because the available bus would take them to a "whole bunch of places" before it finally arrived TTC, making the ride unnecessarily long. To maximize her time and avoid waiting, Monica relied on her parents and sometimes other family members to drive her to TTC.

> I had to ask my parents to drive me or any family member if they could drive me to [TTC]. Sometimes I would get rides from friends, but we live about an hour and a half away from [TTC]. So, I have to drive from [my hometown] all the way to [TTC] and that takes about an hour…I'm lucky that my parents are very, very supportive. As I said, my dad works most of the time, and so

> when he would get out of work, he would pick me up and we would go straight to [TTC] and he would actually wait for me for three hours until the class ended to take me home. And so, it's not like the early college experience was just stressful on me. It definitely put a big impact on my parents as well.

In line with Monica's experience, Alexa also relied on her dad to take her to TTC because it was "easier" for her to get there since they had recently moved to another city closer to the college campus. "Since I can't drive," Alexa shared, "my dad would drop me off at [TTC] before taking my sister to basketball practice. I would get dropped off, and then he would pick me up after school." Both Monica and Alexa's stories highlight the important role that families played in supporting them as they navigated through ECHS.

Participants also tapped into their community networks to help them navigate ECHS. For example, Destiny relied on a friend who attended another STEM high school for guidance on how to track her assignments and due dates:

> I saw her with like a little book, and she had everything like color coordinated. And I was like, "oh my gosh, this is so cute, I have to do it, too!" So, then I went to the store, and I bought these little markers and a notebook. And I was like, "okay I'm going to get it together." And then, once I started doing it, it became a habit. So, I kept up with it. And if I don't have time, I'll just do it like on my phone, in the Notes app or something. And I'll write everything down and then slowly check them off. But it really does help a lot. Like it makes a big difference.

Destiny shared she also relied on this friend to learn about internship opportunities while in ECHS. "We would both tell each other about what was going on," Destiny explained, "and we would apply [to internships] and we would do it together." With the information her friend provided, Destiny was able to complete two internships at a local hospital before the pandemic outbreak. When I asked Destiny if her school had provided information on internships, she said "never" and felt like they "should have done more" to help her find these kinds of opportunities.

Similarly, Monica leaned on her dad's community networks to connect her to internship opportunities. As a police investigator for a school district, Monica explained that his connections were expansive:

> He's a police investigator for the school district. He used to be just a regular policeman and so he would kind of travel quite a lot [and] work really, really long hours…he was able to have a lot of time to converse with a lot of people that work in the school district because he was the one who was guarding the festivals or events that [the school district] would hold. And my dad is very talkative, very much like me I guess [laughs]. So, he got to know a lot of people. I use that to my advantage as much as possible. I'm like, "Hey, Dad, do you know this person? Can I talk to them?"

Through her dad's connections, Monica was able "to get [her] foot in the door for a possible internship" at a local public relations office.

In short, participants described relying on their familial and community networks for support, guidance, and opportunities. Specifically, participants' networks supported them through ordinary, everyday methods like car rides and by providing them with guidance and information on how to manage their time and find internships. Notably, when participants could not find information or guidance on how to manage their time (i.e., Destiny) or how to find internship opportunities (i.e., Destiny and Monica), they leaned on their familial and community networks for social and navigational capital, highlighting the pivotal role of these networks on students' college-going process. This section focused on students' insights as they navigated through ECHS. In the next section, I describe participants' experiences and beliefs as they transitioned out of ECHS and prepared to enter a higher education institution.

Getting Across – Navigating Postsecondary Goals and the College Application Process

Considering their goals after ECHS, participants shared the various ways their ECHS helped them (or not) meet their college and career aspirations. More precisely, participants often highlighted the influential (and sometimes conflicting) role that institutional agents at their ECHS played in helping them prepare for and transition out of ECHS. While participants largely praised their ECHS for helping them

navigate postsecondary goals, they also expressed mix feelings about attending an ECHS and noted the limited information, and sometimes misinformation, they encountered as they made decisions related to their postsecondary goals. In the absence of reliable information and support, participants would often lean on their familial and community networks to meet their postsecondary aspirations. In this section, I detail six recurrent experiences participants shared as they transitioned out of ECHS and prepared to enter a higher education institution. First, I describe the positive and meaningful relationships participants had with their teachers, who they often credited for inspiring their career and educational goals. Then, I discuss how attending an ECHS both positively and negatively changed participants' perceptions about college. Taking into consideration students' college application process, I then illuminate participants' thought processes as they determined to which college to apply and enroll, and then I highlight students' perceptions about the role of counselors and teachers, illuminating how these perceptions prevented them from asking for help. Connected to their postsecondary goals and the application process, I then share how participants were often left in the dark about how to look for a job as their school largely focused on the completion of FAFSA/TASFA and scholarships. I then describe the ways participants leaned on their familial and community networks for college and career support and advice. Finally, I bring to light participants' conflicting stories about taking the ACT, which colleges often use to determine college admissions.

"[My Teacher] Helped Me a Lot in Terms of Discovering What [Job] Fields"

A unique feature of ECHSs is their small learning environments, which are intentionally designed to provide students the opportunity to form positive and meaningful relationships with adults like teachers, counselors, and staff. Indeed, when reflecting on their ECHS experiences, participants largely praised their ECHS teachers, often crediting them for either inspiring their career goals or introducing them to the idea of graduate school. For instance, although most participants entered ECHS with college aspirations, two participants—Jocelyn and Gregory—praised their ECHS teachers for shaping their career goals. When I asked Jocelyn what had inspired her career goal to be a teacher, she said "definitely my

English teacher." Jocelyn specifically aspired to replicate the care and support of her teacher to her future students:

> I feel like she's very nice [and] she's very supportive. I would really enjoy teaching English and just being there for students and helping them and making sure they're okay. Because especially how my teacher is, she's always very caring and she's always making sure we're okay. So, I feel like in the future, I would want to be that figure for my students and make sure that, if they don't have somebody at home, I can be that person for them to make sure they're okay and make sure they're taking care of themselves. I feel like my own English teacher has very much influenced that because I feel like she's just so great. I love her. She's great [laughs].

Jocelyn was one of the five students interested in pursuing graduate school. When I asked her how she had learned about the possibility of graduate school she credited her ECHS chemistry teacher:

> I learned [about the master's degree] through my teachers because a lot of them do have a master's [degree]. There's just like this one specific teacher that I have. He was my chemistry teacher and he really encouraged us to do it. So, he's definitely been there and just talked to us about it and everything. And that's just where it came from. I learned from it from him.

Gregory also learned about graduate school through his ECHS computer science teacher who he described as a "pretty big role model."

> I started learning about the degrees when I met my computer science teacher. I have taken a total of six classes with him, and so I've had plenty of time to socialize with him and talk to him about what does having a computer science degree do. He pursued his master's [degree], and right away decided to go into teaching. He told me, "In order to be a college professor, you need at least a master's." All my professors have a master's in their subject. And I went and looked at the [ECHS] webpage and they do require a master's."

Gregory's computer science teacher also provided him guidance in terms of job opportunities within his field of interest.

> He helped me a lot in terms of discovering what [job] fields. I remember wanting to get into cybersecurity, but he talked me out of it. He said, "Look, cybersecurity is a very narrow subject, jobs are limited, especially because that's a pretty like top security job. The only way you're going to get in is either with the government or with some private company." And he said, "Why don't you go [be a] programmer. That's broader. It deals into cybersecurity. If you get a degree in programming, getting a degree in cybersecurity in the future is going to be way easier for you because you already have the knowledge, and it opens more doors for you. So, you don't just have to know cybersecurity, you can know how to program, you can know how to maintain, you can know how to create." He said, "So you get more options with a programming degree than with a cybersecurity degree."

Gregory's teacher encouraged him to ask questions and even advised him to "get a higher degree" if he wanted to be "more hirable." Gregory was particularly inspired to teach at the college level after seeing how caring his ECHS teacher was when he was absent:

> I recall a moment where I had to take an absence from the school, and my computer science teacher, as soon as he noticed that I was out for two days, he sent me an email, "Like are you okay? Like we're here if you need help," and I thought that was really sweet, and I noticed that he also cared a lot about other students. And so, I kind of had a personal enlightenment of why not help other students the way he's helping you, and I kind of had the scenario in my head where I graduate, maybe four years down the line, my professor right now decides to retire, and I can come back to the school where it all started as a teacher again.

In sum, participants' stories about their teachers brought to light the positive and meaningful relationships they had formed with them while simultaneously highlighting the profoundly influential role teachers played in influencing students' educational trajectories. The importance of fostering positive relationships with adults is reflected through the various contextual documents I reviewed. For example, one of the documents included that advisory lessons were "designed to be both engaging and interactive allowing for staff to share their experiences and mentor students throughout their four years." It is no

surprise, then, to find that, in some cases, participants described their teachers as their "role model" and expressed wanting to emulate the care and advice they had received to their own students in the future. In the next section, I share how participants' perceptions about college were more generally impacted.

"I Feel Like I've Been Placed in an Environment Where I Have to Think About My Future"

An underlying assumption of the ECHS model is that exposing high school students to a rigorous and supportive academic environment will increase their knowledge about and access to college. Participants' stories reveal that being immersed in a college environment both positively and negatively changed their perceptions about college with most students expressing how taking college-level courses had demystified their negative preconceived ideas about college. Prior to starting ECHS, most participants shared that they viewed college as "really hard," "expensive," and "scary." Others expressed knowing that college was important, but they did not know "what to expect." For example, before she started ECHS, Scarlett witnessed two of her older cousins drop out of college, which made her believe that college was "extremely difficult." As the oldest child—and only having seen her cousins go through the college-going process—she feared the same would happen to her. However, after going through the ECHS program, her outlook about college changed:

> I don't see college as scary or as challenging as I thought it was. Of course, it's still challenging, but it's not to the degree that I thought, "oh my gosh, I'm not going to know anything ever!" I'm much more confident [about] going into college, and I'm confident with communicating with my professors and making friends; I'm more social. I've definitely developed communication skills in early college high school, and I'm not so afraid. But the thing that stayed the same is college is still very expensive, and I still worry about money. But I'm lucky that I was able to get a full ride [to college].

Scarlett further elaborated that attending an ECHS provided her with a greater sense of "how college works." "I wouldn't have known how to register for classes," she shared. "I would have been extremely confused. I wouldn't have known how college works. I would have gone [to college] blind." Notably, Scarlett's comment about feeling more confident about "going into college," suggests she might not have

considered obtaining her associate degree as already going to college—a phenomena I discuss in Chapter 5.

Sharing Scarlett's view, Alyssa talked about how attending an ECHS provided her with a better grasp of the workload she would be expected to complete in college. Specifically, taking college-level courses with different teachers provided Alyssa the opportunity to understand that class assignments, quizzes, and tests depended on the course and teacher she would be taking:

> I would not have known the workload that we get…I thought in college you'd be thrown…so many essays, so many tests [and] quizzes. And I mean, yeah, it was a lot of that, but it's all mostly balanced towards what class it is [and] what [teachers] ask for. So, I think I would say that it was just the workload was different towards what I always thought or perceived [college] to be…I always thought that in college we'd get so many essays due every week or take a big exam every week and stuff like that. And we have to read so many chapters of a book or read the whole book and take a test on that. But, now that I've been through it, I'm just like, "Oh wait," it was kind of easier than I thought. You read one chapter, take a test, read [another] two chapters, take a test. So, it was easier than I thought, and some teachers work differently based on the way they did stuff.

For some students attending an ECHS also motivated them to continue their postsecondary educational goals. For example, prior to ECHS, Gregory did not see himself pursuing a postsecondary education after high school. He originally enrolled at his ECHS because it provided him with the opportunity to earn an associate degree at no cost to his parents, but he did not see himself continuing college after high school. He specifically thought that college was "extra school" for those interested in becoming doctors. Attending an ECHS, however, changed his outlook about college and provided him with greater clarity about what he could pursue long-term:

> My thoughts about college are better. I no longer think of it as this big, scary place with extra school. I now see the benefits of it. I see, okay, maybe it's big and scary, but it's extra return for you. You get a degree; you get a better job. And it was something I was interested in because if I

had gone to the normal high school, I didn't have a plan. I didn't know if I was going to go to work fast food or retail, or maybe back to the flea market like my parents do. But when I got into the early college program, I wouldn't say I knew what I wanted. I just knew that I'm going to be better off. And then it was only until sophomore [year] that I took my first computer science class and I liked it. I loved it. And I said, "Okay, this is what I want to do. I know what I want." I wanted to pursue a bachelor's, which I am still going to do at [chosen university]. So, my thoughts about [college] are better, now that I know more or less how college works.

Like Gregory, Jocelyn also did not see herself eventually going to college. Jocelyn shared that, prior to starting ECHS, she "was never super interested in [college]" but nonetheless decided to enroll at an ECHS because of the school's small learning environment. Jocelyn later admitted that her ECHS created an environment where she could reflect about her future aspirations:

Now that I'm actually in high school and, no less, in early college high school, I feel like I've been placed in an environment where I have to think about my future, and I have to think about college and my career and what I want to do. So, I have thought a lot about it and, but just being in that environment, it just feels like, "oh, you're doing college already." So, it's like, "are you going to continue? Do you want to continue? What are you going to do after [high school]?

During our interview, Jocelyn expressed wanting to continue her education after high school because she already had two years of college, and she felt that if she stopped now she would not want "to go back [to college] anymore."

Destiny expressed that attending an ECHS made her aware of other possibilities. Unlike Jocelyn and Gregory, Destiny knew she wanted to attend college since a young age but attending an ECHS motivated her to "pursue a higher-level degree" beyond her associate degree.

There's always a lot of reasons why not to go [to college]. And I feel like once you go to an early college, you become more motivated to pursue a higher-level degree. And once you get your associates, it's like, "okay, I want to keep going." Now you have that drive to want to do more and be better, you get me? And once you go to an early college, I think you learn more about

> scholarships and more possibilities. And you learn that college is not as far away as you once thought it was, because people that go to regular, high school, they're like "college isn't for me. I don't have money to pay for it. I won't make it there." But once you get it done in high school or you take a couple of classes, you learn there's possibilities. I can test myself. I can try it. I can make it possible. And I think that's something that everybody should know, because there's a lot of opportunities that they miss out on when they have this perception of college that isn't always true.

Similarly, Scarlett, who already knew she wanted to go to college prior to ECHS, shared that she was now interested in continuing her education beyond a bachelor's degree. Because she had already "saved two years" of college by completing her associate degree in high school, she believed graduate school was possible:

> I want to learn more about [graduate school] because I know I want a bachelor's, but I want to go deeper into the whole issue [of geology] or like study the earth with more detail. And I feel like I'd have time since I saved two years. I feel that with a master's degree it'll just be four years since I knocked two off. I just want to specialize in something. I don't know what yet, but I want to specialize in it and maybe even a PhD if I can get it paid because I know there are programs that pay for PhDs. I've read of it. So maybe I can get a PhD.

By contrast, one student shared that attending ECHS had the opposite effect on her. Monica shared that there was a moment in her ECHS journey where she second-guessed continuing her postsecondary education:

> I guess you can say it's kind of odd that going to early college actually made me doubt about going to college further on, because I guess, I don't know if it's the correct word to say, it was like burnout. It was like a trauma kind of, and it's definitely something I see with my other friends. All of us, we feel exhausted, and we had voiced our opinions about [whether] this [was] really right for us. But I think it's mainly because we're burnt out. Like, we started this so young that, you know, we didn't really know what we wanted when we signed up for early

> college…And so I did have a moment where I was like, "I don't know if I want to go to university yet, like maybe I should take a gap year." I guess it's strange to say that going to early college actually just kind of felt like it discouraged me from going on. But again, I think that's mainly because of the burnout. I missed all of my high school years. Is this really something I want to continue doing for four more years or five more years or however more long it takes?

Although Monica ultimately decided to apply and enroll in a college to continue her postsecondary education, she admitted that her ECHS experience influenced where she enrolled for college:

> I guess you can say I settled to go to a university in my area. I just knew it would be easier on me mentally, especially after the burnout. I didn't want to stress about picking a college because the way I see it is, I'm okay with getting a bachelor's degree at a local university and then going to a way higher university to get my master's degree. You know, save some money for the bachelor's [degree] and then waste more money for the master's [degree].

Perceptively, while Monica felt like she had "settled" on a college, she strategically rationalized that staying close to home for her bachelor's degree would save her money until she could pursue a master's degree. Indeed, as I will discuss later in the chapter, many students enrolled at a particular college taking into consideration their long-term aspirations.

Although Monica was the only participant whose ECHS experience made her doubt going to college, she shared she would not completely discourage students from attending an ECHS. She would instead "warn" them about it. Other students like Monica also expressed mix views about whether ECHS was worth it. Rose, who switched her ECHS major from engineering to interdisciplinary studies and planned to major in political science next, admitted there were times she regretted going to Southside ECHS. However, she immediately followed her statement with "but I don't think I really regret it, I still gained a lot of benefits from [Southside ECHS]." Similarly, Gregory, at one point during our interview, shared he was not sure whether ECHS was worth it: "I look back on and I am still debating whether it was worth it or not, because there was a lot of social events that I missed." However, when asked if he would

recommend the program to middle school students, he responded with an "of course" but then disclosed the program was not for everyone:

> If you're a student, hopefully not in my exact situation, but similar situations with low-income families, but they have high aspirations, they have the motivation, they have the desire to be more—like especially those students—then I would heavily recommend this [program]. This is your way. You're going to get tested, of course. It's going to be the most challenging four years of your entire academic career, but it's going to be pretty much worth it. I mean I can't say that right now because I still haven't tried it outside, but from the looks of it now, it's very, very promising. I know that this program is definitely not for all students, and I can attest to that personally. I have seen some students in my school that I have said to them directly like, "You shouldn't be here," because their goals are not in the right place…I would stress like this program is not for everyone. It depends entirely upon the individual, not only on what they want to be, but on how their character is built.

Jocelyn also expressed mixed views about whether she would recommend the program, sharing:

> If you ask me, do I recommend [ECHS]? No. It's too much. It's too hard. But I feel like in the end, it's definitely very worth it because you are having those two years [of college] be cut down. And you can just do it while you're a high school student. I feel like that's probably an advantage.

Like Gregory, Jocelyn also admitted that whether she would recommend the program depended on the student and the student's willingness to work hard and challenge themselves. Despite participants' mixed views about ECHS, nearly all participants agreed they would recommend the program (i.e., Alexa, Alyssa, Gregory, Monica, Jocelyn, Rose, Scarlett), with some saying it was "worth it" (i.e., Alexa, Destiny, Gregory, and Jocelyn) and others noting it would depend on the student (i.e., Alexa, Gregory, Monica, Jocelyn, and Rose).

In sum, attending an ECHS both positively and negatively changed participants' perspectives about college. For most students, it demystified their previous negative thoughts about college and motivated them to continue their postsecondary education. Only one student disclosed that attending an

ECHS made her doubt going to college; however, as I discuss next, at the time of the interview, all eight participants had gained admission to a 4-year college or university, choosing to continue their postsecondary education.

"We All…had One or Two Colleges that We Applied to That We Were Actually Looking Into"

All ECHSs in Texas are required to provide college awareness to current and prospective students and families, which includes assistance with the college application. Reflecting on their college application process, multiple participants shared that their ECHS *required* all students to apply to more than one college in order to graduate high school. In general, when applying to colleges, students took the advice ECHS personnel had given them into consideration but ultimately relied on their context and long-term aspirations to determine college enrollment. Alyssa, for example, was advised by her ECHS counselor to apply to three types of higher education institutions as a way to increase her chances of getting accepted somewhere. She elaborated on the advice, explaining:

> So as seniors, they encouraged us to apply to colleges. We were able to choose as to what college [we] wanted to apply to. But we were always encouraged to apply to at least three colleges because we have these steps [we follow that determine] where we want to go [to college]. There's a safe school, dream school, and target school.

Using this advice, Alyssa applied to two safe schools, one target school, and one dream school. She ultimately enrolled in one of her "safe" schools—a large-sized, public in-state research university about 45 minutes from her hometown—explaining that the pandemic had influenced her decision:

> The pandemic influenced my decision to stay close to home because if anything were to happen to my family then I'll still be close by to help. Of course, there was some thought of moving away from home, but the pandemic happened, so I decided to attend a university close by.

Here, the broader context of the pandemic and more specifically the concern that something could happen to her family ultimately influenced Alyssa's decision to stay close to home.

Gregory was another participant who took into consideration his context when deciding college enrollment. Unlike other participants, he only applied to one college, arguing that he did not "want to

waste [his] time applying to more when [he] knew [he] was not going to go to them anyways." Gregory explained:

> I want to go to [university name] because it's closest to home. It's a 30-minute drive and we've gone there a few times. My parents know where it's at, and they were like, "If you want to go there, we can take you. We know where it's at. We can drive you there." But they're hoping—and I'm hoping too—that by that time I can get my car and license. But there's also another reason why I didn't apply to other universities. And that's just something out of my control. I am not a US citizen, that's why I don't qualify for FAFSA. And I can't travel out-of-state, without US citizenship. Some universities don't accept non-US citizens. And others that do, well, their tuitions are skyrocketing high. And I haven't found a lot of scholarships, so I don't have the funds. And if I choose to go to a $30,000 tuition university, how am I going to pay for it? And especially with my family's income, we can't pay for that.

Gregory explained that his opportunity to get a license was taken away when the Trump administration announced it would reject any new Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) applicants. Further solidifying his decision to stay close to home was Gregory's desire to help his family financially:

> Tragically, my cousin passed away and her little kids, they didn't have anywhere to go so they came to our house and they're living with us right now. So, we have to worry about two more little kids, and I don't know how that's going to affect my college, if I'm going to have to work and drop out to care for them, or if maybe I have to take loans out. So that aspect is a bit iffy right now, we're hoping to get it resolved. But we do have a plan or at least I have a plan. And that's why I didn't apply to other universities specifically, especially now. Like, I don't want to apply to go to other [schools].

Gregory not only felt like he had to stay close to home because of his citizenship status but also because of his family's financial and care-giving circumstances. In both Alyssa and Gregory's case, the decision to stay close to home for college were mediated by their contextual realities. In other words, macro

factors like the pandemic and the Trump administration's decision to reject new DACA applicants influenced Alyssa and Gregory's college-going decisions, respectively.

Other participants like Alexa, Jocelyn, Scarlett, and Destiny made college enrollment decisions based on their long-term aspirations and, in some cases, their contextual realities as well. Alexa, for example, took both context and long-term aspirations into consideration when navigating her college application process. For example, in addition to taking cost into consideration, Alexa only applied to colleges and universities would allow her to transfer her ECHS courses and that had a pre-med program as she was interested in going to medical school.

> I applied based on their pre-med programs. And if my classes were able to transfer.
>
> And I also chose [college and universities] based on cost because we're a low-income family. Right now, my mom is the only one that's working, so I didn't want to stress my parents out with [cost].

Cost and distance were two contextual factors that ultimately influenced where Alexa enrolled. Explaining her mother's concern about her safety while in college, Alexa decided to enroll at a medium-sized, public in-state, research university approximately two hours from her hometown.

> That's the only school I could convince my family to allow me to go to. Because the rest of [the colleges and universities] were hours away. And that didn't really sit well with my mother, because she's a type of mom who watches those movies about like teenagers getting abducted and stuff. So, she is really scared. She's like, "No, you don't know what's out there and you don't know what type of people there are. So, either you choose another school, or you stay home."

Like Alexa, Jocelyn also took context and long-term aspirations into consideration. Listening to advice from ECHS personnel, Jocelyn applied to five schools:

> They at least want us to apply to five [colleges or universities], so we can have options, you know? Because what if you apply to one or you apply to two and they don't accept you. You at least have backups. I think they just tell us it's a requirement. But I feel like they just want us to have those options.

However, when asked why she chose those five particular colleges and universities, Jocelyn admitted she only applied to five schools to meet her school's requirement. She was only serious about one school:

> I learned about [these five schools] through other students in my grade. Like I mentioned, it's a requirement for us to graduate to at least be accepted to five colleges. So, I feel like all of us were just like super rushed. We're like, "oh my God, let's just apply to this and that and that, and then we'll figure it out." Because we didn't know we had to be accepted to five colleges. So, we were all just kind of like "oh my God, let's apply here, here, and let's see if they accept us. And if not, we'll figure it out. We all at least had one or two colleges that we applied to that we were actually looking into. And that, for me, was [university name] because I feel like that one was just a safe option for me.

Feeling the pressure to meet her school's requirements, Jocelyn was less intentional about where she applied to college. However, she was intentional about where she enrolled, explaining she wanted to stay close to family and maybe later transfer to another university for her master's degree.

> I wanted to do local because I just don't think I could leave my family that far away. I'm very close with my mom, and I don't think I could deal with just being so far from her…I'm definitely going to [university name] to get my bachelor's, and then from there, I'll probably transfer to another school or if I like it at [university name], I'll probably continue my master's.

Explaining how her family felt about her college decision, Jocelyn disclosed she enrolled in a large-sized, public in-state research university about 45 minutes away from her hometown because it offered her area of study:

> At first, they weren't the best [reactions] because my mom and my stepdad, they were like "why would you want to go to [university name]? You know, it's pretty far away. Why don't you just go to [closer college]." But I had to mention to them that [the college they wanted] doesn't really offer what I want to go study. I had to mention to them that [the university I chose] was better for me for what I wanted to study. So, at first they were just very reluctant. They were very stubborn. They were like, "No, no, no. You should just go to [closer college]. It's easier, it's cheaper, you'll

be closer to home." But after a while, they accepted it. They know I was not going to change my mind. So, after a while, they were like, "You know what? It's fine." [laughs]

Although Jocelyn chose to stay local for college, she chose a university that would enable her to pursue her long-term aspirations of becoming a teacher.

Like Jocelyn, Scarlett was also advised to apply to more than one college or university so she could have "backups just in case something happened." Scarlett chose to enroll at a university close to home because they offered her the best financial aid, and she wanted to be with her "family longer." Clarifying her statement, Scarlett shared:

> I know that in the future, what I want to do is just travel, and I actually want to be a traveling geologist—one that travels and does research in different places of the world. So, I know when I'm older, I'm just going to be traveling everywhere. So, I wanted to really spend time with my family now that I'm here studying to be that. And also, because they offered me the most in aid.

Destiny was the only participant who applied to over 10 colleges and universities—15 to be exact. Mirroring other participants' decision-making process, Destiny was not as intentional about all the colleges she applied to; however, she was intentional about where she enrolled, choosing a large-sized, public research university five hours from her hometown that would take her ECHS college credits:

> Honestly, I didn't consider public or private or anything. People have always mentioned certain schools, so I was like, "okay, I'm just going to apply." And I visited some with that uncle that I had mentioned before, he also took me to visit most of those schools. So, I figured, "hey, let me just apply, let me see how it goes." But it has always been between [three 4- year public universities]. And the rest, to be honest, it was mostly just for scholarship night because at each school they give you a certain number of scholarships and [our ECHS] totals up how much they give you. And then they give you like a little plaque with how much scholarships you received. So, I applied to those schools and each school gave me a certain amount of money, and that money gets added up at the end. So that's why I was applying to a lot.

Thinking about her long-term aspirations, Destiny also chose to enroll in that particular university because it provided her the opportunity to apply to the Joint Admission Medical Program (JAMP)—a Texas-based program designed to help economically disadvantaged students successfully matriculate into medical school. Envisioning her life ten years from college enrollment, Destiny shared:

> I want to come back to the Valley, so I'm hoping to go to [university name] and get everything done over there. I want to apply to JAMP—the Joint Admission Medical Program—because they basically guide you the entire way through medical school and they insure you that you get to go to a medical school in Texas. And then once you finish with medical school, you're able to move wherever you want, throughout Texas, throughout the United States. By that time, hopefully I'll be coming back home and getting a job here at [name of hometown]. I hope to work at [local hospital].

Through their responses, Alexa, Jocelyn, Scarlett, and Destiny demonstrate that their college enrollment decisions were intentional and inspired by their long-term goals and aspirations.

To recap, participants shared they needed to apply to five colleges (or more) in order to graduate. Some participants applied to multiple schools as a way to have "options" and "backups." However, some also admitted that they were only serious about one or two colleges. To meet the school's requirement, some students simply picked colleges they had previously heard about or schools to which their friends were applying. Students' rationales on where they chose to enroll for college, however, appeared more intentional with many students' responses indicating that students considered their contextual realities and long-term aspirations when making enrollment decisions. In addition to requiring students to apply to five colleges and universities, Southside ECHS also made it a priority and requirement for students to submit scholarships and complete their FAFSA/TASFA,[39] which I discuss next.

[39] Only students who are U.S. citizens or eligible non-citizens can apply for FAFSA. If a student is not eligible to apply for federal financial aid and they are Texas residents, they can complete the Texas Application for State Financial Aid (TASFA) to determine if they qualify for state financial aid instead.

"Our Counselor, He's Very Good. He's Definitely Overworked"

A key component of ECHSs that distinguish it from other high school reforms like dual credit is that ECHS models are required—at least in Texas—to provide holistic support services to help students succeed. Participants' narratives reveal that their ECHS personnel provided several opportunities and information sessions to help them navigate the college application process. For example, Jocelyn, Gregory, and Scarlett all talked about their ECHS's use of Google Classroom to disseminate scholarship opportunities, host FASFA/TASFA workshops, and post college-related announcements. Scarlett, in particular, shared that her ECHS had a Remind app, to facilitate student-teacher interactions. She explained:

> We have a Remind app where we can text our teachers personally, or they can text all the classes or group announcements or they post in on Google Classroom. Two of my teachers like to post different events on Google Classroom like scholarship opportunities.

Speaking about her school's help with the FAFSA, Scarlett said,

> They would be showing us how to do it on Google classroom. And then they would record the video and post it to see how we could do it if we were still lost with the process. So, they would go through the entire [FAFSA] process with us and then, we'd submit proof [that we did it] and then cleared [us] for FAFSA.

Despite knowing about these opportunities, students shared they were often reluctant to ask their counselors and teachers for help. This was ironic given that they all spoke highly of their counselor and teachers. For example, Gregory, who called his counselor "boss" out of endearment, shared that his "counselor did a pretty good job in telling [students] what [they] could do and kept [them] up-to-date with everything." Explaining the role of his counselor and other institutional agents, Gregory continued:

> The counselor was all the college side, and our financial advisor is for the future college. The teachers did make sure to give time [in] their class to have us do our Apply Texas [applications], our FAFSA, and TASFA. They would say, "Okay, this day, we're going to work on your FAFSA, go for it. And if you have any questions, then go to the financial advisor or go to the

> counselor." The counselor just referred you back to the financial advisor because he's got enough on his plate already, so he can't work on financial [aid] and the other grade levels [at the same time].

Gregory, however, admitted that he "had to work up the courage to go to the counselor or go to teachers and ask them for things."

Jocelyn who also spoke highly of institutional agents at her ECHS shared similar sentiments to that of Gregory's. For instance, when talking about ECHS staff, Jocelyn described them as "very, very supportive" and "caring."

> The staff at our school is just very, very supportive. They're always very caring because they know it's hard. They know it's challenging. So, they're always there to talk to us, and especially some of my teachers, what they do for our high school classes, they set up like a different dual classroom and you can go in and can talk to them. If you're having a hard time with a certain subject or assignment, you can go in and you can talk to them. Also, the counselors, they also have a dual classroom that meets all day. You can just jump in and if you have any questions, if you have any worries, you can just go in and talk to them.

By dual classrooms, Jocelyn was referring to Zoom spaces where students could log in and ask teachers or counselors questions. While Jocelyn was aware that she could ask her teachers and counselors for help, when asked if she did, she said, "no," noting

> No, we have one counselor for the entire school. And then for our grade, for the seniors, we have, I guess, a counselor, but she helps us specifically financially. So, she's the one that helps us the most with any questions that we have. She's just like our financial aid advisor.

Although Jocelyn knew that her school had a financial aid adviser that focused specifically on helping seniors with their college application process, she still chose to "go through it [herself] and figure it out."

Monica, in particular, shared that their counselor was "very good" but "overworked," and as a result, some students often leaned on peer support for guidance:

> Our counselor, he's a very, very good. He's definitely overworked because of all the papers he has to do for us. But he helps us with anything that we need and a lot of times the seniors are the ones that help the, the younger groups, because they've been through it. And so now as a senior, I try to help freshmen. And so, it was the same thing for me as a freshman, usually it was like random seniors that would see I was struggling, and they'd step up for me.

Monica further elaborated:

> We know that our teachers are going through a lot, especially, my counselor, for example. He works very, very hard for what he does for us. And so, a lot of times we don't really like to bother them. Usually we'll only ask if it's, like, a really, really important thing that we need to know or like, let's say the computer messes up, then we'll go ask. But other than that, we try to figure it out first by ourselves, then we ask our friends, and then we ask the teacher.

Similarly, Rose shared she did not like to rely on her counselor for help.

> I don't really like to rely on him, but he's always there if we have a question or need help with something. But I don't really like asking for help, or like reaching out to people, because I feel awkward. But, he's always there. He's always working. I think he's the one that works the most in that school.

Echoing other students' perceptions about their counselor, Destiny recommended that her ECHS invest in another counselor:

> [Our ECHS] only has one counselor for our school. And I think that making an investment to have another counselor would be so much helpful, because that one counselor has to worry about every grade level. Make sure they're all assigned for their classes. He has so many responsibilities, that he doesn't have enough time to make sure we're doing our work, or make sure we have scholarships, or make sure we have opportunities. You get me? So, I can't really blame him either because it's not his fault. If I had the workload he has, I would not be there. I couldn't.

Destiny's recommendation was odd considering that students had a "financial aid advisor" who focused solely on seniors. Destiny's recommendation, along with the reflections of other students, suggest they did not see their financial aid advisor as key in helping them with the college-going process.

In sum, while participants were quick to acknowledge the impact of a supportive culture at their ECHS, some were hesitant to reach out for help because they believed their counselor and teachers were overworked and understaffed. These beliefs meant that students would either choose to navigate the college-going process on their own or, as reflected in Monica's story, seek help from older ECHS students. Moreover, the fact that some students knew they had access to a financial aid advisor but did not actively go to her for help suggests students might have needed additional guidance and tools to build relationships with institutional agents and ask for help. Taken as a whole, the experiences of participants suggest that even when students know they have access to help and recognize its value, they may not always feel empowered to ask for and receive help because of internalized beliefs.

"Our School Did Focus a Lot on FAFSA"

A goal of ECHSs is to reduce college barriers for underrepresented students in higher education. Understanding how students intend to finance their postsecondary goals after ECHS is an especially important component in reducing barriers to college access. In listening to students' stories, I learned that nearly all students were looking for a job to pay for college. Six students (i.e., Alexa, Destiny, Gregory, Jocelyn, Monica, and Rose) indicated they intended to work and attend college at the same time and one student (i.e., Alyssa) shared she intended to work and eventually go to college. However, beyond completing the FAFSA/TASFA and submitting scholarships, participants' narratives suggest they were not receiving much guidance from their ECHS on how to pay for college. Because the school largely focused on the FAFSA/TASFA applications, students who intended to work to pay for college were left in the dark about how to look for a job and how to leverage their associate degree to get better pay and work experience. For example, when describing his school's emphasis on the FAFSA, Gregory shared:

> They drilled hard, "Get your FAFSA done." We dedicated easily, like three months to getting FAFSA students registered because a lot of kids, either they weren't connecting, they were

> having problems with the internet or the computer, they didn't know enough about computers. So, it was a challenge, the pandemic was a challenge, but our school did focus a lot on FAFSA and helping us get our application done with ApplyTexas.

Monica shared a similar response to that of Gregory's:

> [The FAFSA] was something that they were very, very adamant about. They stressed it to us before it even opened. They were just constantly mentioning it. We had meetings with our counselors and our advisors about it before it opened. So, they were very pushy on that one.

Scarlett shared that even students who had no intention to go to college were also required to complete FASFA: "Even if we're not going to go to college, they require us to do FAFSA and get into [the local public university]. Even if [our] plans are no college, we still have to get accepted."

While ECHS personnel were adamant about helping students complete the FAFSA/TASFA application, participants noted less support in helping them find a job to fund their education. For example, when I asked Jocelyn how she planned to pay for college, she shared that she would be looking for a summer job because the scholarships she had applied to and received were not enough to cover costs. She was considering working at a clothing store because she did not have the "patience" to work at a fast-food restaurant. Jocelyn, however, admitted that she "didn't even know where to start." She shared that her school mostly helped students with scholarships and financial aid but that they "didn't really mention a lot of job-like related things" to them. "They're just very heavy on the scholarships and just applying to them," she shared, "but they don't really mention anything else about like if you don't get them."

Alexa shared similar sentiments to that of Jocelyn:

> [ECHS personnel] talked about loans and they talked about FASFA but that's as much as if they ever talked about. They focus more on the FASFA…They mostly focus on the application itself and choosing the right school, and stuff like that, and essays and they talk about scholarships too.

Alyssa, a student looking to work part-time at a clothing store like Walmart or Target to pay for college, shared that she "needed to do more research" as to what she could do with her degree. In talking about

jobs to pay for college and how to leverage her associate degree for better pay, she particularly shared that she would have appreciated hearing from ECHS alumni about their own career pathways:

> I'd like to know where [and] what they ended up [doing] and did they end up where they wanted to, when, what they had to do to get there and stuff. But, um, no, we didn't actually have any of those [panels] unfortunately this year.

Although Southside ECHS did invite alumni to come speak to students, Alyssa shared that these alumni panels were more about alumni's transition from ECHS to college, which she found really helpful, but did not credit for helping her understand how to pay for college or look for job opportunities.

Gregory was also looking for a job; however, his process came with an extra layer of complexity. As an undocumented student, Gregory felt like he had limited opportunities and was relying on getting a job to pay for college. When I asked Gregory if his school had offered him any assistance with searching for scholarships, he responded:

> Yes, [the financial advisor] helps us in the way that she compiles a document with different scholarships, and she sends it out as a class message. We have a Google Classroom, and she posts an announcement every month. She says, "Okay, these are the monthly scholarships." And there's a bunch of them. I've applied to quite a few of them, or at least I've tried to because for me, I can't apply to scholarships that require FAFSA because I don't qualify. And that is like 99% of the scholarships that the financial advisor posts. So, I tell her and they're like, "We're going to find something for you." I haven't found it and they haven't updated me on it.

When I asked him what kind of job he was looking for, he responded:

> If I have to, I'll go to the flea market happily. I know my way around it, but I am hoping to get my [DACA]... I recently submitted, back in March, I submitted my DACA form, which will basically give me a work permit. So, [my family and I] are hoping I get my work permit so that I can go and work for a retail store or work in fast food, because you can't work there if you don't have either a green card or a US citizenship. I have neither. So, if I get it, I'm going to apply to my local HEB [a grocery store]. It's like five minutes away, or if I have to go to Walmart, or if I

> have to, I'll do both at the same time. I have gotten that into my head. I might have to work twice, but it's okay, I like the money. I want the money. Those are the jobs that I ideally want. If not, then I'll go to the flea market, it's fine. And other than that, there's really no other place where I can go to. Again, I am limited to my circumstances.

Gregory shared that his "school didn't really stress" to students how to get a job. "They only said like, 'Oh, yeah. Get a job if you want to save up money,' but they didn't really provide a document with job applications. That was not their focus," he explained.

Destiny and Alexa were the only participants who mentioned the possibility of work study, which provides part-time jobs to undergraduate students with financial need to help them finance educational expenses. Highly interested in doing work study, Destiny shared her confusion over this option:

> I called [the college] and when they gave me my um, I don't know if it's called financial aid report, there's something, it's called something. When they gave me that, they didn't offer me work study. So, I was confused. I was like, why didn't I get it? Because I got it at like all the other schools. So, I called, and he told me that you have to go get the job [first]. And once they've given you the job, the manager gives you a form and you take that form to verify that you got the job, and that you are working. Because they would give the work study to students and they wouldn't work. And they were basically like getting the money and they weren't working.

At first, Destiny was considering working part-time at a local Starbucks, but then she learned "that it's probably better for you to get a job that's going to help you in your career."

> Somebody told me [she later remembered it was her friend from another STEM school] that it's best to find a job that's going to help you in your career. So that you can put it on your application. People see like, "oh, she worked at this clinic and she didn't just work at a Starbucks."

When I asked Destiny how her friend knew about this she responded:

> Because at her school, the teachers there and the counselors, they give them opportunities. Like they tell them about different things. And I think that's where she gets everything, and she just relays it back to me. And then I take off and start figuring it out.

This new information changed Destiny's mind about where she wanted to work while in college. Destiny who was interested in attending medical school in the future was now thinking about using her receptionist certification to work at a clinic.

Like Destiny, Monica was also seeking a job for two reasons: "to pay for school and to get experience." Monica's perception on getting a job was also similar to that of Destiny's in that they were both determined to get a job that would not only help them pay for college but also serve as a stepping stone for their future careers. Monica explained that her lived experience as an assistant to a Mary Kate saleswoman before the pandemic made her realize that experience was important in the "real world."

> I know that going into the real world, yes, education is important. It's good to have a degree labeled on there, but a lot of times they won't hire you if you don't have experience. And so like I understand that and I want to get that experience as soon as possible, fill out that resume as much as possible, beef it up, you know what I mean?

When I asked Monica if her ECHS had provided any guidance on work opportunities, she responded, "Honestly, I do not believe they do. They have at least not mentioned anything to me or posted anything from what I know of." Monica learned about the importance of work experience through her own lived experience as an assistant and was leaning on "people in the community" and her dad's co-workers and connections to learn about work and internship openings. These connections helped her get her "foot in the door for a possible internship with the bank."

In short, based on students' stories, their school focused largely on FAFSA/TASFA and scholarships, leaving many to navigate the job search on their own. Altogether, participants' stories suggest they would have liked more guidance on how to look for jobs and what kind of jobs to look for to leverage long-term goals. As reflected by some students, financial aid and scholarships are often not

enough to pay for college, and in some cases, scholarships may be restricted to only those who are U.S. citizens—thereby, limiting who can benefit from these opportunities. In the absence of reliable information and support, similar to what occurred during the Getting Through period, some participants turned to their familial and community networks, which I discuss next.

"Make Sure You go to a School that Prepares You. Do Your Research. Choose Wisely"

In an earlier section, I mentioned how participants' familial and community networks helped them get through ECHS. Participants' stories indicate that they also leaned on these social networks to get across, specifically participants leaned on these networks for college and career support and advice. Alexa, for example, leaned on her family for college planning support. To elaborate, when I asked Alexa how she planned to pay for college, she shared that her family had collectively formed a plan to help her pay the remaining cost of college not covered by FAFSA and scholarships:

> So, what my mom's side of the family is doing…they're all going to pitch in to pay for my education my grandma, grandpa, Tía, Tío, and parents. So, one of them is going to do room and board and food. The other ones [will] do books [and] my parents are doing tuition. We have to pay $5,000 out of pocket. So, my parents have been saving a lot.

Related to career advice, Alexa shared that her Tía had advised her to select a college that would prepare her for the MCAT exam—the standardized test needed to enroll in medical school, which was Alexa's long-term goal. Although her Tía was not a doctor or in medical school, she had personally witnessed a friend feel unprepared for the MCAT and wanted to make sure that Alexa was selecting a college that would help meet her get into medical school.

> During my freshman and sophomore year of high school, my Tía got her degree for teaching. [While in college], she befriended a person [who] was pre-med and getting prepared for the MCAT…Her friend was going to transfer to medical school at [university name], and her friend would go endless nights crying because she didn't feel prepared. So [my Tía] was like, "make sure you go to a school that prepares you. Do your research. Choose wisely."

Alexa also got career advice from her family doctor who also happened to be her dad's best friend. Reflecting on the advice her family doctor had given her, Alexa shared: "She was like, 'do your research. Be wise about choosing where you want to go. Make sure they prepare you for the MCAT because the MCAT is harder than any other exam you're ever going to take.'" Following the advice she had been given, Alexa explained that she "dug deep with every school" and ultimately selected a college that "showed results of how their [pre-med] students did academically." Her family doctor's advice, coupled with her Tía's advice, also influenced Alexa's intended major for college:

> I chose biomedical sciences [as my major], because that was the only major that allowed me to go into pre-med. It gives me the classes I would need to take in order to be prepared for the MCAT and be prepared for medical school. I marked pre-med, and they're going to give me the courses I need to take so I can be prepared to transition to medical school and apply for it.

Other participants also praised their Tías for helping them navigate college and career plans. Destiny and Alyssa specifically described the role their Tías played in supporting their educational and long-term career goals. Destiny's Tía, for example, would take her to visit college campuses and encouraged her to apply to out-of-state colleges, while Alyssa's aunt—a teacher at an early childhood center—provided her with the opportunity to shadow her class, which inspired Alyssa to pursue a teaching career.

Gregory also credited his family and community networks for connecting him to information that could help him pay for college. Specifically, Gregory shared he had been leaning on his family, friends, and a community organization for guidance on the DACA application, which would help him obtain a work permit to pay for college. He explained the situation:

> We were going to apply as soon as I turned 15 or 16, but then the Trump administration came in and they shut down DACA, and well, we were kind of bummed out about it, because it was my opportunity and it was taken away, but then as soon as the Supreme Court decided in 2020 that it had to go back up, we were hopeful again, and we're like, "Okay, let's get working on it." And we went to an [community] organization. They help you with the DACA applications and we

were going to do it as soon as it opened up. We do have some friends whose children got DACA before it was shut down. They got their work permits and they also helped us out. They're like, "Okay, they're going to ask for this. You're going to need to give this." So, it was a mix between friends and [the community organization]. [The community organization] was a very central part in getting the documents and sending it out.

At the time of the interview, Gregory said he was hopeful that he would one day be able to submit his DACA application, which would provide him the opportunity to legally work and earn more money to pay for college.

Collectively, participants' stories illuminated the positive relationships and influential role their familial and community members played on their college-going process. Participants tapped into these networks to plan and prepare for college after ECHS. These networks, in particular, linked students to college- and career-related information and other networks, enhancing and expanding their access to information, opportunities, and social networks beyond ECHS. Next, I discuss participants' conflicting experiences and viewpoints about their school's preparation for the ACT—a standardize test used by many higher education institutions to determine a students' college eligibility and admission.

"That Student Must Have Been Misinformed Because They Told Us from the Beginning That It was the Actual ACT"

A major component of the ECHS model is to increase students' college readiness. As mentioned in Chapter Two, college readiness has been traditionally measured by a students' GPA, college preparatory exam scores, course-taking patterns, and/or college admissions test scores. When seeking to understand students' ECHS experience, I found that participants had conflicting stories about their experience in taking the ACT—the standardized test used for college admissions. During our interview, Alexa shared that she had taken her ACT without knowing it was the real exam.

I took the ACT my junior year. I didn't take the SAT because we got exempted because of COVID so universities in Texas didn't require them. But I took my ACT…I didn't even know we were taking the ACT the day that we took it. They didn't tell us. There was no preparation for it.

> So, I didn't practice. It was crazy because it was the actual ACT, but we were taking it as a practice. So, I was like, "Oh, it's a practice exam no biggie." I took it, then we realized that it was the actual thing, I guess they just told us it was a practice [test] so that we wouldn't stress out because we didn't have time to prepare for it. So I was like, "That's a practice, no biggie"…A lot of students were mad. The valedictorian at the time…he got a 19. And he was mad. He was like "I got no preparation". He retook it and got a 25, but he chose to retake it.

Alexa got a 21 on her ACT and, at some point, considered retaking it, but ultimately decided not to after talking to a professor and realizing that many colleges and universities were exempting students from the ACT because of the pandemic. Given Alexa's story, I asked if this was a common practice at her ECHS. Alexa nodded her head and shared that her cousin who had graduated from the same ECHS a year prior to her had also had the same experience.

Curious to know if other participants had encountered the same experience as Alexa, I continued to ask participants this question and followed-up with students who I had interviewed previously. Six of the eight participants responded to my question (the other two students who I followed-up with did not respond). Of these six students who responded, Alyssa and Jocelyn agreed with Alexa's story, stating they also believed the ACT was a practice exam. Alyssa wrote back,

> Yes, this actually did happen to me where our administrators said "don't worry it's just practice" but then we all soon realized it was the actual exam. I was mad because I felt that if I were told it was real then I would've taken it more seriously and probably had studied and practiced before.

Jocelyn's response was similar to that of Alyssa's:

> I think that did happen to me too because I remember taking the ACT twice and the colleges I applied to took the score from my first exam. During that exam I was way too relaxed. I got caught up with time a few times. I thought during some portions I had more time and took my time when I got the times mixed up and ended up having to mark random answers.

When I asked Alexa, Alyssa, and Jocelyn if their school had provided resources for them to prepare for the ACT, only Jocelyn remembered her school offering support. "My school did offer prep courses and

packets to prepare us," Jocelyn wrote back to my follow-up question, "and I was going to do them but ended up not in the end and did just fine in my exam."

Gregory and Scarlett disagreed with Alexa's story and shared that they knew they were taking the real exam from the beginning. In a follow-up response, Gregory wrote back,

> I am fairly positive we were not tricked into taking the real exam under the impression that it was a practice run. First of all, that sounds illegal, but second, I do remember doing two runs of the ACT routine during my junior year. So, no, it didn't happen to me. They didn't offer any physical courses or workshops. Our counselor simply showed us where we could find online guides and practice tests for the ACT. Albeit it's not exactly something that many people took advantage of (me included), our school was very clear on their availability.

Scarlett's memory of the ACT aligns with that of Gregory, writing back:

> No, that student must have been misinformed because they told us from the beginning that it was the actual ACT test. They did [offer ACT prep course/workshops] but I did not focus too much on it because I scored well my first try, and I did not prep at all. Plus, most schools did not ask for ACT/SAT because of the pandemic so I'd say I was pretty lucky on that.

Unlike Gregory, Scarlett remembers her school offering ACT prep courses and workshops, but she did not take advantage of these resources because she was satisfied with her ACT score. Although Jocelyn, Gregory, and Scarlett remembered their school offering resources, their responses differed when asked about the resources that were available to them. Scarlett and Jocelyn both remembered their school offering prep courses while Gregory only remembered his school counselor informing them about online guides and practice tests that were available to them. Of the six participants, Monica was the only participant that did not recall ever taking the ACT or the SAT test. When asked if her school provided her with any resources to prepare for these exams, she responded:

> I don't think my school provided ACT/SAT prep courses or workshops, and if they did, I wasn't informed about it. Honestly, I could have also just overlooked it. I faintly remember some teachers giving us practice for the ACT/SAT through websites, but I wasn't too concerned about

it. I guess I just assumed I would do well in the exams since I was considered to be in the top of my classes for college and high school.

Whether students overlooked the resources available to them or were misinformed about the ACT, their conflicting responses indicate that the information provided to them was not sufficient or meaningful enough to remember or that it was provided too late along their college-going process.

Summary of Findings

Seeking to better understand students' ECHS experiences in relation to college going, two central questions guided my study and analysis of students' narratives: How do Latinx/a/o students describe their early college high school (ECHS) experience? And what do Latinx/a/o ECHS students' experiences reveal about the factors that facilitate or hinder their college-going process? Speaking to the first question, participants largely praised their ECHS for affording them the opportunity save money and earn both a high school diploma and an associate degree. Their experiences widely showcased the types of opportunities and information afforded to them as they navigated being both high school and college students. Despite participants' overall abundant praise for the ECHS program, their narratives also revealed moments where they experienced mixed emotions, misinformation, and, in some cases, no information.

With regard to my second research question, I found that various factors facilitated and hindered students' college-going process. Using a temporal order, I organized these factors into three major themes, with each theme highlighting the people, activities, and interactions that influenced students' ECHS experiences in relation to college going. The first set of factors were organized to describe participants' transition from middle school to ECHS (Getting In). This theme mainly highlighted the challenges that participants faced as they transitioned from high school classes to advanced college-level courses and as they picked a major for ECHS. The second set of factors illuminated participants' experiences as they worked to balance the expectations and workload of ECHS (Getting Through). This theme centered the skills, lessons, and coping mechanisms that students adopted as they navigated ECHS and brought to light how important peer support and accountability was for students. The third set of

factors focused on how participants were navigating postsecondary goals and the college application process (Getting Across). This theme details the influential role of teachers in students' college and career aspirations and outlines participants' changing perspectives about college as result of attending an ECHS. Further, it documents incidents in which students encountered limited information and/or misinformation while navigating the college application process. For both the Getting Through and Getting Across themes, I highlighted the varied ways participants leaned on their familial and community networks. While these networks were not always a central feature in students' ECHS experiences, they, nonetheless, played a role in participants' college-going process. Participants, in particular, leaned on these networks when they did not have access to timely and/or reliable information, opportunities, and support in their educational environment. In the next chapter, I discuss my findings in relation to my conceptual frameworks and outline implications and recommendations based on my findings.

CHAPTER FIVE: DISCUSSION

Introduction

In this final chapter, I use my conceptual frameworks to interpret my findings, making connections between students' experiences in ECHS and the literature. I then discuss the implications of this study and offer recommendations for policy, practice, and future research. Before I discuss my findings within the context of my conceptual frameworks, I first provide a recap of my study and a summary of my findings.

Review of Study and Summary of Findings

The purpose of this critical narrative methodology study was to gain a better understanding of Latinx/a/o students' ECHS experiences in relation to college going. Specifically, I asked:

1. How do Latinx/a/o students describe their early college high school (ECHS) experience?
    a. What do Latinx/a/o students' ECHS experiences reveal about the factors that facilitate or hinder their college-going process?

Based on students' experiences and reflections, I identified various factors that impacted their college-going process, which I organized into three major themes using a temporal order. Each of these themes represented experiences that I found in students' stories, starting with their experiences as they transitioned from middle school to ECHS (Getting In) and then as they adjusted to the expectations and workload of ECHS (Getting Through), followed by their experiences and aspirations as they transitioned out of ECHS (Getting Across).

As summarized in Chapter 4, participants described both the benefits and challenges they encountered along their ECHS journey. Their experiences in relation to college going specifically revealed moments they experienced mixed emotions, misinformation, and, at times, no information. Collectively, participants' narratives demonstrate that their ECHS experiences are co-dependent on the information, resources, and opportunities embedded in their various environments. Additionally, these experiences are co-dependent on how participants interpret and act on these sources of information, resources, and information, which I discuss in more detail next.

Interpretation of Findings

In Chapter 2, I explained how I would be combining elements of Tierney and Venegas's (2009) cultural-ecological framework and Iloh's (2018, 2019) ecological model of college-going decisions and trajectories to examine students' ECHS experiences. Briefly, Tierney and Venegas's (2009) model outlines four overlapping environments that can influence students' experiences: educational, out-of-class, familial, and community. Iloh's (2018, 2019) model by contrast does not outline specific contexts. However, it addresses critiques of ecological models, which tend to be too broad and complex, by specifically highlighting three dimensions that can impact college going for students: information, time, and opportunity. Combined, these frameworks capture the ongoing interplay between students' environments and the types of information and opportunities they have access to (or not) at different points of time.

Rather than attending to each of my research questions or my findings individually, I organized my discussion of findings using Tierney and Venegas's (2009) four overlapping environments. In each environment, I interweave Iloh's (2018, 2019) three dimensions of information, time, and opportunity. It is important to note that while these dimensions are interrelated and interdependent, I do not always discuss the dimensions collectively. Instead, because each dimension has specific insights worth unpacking, I often discuss dimensions separately, and when appropriate, highlight the interplay of dimensions. I begin with participants' educational environment, highlighting specifically the interplay between students' school district, ECHS, and Texas Technical College (TTC). Then, I focus on students' out-of-class environment and focus specifically on the opportunities that influenced their ECHS experiences. Finally, I combine the familial and community environments to showcase how social actors in these spaces worked to provide participants' access to college-related information and opportunities over time.

Educational Environment

As I explained in Chapter 2, the ECHS model is sustained through unique partnerships with local school districts, community organizations, and postsecondary institutions (Schwinn, 2017). It is no

surprise, then, to find that within participants' educational environment, three distinct, but overlapping educational entities existed—the ECHS, the school district, and the partnered higher education institution. As participants navigated these entities, they found themselves in dialogue with various institutional actors, including ECHS teachers, TTC professors, counselors, peers, and their ECHS social worker. Using Iloh's (2018, 2019) dimensions, in this section, I center some of these interactions. First, I describe the tensions students navigated between educational entities, bringing to light how these tensions affected students' transition to ECHS. Second, I discuss the information gaps students experienced along their college-going process and how it affected their perceptions as they selected a major, looked for a job, and took the ACT. Finally, I highlight how the opportunity to attend an ECHS expanded students' perceived opportunities.

Tensions Between Educational Entities

Participants' stories of transition and adjustment, as discussed in Chapter 4, illuminated the cultural differences between educational entities, which often led to "clashes and inconsistencies" in students' ECHS experiences (Mollet et al., 2020, p. 239). Aligned with the literature on ECHS student experiences (i.e., Duncheon, 2020; Thompson & Ongaga, 2011; Locke & McKenzie, 2016), I found that diverging norms, values, and expectations between ECHS teachers and TTC professors and between Southside ECHS and the school district often limited the extent to which participants could fully navigate the college-going process. I elaborate on these tensions next.

Tension Between ECHS Teachers and TTC Professors. Participants' stories suggest that varying norms and expectations between ECHS teachers and TTC professors made it hard for them to adjust to the standards expected of college students. For example, Gregory and Jocelyn believed that their 9th grade high school teachers' practices of letting them turn in assignments late hindered their ability to prepare for the rigor and expectations of college-level courses. Relatedly, nearly all participants shared how they struggled to balance the expectations and workload of high school and college. Some participants described this struggle as a "constant battle," explaining that high school teachers would tell them to focus on graduating high school, while college professors would tell them to focus on completing

their associate degree. In sum, conflicting expectations and messages from ECHS and TTC personnel on what is important served as a hindrance in students' college-going process, as it left many students feeling confused and unable to balance the expectations and rigor of both systems.

Taking into consideration Iloh's (2018, 2019) dimension of information, students found themselves navigating through what she terms "institutional" or subjective information. This institutional information came in forms of clashing recommendations from high school and college professors. These tensions made it difficult for students to balance the expectations and workload of their educational environments. Ironically, in their struggle to adapt to college-level courses, many participants found themselves asking for extensions on assignments—a practice they seemed to do more with ECHS teachers than TTC professors, perhaps because their high school teachers had previously allowed them to turn in assignments late (as reflected by Gregory and Jocelyn's stories). The mixed expectations and messages that students received from institutional agents demonstrate not only the varying and colliding values between K–12 and higher education educators but also the weight that these mixed expectations and messages placed on students. The time dimension in Iloh's (2018, 2019) model also allowed me to see how norms and practices established in students' first year of ECHS can transcend over time, potentially affecting students' performance in the classroom and, more generally, their college-going process.

Tension Between Southside ECHS and the School District. Participants' stories also illuminated tensions between Southside ECHS's culture and the more rigid structures of the school district. Specifically, students' experiences seemed to suggest that their ECHS had a "sink and swim" type of culture (Duncheon, 2020, p. 188) in which students had to learn the importance of noncognitive skills like time management and self-discipline through personal trial and error. Based on Gregory and Destiny's accounts, it appeared that ECHS personnel implicitly expected proactiveness among students and only placed "pressure" on students who needed reminders to turn in assignments. In some ways, as Duncheon (2020) points out in her study on the socialization of ECHS students, this type of culture allowed students to "exercise academic independence" (p. 187). In contrast to Southside ECHS's culture,

the school district had more rigid policies and expectations. One example is how the district mandated that all students needed to apply to three higher education institutions and five scholarships in order to graduate. Though intended to encourage students to have college options and several sources of funding, such micromanagement neglected to consider the contextual realities, or as Cox (2016) terms the "complicated conditions," of students' lives. Gregory's DACA story, for example, offers an important counter narrative to the implementation of rigid policies that do not account for the structural barriers that students face as they make postsecondary decisions. In times of change or uncertainty like the pandemic, rigid policies can be especially problematic. In sum, tensions between Southside ECHS's culture and the more rigid structures of the school district served as a hindrance, perhaps making it difficult for students to truly feel like they were navigating the college-going process. On the one hand, they were expected to act as college students (ECHS culture), but, on the other hand, they were also expected to follow rigid mandates that did not consider their contextual realities.

The dimension of information (Iloh 2018, 2019) provides a useful lens to examine the ECHS's culture. To elaborate, based on students' stories, it appeared that ECHS personnel implicitly expected proactiveness among students, only placing pressure on students who needed that additional encouragement. However, while participants' stories demonstrated that they had engaged in self-growth and self-awareness to manage responsibilities, they still struggled to balance the expectations and workload of college and high school. When asked if resources or guidance had been provided, many said no. Thus, simply having an understanding of these skills did not mean they had the information or knowledge to convert the noncognitive skills they found important into action. In this sense, students experienced an information desert, or a lack of information, on how to convert their understanding of noncognitive skills into practice to effectively navigate the college-going process. Richards (2022) argues that there is a need for schools to "explicitly and systematically" teach specialized knowledge, or "information about how to gain access to resources" (p. 241). Similarly, my findings show that there is a need for schools to provide information and opportunities for students to actively build and hone their skills.

The dimension of opportunity also helps to understand the tension with the school district's policies. Specifically, based on students' accounts, it seemed like their school district wanted them to apply to a certain number of schools so they could increase their chances of getting into a school. They also wanted students to apply to scholarships so they could pay for college. While some students recognized the well intentions of these policies, their contextual realities limited how they perceived this opportunity. Some students' financial, political, and geographical concerns limited how they perceived the school district's policy. As illustrated by Jocelyn, some students just applied to schools to meet the school's requirement. While other students discussed how little scholarships they had received and, thus, were seeking to find part-time jobs to pay for college (an information desert I describe later in this chapter).

Taken together, the diverging norms, values, and expectations that students experienced between educational entities suggest that simply exposing students to college-level courses is not enough for them to fully assume their college student role. Congruency in messaging and expectations across all educational entities is equally important.

Information Gaps in the College-Going Process

In addition to tensions between educational entities, my findings point to how a lack of information can affect students' ability to make informed decisions as they navigate their college-going process. In line with research on the Latinx/a/o college-going process (e.g., Chlup et al., 2019; Liou et al., 2009; Martinez & Deil-Amen, 2015; O'Connor et al., 2010; Vega, 2018), I found that participants had to navigate through various forms of information deserts and information asymmetries, meaning participants often did not have access to reliable college-related information and, sometimes even when they did, they did not take of advantage of the opportunities afforded by this information. To recap, information deserts—described within the information dimension in Iloh's (2018, 2019) model—suggest students are unable to access or find clear and comprehensive information about college or the college-going process. Information deserts can contribute to information asymmetries, a condition that leaves some students having access to better, more reliable, and up-to-date information (Iloh, 2021). In this section, I address

how information deserts and information asymmetry in students' educational environment affected their perceptions about higher education and career opportunities as they selected a major, looked for a job, and took the ACT. I elaborate on each of these below.

Information Desert: Selecting a Major. Participants' stories on how they selected an ECHS major suggest they would have benefitted from additional support and guidance. My review of the ECHS Blueprint, which contains foundational principles and benchmarks that all ECHS must meet, as well as my review of the school's application to become (and renew) their ECHS designation, did not mention a process or any guidance on how to help students select a major. Southside's ECHS public website also did include any links or information on how to help students select a major or explore careers related to their major. Instead, participants found themselves in an information desert—unable to access clear and reliable information. As I discussed in Chapter 4, participants largely chose their ECHS major through three different processes: a process of elimination, a process of career–major association, or a combination of the two. Notably, the processes that students took to select a major signaled that they had a limited understanding of the type of careers available to them. For example, nearly all participants (i.e., Alexa, Alyssa, Destiny, Jocelyn, Scarlett) who chose to major in biology in 9th grade associated their major solely with becoming a medical doctor. The lack of information on how to pick a major and what STEM careers were possible with each major led students to rely on their own, but often limited, understanding of STEM career opportunities. My findings indicate that students would have benefitted not only from more information about how to choose a major but also from more opportunities to learn about the type of STEM careers available and the requirements to pursue these careers.

In the absence of reliable information on how to select a major, some students relied on the "recommendations" or "warnings" of older ECHS students. Iloh (2018, 2019) terms this "institutional information" or subjective information, which, in some cases, influenced what major students chose. For instance, as I shared in Chapter 4, Monica sought guidance from an ECHS senior on what to major and decided not to major in interdisciplinary studies after she was warned that her school "discriminate[d] against interdisciplinary majors." She was told that interdisciplinary studies majors were often

"overlooked" because they were not considered "STEM based" majors. Fearing this would happen to her, Monica avoided majoring in interdisciplinary studies, ultimately picking her major on a "whim." Scarlett who majored in biology also admitted that other students influenced her not to major in engineering, sharing she had been warned it would be hard. As referenced by other scholars (e.g., Farmer-Hinton, 2008; Pérez & McDonough, 2008), an over reliance on peers to gather college-related information can increase the likelihood of misinformation and misconceptions about available opportunities and options. Indeed, participants' willingness to listen to peer recommendations and warnings in the absence of timely and accurate information about majors illustrates this point. The lack of reliable and timely information on how to choose a major and the type of STEM careers available acted as a hinderance in participants' college-going process—this was especially evident as four of the eight students disclosed they had either switched their major in ECHS or they would be switching to a different major once in college, potentially affecting their time to degree completion.

Information Desert: Looking for a Job. Participants also found themselves navigating information deserts as they looked for a job. As I explained in Chapter 4, nearly all participants intended to work as a way to pay for college. However, it seemed—based on students' accounts—that their ECHS was more focused on ensuring that students completed the FAFSA/TASFA application than helping students find job to pay for college after ECHS. Recalling Scarlett's statement, even students who had no intention to go to college were required to complete the FAFSA. Other students also shared that their ECHS was "heavy on the scholarships" (Jocelyn). The school's central focus on completing the FAFSA/TASFA and applying to scholarships, however, neglected to consider other ways students could also pay for college. Iloh's (2018, 2019) dimension of opportunity reveals that students were seeking to work part-time as a means to afford college after ECHS. From their perspectives, they viewed working as a viable option to pay for college when financial aid was not enough. When asked about the kind of jobs they were looking for, some students like Jocelyn and Alyssa did not know where to start. Only two students, Destiny and Alexa, mentioned the possibility of work study. However, Destiny was confused about how it worked, and Alexa did not follow-up on the possibility of doing work study—instead, Alexa

was going to rely on her family's financial support to help her pay "$5,000 out-of-pocket." Finally, only two students, Destiny and Monica, were seeking jobs to help them build their skills and knowledge for their career aspirations. Destiny who at first intended to work at a Starbucks later realized through a friend from another STEM school that she could use her receptionist certification to work at a clinic. Monica, who had previously worked as a saleswoman, realized she needed a part-time job that would help her not only pay for college but also build her resume.

Notably absent from participants' job search narratives was their ECHS's (and TTC's) advice on how to look for a job, what type of jobs to look for, and how to leverage their associate degree (or certifications) to get better pay and work experience. The kind of job students get while in college could expand opportunity structures overtime. For example, in their study on the meaning of work among Latino college students, Núñez and Sansone (2016) found that beyond financial capital, certain jobs can help students develop transferable skills, build relationships and community, and navigate the university better—meaning that students' work experiences can help students cultivate various forms of capital (e.g., social, cultural, navigational). The findings of my study suggest that understanding how students intend to finance their postsecondary education beyond FASFA/TASFA and scholarships is critically important as it can help educational entities better support, advice, and guide students. To be clear, I am not suggesting that a school should not focus on the FASFA/TASFA application. In fact, research shows that students and families who receive assistance and information on how to complete the FAFSA are significantly more likely to attend college and receive aid (Bettinger et al., 2009). Rather, my point and emphasis here is that students often seek to work while in college as a way to pay for their educational expenses and thus need more information and guidance as they navigate this process, especially as research shows that meaningful work opportunities can influence the opportunities and networks students have access to in college and beyond (Núñez & Sansone, 2016). A lack of information on how to pay college beyond the FASFA/TASFA and scholarships acted as a barrier to participants' ability to make informed decisions about how to best finance their postsecondary education, hindering students' college-going process.

Information Asymmetry: Taking the ACT. As participants navigated the college application process, they shared conflicting stories about their experiences in taking the ACT. Collectively, their stories signaled that they were navigating forms of misinformation, which contributed to information asymmetry. As I noted in Chapter 4, some participants (Alexa, Alyssa, and Jocelyn) shared that they took their ACT thinking it was a practice exam; however, other students (Gregory and Scarlett) said they knew it was the real exam. Alyssa specifically remembered ECHS administrators telling her not to "worry" about the ACT because "it's just [a] practice [exam]." Contradicting Alyssa's experience, Scarlett believed those students must have been "misinformed" because they had been told "from the beginning that it was the actual ACT test." While it could have been that ECHS administrators told students not to worry about the exam as a way to reduce their anxiety over the test, students like Alyssa interpreted their message as the ACT not being the "real" exam. Information asymmetry on the ACT left those who thought the test was just a practice exam feeling unprepared. Alyssa, in particular, admitted she would have taken it "more seriously and probably [would have] studied" if she had known it was the real exam, while Jocelyn remembered being "too relaxed" during the exam, which led her to run out of time. These findings suggest that even when information is available, how students interpret and act on this information is equally important.

Participants also shared conflicting responses when asked if their ECHS had provided them with any resources to help them prepare for the ACT. Alexa and Alyssa did not recall their school providing them with any ACT resources. Gregory, Jocelyn, Monica, and Scarlett all remembered their school offering resources; however, their responses differed when asked about the kind of resources available to them. More notably, when asked if they took advantage of these resources, they all said no. This supports the findings of Sanchez et al. (2015) and Chlup et al. (2019) showing that even when information is relayed, some students may not find it as meaningful or informative to act on it. Iloh's (2018, 2019) dimensions of information, opportunity, and time all played a role in how students responded to the information asymmetries of the ACT. To elaborate, my findings signal that even when information and opportunities were available to students, they did not always act on it because of preconceived notions

about the ACT or the timing of opportunities. For instance, Monica assumed she would do well on the ACT because she was a high-performing student (i.e., preconceived notions), while others like Alexa and Scarlett were not concerned about the ACT because they knew colleges and universities were waiving ACT scores due to the pandemic (i.e., timing of opportunity). Information asymmetry on the ACT, along with participants' preconceived notions of opportunity and the timing of opportunities, meant that some participants were left feeling unprepared to take the ACT, while others did not take advantage of the resources available to help them prepare for the ACT. While it is true that many colleges and universities were not taking the ACT the year that participants navigated the college application process, my findings, along with Iloh's (2018, 2019) dimensions, point to how the context of opportunity and information may look different for ECHS students over time, and especially as they navigate the college-going process. Students' conflicting understandings about the ACT, to some extent, hindered their ability to take advantage of some of the resources available to them.

Taken together, my findings suggest that students lacked information on how to select a major and look for a job. While participants did share receiving information on the ACT, their stories reveal that they interpreted and acted on this information differently, contributing to information asymmetry along their college-going process. As reflected through students' conflicting ACT experiences, even when information was accessible and available, they did not always act on it because of preconceived notions and the timing of opportunities.

Perceived Expansion of Opportunities

As I mentioned in Chapter 2, research on the effectiveness of the ECHS model has shown variation, but findings generally show positive experiences and outcomes for ECHS students (e.g., AIR & SRI, 2009; Berger et al., 2013; Calhoun et al., 2019; Duncheon, 2020; Edmunds et al., 2010; Kaniuka & Vickers, 2010; Lauen et al., 2017; McDonald & Farrell, 2012; Sáenz & Combs, 2015; Schaefer & Rivera, 2016). In line with these studies, evidence from my study also shows variation; however, students' narratives for the most part also suggested that attending an ECHS presented them with positive opportunities that, in turn, influenced their college-going mindsets, decisions, and trajectories. First, the

positive and meaningful relationships students described having with ECHS teachers helped cultivate and nourish students' educational and career aspirations. In some cases, participants described their teachers as their "role model" and expressed wanting to emulate the care and advice they had received to their own students in the future. Integrating the information and perceived opportunity components from Iloh's (2018, 2019) model shows that students valued the information (i.e., recommendations and advice) they received from ECHS teachers, inspiring some to pursue certain careers and others to pursue graduate school down the road. In both cases, the positive and meaningful relationships students had with ECHS teachers allowed them to envision a future in which they could pursue their educational and/or career goals. This, in turn, facilitated students' college-going process, propelling them to think about their future goals as items that were tangible and possible.

More generally, students' stories revealed that attending an ECHS both positively and negatively shaped or changed their outlook about college. A majority of students, however, noted the positive opportunities that attending an ECHS afforded them, with many sharing how they no longer believed college was scary or unattainable. For students like Gregory and Jocelyn, it provided them an environment to think about their future, ultimately influencing them to continue their postsecondary education after ECHS. Iloh's (2018, 2019) dimensions of opportunity and time showcase how having access to college-level courses, for example, can change and shape students' perceived realities about college over time. For students who began ECHS with negative preconceived notions about college, attending an ECHS helped clarify and address these notions by providing students the opportunity to gain a better understanding about how to register for classes and how to manage coursework, for example. Collectively, attending an ECHS, for the most part, facilitated students' insights about college, demystifying their previous negative thoughts about college and motivating them to continue their postsecondary education.

Out-of-Class Environment

In seeking to understand participants' ECHS experiences, I found that participants' out-of-class interactions with peers and institutional agents (e.g., teachers, academic counselor, financial aid

counselor, and social worker) influenced the type of information and opportunities to which they had access. In this section, I first bring to light students' (a) out-of-class communication with peers, highlighting specifically the important role of digital platforms in students' out-of-class environment, and then I discuss students' (b) out-of-class communication with institutional agents, problematizing students' hesitancy to reach out to them for help. In both cases, I highlight the (missed)opportunities I found in students' out-of-class environment in relation to their college-going process.

Out-of-Class Communication with Peers

As I discussed in Chapter 4, all participants underscored the importance of peer relationships, sharing they leaned on each other for support, accountability, and validation. Some participants, specifically, highlighted the important role of digital platforms in their communication with peers. Participants, in particular, referenced their use of WhatsApp (an instant messaging tool) and Facetime (a video and audio chatting platform) as a way to share notes, reminders, and information with one another. For example, Alyssa shared how she used WhatsApp to send reminders to peers about due dates. Alexa said she used WhatsApp as a way to share "pointers" on assignments, and Scarlett used Facetime to "catch up on work" with friends. Participants' stories about their use of digital platforms not only brings to light the intersection between students' out-of-class environment with their educational environment but also highlights how students navigated these spaces back-and-forth to manage the expectations and workload of ECHS. To elaborate, students used WhatsApp and Facetime not only to share and access critical information in real-time but also as a way to sustain a virtual learning space when in-person classes were not possible because of the pandemic. Said differently, participants' use of digital platforms encouraged them to build and sustain a sense of community, encouraging informal learning, peer collaboration, and emotional/social peer support (see Robinson et al., 2015 for similar findings at the undergraduate level). Iloh's (2018, 2019) dimensions of information, opportunity, and time were all particularly at play as peers found strategies (i.e., digital platforms) to share information during a difficult time. Students' out-of-class communication with peers facilitated their access to timely information,

helping them navigate the college-going process. However, as I note next, not all students had access to these spaces and opportunities.

While these digital platforms were useful and highly effective for students (based on their accounts), it is important to note that these digital spaces were created by the participants themselves, meaning that not all ECHS students benefitted from these spaces. Alexa, for example, shared that her WhatsApp group chat consisted of five peers. Because these virtual spaces were informally set up by peers (and not ECHS or TTC personnel), not all students had access to timely information and peer collaboration opportunities. However, as I will discuss next, even when ECHS personnel tried instituting different digital spatial opportunities, participants did not always take advantage of these spaces.

Out-of-Class Communication with Institutional Agents

While digital platforms worked for peer-to-peer interactions, these platforms seemed to be less effective in creating and sustaining student–teacher and student–counselor interactions. As I mentioned in Chapter 4, participants shared that ECHS personnel used Google Classroom as a virtual space to disseminate scholarship opportunities, host FASFA/TASFA workshops, and post college-related announcements. Scarlett, in particular, said her school used Remind (a classroom-friendly communication platform) so students could text teachers and teachers could send students messages. Despite Southside ECHS actively trying to engage students through various opportunities, participants frequently shared that they did not ask for help. For example, while a majority of students (Destiny, Gregory, Jocelyn, Monica, Rose) praised their counselor for his work and even called him "boss" out of endearment, they also expressed hesitation in reaching out, stating he was "overworked" (Monica) and had "enough on his plate" (Gregory). Participants expressed similar sentiments for teachers, too, sharing they did not want to "bother them" (Monica). Other students provided different reasons for not seeking help. Rose, for example, said she felt "awkward" asking for help and instead asked her cousin for assistance on the FAFSA. Jocelyn expressed feeling more comfortable reaching out to peers than TTC professors, and Gregory admitted he had to "work up courage" to go to his counselor and teacher for help. Iloh's (2018, 2019) dimension of opportunity demonstrates how perceived notions about opportunity, such as thinking

that their counselor is overworked, can overshadow the real opportunities being provided to students. In other words, while students acknowledged the various ways their school worked to provide them opportunities to ask for help, their own perceptions—whether true or not—influenced whether they took advantage of the opportunities afforded to them. The perceived notions students had about institutional agents hindered their ability to take advantage of the opportunities they, themselves, described were available to them.

Familial/Community Environments

Participants' stories revealed that social actors in their familial and community environments played a major role in nurturing and affirming students' ECHS experiences and postsecondary aspirations. These findings reinforce the extant literature on the importance of family and community members in Latinx/a/o students' educational pathways (see, for example González et al., 2003; Kimura-Walsh et al., 2009; Kiyama, 2010, 2011; Martinez, et al., 2013; Ozuna et al., 2016; Palomin, 2020; Sáenz et al., 2020). In this section, I first describe the evolving ways family members helped students along their college-going process. Then, I center one of these ways, bringing to light how family members actively leveraged community networks to help participants access college-related information and opportunities.

The Evolving Ways Family Members Helped Students

Scholars' work shows that families' involvement in students' college-going process can take on many forms and range from serving as roles models (Carolan-Silva and Reyes, 2013) to motivators by providing students *consejos* (or words of wisdom) (Ozuna et al., 2016; Paugh, 2018; Sáenz et al., 2020; Yosso, 2005). Aligned with this growing body of literature on families, my findings also show that families played a major role in helping students' college-going process. As Cabrera and Nasa (2001) noted in their study, I also found that family support took on two dimensions of support: one being motivational and the other being practical support. Further, I found that the roles of family members and the ways they supported students evolved, somewhat, over time. To elaborate, in applying Iloh's (2018, 2019) dimension of time to students' family support, I observed how the type of support and information that families gave to participants changed in relation to where the students found themselves in the

college-going process. For example, prior to ECHS, some participants shared that their families, including their parents, grandparents, and other extended family members, took on an instrumental role in conveying the importance of an education as a strong driver for social mobility. In other words, they acted as sources of motivational support. Once in ECHS, students' families continued to serve as sources of motivation; however, they also supported them through ordinary, everyday methods like car rides (e.g., practical support). Moreover, documenting the change of support over time through students' narratives, I found that as participants began to think about their educational and career goals, some *Tías*—who had attended college—also began to take a more active role in students' college-going process. Alexa's *Tía*, for example, advised her to select a college that would help her prepare for the MCAT exam, Destiny's *Tía* encouraged her to apply to out-of-state colleges and took her on college tours, and Alyssa' *Tía* invited her to shadow her class, which inspired Alyssa to pursue a teaching career. *Tías*, in my study, acted as educational advocates, providing students with college-related information to support and guide their aspirations. But for Sáenz and colleague's (2020) study on the powerful role of female family members on Latino students, the role of *Tías* in students' college-going process remains understudied. My study makes a unique contribution to the literature by highlighting the important role of *Tías* as educational advocates and the unique ways they guided students along their college-going process. Collectively, these examples show not only how family members' ways of support changed over time, but also how different family members played a role in students' college-going process over time. Moreover, these examples reveal that families acted as sources of support, information, and opportunity, facilitating students' college-going process.

Family Members Actively Leveraging Community Networks

It was evident in this study, as supported in the literature (Kiyama, 2010, 2011; Palomin, 2020; Paugh, 2018), that the college-going process for students was not an "individual endeavor but rather a family [and community] undertaking" (Sáenz et al., 2020, p. 341). Indeed, this collective endeavor was evident as family members actively leveraged community networks to help students access college- and career-related information and opportunities. For example, Alexa received career advice from her dad's

best friend who was a medical doctor, while Monica leaned on her dad's social network to connect her to internship opportunities in the community. Lost as to how to begin the DACA process, which would have granted Gregory work authorization to pay for college, Gregory and his family actively sought advice from community friends whose children had DACA and leaned on a community organization to help them complete the paperwork. In each of these examples, participants' families actively leveraged their community networks to empower students with timely information and resources. These networks, as Kiyama (2010) pointed out, "served as information channels and highlighted relationships built on trust that allowed for exchange of support and resources" (p. 342). On a conceptual level, this also ties to the dimension of information in Iloh's (2018) model. Specifically, the information dimension suggests that "the *who* and *how* of the message are significant" (Iloh, 2019, p. 5). The "messengers" in this case were individuals who students trusted, and, as a result, took their recommendations seriously. Taken together, participants' narratives reveal that the information and opportunities in their familial and community environments worked to supplement the often-limited information and guidance they received on career advice and jobs from their ECHS. This, in turn, helped facilitate students' college-going process.

Summary of Factors that Facilitate or Hinder College Going

Throughout the previous section, I weaved examples of how varied factors embedded in participants' ECHS experiences worked for or against their college-going process. Table 7 provides a summary of the factors that facilitated or hindered students' ECHS experiences in relation to college going. Listed in a temporal order, this summary of factors is meant to help ECHS leaders, partners, and policymakers consider how similar or different factors along students' college-going process can *cause* or *minimize* leakage points as students navigate ECHS and make postsecondary decisions. When looking at these factors, it is important to consider the context in which students were making decisions (e.g., a pandemic, Texas policy, border region).

Table 7

Factors that Facilitated or Hindered College Going Among ECHS Participants

Factors	Facilitated or Hindered	ECHS Experiences in Relation to College Going
Conflicting expectations and messages from ECHS and TTC personnel	Hindered	Left many students feeling confused and unable to balance the expectations and rigor of both high school and college
Lack of reliable and timely information on how to choose a major and the type of STEM careers available	Hindered	Forced students to follow their own, but limited, processes to select majors, while some students relied on subjective information and recommendations from older ECHS students
Tensions between Southside ECHS's culture and the more rigid structures of the school district	Hindered	Made it difficult for students to truly feel like they were navigating the college-going process
Use of digital platforms among peers to share notes, reminders, and information	Facilitated	Helped them built and sustain a sense of community, encouraging informal learning, peer collaboration, and emotional/social peer support and accountability
Family support through motivation and ordinary, everyday methods	Facilitated	Conveyed the importance of an education as a strong driver for social mobility and supported them students through ordinary, everyday methods. *Tías*, in particular, acted as educational advocates, providing students with college-related opportunities and information
Access to positive and meaningful relationships with ECHS teachers	Facilitated	Helped cultivate and nourish students' educational and career aspirations, propelling students to think about their future goals as tangible and possible
Attended an ECHS	Facilitated (and for one student Hindered)	Demystified their previous negative thoughts about college and motivated them to continue their postsecondary education (only one student felt like her experience at her ECHS made her second guess going to ECHS, explaining she felt burn out)

Table 7 (cont'd)

Perceived notions students had about institutional agents being busy and overworked, for example	Hindered	Less likely to ask for help and take advantage of the opportunities they, themselves, described were available to them
Lack of information on how to pay college beyond the FASFA/TASFA and scholarships	Hindered	Unable to make informed decisions about how to best finance their postsecondary education, leaving some students feeling lost about how to start looking for a job to pay for college
Families leveraged community networks	Facilitated	Worked to supplement the often-limited information and guidance they received on internships and other college-related opportunities from their ECHS
Conflicting understandings about the ACT	Hindered	Contributed to information asymmetry, leaving some students feeling unprepared to take the ACT, while others did not take advantage of the resources available to them because of perceived notions they had about the ACT

Contributions to the Field of Higher Education

Findings from this study contribute to the growing literature on ECHSs and add to the larger body of literature on Latinx/a/o students' college-going experiences. In this section, I broadly center five ways my study contributed to the field of higher education. First, I discuss my findings in the context of college going and argue there is a need to reconceptualize the framing of college going to include the holistic experiences of ECHS students. Here I also discuss the impact of the pandemic in relation to students' college-going process. Second, I discuss my findings in relation to attending a STEM-focused ECHS and argue that there is a need to explore how students are making sense of the opportunities associated with a STEM major. Third, I discuss the need to reconsider the traditional understanding of *familismo,* siding with Martinez (2013) on the need to interrogate how *familismo* is shaped by structural forces outside the family unit. Fourth, I explain the need to reconsider who ECHSs are really serving. Finally, I discuss my

findings in the context of my conceptual frameworks and highlight both the strengths and weaknesses of these frameworks. As part of this discussion, I offer two ways these conceptual frameworks can be enhanced.

Discussion of Findings in the Context of College Going

The findings in this study suggest a need to reconceptualize college going, especially for ECHS students. Scholars have repeatedly pointed out that planning for college begins as early as 8th grade (Cabrera & Nasa, 2000, 20001; Swail et al., 2005), with many students already having college and career aspirations by 9th grade (Hossler & Stage, 1992; Stage & Hossler, 1989). Yet, often when seeking to understand the college-going process, scholars narrowly focus on the latter years of high school, capturing the steps, processes, and/or choices that students make mainly their senior year. Given that ECHSs offer students an established pathway to earn an associate degree by the time they graduate high school, I approached my study with an understanding that I needed to consider students' ECHS experiences since enrollment. Because students who enroll at ECHSs straddle between two education systems (Brook, 2013), my reconceptualization of college going meant that I considered participants' ECHS experiences in relation to college going since 9th grade (as opposed to only 12th grade). In expanding the framing of college going to 9th grade, I was able to capture experiences that explained students' perceptions and decisions in 12th grade. For example, Rose's experience in changing majors throughout ECHS made her hyperaware of the possibility of her interests changing down the road, ultimately influencing where she went to college. Moreover, understanding students' transition process into ECHS also brought to light some of the foundational training and knowledge that students lacked to successfully navigate ECHS and, more specifically, college-level courses.

While the focus of this study was not about how the pandemic affected students' ECHS experiences, I would be remiss if I did not address the impact of the pandemic on students' college-going process. In general, participants' stories reveal that the pandemic made it harder for them to access information and resources from ECHS and TTC personnel. This led many participants to rely heavily on their peers for guidance and information. However, as some scholars (e.g., Farmer-Hinton, 2008; Hill et

al., 2015) have noted, peers do not always have access to timely and accurate information. In the context of the pandemic, the ECHS model, which is built on the traditional understanding of students showing up to in-person classes and getting information from personnel on campus, did not work well for participants, which changed how they accessed, gathered, and interpreted information. While many ECHSs and higher education institutions have now resumed in-person classes, it will be important to understand how the context and information gathering practices and habits of students during the pandemic will continue to influence how incoming and current ECHS students gather and interpret information moving forward.

In short, asking students to reflect about their college-going process from the time they chose to attend ECHS allowed me to capture experiences related to college going that I would have missed had I been focused, for example, only on the stages of applying to college. Recent work on students' college-going patterns and behaviors has pushed the field to consider the complexity and nonlinearity of college going (e.g., Acevedo-Gil, 2017; Iloh, 2018, 2019; Tierney & Venegas, 2009; Turley, 2009; Yamamura et al., 2010). Likewise, my findings suggest that there is a need to reconceptualize college going to consider the complex conditions that students navigate much earlier than senior year—this is especially true for ECHS students who begin taking college-level courses as early as 9th grade.

Discussion of Findings in Relation to Attending a STEM-Focused ECHS

As I mentioned in Chapter 3, Southside ECHS opened in 2016 with a STEM focused-curriculum offering students the opportunity to earn an associate degree in biology, engineering, computer science, mathematics, and interdisciplinary studies. When asked why they chose Southside ECHS in particular, some students mentioned an interest in earning an associate degree in STEM. However, some students chose Southside ECHS because it offered a smaller cohort size, while other students perceived Southside ECHS as a safer environment when compared to their district's traditional public school.

While several students chose Southside ECHS for its STEM-focused curriculum, they were not always informed on how to choose a STEM major, leading them to rely on their own, often limited, understanding of STEM career opportunities. In brief, my findings suggest that there is a need to

understand why students are enrolling in ECHS and how students are making sense of their ECHS major and their perceived opportunities associated with that major. A more expansive understanding of students' rationales for enrolling in ECHS could provide ECHS personnel with a foundational understanding of what information and resources students need as they transition to ECHS and choose a major.

A Need to Reconsider the Traditional Understanding of Familismo

In Chapter 4, I noted that many participants chose to stay local for college (six of the eight students enrolled at a local university). While their reasons varied, many expressed wanting to stay close to be with family. Students' rationales align with the traditional use of *familismo,* which is often defined as the "tendency to hold the wants and needs of family in higher regard than one's own" (Martinez, 2013, p. 21). Evidence from my study suggests there is also a need to complicate and extend the framing of *familismo* to account for the various ways that historical, social, political, and economic forces impact students' (and their families') real and perceived notions of opportunity. In other words, it is not enough to say that students chose to stay close to home for college because of their sense of loyalty to family. While this may be true for students, it is equally important to dig deeper into the contextual realities of students and how these realities lead students to renegotiate their intended plans. For example, Gregory ultimately chose to stay home for college because of his family's financial and care-giving circumstances. However, a deeper analysis into his college-going process reveals that he also perceived himself geographically bound because of his citizenship status and the limited opportunities he associated with not having a license. Monica also chose to stay close to home for college, citing her family's strong financial and emotional support as a factor. Monica rationalized that she would stay home to save money for her bachelor's degree so she could afford paying for her master's degree. The rising cost of college, coupled with reductions in state and local governments funding, has made it increasingly difficult for many students to afford a postsecondary education (Hossler, 2014). While *familismo* did play a role in Monica's decision-making process, she was also cognizant of her economic realities, making the decision to save money so she could later pursue her master's degree. In her study on Latina/o high school students' college choices, Martinez (2013) argues that "*Familismo* must be considered for what it is, a

trait that is common among Latina/o families and that is an asset in many ways, even while it is also reinforced by external societal forces that have historically marginalized Latina/o and other minority racial/ethnic families" (p. 36). Gregory and Monica's stories signal a need to reconsider the traditional understanding of *familismo* and, as Martinez (2013) contends, interrogate how *familismo* is also shaped by structural forces outside the family unit. In other words, the onus of *familismo* should be expanded to consider the inequitable structures, systems, and contexts that lead to the real and perceived notions of opportunity in students' college-going process.

A Need to Reconsider Who ECHSs are Really Serving

As I mentioned in Chapter 4, participants had self-selected to apply and enroll at Southside ECHS, and all but two students arrived to ECHS with high college aspirations. While a majority praised their ECHS for the positive opportunities they were afforded, many participants also expressed mix views about whether the program was worth recommending to middle school students. Five students noted that they would recommend the program to high-achieving, academically motivated, and/or dedicated students. This narrow construction of what type of student would excel in an ECHS environment becomes particularly problematic as many ECHS representatives, including students, go to middle schools to recruit students and talk to them about ECHS. Thinking critically about the ECHS model and its intended goals, it may be that ECHS admission practices, as Duncheon (2020) notes, may favor "students who [are], in certain ways, more advantaged than their district peers and perhaps more likely to pursue college—even without an early college intervention" (p. 15). In other words, students' reflections call into question whether ECHSs are really enrolling students who are "least likely to attend college" as articulated by the Texas Education Agency (TEA, n.d.c). This, in turn, prompts the need to further explore "who are ECHSs really serving?" and "are they serving the intended population?"

Discussion of Findings in the Context of the Conceptual Frameworks

In Chapter 2, I explained that I would be combining Tierney and Venegas (2009) and Iloh's (2018, 2019) conceptual frameworks to understand the contextual and individual factors that influence students' ECHS experiences. In Chapter 5, I used these frameworks to frame my interpretation of

findings, which allowed me to bring to light the factors that facilitated and hindered students' college-going process. While organizing my discussion of findings through these frameworks was helpful, I also understand that an overreliance or uncritical take on these frameworks has the potential to limit my ability to see other emergent themes in the data (Maxwell, 2013). Taking into consideration this limitation, in this section, I first identify strengths in the frameworks and then discuss weaknesses, sharing how these frameworks can be expanded to ensure certain student experiences are not overlooked.

I found a few strengths in combining Tierney and Venegas (2009) and Iloh's (2018, 2019) conceptual frameworks. First, both frameworks are designed to challenge dominant discourses that perpetuate linear and narrow ways of understanding students' college-going pathways. This approach aligned with my reconceptualization of college going as it disrupted traditional ways of understanding college going and confirmed previous findings that the college-going process is complex, multifaceted, and nonlinear (e.g., Acevedo-Gil, 2017; Alvarez, 2015; Cox, 2016; Yamamura et al., 2010). Second, both frameworks center context and provide the opportunity to uncover how students' college-going processes are contextually driven beyond prescriptive factors like the GPA and ACT scores. This stronger emphasis on context allowed me to identify power dynamics and information gaps working for or against students' college-going process across various environments. Finally, Tierney and Venegas' (2009) framework outlined specific environments missing in Iloh's (2018, 2019) framework, while Iloh's framework provided specific dimensions to look for in each environment. Together, these frameworks included the necessary parameters to facilitate my analysis and interpretation of data.

While I found these frameworks work well together, I also observed a few weaknesses, too. Individually, Tierney and Venegas' (2009) framework is too broad for an in-depth analysis of findings, while Iloh's (2018, 2019) framework lacks direction in terms of contextual layers. Scholars who wish to use these frameworks separately should consider how they will account for these weaknesses in their studies. Weaving other conceptual or theoretical frameworks would help address these limitations. Sapp and colleagues (2016), for example, weaved Tierney and Venegas's (2009) cultural ecological model with the concept of agency to capture Latinas' college-going behaviors.

Paradoxically, while combining these frameworks provided the necessary parameters to help me analyze and frame my data, these same parameters also limited my ability to analyze and interpret my findings more broadly. Understanding that an overreliance on my frameworks could prevent important data from coming through, I critically reviewed my frameworks, along with my findings. Through this reflective practice, I identified two ways the frameworks can be expanded to ensure certain student experiences are not overlooked. First, I propose adding a fourth dimension in Iloh's (2018, 2019) framework to account for the different relationships that students have with their networks. Second, I propose adding a fifth environment in Tierney and Venegas's (2009) framework that accounts for the broader social, political, and economic context in which students make decisions. I discuss each next.

Based on my findings, Iloh's (2018, 2019) framework would benefit from a fourth dimension: relationships. To elaborate, while Iloh's (2019, 2019) dimension of information does account for the "who" in messaging, the focus remains largely on the quality, quantity, and delivery of messages. Borrowing from the work of Richards (2022), my findings suggest a need to categorize the type of relationships that students have with personal and formal networks. For example, participants described their relationships with institutional agents through narratives of care, admiration, and affection. However, they were less likely to ask institutional agents for help when navigating coursework and the college-going process, more generally. As Richards (2022) notes, "[familial] relationships do not, on their own, lead to academic help-seeking" (p. 250). This distinction signals that while students had a familial type of relationship with some institutional agents, they had less of a professional type of relationship that prevented them from asking for help. A fourth dimension that focuses on the types of relationships students have with institutional and social agents would help garner a deeper understanding of how students view their relationships with their networks, how students' views work for or against their ability to access opportunities and information from these networks, and how these networks lead (or not) to the creation of more capital for students as they navigate the college-going process. Moreover, a focus on relationships would also help understand how students build networks with personal and formal networks and how these relationships change over time as students navigate their college-going process.

I also propose adding a fifth environment—"public environment"—to Tierney and Venegas's framework that accounts for the broader social, political, and economic context in which students make decisions. Borrowing from Perna's (2006) model, I believe a public environment that explicitly considers these contextual factors can provide a deeper understanding of the type of opportunities available and accessible to students. The evidence from this study suggest that the broader social, political, and economic context influenced how students navigated the college-going process. For example, for some students, the pandemic—a social, political, and economic factor—influenced the information students had access to, the ways they perceived opportunities, and the ways they engaged with their networks. A social context can reveal, for instance, how social concerns about the pandemic influenced students' perceptions about college going. A political context can reveal how changing policies or mandates like DACA at the federal level can affect students' real and perceived notions of opportunity in relation to college going. Finally, an economic context can reveal how students are making sense of their college and career aspirations in relation to the local labor opportunities. A fifth environment would help account for the external conflicts that cause *choques* (or collisions) in students' college-going process (Acevedo-Gil, 2017).

Implications and Recommendations for Policy, Practice, and Future Research

This study grounded the voices and experiences of students who are the ones most affected by high school reforms like ECHSs. Although not generalizable, findings from this study provide valuable and critical insights from students that can be used to interrogate taken-for-granted social norms, structures, and practices embedded in the ECHS model. Like other scholars (e.g., Ari et al., 2017), it is my belief that policy, practice, and even future research should be informed by the voices and experiences of students navigating these educational systems. In this section, I discuss the implications of my findings and provide recommendations for policy, practice, and future research.

Implications and Recommendations for Policy and Practice

Over the years, high school reform has been a priority for many policymakers, private investors, and community members at the national, state, and local levels (Kaniuka, 2010; Martinez & Klopott,

2005). A variety of reform initiatives have been created to address college access and success challenges as a way to better prepare students for a knowledge-based economy. One such reform initiative is the ECHS model, which collaboratively works with partnerships to align curriculum and support students' high school-to-college transition. As I discussed in Chapter 2, research on the effectiveness of the ECHS model has shown variation, but findings generally show positive experiences and outcomes for ECHS students (Berger et al., 2013; Calhoun et al., 2019; Duncheon, 2020; Edmunds et al., 2013; Lauen et al., 2017; Ongaga, 2010). The findings of my research study indicate that ECHSs have the potential to positively influence students' perceptions about college, motivating them to continue their education after ECHS. Because ECHSs provide a viable educational alternative to help close opportunity gaps among Latinx/a/o students (Berger et al., 2014; Haxton et al., 2016), I offer the following policy and practice recommendations to help enhance these programs: (a) policies and practices governing the declaration of majors, (b) practices to help students balance workload; (c) policies to award innovative initiatives at ECHSs, (d) annual group trainings and planning sessions for institutional agents, (e) opportunities and tools to build relationships with institutional agents, and (f) alignment and evaluation of information and resources.

Policies and Practices Governing the Declaration of Majors

Findings from this study suggest that students lacked the information and guidance needed to make informed and intentional choices about their ECHS major. In my review of ECHS and TEA documents, I was unable to find language, guidelines, and/or policies on how to choose a major. Given this lack of information, I recommend for TEA to add governing language under Benchmark 6 (school design) in the ECHS Blueprint requiring all ECHSs and partnered higher education institutions to implement a guideline plan on how they intend to help students choose and declare a major. Additionally, as part of the guideline plan, ECHS personnel, in collaboration with their partnered college, should also create a guideline to help students make informed decisions about their major. This guideline can include, for example, a description of each major, a description of the required classes, and information about the potential careers associated with these majors.

Practices to Help Students Balance Workload

All participants shared that they struggled to balance the expectations and workload of high school and college, with many participants sharing they felt burnt out, sad, and overworked. My findings suggest that there is a need to provide ECHS students with specialized knowledge on how to apply non-cognitive skills so they can better manage the workload and expectations of ECHS. That is, it is not enough to teach students the importance of time management—they must also be equipped with tools on how to translate these skills into action. Tools like checklists, planners, calendars, and the Pomodoro technique, for example, can be helpful for students who are navigating multiple deadlines and expectations. On a structural level, it would help to build trust with students from the beginning so when they start feeling burnt out, sad, or overworked, they can reach out for guidance. Additionally, it would help to hire or equip ECHS staff with tools on how to support students' mental health as they navigate ECHS. Structuring monthly group check-ins with students to discuss how they are handling the workload could lead to fruitful conversations among students about how to seek help and prioritize their mental health. Creating healthy and useful habits on how to manage expectations and competing workloads while in ECHS can help students once they transition out of ECHS.

Practices to Award Innovative Initiatives at ECHSs

Results from this study as well as others (e.g., Duncheon, 2020; Ongaga, 2010; Schaefer & Rivera, 2016) provide evidence that ECHSs are conveniently situated to address systemic issues that impede students from continuing their education. Findings from this study, for example, reveal that participating in an ECHS can positively change students' perceptions about college by demystifying their preconceived notions through experiential learning. However, as I detailed in Chapter 4, students still had a difficult time transitioning from middle school to ECHS and from high school classes to college-level courses. Given this context, the state of Texas should consider implementing a grant program that awards ECHSs for evidence-based programs that help students transition into and thrive in rigorous college coursework. As part of the grant, recipients would share best practices and strategies with other ECHSs, providing mentoring, technical assistance, and webinars to prospective, new, and existing ECHSs.

Annual Group Trainings and Planning Sessions for Institutional Agents

Like other studies (Duncheon, 2020; Thompson & Ongaga, 2011), findings from this study reveal that ECHS teachers and TTC professors often had varying and contradictory expectations, which made it difficult for students to transition and adjust to the workload and rigor of their ECHS. Given the tension often found between ECHS teachers and TTC professors, I recommend an annual training in which institutional agents co-create a seamless plan to help students transition to ECHS and then into college. Currently, the ECHS Blueprint requires ECHSs to implement an annual professional development plan that includes activities and events for both high school and dual credit teachers. I am proposing that institutional agents take these annual training sessions a step further by co-creating and implementing a plan that will help them collectively address some of the challenges they experience in the classroom. Specifically, it would be helpful for ECHS teachers to gain more guidance and training on how to create a more college-like atmosphere in their courses. This, in turn, can help smooth students' transition from high school classes to college-level courses. Likewise, it would be helpful for college professors to gain insights into scaffolding and other pedagogical strategies to support ECHS students as they adjust to the rigor and workload of courses. If the vision of ECHSs is to blend high school and college work, then it is imperative that ECHS teachers and college instructors communicate and implement a plan to address discrepancies, misunderstandings, and tensions between each other.

Opportunities and Tools to Build Relationships with Institutional Agents

Like other researchers, I found that ECHS students typically perceived their relationships with counselors, teachers, and other administrators as positive (Adams et al., 2020; Calhoun et al., 2019; Hall, 2013; Kaniuka & Vickers, 2010; McDonald & Farrell, 2012; Ongaga, 2010; Sáenz & Combs, 2015; Schaefer & Rivera, 2016; Valadez et al., 2012; Woodcock & Beal, 2013). However, as I discussed in Chapter 4 and elaborated in my interpretation of findings, students were typically reluctant to ask their counselor (and teachers) for help. While students' reasons varied, most students shared that they did not ask their counselor for help because they believed he was overworked and too busy helping other students with their academic schedules. Students generally perceived his role was limited to helping them sign up

for classes. Given the critical role of institutional agents in students' access to college-related information and opportunities (Carolan-Silva & Reyes, 2013; González et al., 2003; McDonough & Calderone, 2006; Yamamura et al., 2010), institutional leaders should also consider different opportunities and tools that can help students build relationships with institutional agents so they can feel more comfortable asking for help. One possible recommendation would be for teachers/professors to offer extra credit to students who go to office hours. Another idea can be to host group meetings, allowing students to take a friend(s) when they have a question or need extra help. For counselors seeking to encourage students to ask for help, they can ask students to complete a brief student self-assessment information form and establish a monthly check-in meeting with students to review the students' response. The form, to be submitted before the meeting, would contain questions to help the counselor gauge where the student is in the college-going process and can include a section like "things I am confused about" and "things I would like more help on." Alternatively, counselors can create a virtual or in-person bulletin board that allows students to ask anonymous (or not anonymous) questions about the college-going process. The counselor would then answer these questions, allowing the student who asked the question, as well as other students, to see responses.

Alignment and Evaluation of Information and Resources

Findings from this study suggest that students did not always have access to clear and reliable information, which aligns with the work of other scholars' (Chlup et al., 2019; Cox, 2016; Kimura-Walsh et al., 2009; Martinez et al., 2013; Person & Rosenbaum, 2006; Welton & Martinez, 2014). In this study, participants specifically lacked access to accurate and timely information on how to pick an ECHS major and how to find a job to pay for college. Aligned with Duncheon and Relles's (2020) study, I recommend that K–12 and higher education stakeholders work together to systematically align and communicate college-going information to lessen information deserts along students' college-going process. For example, ECHS counselors can work with college admission counselors from their partnered higher education institution to help explain to students the expectations and opportunities associated with different majors. In terms of helping students find jobs, it would be helpful to implement more

scaffolding programming, such as forging partnerships with community and industry stakeholders to provide students professional learning experiences related to their field of study or career interests, which could, in turn, help students learn how to leverage their associate degrees to pay for college.

Implications and Recommendations for Future Research

This study offers a better understanding of Latinx/a/o students ECHS experiences in relation to college going. Specifically, my findings reveal that participants' experiences are co-dependent on the information, resources, and opportunities embedded in their various environments and on how they interpret and act on these messages. That being said, the literature on ECHSs, particularly as it pertains to student experiences and perceptions, remains scant. In this section, I offer five potential areas of study that center on (a) students' experiences longitudinally; (b) students' postsecondary pathways; (c) type of information and information sources; (d) the roles of family, community members, and peers; and (e) institutional agents' beliefs, values, and practices.

Students' Experiences Longitudinally

While some scholars have started capturing ECHS student outcomes over time (e.g., Edmunds et al., 2017; Hoshen, 2016), no qualitative research, to my knowledge, has yet captured the ECHS experiences of students over time. Research on students' ECHS experiences could benefit from a longitudinal qualitative research design to capture how students are interpreting information and opportunities from the start of 9th grade through 12th. As I noted in Chapters 2 and 4, I intentionally framed participants' college-going process as starting their first year of ECHS. This, in turn, allowed me to capture some of their previous thoughts and experiences; however, a longitudinal study would be able to capture students' perceptions and experiences as they unfold in real time. Moreover, while I considered my participants both high school and college students, it was evident that some students did not see themselves as college students. Instead, they often described their experiences as preparation for college in the *future* even though they were all working to earn their associate degree. A study centering students' voices can help capture where these beliefs stem from. Further, because "people, at any point in time, are in a process of personal change," a longitudinal study would enable researchers to narrate the lived

experiences of students, capturing the myriad of changes they experience over time (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000 p. 30). A study on students' experiences over time can capture differences in students' perceptions of college readiness, revealing what structures embedded in the ECHS model support students and which ones do not.

Students' Postsecondary Pathways

As I mentioned in Chapter 3, at the time of the interviews, all graduating ECHS students in my study expressed an interest in attending college. As such, my study did not capture the experiences of students seeking different postsecondary pathways. Understanding the experiences of students seeking different postsecondary pathways can provide school staff with a better understanding of the resources and information students need along the way, ensuring that students not seeking a 4-year degree are not overlooked. Future studies should consider including the perspectives and experiences of ECHS students who are seeking a different postsecondary pathway—this includes ECHS students who are on the verge of dropping out, who have dropped out, and/or who are undecided about next plans. Further, capturing ECHS students' experiences over time (as opposed to only senior year) can help reveal at which point their postsecondary pathways divert in ECHS. Studies like these would expand the work of Alaie (2011) and Hutchins et al., (2019) by capturing the transitional difficulties and perceived barriers encountered by students throughout ECHS and could expand our understanding of how ECHS students' schooling experiences support (or do not support) their college-going process.

Type of Information and Information Sources

My findings reveal that simply providing students with information and resources is not enough. Some participants in my study, for example, were aware of ACT preparation resources, and they still did not take advantage of these opportunities. As such, a study specifically evaluating and assessing the type of information and resources ECHSs and partner colleges provide students and how students are interpreting and acting on the messaging would be helpful. This, in turn, can help institutional agents determine whether they need to change their method of communication or the type and/or timing of information they are providing students. It would be helpful if institutional agents centered the

perceptions and experiences of students by asking them directly about what information they found helpful, what they wish they had better clarity on, and what challenges they are currently trying to navigate. It would be especially critical to understand who students are getting this information from and through what platform.

The Roles of Family, Community Members, and Peers

As I discussed in this chapter, family and community members play a major role in Latina/o students' ECHS experiences. While there is a growing body of research on the role of Latinx/a/o parents and community members (e.g., Carolan-Silva and Reyes, 2013; Kiyama, 2010, 2011; Ozuna et al., 2016; Palomin, 2020; Paugh, 2018; Sáenz et al., 2020), very little research exists on the experiences of parents who have Latinx/a/o children in ECHS. With the exception of Palomin's (2020) study, which explored how parents leveraged cultural wealth to help ECHS Latinx/a/o students navigate the college-going process, more research is needed to understand parents' perceptions of ECHSs and, more generally, how influential social actors outside of students' educational environments assist students' college-going process. This kind of research could help illuminate how ECHSs and partnered higher education institutions might better engage family and community members to enhance students' ECHS experiences.

A better understanding of how students build relationships with peers and how these relationships evolve overtime is also needed. While my study provides a deeper understanding of how peers supported one another, more research is needed to understand the practices and tools that ECHSs and partnered higher education institutions use to help students form and establish these positive and meaningful peer-to-peer networks. This kind of understanding can help institutionalize policies and practices used to build and sustain peer-to-peer relationships at ECHSs.

Institutional Agents' Beliefs, Values, and Practices

Findings from this study revealed that students' own perceptions about their teachers and counselors prevented them from asking for help. Future research could examine how students perceive the roles of institutional agents like counselors, teachers, and professors. A study like this could help practitioners understand how their messages, actions, and responses are interpreted by students.

Moreover, future research could explore the beliefs, values, and practices of institutional agents regarding students' college-going process. Scholars like Duncheon (2010), Duncheon and DeMatthews (2019), and Mollet et al. (2020) have already begun to explore the roles and beliefs of principals, teachers, and faculty in relation to students' college-going preparation. Future research could explore the practices and tools that institutional agents use to help students learn, develop, and transition from high school to college.

Chapter Conclusion

In this final chapter, I discussed the study's findings in relation to my conceptual frameworks and the existing literature. Using Tierney and Venegas's (2009) four environments as an outline and weaving Iloh's (2018, 2019) dimensions of information, opportunity, and time, I considered the ongoing interplay between students' environments and the types of information and opportunities they had access to (or not) at different points of time. Collectively, students ECHS experiences and the themes I derived described both the benefits and challenges they encountered as they navigated the college-going process. While participants largely praised their ECHS for affording them the opportunity to earn an associate degree while in high school, their narratives also revealed points in which they had to navigate information gaps. Moreover, in centering their voices, I was able to capture both the real and perceived notions students had about opportunities as they navigated the college-going process. Understanding students' notions of opportunity and their general ECHS experiences helped inform the implications and recommendations of this study.

A Final Reflection

While Latinx/a/o students have made significant strides toward closing the college enrollment gap, recent data from the National Student Clearinghouse (2021) shows that Latinx/a/o students are no longer going to college at the same rate as before the pandemic. This decline in college enrollment not only threatens to halt the tremendous progress Latinxs/as/os have made throughout the educational pipeline but could also widen the persistent disparities (e.g., educational outcomes, earnings, and health) that already exist between Latinxs/as/os and other racial/ethnic groups in the US. These disparities are particularly pronounced in Texas where Latinxs/as/os are a growing majority-minority group who remain

underrepresented in college enrollment and college graduation rates. ECHSs have been proposed as a solution to improve college access and success among underserved and underrepresented students such as Latinxs/as/os in higher education; however, little to no research has centered the experiences of Latinx/a/o students in ECHS.

In my study, I intended to address this gap by bringing to light the ECHS experiences of eight Latina/o students who, despite going through challenges, steadily continued to make progress along the educational pipeline. Students' narratives revealed that more work must be done to address the factors that hinder students' college-going process. Understanding what causes and minimizes leakage points along students' college-going process can help ECHS leaders, partners, and policymakers create more equitable spaces for students to access (and take advantage of) information and opportunities in a timely manner.

This study not only provided me with the opportunity to center students' voices and experiences, but it also provided me with an opportunity to reflect on my own college-going process, biases, and assumptions. As I mentioned in my introduction, my beliefs about college going have evolved since I first engaged in my own college-going process as a high school student. Participants' stories affirmed my evolving beliefs, bringing to light the importance of considering the structural barriers that facilitate or hinder students' advancement. As a scholar-practitioner, it is my hope that I will continue to center, elevate, and empower students as they navigate the ever-changing nature of the college-going process.

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APPENDIX A: DEFINITION OF TERMS

My intention in defining these terms is not to describe them narrowly, but rather to provide additional context for understanding the intent and purpose of the study. These terms served as a foundation to frame my understanding of students' college-going process.

College-going process: For this study, I reconceptualized the notion of college going to include the lived experiences of ECHS students who constantly *cross borders* given their dual identities as both high school and college students (Brooks, 2013). Borrowing from the work of Acevedo-Gil (2017) and Cox (2016), I specifically defined the college-going process as the negotiations, decisions, and actions that students engage in when planning and preparing for a postsecondary education or career.

College knowledge: College knowledge refers to an individual's awareness and understanding of the "prerequisites, paths, processes, and milestones" needed to successfully apply and enroll in college (Tornatzky et al., 2002, p. 9).

College readiness: Based on Conley's (2007) definition, college readiness has traditionally been defined as a students' accumulation of knowledge and experiences needed to succeed in a postsecondary institution without remediation.

College-ready graduates: In Texas, TEA (2019a) defines college-ready graduates as the percentage of annual graduates who meet or exceed the *college-ready and career/military readiness criteria* on any one of the following ways: 1) met the Texas Success Initiative (TSI) college readiness standards in reading and mathematics; specifically, met the college-ready criteria on the TSI assessment, SAT, ACT, or by successfully completing and earning an approved credit for a college prep; 2) completed 9 or more hours of postsecondary credit in any subject or 3 or more hours of English/Language Arts and mathematics; 3) scored 3 or more on Advanced Placement (AP) exams or 4 or more on International Baccalaureate (IB) exams; 4) earned an associate degree while in high school; 5) completed an OnRamps course and received at least three hours of university or college credit in any subject area; 6) earned an industry-based certification; 7) graduated with completed individualized education program (IEP) and workforce readiness; 8) career and technical education (CTE) coursework aligned with industry-based certification; 9) enlisted in the armed forces; 10) special education students graduate under an advanced degree plan; and 11) earned a Level 1 or Level II certificate in any education area. A student is *only college-ready* if they meet criteria 1–5 (but not criteria 6–11) and *only career/military read*y if they meet criteria 6–11 (but not criteria 1–5).

Early college high schools: Early college high schools blend high school and college coursework to enable students to simultaneously earn a high school diploma and an associate degree (or up to 60 transferable college credits) (see Berger et al., 2010 for a brief history of ECHSs).

Economically disadvantaged: TEA (2019a) defines economically disadvantaged students as those who are eligible for free or reduced-price lunch or other public assistance.

English learners: TEA (2019a) defines English learners as students whose primary language is one other than English and who are in the process of acquiring English.

Equity gap (or opportunity gap): I use the term "equity gap" or "opportunity gap" instead of "achievement gap" to draw attention to the unequal and inequitable allocation of resources and opportunities among minoritize students (e.g., Darden & Cavendish, 2011). According to Milner IV (2012), achievement gap explanations often derive from a deficit perspective and focus on the individual rather than on the "inequitable, racist, and sexist structures, systems, contexts, policies, and practices that

lead to perceived achievement gaps" (p. 696). In using "equity gap" or "opportunity gap" instead of "achievement gap," I hope to draw attention to the power structures and barriers that lead to the perceived achievement gaps between racial/ethnic groups.

Latinx/a/o: I use the term "Latinx/a/o" as an inclusive term for people who self-identify as having racial or ethnic roots in Latin America, South America, Mexico, and parts of the Caribbean. The order of the letters following "Latin-" are intentionally placed to disrupt the Spanish binary gender of the term "Latina/o" (Salinas et al., 2020). I also intentionally opted to use "Latinx/a/o" over "Latinx" when specifically referring to groups of people in an effort to not dilute the experiences and realities of gender-nonconforming individuals who self-identify as "Latinx" (see Salinas & Lozano (2019) for a comprehensive review on the term "Latinx" and Salinas (2020) for further discussion on the term "Latinx/a/o"). When referring to participants, I use the gendered identifying forms they selected as their personal preference (e.g., Latina, Latino, Latinx, Hispanic, Mexican American, etc.). When discussing literature, I use the same terms that authors used (e.g., "Hispanic," "Latina," "Latino," "Latina/o," and "Latinx") to maintain the integrity of the literature being referenced.

Noncognitive skills: Noncognitive skills "include a range of behaviors [skills, attitudes, and strategies] that reflect greater student self-awareness, self-monitoring, and self-control" associated with academic performance (Roderick et al., 2009, p. 190). These skills are not readily measured by standardized tests or other quantitative measures and often cannot be directly taught as content. Nonetheless, these skills remain important to consider because they can reinforce cognitive skills and influence school performance (Bjorklund-Young, 2016).

Power structures: Power structures and brokers (also used interchangeably with systems of power) are norms, practices, and/or social roles within a system that result in an imbalance of power between people. These structures or systems create and/or maintain differential access to resources and opportunities.

APPENDIX B: PARTICIPANT INTEREST FORM

(To be completed using Qualtrics online survey)

Thank you for your interest in this research project. The purpose of this study is to better understand the educational and career goals of early college high school (ECHS) students. To identify participants for the interview, I am asking students to please complete this short Participant Interest Form. **Students who are selected to participate will then be invited to a 60- to 90-minute interview with me and will be compensated with a $50 Amazon gift card for their time.** If you are interested and willing to participate, please take a moment to fill out this form.

Your name and email address are needed so that I may contact you if you are selected for the study. *Your participation, including your name and any other identifying information, will remain confidential and will not be shared with others.* If you do not feel comfortable answering any other question in the form, you may skip it.

Name: [open ended]
Primary email address: [open ended]
Age:

- Under 18 years old
- 18 years or older

Gender: [open ended]

Race/Ethnicity (choose all that apply):

- American Indian or Alaska Native
- Asian
- Black or African American
- Latinx/a/o or Hispanic (defined as a person of Cuban, Mexican, Puerto Rican, South or Central American, or other Spanish culture or origin regardless of race).
- Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander
- White
- Other (if you do no identify with any of the provided race/ethnicity categories, you may enter your detailed identity):

Which early college high school do you currently attend?
[options will be provided for students once the participation of ECHSs are confirmed]

When did you start the ECHS program?

- 9th grade
- 10th grade
- 11th grade
- 12th grade

What is your current high school classification?

- High School Freshman
- High School Sophomore
- High School Junior
- High School Senior

Current High School Grade Point Average (GPA):

High School Rank:

Do your parents/guardians have a bachelor's degree (a bachelor's degree is a four-year undergraduate degree from a college or university)?

- At least one parent/guardian has a bachelor's degree
- Both parents/guardians have a bachelor's degree
- Neither of my parents/guardians have a bachelor's degree

Will you be graduating this May 2021?

- Yes
- No

Will you be earning a certificate or an associate degree this May 2021?

- Yes
- No

  If so, what kind?
  - Associate of Arts in Criminal Justice
  - Associate of Arts in Interdisciplinary Studies
  - Associate of Applied Science Welding
  - Associate of Applied Science in Advanced Manufacturing Technology
  - Associate of Applied Science in Diesel Technology
  - Associate of Applied Science in Fire Technology
  - Associate of Science in Biology
  - Associate of Science in Computer Science
  - Associate of Science in Engineering
  - Associate of Science in Math
  - Certificate in Medical Assistant Technology
  - Certificate in Emergency Medical Technology
  - Other: [open ended]

What is the highest level of education you hope to attain?

- High school diploma
- Certificate
- Associate degree
- Bachelor's degree
- Master's degree
- Doctoral (Ph.D.)
- Law (JD)
- Medical (MD)
- Nursing (RN or LVN)
- Other: [open ended]

What are your plans after you graduate high school?

- Enroll immediately in college
- Work
- Work and eventually go to college
- Work and attend college at the same time
- Join the military
- Other:
- I don't know yet

What have you done so far to achieve your plans for after high school? (choose all that apply)

- I'm currently working on my FASFA
- I applied to FAFSA already
- I'm currently looking at potential colleges/universities to attend
- I applied to colleges/universities already
- I'm waiting to hear back from colleges/universities
- I'm looking for job opportunities for after I graduate high school
- I'm currently applying for job opportunities for after I graduate high school
- I'm looking to join the military
- I applied to join the military
- Other:
- I'm still undecided

Thank you for taking the time to fill out this survey. If you are selected for the one-on-one interview, you will be notified and invited to participate via email. If you have any questions about the survey or interview, please do not hesitate to contact me. I have also listed the contact information of my advisor, Dr. Patricia Marin.

Dianey Leal
Doctoral Candidate
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Chicano/Latino Studies Program
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lealdian@msu.edu
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Dr. Patricia Marin
Associate Professor
Higher, Adult, and Lifelong Education
Michigan State University
pmarin@msu.edu

APPENDIX C: RECRUITMENT EMAIL AND FLYER

Subject: Participants Needed for Study: Latinx/a/o Students Attending an Early College High School

Hello!

My name is Dianey Leal and I am a former GEAR UP student and Rio Grande City High School alum. I am currently recruiting students to participate in a research study that examines the experiences and perceptions of students enrolled in an early college high school (ECHS). Specifically, my study seeks to better understand students' educational and career goals.

To participate, students who volunteer and are selected to participate will be asked to complete a 60- to 90-minute interview with me. **Students who participate will be provided a $50 Amazon gift card.**

Please note that in order to participate in this study, you must meet the following criteria:

- Be a 4th or 5th year senior attending an early college high school;
- Identify as Latinx/a/o or Hispanic (defined as a person of Cuban, Mexican, Puerto Rican, South or Central American, or other Spanish culture or origin regardless of race); and
- Have attended an ECHS for at least three years in the Rio Grande Valley by the time you graduate.

If you meet these criteria and would like to participate, you will need to complete the following steps:

1. Carefully read and sign the following consent form [**distributed through Qualtrics—if students are under the age of 18, they will sign the parent/guardian permission/assent form. If students are 18 years or older, they will sign a similar form without the need for their parent/guardian's signature. A link for reach consent form will be provided and students will choose which one corresponds to them.]**
2. Once I receive your signed consent form, I will send you a secured link to complete the Participant Interest Form.
3. If you are selected for the one-on-one interview, you will be notified via email.

To be selected for the one-on-one interview, students must submit the consent form first and then complete the Participate Interest Form second. Should you choose to take part in this project, please know that you have the option to stop your participation at any time and without any ramifications. *Your participation, including your name and any other identifying information, will remain confidential.* If you have any questions, please do not hesitate to contact me. I have also listed the contact information of my advisor, Dr. Patricia Marin. Thank you, in advance, for your interest and assistance with my research. I truly appreciate your help.

Dianey Leal
Doctoral Candidate
Higher, Adult, and Lifelong Education
Chicano/Latino Studies Program
Michigan State University
lealdian@msu.edu
(965) 735-7937

Dr. Patricia Marin
Associate Professor
Higher, Adult, and Lifelong Education
Michigan State University
pmarin@msu.edu

Figure 4

Call for Student Participants Flyer

APPENDIX D: PARENT/GUARDIAN PERMISSION/ASSENT FORM

Research Participant Information and Consent Form

You are being asked to participate in a research study and your parent/guardian is being asked to provide parental permission. As a researcher, I am required to provide an assent form/parental permission form to inform both of you about the research study, to convey that participation is voluntary, to explain risks and benefits of participation, and to empower you to make an informed decision. You should feel free to ask the researcher any questions you may have. Both you and your parent/guardian need to agree on your participation in this study.

Study Title: Understanding the College-Going Process of Latinx/a/o Students Attending Early College High School: A Critical Narrative Study
Researcher and Title: Dianey Leal, doctoral candidate
Department: Higher, Adult, and Lifelong Education and Chicano/Latino Studies Program
Institution: Michigan State University
Email Address and Contact Information: lealdian@msu.edu; (956) 735-7937

1. PURPOSE OF RESEARCH
Your child is being asked to participate in a research study that seeks to understand the college-going experiences and perceptions of students enrolled in an early college high school (ECHS). Specifically, I am looking to understand how attending an ECHS has influenced students' educational and career goals. Your child has been selected as a possible participant in this study because they attend an ECHS, identify as Latinx/a/o, and are about to graduate high school. To participate, students will be asked to complete a Participant Interest Form and, if selected, to partake in one interview with me either through Zoom or at the student's high school. The interview will take about 60- to 90-minutes.

2. WHAT STUDENT WILL DO
Students who are selected to participate in this study will be asked to complete a Participant Interest Form and, if selected, to participate in a 60- to 90-minute, one-on-one interview with me.

- ***Participate Interest Form:*** The Participant Interest Form will be available through a secured link online and will include questions like when your child enrolled at their ECHS, when they will graduate high school, and what their educational and career goals are. Students who complete the Participant Interest Form will be notified if they have been selected for the interview through email.
- ***Interview:*** If selected, your child will be invited to participate in a 60- to 90-minute, one-on-one interview with me. During this interview, I will ask your child about why they chose to attend an ECHS, what their experience has been at the ECHS, and what their educational and career goals are.

3. POTENTIAL BENEFITS
Your child will not directly benefit from participating in this study. However, their participation in this study may help school administrators, counselors, and teachers better understand what students need to successfully graduate and meet their goals. It is my hope that this study will specifically help ECHS administrators, counselors, and teachers enhance or implement resources, services, and/or practices that assist students in their academic and college/career preparation.

4. POTENTIAL RISKS
There is minimal to no risk involved to participate in this study. While participating in the interview, they may feel uncomfortable answering questions about themselves. If they feel this way, your child may simply choose to not answer certain questions or choose to stop participating at any time.

5. PRIVACY AND CONFIDENTIALITY
All research materials, including your child's responses in the Participant Interest Form and the interview, will remain confidential and will only be used for research purposes. To protect your child's identity, a pseudonym (or fake name) will be used in place of their real name and their school's real name. Your child will be given the opportunity to choose their own pseudonym at the beginning of the one-on-one interview. No identifiable questions such as home address will be asked.

If your child chooses to participate in the interview, please know that they will be audio recorded with your and their permission. Your child will be given a summary of our interview conversation and will have the opportunity to offer feedback and suggestions to ensure that they are comfortable with the presentation of the material.

During the research process, all of the field notes, interview transcripts, and findings will be kept in a locked file cabinet in my apartment and computer records will be on a password-protected computer to maintain security. The only individuals that will have access to the interview data are myself, Dr. Patricia Marin (my advisor), and a paid transcriptionist. Parents/guardians, as well as administrators, teachers, and counselors, will not have access to the data that is collected through this research.

There may be circumstances where research material must be released. For example, personal information regarding your child's participation in this study may be disclosed if required by state law. Also, your child's data may be reviewed by the following groups (as applicable to the research): Office for Human Research Protections or other federal, state, or international regulatory agencies and Michigan State University's Institutional Review Board (IRB).

Although my research does not include questions on sexual assault and/or violence, please note that as a university employee, I am obligated to report any allegations of relationship violence, sexual misconduct, or child abuse involving research participants to the MSU Police and the Office of Institutional Equity (OIE) staff.

6. YOUR RIGHTS TO PARTICIPATE, SAY NO, OR WITHDRAW
Participation is voluntary. Refusal to participate will involve no penalty or loss of benefits to which your child is otherwise entitled. Your child may choose not to answer specific questions, and they may change their mind about responses at any time. Whether your child chooses to participate or not will have no affect on their grade at their ECHS. If you decide to allow your child to participate, you are free to withdraw your consent and stop your child's participation at any time without penalty or loss of benefits to your child.

7. COSTS AND COMPENSATION FOR BEING IN THE STUDY
There are no costs associated with participating in this study. Students who participate in the study will be compensated with a $50 Amazon gift card for their time.

8. AUDIOTAPPING
I am asking for your and your child's permission to ***audiotape (sound)*** our interview as part of this research study. All audiotapes will be stored in a password-protected computer to maintain security. Following "best practices," approved by the University Research Council at Michigan State University,

all audiotapes will be erased after three years after the submission of my dissertation or publication, whichever occurs last.
Please check a box to indicate what you and your child want to do:

☐ Yes, my child and I give permission for the interview to be audiotaped.
☐ No, my child and I do not give permission for the interview to be audiotaped.

9. CONTACT INFORMATION

If you and/or your child have concerns or questions about this study, such as how to do any part of the study, please contact me, Dianey R. Leal, at lealdian@msu.edu or at (956) 735-7937.

If you and/or your child have questions or concerns about their role and rights as a research participant, would like to obtain information or offer input, or would like to register a complaint about this study, you and/or your child may contact, anonymously if you wish, the Michigan State University's Human Research Protection Program at 517-355-2180, Fax 517-432-4503, or e-mail irb@msu.edu or regular mail at 4000 Collins Rd, Suite 136, Lansing, MI 48910.

10. DOCUMENTATION OF INFORMED CONSENT.

Your signatures [or electronic signatures] below mean that you voluntarily give your permission for your child to participate in this research study and that your child has given his/her/their assent to participate.

_____ _____
Signature of Parent/Guardian Date

_____ _____
Signature of Assenting Student (13-17) Date

You will be given a copy of this form to keep.

APPENDIX E: STUDENT PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM

Research Participant Information and Consent Form

You are being asked to participate in a research study. As a researcher, I am required to provide a consent form to inform you about the research study, to convey that participation is voluntary, to explain risks and benefits of participation, and to empower you to make an informed decision. You should feel free to ask the researcher any questions you may have.

Study Title: Understanding the College-Going Process of Latinx/a/o Students Attending Early College High School: A Critical Narrative Study
Researcher and Title: Dianey Leal, doctoral candidate
Department: Higher, Adult, and Lifelong Education and Chicano/Latino Studies Program
Institution: Michigan State University
Email Address and Contact Information: lealdian@msu.edu; (956) 735-7937

1. PURPOSE OF RESEARCH
You are being asked to participate in a research study that seeks to understand the college-going experiences and perceptions of students enrolled in an early college high school (ECHS). Specifically, I am looking to understand how attending an early college high school has influenced students' educational and career goals. You have been selected as a possible participant in this study because you attend an ECHS, identify as Latinx/a/o, and are about to graduate. To participate, students will be asked to complete a Participant Interest Form and, if selected, to partake in one interview with me either through Zoom or at the student's high school. The interview will take about 60- to 90-minutes.

2. WHAT STUDENT WILL DO
As a participant of this study, you will be asked to complete a Participant Interest Form and, if selected, to participate in a 60- to 90-minute, one-on-one interview with me.

- ***Participate Interest Form:*** The Participant Interest Form will be available through a secured link online and will include questions like when you enrolled at your ECHS, when you will graduate, and what your educational and career goals are. Students who complete the Participant Interest Form will be notified if they have been selected for the interview through email.
- ***Interview:*** If selected, you will be invited to participate in a 60- to 90-minute, one-on-one interview with me. During this interview, I will be asking you about why you chose to attend an ECHS, what your experience has been at the ECHS, and what your educational and career goals are.

3. POTENTIAL BENEFITS
You will not directly benefit from participating in this study. However, your participation in this study may help school administrators, counselors, and teachers better understand what students need to successfully graduate and meet their goals. It is my hope that this study will specifically help ECHS administrators, counselors, and teachers enhance or implement resources, services, and/or practices that assist students in their academic and college/career preparation.

4. POTENTIAL RISKS
There is minimal to no risk involved to participate in this study. While participating in the interview, you may feel uncomfortable answering questions about yourself. If you feel this way, you may simply choose to not answer certain questions or choose to stop participating at any time.

5. PRIVACY AND CONFIDENTIALITY
All research materials, including your child's responses in the Participant Interest Form and the interview, will be kept confidential and will only be used for research purposes. To protect your identity, a pseudonym (or fake name) will be used in place of your real name and your school's name. You will be given the opportunity to choose your own pseudonym at the beginning of the interview. No identifiable questions such as home address will be asked.

If you choose to participate in the interview, please know that you will be audio recorded with your permission. You will be given a summary of our interview conversation and will have the opportunity to offer feedback and suggestions to ensure that you are comfortable with the presentation of the material.

During the research process, all of the field notes, interview transcripts, and findings will be kept in a locked file cabinet in my apartment and computer records will be on a password-protected computer to maintain security. The only individuals that will have access to the interview data are myself, Dr. Patricia Marin (my advisor), and a paid transcriptionist. Parents/guardians, as well as administrators, teachers, and counselors, will not have access to the data that is collected through this research.

There may be circumstances where this information must be released. For example, personal information regarding your participation in this study may be disclosed if required by state law. Also, your data may be reviewed by the following groups (as applicable to the research): Office for Human Research Protections or other federal, state, or international regulatory agencies and Michigan State University's Institutional Review Board (IRB).

Although my research does not include questions on sexual assault and/or violence, please note that as a university employee, I am obligated to report any allegations of relationship violence, sexual misconduct, or child abuse involving research participants to the MSU Police and the Office of Institutional Equity (OIE) staff.

6. YOUR RIGHTS TO PARTICIPATE, SAY NO, OR WITHDRAW
Participation is voluntary. Refusal to participate will involve no penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. You may also discontinue participation at any time without penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. You may choose not to answer specific questions and you may change your mind about responses at any time. Your participation in this study will have no affect on your grades at your ECHS.

7. COSTS AND COMPENSATION FOR BEING IN THE STUDY
There are no costs associated with participating in this study. If you decide to participate in the study, you will be compensated with a $50 Amazon gift card for your time.

8. AUDIOTAPPING
I am asking for your permission to ***audiotape (sound)*** our interview as part of this research study. All audiotapes will be stored in a password-protected computer to maintain security. Following "best practices," approved by the University Research Council at Michigan State University, all audiotapes will be erased after three years after the submission of my dissertation or publication, whichever occurs last.

Please check a box to indicate what you want to do:

☐ Yes, I give permission for the interview to be audiotaped.

☐ No, I do not give permission for the interview to be audiotaped.

9. CONTACT INFORMATION

If you have concerns or questions about this study, such as how to do any part of the study, please contact me, Dianey R. Leal, at lealdian@msu.edu or at (956) 735-7937.

If you have questions or concerns about your role and rights as a research participant, would like to obtain information or offer input, or would like to register a complaint about this study, you may contact, anonymously if you wish, the Michigan State University's Human Research Protection Program at 517-355-2180, Fax 517-432-4503, or e-mail irb@msu.edu or regular mail at 4000 Collins Rd, Suite 136, Lansing, MI 48910.

10. DOCUMENTATION OF INFORMED CONSENT.

Your signature [or electronic signatures] below means that you voluntarily give your permission to participate in this research study.

_____ _____

Signature of Student Participant Date

You will be given a copy of this form to keep.

APPENDIX F: EMAIL TO SELECTED PARTICIPANTS

Hi [NAME],

Thank you for your interest in participating in my research study regarding early college high school students' educational and career goals. I am excited to inform you that you have been selected to participate in this study!

To secure a date and time for our interview, can you please send me your general availability for a 60- to 90-minute interview? Once I receive your response and we agree on a date and time for the interview, I will send you a Zoom link for our interview. I will also send you a reminder text the day before our scheduled interview.

Please let me know if there are any particular accommodations you may need before our interview.

I have included a copy of the Consent Form in this email. As mentioned in this form, your participation in this study is completely voluntary and you may stop participation at any time. Anything you share with me regarding the study will remain confidential and will only be used for research purposes. When we meet for our interview, I will ask you to choose your own pseudonym (fake name) that I will use when I refer to you, your ideas, and your experiences in the study.

I sincerely appreciate your willingness to participate in this study and look forward to learning about your early college high school experience! If any questions or concerns arise prior to our interview, please feel free to contact me at (956) 735-7937 or lealdian@msu.edu. I have also listed the contact information of my advisor, Dr. Patricia Marin. Thank you, in advance, for your participation in this study.

Sincerely,

Dianey Leal
Doctoral Candidate
Higher, Adult, and Lifelong Education
Chicano/Latino Studies Program
Michigan State University
lealdian@msu.edu
(965) 735-7937

Dr. Patricia Marin
Associate Professor
Higher, Adult, and Lifelong Education
Michigan State University
pmarin@msu.edu

APPENDIX G: SHARING INTERVIEW PROTOCOL WITH STUDENTS

Hi! Thank you again for agreeing to participate in my research study! The purpose of this study is to better understand the educational and career goals of early college high school (ECHS) students. **For this interview, I hope to learn more about you, such as your reason for applying to an ECHS, your ECHS experience, and career goals.**

Before our interview on [INSERT DATE AND TIME], I would like to share some of the questions I will be asking you. My reason for sharing these questions with you is so that you can have time to think about your responses. The questions I will be asking you are meant for me to better understand who you are as a student and what your experience has been attending an ECHS. There aren't any right or wrong answers. I'm simply looking to understand your ECHS experience from your perspective. When reflecting on these questions, it might be helpful to think about your responses using examples and/or stories that convey your experiences. Stories are often useful tools to describe your personal experiences, what you've learned, and what you hope to do.

The questions below are a few sample questions I will be asking you during our one-on-one interview

[Sample Questions]

1. Let's start with you. I want to know what kind of student you were before you enrolled at your ECHS. For example, think back to when you were in elementary school or middle school, can you describe what kind of student you were?
2. Before high school, what were your perceptions of college?
3. When you were learning about the ECHS program, what kind of messages did you receive about the program?
4. What was the process of applying to the ECHS program like for you personally?
5. Can you describe what it is like to be an ECHS student? What does a typical day look like for you? Who do you interact with the most during a typical day at your ECHS?
6. Can you tell me what it's been like to take college-level courses while still being a high school student?
7. What kind of academic resources does your ECHS offer students to help you all prepare for and succeed in college-level classes? Of these academic resources, what do you find most helpful?
8. So, what is next after high school? How did you come to this decision?
9. Has anybody in particular reached out or tried helping you figure out what plans would be possible after high school?
10. Picture yourself 10 years from now. Can you describe what you see yourself doing?
11. Describe how your family has been involved in your education and future goals.
12. Let's say a middle school student is interested in attending an ECHS. What advice would you give that student?

APPENDIX H: STUDENT INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

Thank you so much for taking the time to talk with me today! The purpose of this study is to better understand the educational and career goals of early college high school (ECHS) students like you. **For this interview, I hope to learn more about you, such as your reason for applying to an ECHS, your ECHS experience, and your plans after high school.**

Before I begin, I want to remind you that you can skip any question you don't want to answer or stop the interview altogether at any point. If you choose to completely withdraw from the study before its publication, all the information you provide me with will not be used in the study. It is also important to note that I will protect what you share with me today. So, your identity, including items such as your name, school, and any other names you provide, will be kept confidential. I will be doing this by using a pseudonym (or a fake name) instead of actual names. **What alternative name would you like for me to use instead of your real name?**

[*If they indicated they are okay to be audiotaped in the consent form*]
In the consent form you turned in to me, you indicated you would be okay with having this interview recorded. The purpose of recording our conversation is to ensure I don't miss anything you say. **Are you still comfortable with me recording our conversation today?** [*let student know you will be asking this question again when recording starts*]

Do you have any questions for me before we begin? If you need me to clarify any questions during the interview, please do not hesitate to let me know.

Prompt 1: Pre-ECHS Experience

1. Let's start with you. I want to know what kind of student you were before you enrolled at your ECHS. For example, think back to when you were in elementary school or middle school, can you describe what kind of student you were?
    a. ***Probe:*** What did you enjoy learning about when you were in elementary [or middle school]? Why did you enjoy learning about that?
    b. ***Probe:*** When you were in elementary school [or middle school], what kind of school-sponsored clubs or activities were you involved in?
        i. ***[if student was not involved in school-sponsored clubs and activities]*** what kind of activities, sports, or hobbies did you enjoy doing in your free time?

2. Before high school, what were your perceptions of college?
    a. ***Probe:*** Where did this thinking come from?
    b. ***Probe:*** Before high school, what kind of messages did you receive about attending college? Can you give me a few examples?
    c. ***Probe:*** Where (or from whom) did you hear these messages from?

Prompt 2: Applying and Enrolling at an ECHS

3. When did you learn about the ECHS program?
    a. ***Probe:*** How did you learn about the ECHS program? Did anybody in particular talk to you about the it?

b. ***Probe:*** When you were learning about the ECHS program, what kind of messages did you receive about the program?
    i. Where (or from whom) did you hear these messages from?

4. When I was looking up information on your school district. I noticed that your district has several ECHSs. Why did you decide to attend this ECHS in particular?
    a. ***Probe:*** [***if student says they didn't really have a choice***] What do you mean you didn't have a choice? Tell me more about that.

5. I know that all students are required to do [***insert program requirements***] in order to get into the ECHS program. What was the process of applying to the ECHS program like for you personally?
    a. ***Probe:*** Did anybody in particular help you with the application?
    b. ***Probe:*** What did you find most challenging about the application process?
    c. ***Probe:*** Did anybody try to discourage you from applying to the program?

Prompt 3: ECHS Experience
Now that you've been attending your ECHS since [***insert grade level based on survey response***], I'm interested in learning a little more about what your personal experience has been like as an ECHS student.

6. Can you describe what it is like to be an ECHS student? What does a typical day look like for you?
    a. ***Probe:*** Who do you interact with the most during a typical day at your ECHS?
        i. Describe your interactions with [***insert person or group they mention***].
    b. ***Probe:*** Describe the kinds of classes you are currently taking.
    c. ***Probe:*** What do you do after you finish with classes each day?

7. As an ECHS student, you are required to take college-level courses. Can you tell me what it's been like to take college-level courses while still being a high school student?
    a. ***Probe:*** What do you like most about your college-level courses?
        i. ***[depending on student response]*** Tell me more about this.
    b. ***Probe:*** What do you like least about college-level courses?
        i. ***[depending on student response]*** Tell me more about this.

8. When I was in high school, I also took college-level courses at a nearby community college, and I remember how difficult it was for me at first because I wasn't used to the workload. So I'm interested to know what kind of academic resources your ECHS offers students to help you all prepare for and succeed in these classes? (e.g., tutoring, mentoring, library workshops)
    a. ***Probe:*** Of these academic resources, what do you find most helpful?
    b. ***Probe:*** Is there anyone in particular who helps you the most academically?

9. Are you currently working and/or involved in any extracurricular activities like clubs, sports, or organizations in your ECHS? Tell me more about your involvement.
    a. ***Probe:*** How do you balance your workload responsibilities with your job requirements and/or extracurricular involvement?

b. ***Probe:*** What is your school's overall thoughts about working or participating in extracurricular activities?

10. Earlier I asked you about your perceptions of college before you enrolled at your high school. Now that you have been part of ECHS program for some years, have these perceptions about college changed for you?
    a. ***Probe:*** [***If no***] Is there something in particular that you have learned about college that you did not know before?
    b. ***Probe:*** [***If yes***] In what ways have your perceptions about college changed?
        i. What kind of messages have you received about attending college as an ECHS student? Can you give me a few examples?
        ii. Where (or from whom) did you hear these messages from?

Prompt 4: Postsecondary Aspirations And Preparedness

As I mentioned earlier, in addition to understanding what your ECHS experience has been like, I am also interested in learning about your educational and career goals.

11. So, what is next after high school?
12. Describe the moment that you knew that you wanted to go to college.
13. How did you come to the decision that you wanted to go to college?
    a. ***Probe:*** What kind of information did you gather to make this decision?
    b. ***Probe:*** Where did you get this information from?
14. Do you know what college you want to attend yet? If so, who or what influenced this decision?
    a. ***Probe:*** Did you meet with or talk to any representatives from specific colleges? Tell me more about that.
    b. ***Probe:*** Have you visited (virtually or physically) any of these campuses? What stood out to you when visiting these schools?
    c. ***Probe:*** Do you know what you plan to study in college?
15. What factors did you take into consideration (or will you be taking into consideration) when selecting colleges to apply to (e.g., costs, type, geography, etc.)?
16. In what ways has your ECHS prepared you for, or supported you in, the process of applying to college?
    a. ***Probe:*** Describe your advising experience with your ECHS counselor. What kind of advice did your counselor give you as you prepared and applied to colleges? What did you find helpful?
    b. ***Probe***: What kind of support services does your school offer to help students prepare and apply for college? (e.g., college entrance exam preparation, career counseling, personal counseling, emotional support, internships, financial aid workshops, tutoring).
    c. ***Probe***: What kind of support services have you used personally to help you prepare and apply for college?
    d. ***Probe:*** I know your program requires students to take [***insert list of requirements***]. Did you pursue any other additional support services to help you with your educational and career goals?
17. In the participant form, you mentioned that you will be earning an associate degree in [***insert degree name***] by May. Why did you decide to get an associate degree?

a. ***Probe:*** Why did you decide to get an associate degree in this particular subject?
b. ***Probe:*** What would you like to do with this degree?

18. Picture yourself 10 years from now. Can you describe what you see yourself doing?

Prompt 5: Social Network Influences

19. Earlier you said that [***insert student response***] has helped you the most academically. Are there other individuals in our life who have also played a role in your education?
    a. ***Probe:*** Tell me more about how this individual(s) has played a role?
20. [***If student does not mention their family as playing a role in question 19***] Describe how your family has been involved in your education and future goals.
21. Tell me about the reaction of your family or those close to you when you told them your plans after high school.
22. Students often talk about how others have inspired or motivated them in school. Sometimes students call these individuals role models. Do you have any role models that you looked up to? Can you tell me why you consider them your role model(s)?

Prompt 6: Student Advice

23. Now that you are about to graduate from your ECHS, would you recommend this program to middle school students? Why? [or Why not?]
24. Let's say a middle school student is interested in attending an ECHS. What advice would you give that student?
    a. ***Probe***: [If student is going to college] What advice would you give that student in terms of preparing for college?
    b. ***Probe***: [If student is joining workforce or military] What advice would you give that student in terms of preparing for the [workforce or military]?
    c. ***Probe***: [If student does not have plans yet] What advice would you give this student to ensure she/he graduates from school?

Conclusion

Before we conclude this interview, do you have anything else you would like to share with me about your ECHS experience that we didn't talk about?

Again, thank you for taking the time to talk with me today. I will be following up with you to share a short summary [narrative] of this interview. The purpose of me sharing this summary is to make sure I captured our conversation today accurately. When I share this short summary with you, I will invite you to add, edit, and/or clarify any points you would for me to make.