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A Phenomenological Exploration of the Experiences of High School Students Enrolled in School-Wide College Readiness Programs

Sherlina Thomas
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Walden University

College of Social and Behavioral Sciences

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Sherlina Stephens

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Walden University
2015

Abstract

A Phenomenological Exploration of the Experiences of High School Students Enrolled in

School-Wide College Readiness Programs

by

Sherlina Latice Stephens

MSW, The Florida State University, 2001

BSW, University of Central Florida, 2000

Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

Human Services

Walden University

December 2015

Abstract

In the early 1980s, the United States experienced a high school dropout epidemic, leading school systems to adopt reform efforts. College readiness programs (CRPs) became a tool to address educational disparities in secondary and postsecondary education for over three decades. While decreases occurred in the overall high school dropout rate across racial and ethnic groups, they have been minimal. This study addressed a research gap on the lack of student input and perceptions about their experiences in CRP programs. This phenomenological study used in-depth, semi-structured interviews with criterion-selected former high school students from 3 schools within the ABC County School System in the southern United States. The sample of 12 students provided data about their lived experiences as Project GRAD scholars. The theoretical framework for this study was Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory (EST) based on human development and systems of the environment. Based on results of the interview questions and emergence of themes, 95% of the students indicated their motivation for attending college was based on family. While the traditional college readiness program had some positive influence on student's secondary and post-secondary plans, such programs were not the primary contributing factor, but rather parental/family support was. Furthermore, personal student accounts of their involvement with the Project GRAD program reflect a positive experience. However, such accounts did not reflect a consistent and active supporting relationship with the organization. This finding is in opposition to reported data by many college readiness programs. Implications for social change will bring awareness and modification to programs with the intent of alleviating educational dropout epidemics.

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Dedication

This has been a long journey, one where I have endured much heartache and pain, and many victories. As I sit and type this page, I look back over the past 4 years and realize I would not be here had it not been for the support, prayers, and love from so many people. On November 1, 1976, in a small hospital in a small town, my purpose gave life. It was on that day the world changed. Jeremiah 1:5 says, “Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, before you were born I set you apart, I appointed you as a prophet to the nations.” That scripture has been my drive and motivation over the past four years. So, God, I thank you for choosing me!

I also dedicate this page and my dissertation to my biggest supporter and my cheerleader since I was born: my sissy, Tamera Nacole MeBane. I love you with everything in me. Even when I didn't believe in myself, you were always there to lift my spirits, pray for me, and encourage me. While growing up, we endured a lot and so many doubted our success, but we proved them wrong. I thank you for being you and thank God for choosing you to be my big sissy. We did it! I love you.

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Xavier Thomas, my husband. What more can I say? I'm so appreciative that God placed you in my life at the time that He did. I love you and look forward to a lifetime together. Thank you for allowing me to cry, vent, scream, yell, you name it—no matter what, you never judged me. You are one of the most constant figures in my life and I love you even more for that. I can't thank you enough. And lastly to my son, you're my motivation to want more in life. I will continue to work hard and do everything in my power to ensure that you have the best quality of life. Mommy loves you!

I also want to thank both of my parents, Eddie and Carolyn Stephens. I know that that their journey throughout life was rough. They endured many struggles, but also worked hard to give me the best life possible. I thank them for raising me to be such a driven and motivated woman. I love my parents; they are the most supportive, loving, caring parents. Without you I would not be here. You've always believed in me, even as a little girl. Thank you and I love you!

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Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

Introduction

Historically, the United States has produced less than stellar primary and secondary level educational outcomes and results compared to other industrialized nations (Droogsmas-Musoba, 2011). The national graduation rate increased considerably from the years of 1974 until 2012 (Brenchley, 2013) with a substantial increase in high school graduation rates for the 2009-2010 school year (Stillwell & Sable, 2013). However, during this same school year, the U.S. Department of Education reported that the national dropout rate increased incrementally amongst grade levels 9-12 (Stillwell & Sable, 2013).

The U.S. national dropout rate for grades 9-12 for the 2009-2010 school year was 3.4%. This low overall statistic is contrasted with the significantly higher aggregated dropout rate of 5.7% for minority students, in particular Black students (5.7%), Hispanic students (5.5%), and Native American students (6.7%). Although the graduation rate of minority students has increased over time, there is an ongoing debate over the continuation of the gap and the growth of the gap (NCES, 2012). Debate has continued on why this educational gap has continued to exist and why minority students continue to lag behind in high school graduation and matriculation into postsecondary educational institutions (Barnes & Slate, 2010; Bower, 2013; Walsh, 2011).

Historically, high school graduation and college matriculation rates for minority students in metropolitan cities in the United States have been lower than those of their majority counterparts (Stillwell & Sable, 2013; Strayhorn, 2011; Walsh, 2011; Watt,

Huerta, & Alkan, 2011). These lower rates linked to students dropping out of high school, an event that makes the likelihood of attending college virtually nonexistent (Bower, 2013). This pattern continued with minority students in 2010, representing about one-third of all students enrolled in a postsecondary institution in the United States (NCES, 2012).

Background

Several factors account for the high number of at-risk minority students who do not graduate high school and enter into postsecondary education institutions. These factors include educational capacity (Watt et al., 2011), family dynamics (Strayhorn, 2011; Walsh, 2011), institutional and hidden racism (Bower, 2013; Walsh, 2011), and socioeconomic status (Bower, 2013; Strayhorn, 2011). In addition, many of these students experience anxiety from the pressure of having to pave the way as the first in their families to achieve these milestones (Watt et al., 2011).

Since the last eighties, the rise in dropout rates and lack of visibility in postsecondary educational institutions for minority students has prompted a move by educators and policy makers to create interventions (Bower, 2013; Domina, 2009; Murphy, Gaughan, Hume, & Moore, 2010). These interventions targeted minority student groups that are historically and statistically at-risk for dropping out of high school and never attending college (Bower, 2013; Domina, 2009). These interventions also recognized at-risk characteristics and experiences, including:

- family composition (Strayhorn, 2011; Walsh, 2011),
- generational education history (Strayhorn, 2011), and

- neighborhood and community location (Bower, 2013; Bragg & Durham, 2012; Domina, 2009; Gandara & Bial, 2011; Walsh, 2011).

The overall goals set forth by policy makers were:

- craft intervention programs aimed at shortening the educational achievement gap,
- increasing high school graduation rates, and
- improving college matriculation rates for first generation minority students identified as being educationally disadvantaged, marginalized, and in general at-risk (Bower, 2013; Bragg & Durham, 2012; Domina, 2009; Droogsma-Musoba, 2011; Gandara & Bial, 2011).

These educational intervention programs crafted to fulfill these goals became known as college readiness and/or college access programs (Gandara & Bial, 2011).

The introduction of college readiness programs (CRPs) began through the creation of federally funded programs known as TRIO programs (Pitre & Pitre, 2009).

TRIO programs were the initial response by policy makers at the federal level to address the educational gap between underrepresented minority youth and the White majority (Pitre & Pitre, 2009; Walsh, 2011); such programs have now been in existence for over 40 years (Bower, 2013; Pitre & Pitre, 2009). TRIO programs such as Upward Bound, Talent Search, and GEAR UP aligned program goals with targets of increasing high school graduation rates, decreasing dropout rates, and increasing college matriculation rates amongst economically, educationally, and socially disadvantaged minority students (Domina, 2009; Walsh, 2011). According to the Department of Education (2012). For

nearly twenty years students enrolled in TRIO programs have a higher GPA, and nearly a tenth of students remain in school. On the contrary, reports by the Department of Education on the effectiveness of TRIO programs also indicated that with each student that was enrolled in their programs, the percentage of positive gains decreased (Department of Education, 2012). The reasoning behind the decreases can be attributable to a number of reasons, some of which include the transient nature of many students who reside within low socioeconomic areas to student's consistent participation in the program (Pitre & Pitre 2009; Walsh, 2011).

Although CRPs programs have differed in terms of specific program components, emphases, and/or outcome measures, the overall mission and focus of all college readiness, college access, and TRIO programs have been synonymous (Contreras, 2011; Domina, 2009; Pitre & Pitre, 2009; Strayhorn, 2011; Walsh, 2011). Their mission and vision were dropout prevention and increasing high school graduation and college matriculation rates amongst at-risk minority students (Contreras, 2011; Horn & Chen, 1998; Pitre & Pitre, 2009; Strayhorn, 2011).

According to seminal work, Horn and Chen (1998) reported that first generation, at-risk, socially and economically disadvantaged students involved in any TRIO or college readiness program completed high school and matriculated to college at a faster and higher rate in comparison to those students not involved in these programs (Domina, 2009). Students who participated in CRPs not only excelled academically, graduated from high school and matriculated to college, but they were also more interested in

postsecondary education options with a good fit for their interests (Contreras, 2011; Horn & Chen, 1998; Walsh, 2011).

The effectiveness of CRPs has been gauged through an array of measures, including graduation rates, decrease in student absences, college enrollment rates, grade point averages, graduation tests, enrollment in Advanced Placement classes, and school report cards (Roderick, Nagaoka, & Coca, 2009). Additional research on CRPs continued to support the use of such programming that motivated students to achieve higher academic standards, as well as served as a catalyst for considering postsecondary educational options (Contreras, 2011; Roderick et al., 2009). The overall evaluation tools in assessing these programs' effectiveness has been their ability to increase high school graduation rates within a district and/or state, and to report positive school reform efforts (Contreras, 2011; Droogsma-Musoba, 2011; Strayhorn, 2011). An indication of progress and program effectiveness based on reports from college readiness programs would indicate that CRPs were in fact working (Droogsma-Musoba, 2011).

During the 1960s the goal of school reform was to provide equality and better educational resources for schools where the student population comprised a majority of impoverished, socially, and economically disadvantaged minorities in low-performing schools (Fletcher & Tienda, 2010). As a result of these efforts, school districts reported organizational and institutional gains and improvements (Bower, 2013; Fletcher & Tienda, 2010). Although initial programmatic evaluations were promising, the majority of the research on these reforms' effectiveness was anecdotal (i.e., school endorsements and praise of such programs) and/or focused on institutional effectiveness (i.e.,

graduation rates, dropout rates, matriculation to college; Domina, 2009; Droogsma-Musoba, 2011; Strayhorn, 2011).

Most school reform efforts throughout the United States focused on internal solutions within the institutions (Bower, 2013; Domina, 2009). Many programmatic evaluations have failed to examine students' experiences and measure if, in fact, school-wide CRPs were helpful and associated with of high school graduation and college entrance. Despite evidence of program effectiveness, CRP students continue to drop out of school and fail to matriculate to college (Bower, 2013; Murphy et al., 2010; Strayhorn, 2011). During the 2011-2012 school year, the number of students that dropped out of school for the entire state was nearly one-fourth of the national dropout average (Alliance for Excellent Education, "Education and the Economy", 2011).

Although the aforementioned research regarding the evaluation of school-wide college readiness programs illuminates important findings, I have found no research that examined the perspectives and experiences of high school student's based on their participation in a school wide college readiness programs. Given such, further research is warranted that could examine this lack of research, in an effort to address the problem of considering student perspectives and experiences based on their participation in the CRP to the successful graduation from high school entrance into college (Bower, 2013; Murphy et al., 2010; Strayhorn, 2011; Strayhorn, 2014).

Problem Statement

In the ABC County Schools system, during the 2011-2012 school year 949 students were classified as seniors at Jones, Mitchell-Jones, and Smithview the schools,

the research sites for this study. The aggregate number of students who dropped out during that same school year was almost half the number that began at the start of that school year. This number was 9% lower than the graduation rate for the entire state (Georgia Department of Education, “2012 4-Year Cohort Graduation Rate”, 2013).

The perspectives and experiences of high school students who participated in school-wide college readiness programs have not been a focus in previous literature on CRPs, creating a gap in the literature. Addressing this gap by documenting student perspectives and experiences in the CRP is important in understanding the factors necessary for at-risk students to successfully graduate from high school and enter into college (Bower, 2013; Murphy et al., 2010; Strayhorn, 2011, 2014).

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to examine U.S. high school students’ perspectives of and experiences from their participation in the Project GRAD school-wide college readiness program. Also explored was how this program affected participating students’ decisions to graduate high school and attend college. Its anticipated outcome was to improve how this system created programs addressed educational disparities without considering the populations directly affected. Data from in-depth interviews with the student participants were the data to answer the primary research questions.

Research Questions

The primary research questions guiding this study were:

- RQ1: How did high school participants in the Project GRAD college readiness program describe their experiences as students in this program?
- RQ2: How did high school student participants in Project GRAD perceive and link their program participation with high school graduation and college entrance?

Theoretical Framework

This study used Urie Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory (EST) as its theoretical framework. EST was originally based on the process of human development within social systems (Wallace & Chhuon, 2014). Bronfenbrenner's EST engages the interconnectedness of four systems: microsystem, mesosystem, macrosystem, and exosystem (Nichols, Kotchick, McNamara-Barry, & Haskins, 2010). According to this theory, each system has some influence on an individuals' social constructs and individuals (Bronfenbrenner, 2009); these influences essentially shaped how individuals enmesh into society through levels of adaptability, assimilation, and functionality (Nichols et al., 2010; Ortiz, Valerio, & Lopez, 2012).

According to Bronfenbrenner (2009), individual experiences become intertwined with one's environment and cultural norms. As a result, when individuals are in certain situations, the context of their environment and cultural norms produces differing responses (Bronfenbrenner, 2009; Wallace & Chhuon, 2014). While using the conceptualization of human development and environment and its direct connection to Bronfenbrenner's EST, Nichols et al. (2010) noted two specific notions at its core. First, people were the core of their environment and ultimately determined the overall flow. Second, disparities and disadvantages existed within the context of environments. As a

result, it should be expected that all individuals to respond in the same manner when placed in the same situation (Duerden & Witt, 2010; Levine-Brown, Kanny, & Johnson, 2014). Individual experiences cannot be universal, and so no universal or generic solutions exist (Bronfenbrenner, 2009). However, some stages of human development are synonymous with timing, circumstance, history, and other environmental barriers that impacted the overall being (Bronfenbrenner, 2009; Duerden & Witt, 2010; Levine-Brown et al., 2014; Wallace & Chhuon, 2014).

College readiness programs were first developed as a response to or product of a system. In this case, the macrosystem consists of values and established norms that provide opportunities for certain students deemed at-risk for school failure within the United States. These opportunities take the form of such school reform efforts as CRPs. The exosystem, comprised of the school boards, superintendents and other systems, which make direct decisions regarding educational standards. At this level, school-aged children have indirect experiences based on the decisions by such individuals to implement such programs. The microsystem consists of the family unit, the local schools, and the individuals directly associated with the Project GRAD CRP. The mesosystem includes the interaction and relationship between the students, the schools, and the various components of the CRP.

Unfortunately, at the time of this study, no research existed to document student perspectives and experiences based on the larger exosystem. This research gap is linked to the lack of CRP implementations at the microsystem level for school-ages children.

The use of EST in this study had social change implications from the microsystem level to the macrosystem level regarding the implementation of CRPs.

Nature of the Study

This study used a qualitative methodology with a phenomenological conceptual framework. Phenomenological research allows individuals to (a) have and speak of their experiences based on a common event (Creswell, 2013; Savitz-Romer, 2012), (b) compare and contrast such individual shared experiences from that event, and (c) conceptualize a combined account of the event (Creswell, 2013; Parikh, 2013; Savitz-Romer, 2012). As a result, a phenomenological conceptual framework was used to outline, translate and view the individual lived experiences of the student participants as, through the current literature and research on college readiness programming.

This study collected data using in-depth interviews with 12 former high school students from three Project GRAD high schools within a major metropolitan area with a school-wide college readiness program. These schools were the only metropolitan southern high schools in this area that were partnered and affiliated with Project GRAD at the time of the study. Participants were selected through the use of criterion sampling and provided relevant in-depth and detailed personal experiences, as suggested by Harper (2015). I specifically sought participants who could provide information on student experiences including:

- the services students obtained as participants in Project GRAD,
- the influence their participation had on graduating high school, and

- the influence their participation had on the decision to attend a postsecondary educational institution.

These study findings were intended to be used by Project GRAD administrators to improve its programs, ultimately benefitting the program and the students it serves, as suggested by Ortiz et al. (2012).

The 12-person sample size was specifically chosen to replicate prior research focused on the meaning of student incentives based on their enrollment in a dropout prevention program (Creswell, 2013; Emmel, 2013; Griffith, 2013). The sample size met the threshold suggested by Creswell (2013), Emmel (2013) and Griffith (2013) for a sufficiently large sample of participants to identify emerging themes and commonalities. A larger sample was undesirable because it would have been increased the likelihood difficulty in developing themes because of the possibilities of too many varied experiences (Creswell, 2013; Emmel, 2013; Griffith, 2013). The research site was a whole-school college readiness program in three different schools within a large metropolitan school system in the southern United States, hereafter referred to as Site ABC (pseudonym). For the purposes of this study, the term college readiness schools referred to high schools that fit the criteria for similar school performance, student population, and neighborhood location.

Definition of Key Terms

Achievement gap: A longstanding disparate educational lag that causes ethnic minority students to have a disadvantage in accessing education (Blackford & Khojasteh, 2013). The achievement gap is closely associated with socioeconomic status and race.

The existence of the achievement gap in the United States implies that educational systems were historically created for the White male (Blackford & Khojasteh, 2013; Harris, 2011). As a result, other ethnic minority groups had difficulty in achieving academic success in the United States (Blackford & Khojasteh, 2013; Harris, 2011).

College readiness: The process by which students become acclimated and prepared for the rigor of postsecondary educational attendance (Lombardi, Seburn, & Conley, 2011). Throughout elementary, middle, and high school years, children receive a set of comprehensive curricula outlining every expectation and aspect of a successful college transition and graduation (Droogsma-Musoba, 2011; Porter & Polikoff, 2012). Students who exhibit college readiness are equipped academically, socially, and emotionally, once they graduate high school, to enter college (Lombardi et al., 2011).

College Readiness Program (CRP): Educational intervention programs created in the United States for underrepresented and/or disadvantaged ethnic groups during the early 1990s (Walsh, 2011). These intervention programs were designed to decrease the academic achievement gap between minority and White students, in response to increased awareness of a disparity in the number of minority high school graduates, their academic performance, and college entrance rates (Contreras, 2011; Sablan, 2014; Strayhorn, 2011; Walsh, 2011). Hundreds of college readiness programs exist across the United States and generally either focuses on a whole school or are population- and group-specific (Strayhorn, 2011).

Education reform: Schematic and systematic efforts by which a government influences and puts into action processes to fix the problems with the education system

(Blackford & Khojasteh, 2013; Domina & Ruzek, 2012). It includes the implementation of specific tools, resources, and systems to provide a solution for the lackluster and dismal production of academic performance from students (Domina & Ruzek, 2012).

No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB): A federal law designed to hold historically and consistently lower-performing schools accountable for educational delivery to students (Koyama, 2011). NCLB mandated assessing students' academic aptitude in core subject areas in each school year, using students' performance on a specific standardized to determine a school's effectiveness (No Child Left Behind Act [NCLB], 2002). The efficacy of NCLB has been heavily argued and debated based on the alleged racially biased content and relevance of the standardized tests (Koyama, 2011).

Minority. Individuals from both gender orientations who have been traditionally marginalized and considered to have a disadvantaged and inequitable access to services and resources within society. For the sake of this study, a minority is identified by race and ethnicity (Strayhorn, 2009).

Project Graduation Really Achieves Dreams (Project GRAD). A specific whole-school college readiness program implemented in response to the increased minority high school dropout rate in the United States and the lack of minority representation within collegiate institutions (Contreras, 2011; Holland, 2005).

School reform: Efforts created to address the academic achievement gap and the delivery of education within inner city or larger metropolitan schools (Harris, 2012, Hemmings, 2012). School reform is a means through which programs transform and

change the face of education, thereby making it equal for everyone (Harris, 2012; Hemmings, 2012).

The *National Center for Education Statistics (NCES)* is an organization that maintains a national database with significant statistics and data on the state of education (NCES, 2014). The NCES database provided an analytical and in-depth analysis of trends, reported outcomes, and measures surrounding primary, secondary, and postsecondary education (NCES, 2014).

TRIO Programs: Federally funded programs created as part of U.S. educational reforms to develop a trajectory system by which underrepresented and first-generation students gain equal access to a college education (Office of Postsecondary Education, 2013; Pitre & Pitre, 2009; Walsh, 2011). TRIO Programs are specifically designed to pinpoint and address concrete and tangible factors influencing college entrance (Contreras, 2011; Glennie, Dalton, & Knapp, 2014). TRIO programs are divided into three main categories: Educational Talent Search, Upward Bound, and Student Support Services (U.S Department of Education, 2012, “Federal TRIO Programs,” para. 2).

Assumptions

1. Participants presented their perspective during the interview in response to open-ended questionnaires.
2. Participants would be knowledgeable about the Project GRAD program, its mission, purpose, and objectives.
3. Participants had the social maturity of their age group and the emotional and social intellectual capacity to answer questions.

Scope of the Study

The scope of this study included former high school students from three metropolitan southern high schools who were participants in Project GRAD. Although the sample was from schools designated as Project GRAD schools, the sample did not include the entire school population. Project GRAD students had to have a signed Project GRAD Scholarship Covenant on file in order to be considered a part of the sample. In addition, students had to have maintained a 3.0 G.P.A. and completed two summer institutes in order to continue in the program.

Project GRAD was a national college readiness and dropout prevention program with programs in eight states (Holland, 2005). The scope of this study included three Project GRAD's metropolitan southern schools. Although the study was open to any racial group, of the 12 participants who responded, 11 were Black and one Hispanic. Therefore, the findings may reflect similar patterns associated with this type of program.

Limitations

Many of the student participants may have had some affiliation or relationship with me based on my role and relationship within ABC County Public School System (pseudonym) and the Project GRAD program. However, I was not directly connected to either of the three schools or Project GRAD. In order to protect the ethical integrity of this study, I shared as well as my previous experience with and relationship to the Project GRAD program my role and the purposes of the study and its social implications.

Significance of the Study

During the 1960s, school reform was popular in the United States. The goals of school reform were to provide (a) better educational resources for schools with students designated as impoverished and (b) equality for socially and economically disadvantaged minority students in low performing schools (Fletcher & Tienda, 2010). As a result of such efforts, school districts reported organizational and institutional gains and improvements (Bower, 2013; Fletcher & Tienda, 2010). Yet students continued to drop out of school and never matriculated to college, despite the assumption that the CRP was effective (Domina, 2009; Strayhorn, 2011).

Although other environmental and external factors might have influenced student success (Bower, 2013), most school reform efforts focused on internal solutions within the institutions (Bragg & Durham, 2012; Domina, 2009). Many of these solutions were a means to pacify and appease the nation by implementing many general college readiness and outreach programs.

Summary

Chapter 1 has provided a background on the reasoning behind conducting research on college readiness programs and school reform initiatives. College readiness programs were one of the many educational reform initiatives designed to address the national dropout epidemic (Domina, 2009). This specific reform effort, along with other solutions, had a proposed remedy to alleviate this problem (Domina, 2009; Stayhorn, 2011). Although there was an increase in the number of at-risk students graduating high

school, a gap in the educational attainment and opportunities continued for these students (Bower, 2013).

Chapter 2 of this study consisted of researching studies and data on the history of education and fusing such literature to modern education. Chapter 2 also discussed the academic achievement gap and the impact on equal access to educational opportunities. The terms identified above provided the history and symbolism behind college readiness programs. Moreover, such terms provided insight on the fundamentals and skeletal frame for school-wide college readiness programs and educational interventions. Chapter 3 provided information on the methodology and design of the study. Chapter 3 also consisted of the rationale for the study, data collection, and instrumentation. Chapter 4 was a descriptive account of the data collected. Chapter 4 also discussed the formulation of themes and any subthemes created based on the data collected. Finally Chapter 5 concluded with a summative account of the entire research study. Chapter 5 discussed the interpretation of research findings, any limitations of the research study, and recommendations for further research.

The evaluation of many college readiness and preparation programs produced outcomes with success stories from selected students. Historically, the reported gains and improvements failed to account for student insight and feedback based on their participation. As a result, many educational programs created to curtail the rate of high school dropouts failed to include the perceptions and experiences of those directly involved. This phenomenological study will provide an explanation of the perceptions and experiences of students from three high schools within a major southern metropolitan

school district considered as Project GRAD schools. Through semi-structured interviews, student participants answered questions related to their participation in Project GRAD and how it influenced their decision to graduate high school and attend college.

The overall intent was to (a) make an impact on the delivery and development of education reform efforts; and (b) develop better processes of service delivery by an examination through the lens of students' lived experiences regarding such programs.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Introduction

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to examine the experiences of U.S. high school students who participated in a Project GRAD school-wide college readiness program. It specifically explored how program participation influenced a student's decision to graduate high school and matriculate to college. This literature review will communicate how this study exists within the current body of research. Moreover, the remainder of Chapter 2 ensues an extensive examination of the literature on associated variables of this study. This examination of the literature provides a contextual and foundational understanding of the significance of the study and overarching identified problem, many College Readiness Program evaluations fail to actually link student experiences with actual program effectiveness. In this study, program effectiveness is based on high school graduation and entrance into a post-secondary institution.

This literature review is organized into three sections. The first section provides a historical overview of the educational achievement gap in the United States, including a historical discussion of the first schools in the United States, discussion of present-day U.S. schools, and relevant statistics concerning the graduation and dropout rates of different racial groups in the United States. The next section presents a discussion of the background and history of educational reform and the "need" to begin college readiness programs. It also includes an overview and comprehensive picture of school reform legislation in the United States, and a brief overview of programs implemented to create

equal educational opportunities for all students. The final section provides information on college readiness-oriented school reform in the United States, highlighting college readiness programs in general and the specific college readiness program examined in this study, Project GRAD. This section also highlights how extant literature supports the usefulness and effectiveness of US college readiness programs (CRPs), but has not examined student input.

Search Strategies

I gathered sources for this literature review from peer-reviewed journal articles and publications by the U.S. Department of Education and the National Center for Education Statistics. The umbrella topic for the research was college readiness and college outreach; additional topics included school and educational reform. I searched several online databases to identify pertinent literature: ERIC, Education with SAGE, Education Research Complete, ProQuest Central, Academic Search Complete, Google Scholar, SocINDEX, PsycINFO, and Multidisciplinary Databases. The databases listed above were utilized interchangeably throughout the course of writing this research study for the purposes of formulating the literature review, establishing a foundation for the study, and obtaining scholarly material on the research design and methods. The databases that fall under the education discipline are: ERIC, Education with SAGE, and Education Research Complete. The databases previously mentioned were utilized when researching the *academic achievement gap, college readiness programs, dropout rates of minority students, education reform, and the history of schools*. Topics pertaining to The primary search keywords were: *academic achievement gap, at-risk, social factors,*

college readiness programs, dropout rates of minority students schools today, education disparities, education reform, graduation rates of minority students, history of schools, intervention, interventions for inequality in education, No Child Left Behind, program evaluation, school reform, and urban education. The remaining databases were utilized in addition to the education discipline databases.

The Eras of Education

The origins of human education are documented through the historical accounts of archaeologists, scientists, and philosophers, whose research was affected by their own assumptions and opinions (Adams, 2010; Anderson, 2010). These records depict a story of how the human species learned to communicate both verbally and nonverbally (Adams, 2010). However, the most pivotal points for this study are how the institution of education as a social system outside the family began, and how the present-day U.S. educational system developed Harris (2011).

Colonial America and Education

Education has vastly changed since the origins of the United States. The time period from 1600-1900, the changes brought about by Colonial America's educational system as well as by the Industrial Revolution have played a major role in all of today's luxuries and daily necessities (Marin, 2010). According to seminal work by Clapp, Chase, and Merriman (1929) and Cohen (1974), the Colonial American educational system was founded on basic life lessons and cultivated through hard work, perseverance, and familial patterns. Farms, fields, and household chores dictated the manner by which children were taught (Marin, 2010; Mraz, 2010). Functionality and adaptation

throughout the world were the parents' beliefs and a hands-on approach to teaching their children (Marin, 2010; Mraz, 2010; Ornstein, 2012). The families, as well as others within a village were the only educators during early civilization; household maintenance and daily survival were the catalysts for children to learn to read, write and compute numbers (Mraz, 2010; Hinitz, 2013).

Religious groups, such as the Quakers, Catholics, Lutherans, and Jews, viewed religion as the primary basis behind why individuals should be taught to read and write, as the Bible and other religious documents provided a means by which children were educated (Hinitz, 2013; Wakefield, 2011). Biblical teachings reinforced cultural norms, belief systems, and values for how children should become productive and law-abiding citizens (Hinitz, 2013). The heavy reliance on religious writings for moral instruction and the general value that education be practical formed the foundation on which the present-day U.S. education system was created (Mraz, 2010; Wakefield, 2011). In this early system, a family's status, race, gender, and the literacy level of the parents were generally considered as indicators of the level of a child's educational capacity (Jeynes, 2011; Mraz, 2010). Seminal work from Cohen (1974) and Miller and Gordon (1974) found that children with literate parents were more privileged and were taught basic skills before they arrived at school.

During the late 16th century, the first formal schools in Colonial America were introduced to society (Wakefield, 2011). The sole purpose of creating both informal and formal institutions of learning was to create order and to dictate the manner in which individuals behaved in society (Marin, 2010; Wakefield, 2011). Families in colonial

societies were highly respected if their children were well-behaved and able to present themselves without a flawed image (Pisapia, 2010). The levels of education and literacy were not as important as family stature and moral reputation (Wakefield, 2011).

According to seminal work by Cole (1966), proper etiquette and moral standards reached the level of societal obligations and were reinforced throughout society.

During the 16th and 17th century in Colonial America, those who were privileged gained access to a free education (Ornstein, 2012); this kind of education was for the privileged White male (Deem, 2012). The basis of this resonance was the notion that society should be run and dictated by the superior White male (Ornstein, 2012). On the other hand, although education and schooling for the public was free, it was not equal (Ansell & Lindvall, 2013). Women, the poor, immigrants, and Blacks were not afforded the opportunity to attend school until 200 years after development of the first official public school (Deem, 2012; Mraz, 2010). The purposes of this form of education were to maintain order and to ensure that children became adequately socialized and capable of competing in society (Irwin, 2012). More important, however, was that this education supported a way of life that was an extension of the morals, values, and respect that were taught within the home (Ornstein, 2012).

These standards and way of life were predicated and based on early Biblical teachings (Ansell & Lindvall, 2012; Mraz, 2010; Irwin, 2012). According to several religious affiliations, those who lived according to the ordinances of the Bible were more apt to govern themselves properly, as well as have established a certain standard of living (Archer, 2013). Public education was not always a free service in some areas of Colonial

America (Hinitz, 2013). Families were required to pay a fee in order for their children to be educated (Hinitz, 2013; Ornstein, 2012).

Master male teachers taught a certain caliber of curriculum to males (Hinitz, 2013; Ornstein, 2012). Girls did not attend the traditional school they were only taught enough to understand the basics of the Bible. The primary role and responsibility of girls was to help their mother with household chores (Archer, 2013; Hinitz, 2013). There was however the opportunity for some girls in Colonial America to study the more non-traditional subject areas, much of which related to being a homemaker (Archer, 2013). The author further notes that when girls did have the opportunity to attend a school setting, the teacher did not have the formal education as her male counterparts.

The establishment of more formalized public schools became a necessity after the colony of Massachusetts declared that townships with numbers of 50 or more be required to set up a school (Archer, 2013; Ansell & Lindvall, 2012). In these schools, male teachers were responsible for teaching the younger boys (Mraz, 2010). Although many schools were established in the 17th century, wealthy families still generally sent their male sons to England to receive formalized schooling (Ornstein, 2012).

Many politicians believed that education should be a right, where citizens made their own decisions about the manner in which they wanted to be educated (Ansell & Lindvall, 2013; Apple, 2013). That idea, criticized and refuted by others, was that the federal government should be involved in how education and schooling were disseminated throughout society (Ornstein, 2012). As a result, during the late 18th century, individual states became the sole proprietor of school establishment.

Many wanted to become educated and literate; as a result, the idea of public education began to spread throughout the states (Ansell & Lindvall, 2013; Irwin, 2012; Ravilious, 2010). Nearly one hundred years after the inception of the first school, states in the North began to offer free schooling for those considered to be disadvantaged, although this did not include slaves (Ansell & Lindvall, 2013). Indeed, it was illegal for any slave to be educated or literate, particularly in southern colonies (Irwin, 2012; Ravilious, 2010). Those slaves who were literate and educated did so through their own determination and with the secret help of their owners (Hinitz, 2013; Holme & Rangel, 2012).

Many changes occurred in public education in what became the United States from the 16th century until the beginning of the 19th century, (Hinitz, 2013; Holme & Rangel, 2012). The federal government's goal was to fund schools, create order in society, and dictate the manner in which the schools operated (Hinitz, 2013; Holme & Rangel, 2012; Ornstein, 2012). Very little difference existed in the manner in which Colonial and contemporary schools were run and operated (Lonsbury & Apple, 2012). Nonetheless, primary and secondary education was of most importance; attending a college or university was not important (Lonsbury & Apple, 2012; Mraz, 2010). According to many influential American leaders and founders, such as John Blair, Mary McCleod Bethune, John Harvard, and George Washington Carver, believed that a college education did not define a person's abilities. Rather, a person was defined by their work experiences, ability to produce in society, and moral character (Mraz, 2010).

Higher Education Over the Decades

Today, a college education has a different connotation than it did in Postcolonial America (Clarke, 2012;). Now a college education affords more opportunities and promises a certain standards of living. While it appeared that the opportunities were equitable, the notion of education equality was a misnomer (Warren, 2011). The history of the American educational system shows that it perpetuated a system founded on the principles that the wealthier and privileged have easier access, while marginalized groups and the poor appear to fight for the same opportunities (Strayhorn, 2009; Strayhorn, 2011; Taines, 2012; Walsh, 2011).

In 1984, on average, over 12 million students enrolled in a two- or four-year college or university (NCES, 2012). The average rate of completion during this time was one-third the enrollment rate. Today, on average, over 21 million students enroll into a two- or four-year college or university with an average college graduation rate of 60% (Stillwell & Sable, 2013). While this is good news on the whole, the aggregate racial composition data collected on college graduates is rather disproportionate (NCES, 2012). In 2005, “21% of Blacks, 29% Hispanics, and 23% of Native American students graduated from a four-year college or university” (NCES, 2012). In contrast, the graduation rate for White students was nearly double that of Black, Hispanic, and Native American students.

Race and Higher Education

In 1635, the first documented institution of higher education in the United States was established (Clarke, 2012; Wakefield, 2011). Harvard University’s purpose was to

educate wealthy Christian White men to become upstanding political and religious figures in society (Clarke, 2012; Thelin, 2011). The goal was to create an ongoing legacy for generations to follow (Mraz, 2012). After the successful launch of Harvard University, between 1690 and 1775, over two dozen other institutions were created (Thelin, 2011). These institutions bargained on the precept of establishing a sound, reputable, lucrative, and prestigious institution within the United States (Clarke, 2012; Mraz, 2010).

Just as with early primary and secondary education, access to higher education was not equal (Rury, 2012; Thelin, 2011). Women, Blacks, and other minority groups were prohibited from attending any type of institution of higher education (Anderson, 2010; Deem, 2012; Rury, 2012; Thelin, 2011). The founding principle of the United States in its colonial era was a slavery-based system where the White males were more educated and powerful and White women and men and women of all other racial groups were less educated and inferior (Rury, 2012; Strayhorn, 2009). Blacks had to fight for access to higher education (Rury, 2012).

When people were unable to desegregate majority colleges and universities, they created Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) (Reese, 2011; Rury, 2012). The first HBCU was established with the intent of educating Black students due to the lack of educational opportunities available in higher education (Flores & Park, 2013). Cheney University provided Blacks with a critical voice and enhanced their standing, thereby increasing their ability to compete in the world (Flores & Park, 2013; McDaniel, Prete, Buchmann, & Shwed, 2011).

Over 100 HBCUs were throughout the United States (Exkano, 2013; McDaniel et al., 2011). While also offering Black students a competitive college education, they continued to serve their original purposes of restoring and maintaining Black culture and history (Flores & Park, 2013). In light of stringent admissions criteria for entrance into many higher educational institutions, HBCUs offered less stringent admissions criteria and more diverse educational opportunities (Exkano, 2013). The author further notes these historic institutions changed the face of higher education for Black and other minority students, yet many HBCUs still suffer and fight for the same respect as majority institutions.

Gender and Higher Education

Women, too, did not have the same opportunities to attend institutions of higher education (Pisapia, 2010; Whitehead, 2012). Activists, such as Jane Adams and Ida B. Wells, fought for equal rights for women throughout society (Whitehead, 2012). The mentality was that women maintained the position of domestic duties and not be educated (Pisapia, 2010). It wasn't until the mid-18th century that a woman received a college degree (Whitehead, 2012).

Race and gender continued to pose issues in higher education (Moller & Stearns, 2012). Even after integration occurred on majority campuses, fewer minorities attended these institutions (Moller & Stearns, 2012). Some associated this finding with admissions criteria, entrance tests, and overall college preparation (Bower, 2013; Lee, 2012; Reese, 2011). Some account for this imbalanced racial make-up by pointing to educational disparities and inequalities within the institutions of higher education (Walsh, 2011).

Over 50 years ago, college education was the most marketable tool for social advancement and an esteemed accomplishment. Economic changes and significant events (e.g., war, Industrial Revolution, the Great Depression, and the Civil Rights Movement) affected that (Clarke, 2012). For some, college education grew to merely symbolize a statement of recognition of association with the most prestigious and renowned institutions (Lee, 2012; McDonald & Farrell, 2012; Reddick, Welton, Alsandor, Denszyn, & Platt, 2011). The demands of higher education have changed (McDonald & Farrell, 2012; Reese, 2011; Roderick, Coca, & Nagaoka, 2011), but higher education policies and practices continue to dictate the means through which Americans seek an education (Clarke, 2012).

The Industrial Revolution's Impact on Education

The Industrial Revolution was the single most prolific period of change, reformation, and transformation in the history of the world (Horn, Rosenband, & Smith, 2010). According to the seminal work from Lucas (2006), the economy was beginning to shift in a positive direction, people began to experience sustainability and stability in their lives. This pivotal period in history affected every area of life, but especially education and employment (Horn et al., 2010). A society that was once reliant on the work of hands and traditional laborious farming soon became introduced to faster and more efficient manners of production (Jones, 2010). Because of mechanization, a job that would normally take 2-3 days to complete would soon be done within hours and sometimes minutes (Horn et al., 2010). Still, the machines needed human hands to operate them. The Industrial Revolution forced the poor, middle class, and wealthy to change their manner

of living and functioning (Horn et al., 2010; Jones, 2010). People no longer controlled society—it became machine driven and operated (Jones, 2010).

The Industrial Revolution affected education on several levels, but in particular for the poor (Jones, 2010). Economic and social changes provided better opportunities for workers to provide for their families (Horn et al., 2010; Jones, 2010). The Industrial Revolution created more opportunities for the poor to obtain money and meet the needs of their family unit (Ansell & Lindvall, 2013). Although many children wound up working in factories, which contradicted the traditional role of educating children, it alleviated the financial burden and stress for many families (Horn et al., 2010). However, these social changes were not without additional consequences and detriments to overall living conditions.

Vocational education was on the rise during this period because of the need to train and prepare workers for the demands and rigors of factory work (Horn et al., 2010). As majority women and children performed the work within the factories, owners needed to have skilled workers that were trained to perform specific duties (Ansell & Lindvall, 2013). Women and children toiled long hours under some of the harshest working conditions (Horn et al., 2010; Jones, 2010; Witz, 2013). As a result, school was no longer the focus for poor and some middle class children (Horn et al., 2010; Jones, 2010).

Families could not afford to maintain their household as well as pay for schooling for their children (Deem, 2012; Witz, 2013). While Child Labor Laws or “factory acts” enforced labor rules and laws for children, some factories and owners forced their workers to operate in unsafe and dangerous conditions (Horn et al., 2010; Jones, 2010).

Children were unable to obtain the education that parents had desired for their offspring prior to the inception of the Industrial Revolution (Deem, 2012; Witz, 2013).

Feminism's and Civil Rights Impact on Education

The plight of education for Blacks was not always that of resistance, struggle, and inequality (Rury, 2012). Before there were aggregate Black slavery and Jim Crow Laws in the United States, Blacks in Egypt, Rome, and Africa created educational systems whose foundations and precepts are being utilized today (Exkano, 2013; Rury, 2012). Based on the research, many authors noted the need for Blacks to advocate and demand attention to the history and significance of education for their entire race (Rury, 2012).

Contrary to historical accounts that depict Blacks as always having been slaves, researchers have highlighted historical examples of Black writers, philosophers, writers, scientists, astrologers, and mathematicians (Witz, 2013). Throughout the world, before race was of cultural significance, hierarchies centered on class and social status (Deem, 2012). Greed, power, and competition were catalysts for the inception of slavery amongst tribes in Africa, even before foreigners came to partake in the slave trade (Exkano, 2013; Giroux & Shannon, 2013).

The effects and remnants of slavery continue to have a major effect on the educational opportunities for Blacks (Kluger, 2011). Laws and practices from over 400 years ago continue to impose subtle and hidden infractions on the Black race (Strayhorn, 2009; Walsh, 2011).

While much of America could enjoy or entertain the option of education, Blacks were prohibited and forbidden from even considering such options (Exkano, 2013;

Kluger, 2011). During the 16th thru the 18th centuries any slaves caught reading, writing, or seeking to become literate suffered harsh and often deadly consequences (Kluger, 2011). As a result, Blacks relied heavily on the church as their primary source of education (Rury, 2012). The Holy Bible became the text through which Blacks learned to read and write (Rury, 2012; Taines, 2012). To be an educated Black person was a privilege, yet not only Whites frowned upon it, but also some Blacks living in the same community (Roderick et al., 2009; Taines, 2012).

Some slave owners and others volunteered their services in order to teach Blacks to read and write, but doing so was very personally costly, often with the threat of death if caught (Kluger, 2011; Rury, 2012). Such inequalities continued to plague the Black community through the 18th and 19th centuries (Blackford & Khojasteh, 2013; Kluger, 2011; Rury, 2012). Frederick Douglass said: “Education, the sheet anchor to a society where liberty and justice are secure, is a dangerous thing to society in the presence of injustices and oppressions” (McKivigan & Kaufman, 2012, p. 88). Douglass’ goal was to support the notion that without the foundation of education, it would be impossible to thrive and survive in this society (McKivigan & Kaufman, 2012). From the advocacy and rhetoric of other Black leaders (i.e., W.E. B. DuBois and Booker T. Washington), we understand the importance of education for the Black community (Oldfield, 2012; Rury, 2012). Although there were many changes to the ways society was offered schooling, Jim Crow Laws made it difficult for Blacks to receive the same quality of education as Whites through the 1960s (Nichols et al., 2010).

Not until important court cases (e.g., *Plessy v. Ferguson* in 1896 and *Brown v. Board of Education* in 1954) were won did some changes in segregation practices occur within schools (Kluger, 2011). While not without a price, these landmark decisions brought about a change in the manner in which society received free education (Blackford & Khojasteh, 2013; McCandless, 2011).

Blacks were not the only group negatively affected by blockades to their education and schooling. Women endured harsh treatment and inequitable practices within the educational system (Shilliam, 2012). From the days of Ancient Greece and Rome through the present day, societies have always imposed their standards to evaluate learning and educational practices (Deem, 2012). The role of women has always been relegated to the subservient role of domestic care (Lloyd-Jones, 2009). Women were expected to take care of the entire family unit (Deem, 2012; Mraz, 2010; Oldfield, 2012; Shilliam, 2012).

Commonly thought was being educated and literate would give women too much power and independence—attributes not considered “respectable” for women (Oldfield, 2012). the Feminist Movement energized women to advocate and fight for equitable rights in all areas, especially education (Deem, 2012; McCandless, 2011; Witz, 2013). In greater numbers than ever before, women became entrepreneurs, attended college, and pursued careers, usually suited for men (Deem, 2012; Witz, 2013).

Although they met with many reservations and resistance, women continued to make strides in education and equality in schools (Deem, 2012). Several women pioneers (e.g., Prudence Crandall opened the first official school for Black girls; Jane Addams

started the first settlement house; and Mary McCleod Bethune was the first woman to open a higher education institution for Blacks in Florida) paved the way for educational equality in America.

Modern-Day Education

The United States has gone through many cultural and economic changes: from the Colonial Period (or United States) and the beginning of the United States to the Industrial Revolution, to the 20th century with its mandated child labor labors, World War II, and the feminist period and civil rights movements of the 1960s, to the digital revolution, to the present day (Ornstein, 2012). The author further notes that not much has changed regarding education in American. Parents remain the first teachers and schools focus on providing a holistic yet primary academic approach to individual societal functioning (Ornstein, 2012).

Although our educational system has endured centuries of transformation and reformation, our schools still reflect the first schools established in American society (Peck & Reitzug, 2013). The privileged can obtain a higher quality of education while the disadvantaged receive the remnants and have fewer options (Paige & Witty, 2010). Educational reform has brought about many changes, but the locus of control over equal access to education has not changed significantly (Blackford & Khojasteh, 2013; Harris, 2011).

The educational system is plagued by competing agendas and restrictive regulations (fights over standardized testing and minimum core standards), as well as by perpetual struggles over quality textbooks, qualified teachers, and providing equitable

and accessible education for all (Droogsma-Musoba, 2011; Harris, 2011; Paige & Witty, 2010; Strayhorn, 2011). With so much pressure coming from all sides, the nature and scope of traditional education has become monopolistic, opportunistic, and self-indulgent (Droogsma-Musoba, 2011; Strayhorn, 2011). The idea and goal of schools still remained: the more education our population has, the more productive we will be and the more opportunities will be available in society (Boutte-Swindler, 2012; Droogsma-Musoba, 2011). Furthermore, federal and state leaders still believed that formalized and free public education maintained order within society (Domina, 2009; Taines, 2012; Walsh, 2011).

Each day, students learned what each state deemed appropriate, based on the four basic subject areas, Math, English, Social Studies, and Science (Contreras, 2011; Droogsma-Musoba, 2011; Roderick et al., 2009). Unfortunately, for most states, that required standardized testing, and learning was reduced to students getting what they need to pass the test (Holme & Rangel, 2012; Lonsbury & Apple, 2012).

Traditional schooling methods of learning basic math operations, formalities of the government, simple sentence structure, and the scientific table have become virtually nonexistent (Swindler-Boutte, 2012). Students must learn to meet the common core standards and benchmarks as dictated by their state educational system (Droogsma-Musoba, 2011; Goldstein, 2011; Strayhorn, 2011; Walsh, 2011). The many demands, inequitable resources, and pressure for measurable results have led to the demise and downfall of the traditional American education system (Dee, Jacob, & Schwartz, 2013; Goldstein, 2011). Many reforms, environmental imbalances, and historic nuisances have

led to drastic changes. Such drastic changes have trickled down into the manner in which various racial and ethnic groups respond (Price, 2010; Taines, 2012).

During the 1500s students had no choice but to attend school; the first compulsory attendance laws were passed in 1524 (Prus, 2011). Contemporary attendance laws provided more options and choices related to school attendance (Landis & Reschly, 2011). As such, more students were not only absent more often, but also dropping out of school prior to graduating high school (Prus, 2011; Jeynes, 2011; Marvin, 2010).

Mentoring Programs and Support Services

Mentorship

Vast changes to the culture, integrity, and climate of education precipitated global solutions and changes (DuBois, Portillo, Rhodes, Silverthorn, & Valentine, 2011). Although the early 1990s brought the most recent emergence of governmental solutions, such solutions actually began during the Neolithic period and post Industrial Revolution (Smith & Storman, 2011). The basis of many changes targeted towards specific groups was the presumption to aid all (Pryce & Keller, 2013). Mentoring and After School Programs (ASPs) were two initiatives of great significance (DuBois et al., 2011; Pryce, 2013).

The term *mentor* derived from a mythological legend (Poulos, 2014). Telemachus, son of Ulysses, was left in the guardianship and care of his father's apprentice, Mentor (Poulos, 2014). During Ulysses' time away, Mentor was responsible for teaching and instilling moral character, integrity, and values into Telemachus (Lincoln, 2012). The relationship between Mentor and Telemachus was successful, such

that Telemachus soon exemplified the character of a well-respected man in society (DuBois et al., 2011).

The role of mentor has been well-respected until this day; the relationship between mentor and recipient involved transferring necessary survival skills, support, and love (Pryce, 2013). Mentorship was a transitional stage through which entrusted individuals carried the onus of initiating and fostering growth in the next generations (DuBois et al., 2011; Pryce, 2013). This profound legend of mentorship development highlights the general purpose and intent of mentorship programs: to prepare individuals for real life situations and eventually enable them to grow into responsible adults (Poulos, 2014; Pryce, 2013). As with Telemachus, in many instances, parents and other guardians were often absent or unavailable and needed the support and guidance of other responsible adults (Lincoln, 2011; Lonsbury & Apple, 2012; Poulos, 2014).

Thousands of mentoring programs operated throughout the world with the intention of cultivating relationships with children encountering various environmental challenges (DuBois et al., 2011; Pryce, 2013). The connotation and extent of many mentoring programs varied according to the needs of children being served (DuBois et al., 2011; Parikh, 2013; Wood & Mayo-Wilson, 2012). Some programs focused on preventing juvenile justice involvement, teenage pregnancy, high school dropout, and substance abuse (Thomason & Zand, 2010). These programs enlisted and established a network of systems to support that goal.

One of the primary allies for mentorship programs was the school system (Pryce, 2013). Students, directly connected to a positive, caring adults were able to have quality

time and support. Thus, they would be not only be successful, but also finish high school (DuBois et al., 2011). As a result, mentorship programs were directly linked to schools in order to (a) prevent high school dropouts and (b) address many educational disparities.

After-School Programs

After-School Programs (ASPs) were initiatives first introduced to society after economic necessity forced more parents left their homes in the rural countryside to work in factories in the cities (Miller, 2012). As a result, parents had to find suitable care for their children during the hours between the end of school and the end of the parents' work shift (Durlak, Weissberg, & Pachan, 2010).

Although some children had to work under duress in factories and forego school, after the inception of United States child labor laws in 1938, the number of children working decreased tremendously (Taheri & Welsh, 2015). As a result, more children began attending school. During this transitional period other changes took place within schools across both the North and South, including mandatory school attendance and enforced subjects (Miller, 2012).

After-school programs or "boys clubs" formed as a transitional mechanism for children once traditional school hours ended (Durlak et al., 2010; Springer & Diffily, 2012). During this experience, school children encountered recreational and other extracurricular activities not normally offered during school hours (Springer & Diffily, 2012). More specific after-school programs formed with the sole purpose of instilling life skills and character education in children (Taheri & Welsh, 2015). Over time, as society

grew through labor force, economic, and environmental changes, there was an influx of children and a growing need for more ASPs.

High School Graduation and Dropout Rates

Since the start of the new millennium, education reform efforts focused on increasing the number of students who graduated from high school (Hauser & Anderson-Koenig, 2011; Holme & Rangel, 2012). Since the inception of high school in the 15th and 16th centuries, its purpose has been to produce high school graduates (Archer, 2013). Economic changes, political influence, and social policy influenced the rate and number of students who completed high school (Strayhorn, 2011; Walsh, 2011). As a result, national educational policies focused on comparative percentage graduation rate increases as the indicators of educational success. Such indicators of educational success continued to be the predictive model through which the United States defined its educational system (Hauser & Anderson-Koenig, 2011).

Continuous controversy and debate existed over the reported outcomes and the number of students actually remaining in school (Hauser & Anderson-Koenig, 2011). The inconsistencies in reported numbers of graduates were red flags for researchers, economists, and social scientists (Archer, 2013). Specifically, outcome measures often reported misleading and fallacious high school completion rates and decreases in historic disparate educational trends (Lonsbury & Apple, 2012). Policies and interventions neither accurately reflected, nor addressed the actual issues (Droogsma-Musoba, 2011; Holme & Rangel, 2012; Lonsbury & Apple, 2012).

The temporary solutions of ASPs often played into an even larger issue and ultimately ignored the problem at hand (Strayhorn, 2011). Dropping out of high school was not a new societal issue, but rather one whose social implications created a social movement; changes needed to occur at the social movement level (Holme & Rangel, 2012). The need for such systemic changes evoked questions about the formation and structure of school operations (Bower, 2013; Paige & Witty, 2010).

Racial and Ethnic Comparison

In 2011, the graduation rate was the highest it had been in over 30 years, indicating substantial progress for the state of the public education system (Harris, 2011). This statistic, as reported by the National Center for Educational Statistics (2012) reflected that educational reform, interventions, policies, and practices had been effective. Unfortunately, gains were not equal across different racial and ethnic groups of students. The national high school graduation averages reported by the NCES for Black students were 66.1%, Hispanic 71.4%, American Indian/Alaska Native 69.1%, and that of White students 83 % (NCES, 2012).

The basis of these NCES (2012) statistics was the number of students who graduated within four years of entering high school. Excluded from this data were those students retained and graduating at a later date. Midwestern states reported the highest percentage of high school graduates, while states in the south and within large metropolitan cities reported at the lowest rate (NCES, 2012). While seemingly great news of progress, also of importance were the gaps between races, indicating a near 20% gap from that of White students.

On average, over a million students reportedly dropped out of school each year (Harris, 2011). Minority students (i.e., Black, Hispanic, and American Indian/Alaska Native) make up the highest percentage of that number (Harris, 2011; NCES, 2012). Students who resided within impoverished communities and whose parents were classified as low socioeconomic status were twice as likely to drop out of school as non-minority students who are economically advantaged and who come from middle-class backgrounds (Harris, 2011; Levine-Brown et al., 2014).

Historically speaking, the population of high school dropouts is made up of a majority minority population. In communities where students dropped out the most, Black and Hispanic students made up the majority population (Brenchley, 2013). Such schools historically produced dismal graduation numbers and their communities wound up with large numbers of people who never completed school (Roderick et al., 2011).

Some of the poorest performing schools reported that over half of all Black and Hispanic students dropped out, as compared to less than one-third of their White peers (Verdugo, 2011; Walsh, 2011). Increasing scrutiny regarding the actual reported numbers of the dropout rate found inconsistencies in the reported data (Droosgma-Musoba, 2011; Verdugo, 2011). The basis of the question was the actual definition of a dropout versus the process of becoming a high school dropout.

Many factors contribute to a student's failure to graduate high school (Bower, 2013) and the focus of research for nearly two decades (Fletcher & Tienda, 2010; Roderick et al., 2011; Walsh, 2011). Some factors included: lack of preparation in middle school, learning deficiencies, environmental stressors, attendance, behavioral problems

persistent in elementary and/or middle school, and a lack of student support (Barnes & Slate, 2011; Strayhorn, 2011; Walsh, 2011). This myriad of issues contributed to the disparate number of minority students dropping out of high school (Moore et al., 2010; Reddick et al., 2011; Roderick et al., 2009; Strayhorn, 2009).

Factors Contributing to High School Dropout

The freshman year was the most critical year of a student's high school career (Suldo & Shaunessy-Dedrick, 2013). According to the National High School Center at the American Institutes for Research (2012), only one-third of ninth graders who attended poor-performing schools were promoted to the tenth grade. In addition, 20% failed to graduate high school (Chen, Sable, & Liu, 2011). Those students who encountered academic, social, emotional, and often physical barriers while in elementary and middle school were less likely to complete high school without additional support and resources (Suldo & Shaunessy-Dedrick, 2013).

In the 2010-2011 school year, 3.6 million middle school students transitioned to high school. In the 2011-2012 school year, a near 10% decrease occurred in the number of tenth grade enrollments. That same year, the number of twelfth-grade enrollments decreased by 8.4% (Chen et al., 2011; NCES, 2012). A racial comparison found that the number of minority students in each grade in each school year continued to decrease.

For example, during the 2009-2010 school year, only 10% of Black students received promotions to the 10th grade; however, the number of enrolled students was twice this number. For Hispanic students, the statistics showed the same result, a near doubled decrease in the number of students transitioning from the 9th to the 10th grade

(National High School Center at American Institute for Research, 2012). Essentially, the dropout epidemic was still growing with a gap remaining in academic achievement.

History of Academic Achievement Gap

Historically, environmental systems have been indicators of a child's educational success and aptitude (McDonald & Farrell, 2012; Paige & Witty, 2010; Parikh, 2013). More specifically, family patterns and their responses to environmental systems were indicators of a child's educational success (Walsh, 2011), as a fair and opportune way of life for everyone (Fletcher & Tienda, 2010; Holme & Rangel, 2012). Unfortunately, several institutionalized variables and factors such as racial and ethnic discrimination needed consideration.. These variables reflected a notable gap in the transference, quality, and output of education between minority and White students (Paige & Witty, 2010).

The Civil Right Movement highlighted the unequal and unfair educational practices that perpetuated distinct differences in testing scores, graduation rates, college matriculation, and overall educational aptitude of students (Nichols et al., 2010; Paige & Witty, 2010). The Coleman Report became one of the catalysts for bringing awareness to the gap in education (Boykin & Noguera, 2011). For decades, the image of minority students lagged behind White students in educational performance due to lack of academic ability, but this educational disproportion was due to a system built on the premise of social inequality (Boykin & Noguera, 2011). This system inherently favored White students' academic prospects while merely granting minority students the access to pursue a quality education (Ortiz et al., 2012; Paige & Witty, 2010). This system was a

physical and psychological barrier, inhibiting minority students from achieving certain levels of academic success and achievement (Ortiz et al., 2012). The highly-researched topic of the achievement gap was the subject of debates for many years (Lee, 2012; Paige & Witty, 2010).

For example, Harris (2011) and McDaniel, DiPrete, Buchamann, and Shwed (2011) rebutted the underlying claim of the achievement gap by stating that environmental factors were not the sole determinant of a student's academic achievement. Rather, some researchers (i.e., Paige & Witty, 2010) found that individual and family systems were responsible for creating an environment and system that fostered better opportunities and successes. Their conclusion was that opportunities were free and available to all; persistence, dedication, and motivation were the individual ingredients for success.

Other research noted that not all minority families (i.e., Black, Hispanic, and Native Americans) were either equipped for or capable of providing an educationally stable and engaging environment (Bragg & Durham, 2012; Fletcher & Tienda, 2010). The authors further stated that many parents struggled financially and lacked educational aptitude to provide such assistance. In addition, this disproportion in the system, while noticed, mitigated the necessity to remedy a solution (Harris, 2011; Paige & Witty, 2010). The solution included professional development and training of teachers in low performing schools with a majority minority population, equitable distribution of educational resources, programmatic junctures to focus on higher education, as well as

attempts to address the systemic family and societal issues affecting those students (Bower, 2013; Warren, 2011).

Background and History of School Reform Efforts

The idea of reforming and transforming the education system was not new; it had been in existence since the late 18th century (Holme & Rangel, 2012; Taines, 2012). Changes throughout the world and the emergence of a freer society called for an overhaul of public education (Peck & Reitzug, 2013). Specifically, mandating that schooling be offered to everyone at no charge was among the first efforts to make sweeping changes within the educational system (Dee et al., 2013). These mandates paved the way for additional reformations: formal grading systems, compulsory attendance, and core minimum standards, to name a few (Domina & Ruzek, 2012). The goals of education reform were to ensure that all citizens were literate, to bring order and structure to society, and to create a universal system that could be utilized by all (Peck & Reitzug, 2013).

Purpose of School Reform Efforts

Social policy and economic changes forced more creative, stringent, and feasible school reforms (Johnson & Chrispeels, 2010; Peck & Reitzug, 2013). A survey of many school districts netted similar responses relating to the achievement, success, and performance of their students (Domina & Ruzek, 2012). The underlying goals were for students to be prepared, competent, and capable of functioning within society after graduating high school (Droogsma-Musoba, 2011; Harris, 2012; Taines, 2012). The plan was for student to enter into an educational institution at a certain level and depart when

they have ascertained and absorbed the essence of the fundamentals surrounding the American educational system (Johnson & Chrispeels, 2010).

Unfortunately, America's fundamentally sound educational system was not feasible for all (Harris, 2012; Hemmings, 2012; Spencer, 2012). Students across the nation entered schools at different academic, social, and emotional levels (Hemmings, 2012). For some, the ability to adapt, cope, and function within many systems was unrealistic with those students becoming unsuccessful (Spencer, 2012; Verdugo, 2011). Many factors impeded some students' educational and academic progress, so reformers called for schools to put processes and procedures into place to ensure all children had equal access and opportunities to schooling (Spencer, 2012).

School reform efforts also began to address the educational performance gaps between minority and White students (Hemmings, 2012; Paige & Witty, 2010). Reformers implemented systems and marshaled resources to address the economic and social stressors affecting the educational maturation of students in historically disadvantaged groups and children in lower socioeconomic communities (Contreras, 2011; Peck & Reitzug, 2013; Walsh, 2011). Such efforts became the primary catalyst for reforming lower-performing schools located within inner cities with a majority minority population (Droogsma-Musoba, 2011; Harris, 2012; Hemmings, 2012; Spencer, 2012).

The results of school reform have been the hiring of more qualified teachers, reductions in class size, increases in schools' national performance, additional resources coming into schools, and deepened levels of family support (Goldstein, 2011; Peck & Reitzug, 2013). The premise underlying school reform was that a more conducive

learning environment for students would lead them to succeed in society (Goldstein, 2011).

Many researchers and educators (e.g., Lonsbury & Apple, 2012) argued against this premise because the changes were only applicable and noticeable on a large scale. For many students, the results and impact were not apparent at the microsystem level. As a result, reformers focused on creating a strategic system of resources to address the needs of economically disadvantaged children who were at risk of dropping out of school (Dee et al., 2013; Price, 2010).

No Child Left Behind (NCLB)

The Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 (ESEA) was one of the first pieces of legislation to directly address inequitable education within school districts with high minority populations and serving majority impoverished communities and neighborhoods (Harris, 2011). The ESEA provided funding for schools to level the educational playing field (Price, 2010). During the George W. Bush administration, with the revision of the ESEA became the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB). NCLB is one of the more controversial and highly debated attempts to reform the school system (Peck & Reitzug, 2013; Reese, 2011). This dissention of the ESEA was implemented as a means through which to address the academic achievement gap. The overall goal was to hold schools and school districts to a certain level of performance, thereby encouraging schools to establish enriched, quality, and productive processes to ensure student success (Dee et al., 2013; Goldstein, 2011; Harris, 2011; Price, 2010).

Under the NCLB, schools that traditionally performed lower than other schools within their area now had the additional resources, venues, and strict guidelines through which to make a turnaround over a specific period of time (Heinrich, Meyer, & Whitten, 2010). Evidence of *minimal to no change* would trigger other measures from the school district and parents, possibly leading to the closing of the school (Koyama, 2012). The NCLB called for specific performance measures and grids to ensure that schools were measuring up to a certain standard of educational performance (Heinrich et al., 2010; Koyama, 2012). From the beginning, objections to the NCLB centered around the formality, as opposed to the applicability and feasibility, of such processes (Goldstein, 2011; Price, 2010). According to Dee et al., (2013), this legislation did more harm than good. This fit-for-all system inspired much debate and pointed questioning regarding the primacy of the textbook, the lack of feedback, and the commendations from those directly involved and affected (Spencer, 2012).

Universal and Targeted Programs

Several other school reform efforts delimited the educational disparity between majority and minority students (Warren, 2011). Such efforts focused on measures, inherently responsive and evidence-based (Domina & Ruzek, 2012; Warren, 2011). One such effort has been the implementation and development of academic intervention programs (Contreras, 2011). These programs were intended to encourage scholastic aptitude in majority minority communities (Slavin, Cheung, Holmes, Madden & Chamberlain, 2012; Spencer, 2012). Their overall goal was to act as a buffer through which disadvantaged minority youth could receive equitable educational opportunities.

Through such programs, students from low socioeconomic neighborhoods and poor-performing schools would receive the necessary resources to produce optimal educational performance (Warren, 2011).

The greatest argument against this one-size-fits-all school reform was its lack of sufficient and noticeable progress (Holme & Rangel, 2012; Slavin et al., 2012). Many programs showed little evidence of effectively reducing the dropout rate amongst Black, Hispanic, and Native American students while decreasing the educational disparity between minority and White students (Lee, 2012). On the contrary, supporters of such programs argued that they were in fact effective. The bases of the successes were on the levels of program implementation, effort, and support by internal and external stakeholders (Contreras, 2011; Porter & Polikoff, 2012). Droogsma-Musoba (2011) believed that many of the fit-for-all educational reform policies were not applicable for ethnic minority groups. Furthermore, such policies were harmful and, in fact, negate their stated intention (Droogsma-Musoba, 2011).

Educational school reform should be situation-based and cater to specific groups and situations in order to see a change (Droogsma-Musoba, 2011; Walsh, 2011). Walsh (2011) noted that educational policies have become too vague. In order to have some lasting and monumental impact on decreasing the academic achievement gap, quantifiable data were not sufficient. The basis of successful evaluations of what works should be individual claims (Strayhorn, 2011; Walsh, 2011).

Program Effectiveness and Interventions

The premise of college readiness and other intervention programs had the assumption that all program participants would respond positively to the intervention and program (Strayhorn, 2011). Also, the underlying assumption was that students who participated were willing to make changes academically, in agreement with program standards, and capable of performing in a rigorous and intense environment (Porter & Polikoff, 2012). These assumptions fueled measurements of program implementation and evaluation, as well as the level of expectancy (Droogsma-Musoba, 2011; Porter & Polikoff, 2012).

History and Significance of College Readiness Programs

In 1970, over 80% of students enrolled in high school graduated. The dropout rate during that same year was 15%, with a near 30-point difference between minority and White students (U.S Department of Commerce, 2011). During that same year, 1.6 million students enrolled in two- or four-year colleges/universities (NCES, 2012). Of that number, 15% were Black and 27% White. Hispanic and Native American students were not categorized as Black or White (U.S. Department of Commerce, 2011). This unequal distribution of educational success inspired reformers to call for shifts in the educational reform agenda (Sablan, 2014).

The rise in dropout rates and lack of visibility in postsecondary educational institutions of minority students prompted a move by educators and policy makers to create interventions geared specifically for at-risk minority students (Bower, 2013). Educators and policy makers crafted intervention programs aimed at shortening the

educational achievement gap, increasing high school graduation rates, and increasing college matriculation rates for first-generation minority students (Bower, 2013; Bragg & Durham, 2012; Domina, 2009; Droogsma-Musoba, 2011). These educational intervention programs with such goals became known as college readiness and/or college access programs (Domina, 2009).

Policy makers and community activists recognized that both colleges and the workforce were still too segregated (Reddick et al., 2011). As a result, a push to enforce a college-going culture began in urban middle and high schools (McDonald & Farrell, 2012; Moore et al., 2010). The overall goal was to create equitable opportunities and resources comparable to suburban and predominately White-populated schools (Contreras, 2011; Huerta et al., 2013; Strayhorn, 2011; Walsh, 2011). The hope was that by achieving this feat would decrease the number of high school dropouts, increase the rate of high school graduation, and eventually curtail cycles of generational poverty (Bragg & Durham, 2012; Huerta et al., 2013). Such programs would create the necessary tools, resources, curriculum, and staff to foster, enforce, and promote college matriculation. However, the first step was to ensure that all students graduated high school with a competitive edge that would make them marketable as they applied for higher education (Fletcher & Tienda, 2010).

The federal government's efforts led to the inception of several other college readiness and/or college access programs (Bower, 2013). These programs operated in varying capacities at local, state, and federally funded levels (Reddick et al., 2011). In addition, some programs operated under the auspices of both nonprofit and higher

educational institutions (Droogsma-Musoba, 2011; Harris, 2012). Programs that operated at both levels included: Project GRAD, AVID, I Have a Dream, MESA, CROP, and Puente (Contreras, 2012; Huerta et al., 2013; Strayhorn, 2011, Walsh, 2011). Today, thousands of CRP exist with different program focuses (Droogsma-Musoba, 2011). Programs, such as Mathematics, Engineering, Science, Achievement (MESA), had a focus on increasing the number of minorities in math and science careers (Contreras, 2011; Harris, 2012). Puente, on the other hand, worked with Latino students on personal and social development in preparation for transition to college (Sablan, 2014). Despite the differing program components, emphases, or outcome measures, the overall mission and focus of all college readiness, college access, and TRIO programs was the same: dropout prevention, increased high school graduation rates, and increased college matriculation rates amongst at-risk minority students (Peck & Reitzug, 2013; Roderick et al., 2011).

Project GRAD

Researchers examining CRPs found that more students graduated from high school and entered college than in previous years (Contreras, 2011). Project GRAD, one of the more popular school-wide college readiness programs, has been in existence for over twenty years (Holland, 2005). The mission of this CRP was to implement programs in historically low-performing schools within metropolitan and urban areas to encourage students to graduate high school, enroll in college, and graduate from college. Since its inception, this national CRP reported that “GRAD” students were more likely to

graduate high school and matriculate through college faster than “non-GRAD” students (Holland 2005).

Project GRAD Atlanta reported a remarkable transformation in their three identified GRAD schools: a near 50% increase in high school graduations within the Atlanta Public School District (Honig & Copland, 2008). Project GRAD Atlanta’s later data was that over 700 GRAD students attended colleges and universities (Project GRAD Atlanta, 2011). The Houston affiliate reported similar gains and achievements in their GRAD schools. Houston’s Project GRAD program was implemented in the school with the city’s highest dropout rate during the early 90s (Project GRAD, 2011). Over the past twenty years, the school’s dropout rate decreased to become the lowest within the city (Holland, 2005).

The bases of measures of effectiveness for Project GRAD programs were seven core criteria: Georgia Graduation Test (GGT) scores (measuring math and English proficiency), graduation rates, percentage of students with absences in excess of 10 days, decrease in the dropout rates, number of scholarships rewards (based on level of participation in PG programs), college enrollment, and college matriculation (Holland, 2005).

Based on the latest reports, all three Project GRAD schools had gains:

From 2004-2011, Math GGT gap between GRAD schools and the state decreased by nine percentage points” (Project GRAD Atlanta, 2011). The percentage of K-12 students, who were absent 10 or more days, decreased from 35% to 24%”. (Project GRAD Atlanta, 2011). In 2002 the graduation rate at Washington High School was 58%. In 2011 it was increased to 85%. (Project GRAD Atlanta, 2011, “Project GRAD At-A-Glance”, para 1)

Based on this information, it would appear that the Project GRAD program model produced results conducive to boosting the morale and educational reputation of the state, as well as of specific schools and school districts.

Summary

The medium through which society educated its children has undergone many changes (Harris, 2011). Such changes involved economic developments, technological advances, and the need to effectively educate society (Porter & Polikoff, 2012). The dropout epidemic within the United States has been a problem since the first Industrial Revolution (Droogsma-Musoba, 2011; Bower, 2013; Strayhorn, 2011). Many factors precipitated a student's decision to drop out of school (Bower, 2013; Walsh, 2011). Some were environmental, while others, a result of a historically inequitable system. The development of adolescent support services and intervention programs were among the attempts to reform a system deemed archaic, dysfunctional, and unequal (Droogsma-Musoba, 2011). The author further noted that college readiness, mentoring, and after-school programs were among the many reforms created to alleviate this problem. Although many programs had a positive impact on society, a continuous need remains for research and evaluation aimed at improving program outcomes because academic and educational gaps persist (Droogma-Musoba, 2011; Porter & Polikoff, 2012; Strayhorn, 2011).

This study is intended to address lacks in the current research about evaluation of program success. Chapter 3 details how the phenomenology method was utilized to complete this study. In addition, this chapter outlines the research design and rationale,

role of the researcher, sample size, instrument utilized, data collection methods and recruiting process. It commences with the plan used to analyze the data and any ethical concerns or issues of trustworthiness that may have compromised the integrity of this study.

Chapter 3: Research Method

Introduction

During the mid-1960s college readiness programs (CRP) were part of a national school reform effort to remedy the achievement gap and dropout prevention amongst minority students, while increase post-secondary attendance among minority students (Domina, 2009). The creation of such programs had positive effects on the variables mentioned above (Bower, 2013; Strayhorn, 2011, 2014). On the contrary, the positive results were not always indicative of the program's involvement and interventions (Droogsma-Musoba, 2011).

The basis of the gap in literature is a lack of such CRPs to explore the perspectives and experiences of student participants on measuring whether their participation influenced graduating high school and attending college. The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was twofold: to (a) examine student perspectives and experiences of their participation in the Project GRAD school-wide CRP and (b) explore how this program affected students' decisions to graduate high school and attend college. The resulting collection of student experiences provided insights into and generated a better understanding of how each participant's perceived programmatic interventions and resources shaped their high school and college decisions.

This study consisted of an in-depth exploration of how students perceived the benefits, significance, and importance of participating in Project GRAD at their school. It specifically explored the phenomenon of student participation in a school-wide college readiness program. Students provided descriptions of their level of involvement with

Project GRAD while in high school. The design of the study provided an opportunity for students with a non-traditional voice could share their accounts, as suggested by Finlay (2013) and Strayhorn (2011). Other research studies (i.e. Munnell-McHugh et al., 2013). focused on academic achievement, educational disparities, and other topics related to education. This study expanded the literature by evaluating a college readiness program (CRP) based on the actual perspectives of its students.

Research Design and Rationale

The primary research questions guiding this study were:

- RQ1: How did high school participants in the Project GRAD college readiness program describe their experiences as students in this program?
- RQ2: How did high school student participants in Project GRAD perceive and link their program participation with high school graduation and college entrance?

Phenomenology

This study used a phenomenological approach to focus on individual interpretations of occurrences as lived by said individuals (Drewry, Burge, & Driscoll, 2010; Seidman, 2013). Phenomenology is an exploration and examination of the perceptions (Creswell, 2013; Nichols et al., 2010; Munnell-McHugh, Galleta-Horner, Colditz, & LeBaron-Wallace, 2013) that individuals attach to their feelings and experiences (Creswell, 2013; Nichols et al., 2010) , directly related to an event or situation encountered (Munnell-McHugh et al., 2013; Weidman, 2014). Phenomenology is a strong approach in qualitative research because it allows for thick and detailed first-

hand accounts of individual's experiences (Nichols et al., 2010), characteristics desirable in this study.

Through this phenomenological study, individuals were able to exercise their voice and share their perceptions of a particular event, incident, or knowledge, as suggested by Creswell (2013) and Drewry et al. (2010). Phenomenological studies are significant because of the linkage to similar individuals with the intent of establishing one voice to descriptively convey a message (Creswell, 2013; Finlay, 2013). Such experiences do not emphasize an account of logical proportions, but rather realistically capture feelings, emotions, and familiarity (Finlay, 2013).

Nichols, Kotchick, McNamara-Barry and Haskins (2010) used a phenomenological approach to capture the core of an individual's experience. This methodology enabled a researcher to associate meaning directly with those experiences (Nichols et al., 2010). In this study, I wanted to capture the essence of how students feel, which made a phenomenological approach appropriate because this approach realistically captured feelings, emotions, and familiarity (Finlay, 2013). Moreover, I wanted students to have an opportunity to provide their genuine feelings about their participation in the college readiness program. There was no hidden motive, no need for program data, just students providing their accounts. Traditional research of College Readiness Programs focused on program results and outcomes, while exempting student feelings or students' relational ties to secondary and postsecondary completion.

Role of the Researcher

My primary role as the researcher conducting this study was to gather and interpret the data from student participants and analyze this information into themes (Maxwell, 2012; Schoorman & Bogotch, 2010). The ethical responsibility of a researcher is to complete a self-evaluation of any preconceived notions and past unresolved issues with relevant parties in order to convey the intent of the research (Creswell, 2013; Siemiatycki, 2012). Rossman and Marshall (2010) suggested that researchers be honest and open with participants regarding their relationship and affiliation with the study. The author further notes this way of communicating further rationalizes the stance of the researcher as a participant or observer. As the researcher of this study, I did not have any past unresolved issues with the relevant parties. In addition, during initial introductions with all research participants, I explained the purpose of their participation and their role in the study.

I had significant prior experience and a past affiliation with Project GRAD. For four years, I worked very closely with the middle school component of Project GRAD. As a staff member with Project GRAD, I served contractually as a residential advisor for five summers during their summer institute program at two separate higher educational institutions. Although I had extensive knowledge of Project GRAD's programs, my only direct involvement with high school students was for three weeks during their summer institute. None of the student participants in this study had any direct affiliation with or knowledge of me.

Rossman and Marshall (2010) suggested that if such a situation arose where a past direct relationship with the researcher existed, the researcher should eliminate such students from the study and select another participant. I followed this guideline by eliminating any students who had a previous relationship with me, so as to avoid their providing any coached or disingenuous responses. A total of 231 students were in the Project GRAD database, within that total only 4 students with whom I had a prior relationship. Due to such a large population size, eliminating those 4 students did not have a significant impact my potential participant pool.

I used bracketing to filter and dismiss previous experience and affiliations (Creswell, 2013; Tufford & Newman, 2012), including disassociating any negative experiences or thoughts, knowledge of loopholes in programming, or programmatic problems. I addressed my previous relationship with the program with my student participants through a thorough explanation of the study's purpose, reiterating my neutral stance, and assuring them that I no longer had an active affiliation with Project GRAD. This explanation included disclosing my previous employment and experience working with Project GRAD. Further explanation included the lack of current affiliation with the program

Methodology

Participant Selection Logic

The participants were graduates from three public metropolitan high schools in the southern United States. Each of these three schools was a Project GRAD school. Students were not Project GRAD participants until they signed the Project GRAD

covenant and completed their 9th grade year. This signed covenant served as a contract between Project GRAD and the students wherein the students promised to participate in the minimum program requirements. Once completed, students had opportunities to participate in various programs and activities with resources as tools to prepare them for college (Project GRAD, 2011). In addition, students were eligible for the Brumley Scholarship (Project GRAD, 2011).

I recruited participants using a database, which included those students who graduated high school in 2012, provided by the Project GRAD organization. The Project GRAD database included these students' name, address, phone number, high school, and email. The ages of the participants varied from 20-21. I obtained this data by contacting the organization to share information regarding the overall purpose of the research study and the data needed in order to conduct the study. I informed the organization that all names of individuals, schools, and the school system would be protected by the use of pseudonyms. By maintaining a cordial and continuous relationship with the organization, they became aware of my interest in college readiness programming.

Approximately 803 students graduated from all three schools during the 2010-2011 school year, 230 of whom were Project GRAD participants (Georgia Department of Education, 2011, "2011 Adequate Yearly Progress Graduation Rate Comparison by School"). After obtaining the list, I separated schools by name to begin the sampling process.

Criterion sampling strategy, according to Creswell (2013) and Harper (2015), recommended a narrow selection window for sampling. Similar phenomenological

research on the academic achievement gap and school reform utilized criterion sampling as the strategy for selecting student participants (Munnell-McHugh et al., 2013; Nichols et al., 2010; Ortiz et al., 2012). This strategy required that participants meet a specific requirement in order to be a part of the sample (Creswell, 2013). This strategy aligned well with a phenomenological study, since the participant population shared the commonality of being Project GRAD students (Harper, 2013).

The criteria established to select participants for this study had two requirements.

1. Signed Project GRAD Covenant. Students must have on file a signed PG Covenant to complete their ninth grade year. This signed contract defined a relationship between the student and Project GRAD, whereby both parties agreed to perform certain tasks in exchange for a particular compensation. For the students, the ultimate compensation is a \$4000 scholarship; for Project GRAD, the compensation is producing a high school and college graduate (Project GRAD, 2011).

This measure of reliability provided consistency and uniformity throughout the research sample. Because each student had four years of participation in the Project GRAD program, uniformity of timing, availability and access of services were available for all participants.

2. 2011-2012 High School Graduates. Students were high school graduates and classified as seniors during the 2011-2012 school year. This school year was the data source because of the availability of and access to archival public data provided by the Georgia Department of Education and Project GRAD. The selection of those classified as seniors during the 2011-2012 school year decreased the number of the entire PG database

and provided an accurate account to coincide with the interview questions. Furthermore, such students had been at the school for the entire four years of their high school career, which provided a better and more illustrative account of their experiences with Project GRAD.

Based on the criteria listed above, the number of students remained relatively large. In this study, the sample size ($n= 12$) allowed for equal representation amongst all three schools. As a result of the number of students who met the criteria, a systematic sampling method provided random selection of the final participants. This sampling method allowed a researcher to select a certain number to coincide with the final sample size selected (Creswell, 2013; Palinkas et al., 2013).

For example, if the total number of students in the PG database per school was 1500, in order to obtain a sample size of 15, the researcher selected every 100th student (Creswell, 2013; Munnell-McHugh et al., 2013; Nichols et al., 2010). One of the advantages of this method of sampling was the convenience of selecting participants (Creswell, 2013; Neuman & Wright, 2010).

An additional advantage was the constancy of the sample size (Creswell, 2013; Neuman & Wright, 2010). After filtering the names within the PG roster, the researcher selected 12 students to represent the overall sample; this number allowed for attrition based on inaccurate contact information and inability to locate some of the students. Should that occur, and I deleted those names from the roster and repeated the systematic sampling method based on the new number and select another student to be part of the sample.

After completing this sampling, the first steps involved making contact via telephone or email to all potential student participants. Scheduling a face-to-face meeting with the students occurred after the researcher explained the purpose of the research. In addition, students received the Informed Consent document via email.

Sample Size

Scheel et al. (2009) conducted a phenomenological study on student perceptions regarding their motivation to complete and excel in school. The sample size selected for that study was 20 (Harper, 2015). A similar study on students' transitions to high school and their experiences from primary to secondary education used the sample size of 16 (Ganeson & Ehrich, 2009). According to Creswell (2013) and Palinkas et al. (2013), the sample size varied based on the phenomenon under studied. Duke (1984) found that sample sizes in phenomenological studies ranged from as small as three (p. 126) to over 300 participants (Creswell, 2013). Patton (2002) stated that size was not of the greatest importance (Harper, 2015). The most significant factor in determining sample size was the intent of the study, the number established reliability, and the feasibility and availability of the resources (Nichols et al., 2010; Ortiz et al., 2012; Sablan, 2014).

The sample size for this study was 12 participants. Based on previous phenomenological studies on academic intervention programs and education reform, this size was appropriate (Reid & Moore, 2008; Strayhorn, 2010). The final number reflected the availability of students and the inaccurate contact information in the database provided by the organization. The systematic sampling strategy needed to be applied 10 times due to incorrect information and failed attempts to contact students. The further

sample strategies utilized in this study involved compiling a list of students from diverse backgrounds based on their race, ethnicity, academic level, family background, life experiences, grade point average, etc.

The process of data collection, data analysis, and the formation of categories required finding patterns (Creswell, 2013; Palinkas et al., 2013). Patterns found based on the responses of participants supported selected themes (Munnell-McHugh, 2013). The goal was to saturate each category to show similarity and consistency (Creswell, 2013; Nichols et al., 2010). Data saturation was essential as it provided a more in-depth understanding of data and supports categories selected from the sample's responses (Creswell, 2013; Nichols et al., 2010; Palinkas et al., 2013). The saturation of data also allowed for data to stand alone without additional information (Ortiz et al., 2012; Sablan, 2014).

Instrumentation

Interviews

Interviews are the most common and best choice of collecting data from participants. Interviews allow the researcher to observe both verbal and non-verbal cues, and document in transcribed material (King & Horrocks, 2010). In addition interviews are more personable and allow the researcher to connect to participants (Harper, 2015). Interviews in phenomenological studies mold the story of the entire study (Poulos, 2014) because participants have the opportunity to provide insight and feedback on their individual experiences (Durlak et al., 2010).

Considering the purpose of this study, the structure and format of student interviews were vital and important. It was necessary to take specific notes, to ask questions relevant to the student's participation, and to allow participants to have a voice. However establishing rapport and a comfortable environment was just as important (Durlak et al., 2010; Harper, 2015; Poulos, 2014). Students had to understand that although they could provide insight and input, as the researcher, I was in control of the questioning.

The interviews consisted of open-ended questions, in addition to some close-ended questions. Open-ended questions included, "Have you participated in any specific activities with Project GRAD"? The follow-up questions asked students to indicate the specific activity. During the interview process, student participants were informed that the researcher was taking notes for purposes of recording valid statements (Creswell, 2013; Palinkas et al., 2013). All interviews were conducted via phone, as it was the most feasible. Interviews were conducted separately based on logistics, researcher availability, and location of students.

No published data collection instruments were utilized in this study. The interview questions were developed based on the literature review and research on college readiness programs and student perceptions. I wrote six semi-structured interview questions that were based on students' participation in the CRP. Interview questions were also developed based on students' perceptions on whether their participation in the CRP influenced their graduation from high school and postsecondary educational plans (See

Appendix A). The primary goal of the interview questions was to obtain students' input and perceptions of their experiences.

Each interview began with the student first providing basic information such as their name, chronological age, high school attended (just to cross-check the database), classification in college, if applicable, and college/university name and location. Such questions were created for the purposes of determining postsecondary education status. The interview questions were specific in nature, which allowed students to elaborate and provide their opinions. Students were asked what they believed contributed to their successful graduation from high school and postsecondary educational plans. This question was created so the students would think of all the resources and support systems they believed contributed to their accomplishments in high school and after high school.

Interviews were completed over a three-to-four-week period; this allowed time to make contact with students, obtain all accurate contact information, obtain consent, and sync schedules of all parties (Palinkas et al., 2013). It was the sole responsibility of the researcher to collect all data for the interviews. In order to account for the threat of mortality to this study and limited participants, the researcher made the necessary accommodations to meet the schedule and needs of the participants to ensure their availability for the interview. A copy of the semi-structured interview can be found in the appendices (See Appendix A).

Telephone and Skype Interviews

According to Cohen and Arieli (2011), although face-to-face interviews are the most beneficial and provide the most detailed accounts, the researcher must consider the

safety of both themselves as well as the participants. If there poses any physical threat, other accommodations should be pursued (Cohen & Arieli, 2011; Irvine, Drew, & Sainsbury, 2013). While telephone, Skype, and face-to-face interviews were an option, all interviews were completed via phone, recorded, and then transcribed. Students were informed of this during the interview.

Procedures for Recruitment, Participation, and Data Collection

Data collection for this study began with the selection of potential participants based on the record of the Project GRAD database. Selected students were then contacted via phone or email to schedule the initial meeting. During the first point of contact, students were introduced to the study, the criteria for participant selection, and the nature of the study. During my introduction, I was clear about my role as the researcher and differentiated myself from Project GRAD and Green County Public Schools. In addition, during the initial phone conversations, a time and date were scheduled to conduct the interview.

In order to maintain confidentiality of the student participants and the school system, pseudonyms were used in place of personal and school names. The next step involved sending out informed consent forms. Many of the students were in college and inaccessible, or residing outside of the area; therefore, emailing appeared to be fastest communication method. For that same reason, telephone interviews were decided as the primary means of obtaining information. An allotted time of 30 minutes to an hour was factored in for each semi-structured interview; no parent participation was necessary. Interviews were audio taped and transcribed word for word.

The day of the interview, if not already collected, students provided their signed copy of the consent form, their signature sufficed with an “I consent” message via email. Those messages were saved, printed and placed in a folder. Student participants were asked a total of six questions related to their participation in Project GRAD. The interview was a one-phase process; therefore, no follow-up was needed after the conclusion of the interview. After the collection of all data, interviews were transcribed word for word and developed into themes. Students did have the opportunity to review their interview transcripts for accuracy.

Data Analysis Plan

Data analysis for qualitative research is based on configuring the collected data into understandable information (Emmel, 2013). This process of analyzing data took place throughout the duration of this study. Through the transcription of interviews, field notes, and developed themes, the researcher was able to formalize a completed report on the interpretation and analysis of the data collected. The analysis of data provided during student interviews will provide valuable information for future planning of school-wide college readiness programs and initiatives. Data analysis will further support or belie the outcome data provided by Project GRAD.

The database provided by Project GRAD was organized by school and separated onto three different documents. I used criterion sampling to select every 15th person. The number selected was based upon the total PG database of 231 students. In order to obtain equal representation from each school, based on a total sample size of 15, 5 students from each school were to be selected. However, the final sample size was 12 students. This

was based on availability of students, response time from students, and the accuracy of the contact information.

Student participants met a selected set of criteria and have “lived” or experienced the phenomenon being researched (Creswell, 2013; Drewry et al., 2010; Finlay, 2013; Weidman, 2014).). According to Palinkas, Horwitz, Gree, Wisdom, Duan, and Hoagwood (2013), criterion sampling was a quality measure that provided for obtaining detailed and in-depth accounts from those influenced, based on their experience. In addition, criterion sampling pinpointed any specific loopholes, areas for improvement, and attention to specific content or measures deemed important or impactful by those affected (Creswell, 2013; Palinkas et al., 2013; Nichols et al., 2010).

Transcription of Interviews

To organize the data collected, the researcher created specific folders for documentation (call logs, contact with participants), consent forms, the complete roster of Project GRAD student participants, and separate school folders. The next step during this phase was the transcription of all interviews: each and every typed interview included student responses, along with field notes and contact logs.

Developing Themes

Developing themes involved a thorough and detailed review of all data (Harper, 2015). During this step, the researcher read through every interview to determine categories or themes. Developing themes required categorizing specified subtopics and placing connecting data to those categories. This process of coding or segmenting provided more clarity of the data (Silverman, 2010). Codes or themes were ranked and

organized based on context and meaning. More importantly themes were created with meaning, relevance, and logic based on research questions (Emmel, 2013).

Issues of Trustworthiness

One primary means was available for gathering data from the participants. Although the initial options indicated face-to-face and Skype interview, telephone interviews proved to be the most efficient and feasible. This decision was based on student participant's physical location and technology capabilities. The phone interviews were recorded and transcribed, as a backup, I utilized an online recording program that also transcribes. This will account for the meticulous and thorough nature of the documentation.

Transferability

Transferability entailed using descriptive and thorough explanations in defining or describing individual experiences (Rossman & Marshall, 2010; Tracy, 2010). The primary goal was to make sure descriptions and specific accounts were realistic and believable. Quotations from student participants, specific highlights of field notes, atmosphere, and environment were used in order to account for the external validity of the study (Tracy, 2010).

Credibility

Credibility of this research was established through the use interviews to gather data. Interviews of students supported and maintained the overall accuracy of the study (Rossman & Marshall, 2010). Credibility was further established through a meticulous

and thorough process during transcription and documentation, so that nothing was omitted, abbreviated, or misinterpreted (Tracy, 2010).

Maintaining the integrity, validity, and reliability of this study was through the use of audit trails (Emmel, 2013; Rossman & Marshall, 2010). This system of checks and balances solidified a more accurate measure of quality assurance (Tracy, 2010).

Furthermore, it provided for more consistency and support regarding the trustworthiness of this study (Rossman & Marshall, 2010).

One of the limitations of this study may include the lack of student experiences and perceptions from the other seven Project GRAD affiliates. As result, the results of this study are not a definitive indication of the entire Project GRAD program.

Member Checks

This process was a great way for participants to become directly involved with and connected to the study. Member checks also built trust and eliminated the thought of any potential hidden agendas with participants. Although requiring no long-term follow-up, participants had an opportunity to directly review the final transcription of their interview to check their responses to ensure accuracy of their statements (Emmel, 2013). Nonetheless, the researcher explained the transcription process. This process of establishing credibility was key to creating accurate and thick descriptors of the study and data (Tracy, 2010).

Audit Trails

This method of establishing reliability of the study and data I was on consistency of documentation (Silverman, 2010). In addition, documentation must be organized.

Reliability was an internal audit check for mistakes in transcription, grammar, and connotation (Silverman, 2010; Tracy, 2010). This process also involved defining the development of themes and categories from the interview responses (Emmel, 2013).

Audit trails provided tracking the progress of the research study from beginning to end (Palinkas et al., 2013). This trail followed the steps and processes kept and followed throughout the life of the study (Rossman & Marshall, 2010). Information included in audit trails were hard copies of all data, notes, audio and visual materials, and systems used to capture information for the study (Creswell, 2013; Emmel, 2013). Audit trails were essential in qualitative research, as they provided help to keep track of the steps taken throughout the study (Emmel, 2013). Audit trails also justified and supported the interpretation of data and material when selected peer reviewers or auditors complete a thorough checks and balances system (Tracy, 2010).

Ethical Procedures

One of the first steps in the process of collecting data was to obtain written consent from all participants. If the students were under the age of 18, 45 CFR mandated that students must have a signed consent form from their legal guardian (Phelan & Kinsella, 2013; Rossman & Marshall, 2010). All student participants and their families, if necessary, were informed of the confidentiality surrounding this study. Specifically, no one other than the researcher would be allowed access to their data. In addition, participants learned that their individual names would be omitted from the study, with the exception of the school names, but should there be a need to mention a student's name, a pseudonym would be in its place. Although this study contained detailed, rich, and

descriptive data, I paraphrased some quotes to protect anonymity, voice, and tone (Phelan & Kinsella, 2013).

Hard copy data were in a physical storage system for security. This physical storage system consisted of a locked box with a security combination. The researcher was the only individual with knowledge of the security combination. In addition, other data, such as typed field notes, transcribed interviews, and other pertinent data, was on the hard drive of my personal laptop, which was password protected, where no other individual had knowledge of the password. After five years all data would be destroyed.

Summary

Project GRAD was a school-wide college readiness program in existence for over 20 years (Project GRAD, 2011). Over a decade ago, Green County Public Schools implemented this school reform effort in three of their high schools (Project GRAD Atlanta, 2011). The intent of the implementation of this program was to increase the overall graduation rate amongst at-risk and disadvantaged kids at three historically poor-performing high schools. The three identified high schools had low attendance rates, grades, test scores, graduation rates, and college entrance numbers. According to the latest outcome data published by one of the local PG affiliates, this program has increased the graduation rate at all three schools and improved college entrance by 85% (Project GRAD Atlanta, 2011).

This chapter of the study provided a thorough and in-depth overview of the data collection and data analysis processes. The semi-structured interview provided to the students consisted of 6 open-ended questions that students answered based on their

experience participating in Project GRAD programs. The interview questions were designed specifically for students to explain how their participation may have influenced their decision to graduate high school and enter college. The overall intent of this section was to mention and account for any issues with trustworthiness and data collection. Chapter 4 outlined the overall results of the study. Chapter 4 further discussed the research setting, demographics of the participants, and the methods of collecting data. The chapter concludes with an analysis of the data and description of the developed themes.

Chapter 4: Results

Introduction

The purpose of this qualitative research study was to explore the experiences of former high school student participants in the Project GRAD college readiness program, and examine how these students' participation in this program influenced their graduation from high school and their plans for college attendance. The analysis of study data used data collected through in-depth interviews of 12 students who graduated high school in 2012 from one of three ABC County Schools that were Project GRAD affiliates. The interviews continued until saturation was reached. This chapter provides information regarding the data analysis process of collecting, managing, and analyzing information. The analysis was driven by the following two research questions:

- RQ1: How did high school participants in the Project GRAD college readiness program describe their experiences as students in this program?
- RQ2: How did high school student participants in Project GRAD perceive and link their program participation with high school graduation and college entrance?

Based on the guiding research questions, themes and subthemes emerged. In order to maintain the integrity and quality of the data responses, the process establishing themes and subthemes are explained in detail. In addition, some direct quotes from student responses provided data to document specific accounts and details of students' experiences.

Setting

This chapter provides findings based on the lived experiences of the 12 participants. Data gathered from the participants was through a six-item interview. The students were Project GRAD participants and 2012 high school graduates from three ABC County Schools. All participants resided in Smallville at the time of the study with the exception of one who attended college in another state. The data analysis provided further information regarding each participant's attendance at and/or entrance in a postsecondary institution. Nine of the 12 students were enrollees in a postsecondary institution. One student had already graduated with a certificate as a medical assistant; the remaining two planned to re-enroll for the Spring 2015 semester.

Theme Development

After considerable immersion in the data and careful review of the transcribed interviews and syncopation with research questions, I was able to establish the study themes. The most prominent theme was family support. The family support theme was also identified during this study's literature and cited in many discussions of the challenges of first-generation minority college students and their desire to finish high school and attend a postsecondary institution (Reid & Moore, 2008; Roderick et al., 2009; Strayhorn, 2010; Watt et al., 2011).

Demographics of Participants

The results of this phenomenological qualitative study emerged from in-depth interviews of 12 students who graduated from high school in 2012 from the ABC County school system who were participants in the Project GRAD college readiness program.

Some of the students were still affiliated with Project GRAD at the time of this study through the scholarship the project grants them. In order for students to continue to receive the scholarship, they must be actively enrolled in a postsecondary institution and have maintained a G.P.A of 3.0.

Table 1

Summary of Student Demographics

Participants	Currently Enrolled in College	Classification	High School
Participant 1	Yes	Sophomore	Jones
Participant 2	Yes	Freshman	Jones
Participant 3	Yes	Sophomore	Mitchell Jones
Participant 4	No	N/A	Smithview
Participant 5	Yes	Junior	Jones
Participant 6	No	N/A	Smithview
Participant 7	Yes	Junior	Smithview
Participant 8	Yes	Senior	Jones
Participant 9	Yes	Junior	Mitchell Jones
Participant 10	Yes	Junior	Mitchell Jones
Participant 11	No	N/A	Mitchell Jones
Participant 12	Yes	Senior	Smithview

Nine of the student participants were current students in Project GRAD, as they received the current scholarship. Of these nine, six were enrolled in a four-year institution; two were enrollees in a community college, and the remaining one in a technical school. Two more students were working and planning to enroll during the upcoming spring semester, and the remaining student had already graduated with a medical assistant certificate. I did not obtain the actual college majors from the participants, but did obtain their student classification.

All of the students voluntarily participated in the study and, since they were all 18 years of age or older and completed an Adult Consent Form. I obtained the student participants' initial information through the Project GRAD office. Since much of the contact information provided was incorrect or out of date, I used social media to make contact with students. If I was still unable to make contact with a student after using social media, I chose another student of the same gender and school to replace the earlier contact.

Students attended one of three high schools: Mitchell Jones, Smithview, or Jones. Each of the three schools is in the greater metropolitan area of the city and the schools are a part of the ABC County School System, one of the largest in the state. The breakdown for the sample was as follows: four were high school graduates of Mitchell Jones, four from Smithview and four from Jones. While the students were in high school, two of the schools, Jones and Smithview were divided into small learning communities. The majority of the students chosen from Jones were from the college-ready community.

I made initial contact with students via an email or social media message that introduced them to the study and asked for voluntary participants. However, after failing to receive a response from five of the twelve participants, I attempted to make contact via phone. During the initial phone conversation, I provided an explanation regarding their voluntary participation in study and the purpose of the research. If students agreed verbally to participate, they learned about signing the Adult Informed Consent Form, sent via email. After I received the consent form, I interviewed each participant via telephone. After considering the locations of the students and their schedules, I decided that

telephone interviews were more feasible and efficient. I also conducted phone interviews to more easily transcribe the recorded interviews. Scheduling interviews was sporadic with the frequency based on student's availability and response time to phone calls and emails.

I conducted all interviews during the month of August 2014. Interviews lasted between 6 minutes and 30 seconds to 15 minutes, with the durations based on the responses of students. In addition to recording all interviews on an Olympus Digital Voice Recorder, I took field notes. When I made telephone contact with participants, I also informed the participants that with their approval the interview would be recorded and transcribed. At the start of the interview, the call was placed on speaker and the interview began. In addition, participants learned that they would receive a copy of their transcribed interview. This form of member check was one way to address issues of trustworthiness.

Data Collection

The initial data collection process called for mailing or hand delivering consent forms. However, to make for a more efficient and convenient process for participants, I amended this and emailed the consent form, asking participants to reply back with the phrase, "I Consent." Although Skype and face-to-face interviews were initial options for conducting the interviews, neither was feasible due to student location and access to technology.

After selecting the sample, I sent an additional email to students with information regarding the study and with emphasis on voluntary participation. During the initial

phone contact, the same information provided in the introductory email was provided to the potential participants: researcher introduction, purpose of study, voluntary participation, and signing the Informed Consent. Once potential participants indicated their decision to participate and informed consent provided, the telephone interview commenced.

During the telephone interviews participants were informed about the recording on three different occasions: during the initial email introduction, prior to signing the Informed Consent, and just before the start of the recording of the interview. Telephone interviews made for easy transcription of the interviews. During data collection, there were no unusual circumstances encountered. All participants made an effort to complete the interview by verbally noting their desire to allot time to complete the interview and then by eliminating distractions during the interview. For example, one of the students, when initially contacted, was on family vacation; as a result, the interview was scheduled for a later day and time.

Data Analysis

Each participant answered a total of six questions. There was no test administered to participants during this study. Student participants did not receive a copy of the questions prior to the interview. However, during the initial conversation about the purpose of the study, the researcher mentioned sample questions.

Although I asked most of the interview questions exactly as written and provided, there were times when I had to provide an example when a participant needed more clarity or was unable to completely understand the questions. For example, one of the

research questions was, “What activities did you participate in with Project GRAD?” Participant 5 responded, “What do you mean by activities?” At that time, the researcher had to provide further explanation of that question. Additional explanation was needed for one participant after the question, “Tell me more about your experiences with Project GRAD?”

I transcribed each of the interviews. Initially, I thought about hiring an outside company to transcribe the interviews. However, after conducting the interviews, I concluded that, the code words and manner of interviews, it would be easier to transcribe in-house.

Based on the transcriptions and the researcher’s analysis of the interviews, seven distinct themes emerged:

1. Summer Institute
2. Lack of consistent program support
3. Family as strong support system
4. Project Grad scholarship
5. Unable to recall specific events as related to PG
6. Project Grad was fun, exciting, interesting, and helpful

Table 2

Emergence of Themes Through Responses to Interview Questions

Interview Questions	Themes
<u>Question 5. What activities or resources (if any) do you believe influenced your successful graduation</u>	1-4

<u>from high school?”</u>	
<u>Question 6: “What activities or resources (if any) do you believe influenced your decision to attend college?”</u>	1-4
<u>Question 3: “What activities did you participate in with Project GRAD?”</u>	5
<u>Question 4: “Tell me what things you would change about Project GRAD (if any) that would impact your experience”</u>	5
<u>Question 5: “Which activities or resources (if any) do you believe influenced your successful graduation from high school?”</u>	5
<u>Question 6: Which activities or resources (if any) do you believe influenced your decision to attend college?”</u>	5
<u>Question 2: “Tell me about your experience with Project GRAD.”</u>	5-6
<u>Question 3: “What activities did you participate in with Project GRAD?”</u>	6

Each of the themes defined above will be discussed in more detail in the following paragraphs. There was no theme aligned with the initial question, as this was a closed-ended question that required a “yes” or “no” response.

Theme 1: Summer Institute

All 12 of the student participants attended at least two summer institutes. Summer institutes were a requirement for the PG scholarship. Five of the participants noted summer institute as having some level of impact as a significant activity or influence on them attending college. Participant 4, currently a junior at the University of Georgia (UGA) noted, “My first summer institute was horrible, I had no friends, but went to UGA, like I introduced myself and everybody was talking to me... This helped because I suffered from being depressed, I made lots of new friends.” Participant 10 called summer institute a “great activity.” Participant 10, who attended Smith High School’s early college program, further stated, “Summer institute definitely made my transition from high school to college way easier than I expected.” Participant 8 stated, “The summer really helped me.” Participant 8 was not currently enrolled in college; however, the student would re-enroll back into college for the Spring 2015 semester.

Theme 2: Lack of Consistent Program Support

The design of Project GRAD CRP was to (a) improve the likelihood of high school graduation for at-risk minority students, (b) support college success, and (c) reduce college attrition (Project GRAD, 2011). In addition to the services offered to students in high school, the program mission was to increase college matriculation rates by providing interventions to both students and their families while in college (Project GRAD Atlanta, “About Us,” 2011). Nine of the students noted a lack of consistent support and correspondence after graduation from high school, while they were in college.

When asked the question, “Tell me what things you would change about Project GRAD (if any) that would impact your experience,” participants expressed a generalized desire to have post-high school support and follow-up. Participant 12 stated, “I really don’t have any communication with them other than things to do with my money, but I would like if they checked up on me.” Another student, participant 9, stated, “I haven’t had anyone really check up on me since my freshman year and that was while I was at Clark...they sent a care package which was like a \$10 Wal-Mart gift card.” This same student continued, “It would have been helpful if somebody checked up on you every once in a while just kinda say, ‘hey, Susan, how are you doing, how’s class,’ some sort of motivation.”

In order for students to keep their PG scholarship, they must maintain a grade point average of 3.0 or higher. Students noted that, for the most part, their correspondence with PG related to financial aid. Participant 4 said, “I wish they would check on me or even gather up people from the program to have like one more meeting together, that would be awesome.” Participant 7, currently a senior at the University of Mountain State, said to the researcher, “Thank you for calling. I feel like my voice is being heard. I haven’t heard from anyone from PG, that’s very disappointing.” Participants 9, 10, and 2 each echoed a desire to have some relational support beyond high school outside of the electronic correspondence regarding their scholarship.

Theme 3: Family as Strong Support System

All student participants attributed the support and push they received from family members as being a significant influence and motivator for high school graduation and

college entrance. Several of the students were first-generation college students; they highlighted how instrumental their families, particularly their mothers, were to their academic success. When asked the question, “What activities or resources (if any) do you believe influenced your successful graduation from high school?” Participant 1 said, “I would say my family, my mother, brothers and grandma all pushed me to go forward.” The participant continued, “My mama was always there, she never turned her back on me...If it wasn’t for my mom I wouldn’t be where I am now.”

Participant 6 answered questions five and six: “My family was my greatest motivation.” Participant 4 concurred with that statement: “I would mainly have to say family...I’m the only one in my family to graduate high school so you know it was kinda more of a motivation.” Participant 8’s response was similar to that of several others. Participant 3 said, “My family definitely. I’m breaking the cycle.”

Theme 4: Project GRAD Scholarship

The Project GRAD scholarship was a motivating factor for students to become involved with the program. Each student in Project GRAD who maintained certain program standards received a yearly college scholarship for four years of college totaling \$4,000. Many of this study’s participants noted the help and usefulness of the Project GRAD scholarship.

The monies were beneficial in helping to fund college. Participant 3 was particularly vocal about the PG scholarship after experiencing some financial difficulties in paying tuition: “When I first heard about that \$500 a semester, I really thought it was going to be nothing.” Participant 7 said, “That \$1,000 was very helpful last school year,

because I tried to avoid taking out loans. Participant 9 also noted, “Now that I’ve graduated, I have the scholarship.”

Theme 5: Unable to Recall Specific Events

Some of the participants had a difficult time recollecting their involvement with Project GRAD. Participant 12, when asked about the experience with PG responded, “What do you mean...I didn’t really do anything with PG that I can remember.” Participant 11 stated, “From what I can remember, PG was very helpful.” Participant 13 couldn’t really recall the PG program; the researcher had to provide some background information regarding the program. The response from Participant 1 was very generic and basic: “Okay, they encouraged me to do a lot of things. They kept me going even when I wanted to give up on some things.” Participant 6 asked, “Wait, Project GRAD, I’m getting confused with what they used to do, the summer program right?”

Theme 6: Project GRAD was Fun, Exciting and Helpful

All 12 participants agreed that their involvement in Project GRAD was helpful to some degree. The level of influence, usefulness, and impact varied. For example, Participant 1 further stated, “Project GRAD was helpful. It helped a lot of people realize that they wanted to go to school.” Another participant stated, “PG practically saved my life... I came out of my shell.” Participant 4 stated that although memory of the program was a bit hazy, “Project GRAD allowed me the opportunity to be around my friends, they support me, we support each other.” Participant 4 continued, “Every field trip after classes was fun because it wasn’t just a field trip, there were things to do, they kept us engaged.”

Evidence of Trustworthiness

One can obtain proof of trustworthiness by determining the quality of the study in several ways. In Chapter 3, the researcher discussed the use of member checks, peer reviewers, and audit trails. I used member checks and audit trails as quality measures for the study.

Although peer reviews were not utilized, member checks and audit trails were necessary. Such measures were quality assurance tools. One of the possible limitations in the study, indicated in Chapter 3, was the lack of varied student experiences and perceptions throughout all Project GRAD programs: not all student participants will have opportunity to detail and account for their experiences. Therefore the researcher made it known that this study was based on the experiences and perceptions of some students in a particular Project GRAD program that was affiliated with a particular school system.

Member checks provided a way for participants to feel involved in the study (Tracy, 2010). The participants were former high school students and some current college students. As a result, it was necessary for the researcher to mention the long- and short-term benefits of their participation. It was also important that the students be made aware that there were no sneaky or manipulative tactics being utilized to obtain data. During the second contact with the students, in some cases, and prior to the start of the interview, students were informed that they would have access to the transcribed interview. This helped ensure the accuracy of their statements and provided a level of relief and comfort to them after disclosing what may be sensitive information.

Furthermore, with certain populations, member checks are also a way to establish trust with participants.

Field notes were essential to the organization of this study. During the transcription process, I used exact terminology and quotations included in Chapter 4. The interviews took place over a period of one month. The researcher had to use several identifying and demographic categories as thick, rich descriptors to establish categories, themes and create tables. For example, a table was created to identify current college enrollment status, college name, classification, and graduating high school name. The researcher has maintained all field note, transcribed interviews, the recording device, jump drive with tables, and field notes in a locked file cabinet.

Results

College readiness programs were created as a response to a high school dropout epidemic in the 1980s (Strayhorn, 2011, Bower, 2013). Such programs established a process and means through which students can gain access to high education to make a successful transition into the world (Nichols et al., 2010; Oldfield, 2012, Ortiz et al., 2012; Sablan, 2014). Although evidence supported the effectiveness of such programming, there continues to be the problem of high school dropout for minority students and lower rates of college entrance and completion. This macro solution to alleviate the problem of educational disparities failed to consider internal input of those directly involved and impacted by programs.

The problem was that programs created on such magnitudes often fail to consider the experiences of students, which means that program designers miss out on valuable

insights that could assist them in creating purposeful and specific programming and interventions. Based on the results of the interview questions and emergence of themes, 95% of the students indicated their motivation for attending college was based on family. Ninety-percent of the students were first-generation college students. Student participants indicated a desire to break generational cycles of poverty, make their family proud, and provide better living opportunities for themselves, their siblings, and parents. The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to examine former high school student perspectives and experiences based on their participation in the Project GRAD school-wide CRP. More specifically, the purpose was to explore how the PG CRP impacted high school students' decisions to graduate high school and attend college. Through 12 interviews, former high school students and Project GRAD participants provided specific accounts of their experience with the PG program in high school and college.

The interview process consisted of six questions that were formulated to answer the two research questions. Student participants answered the questions and explained their experiences as participants in the Project GRAD programs within the Green County High School system during and after high school. Participants for this study were between the ages of 20-21.

Summary

In this research study, 12 former high school students and Project GRAD participants participated in a six-question interview to provide insight into their experience with Project GRAD while in high school and college. The research questions

aimed at determining whether participation in the Project GRAD College Readiness Program had some influence in a student's decision to graduate high school and attend a postsecondary institution. A total of six themes emerged based on the participants' responses; the raw data used to derive these themes is found in Appendix C. Chapter 5 concluded this research study through an interpretation of the research findings, identified limitations of the study, recommendations for future research, and finally implications for social change.

Chapter 5: Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations

Introduction

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to explore the lived experiences of former high school students who participated in a school-wide college readiness program. Its design was to determine whether students' participation in the Project GRAD college readiness program affected their decision to graduate high school and attend college. Prior research on school reform efforts, such as CRPs, historically focused primarily on the macro approach of finding a general solution suitable for everyone (Domina, 2009; Droogsma-Musoba, 2011; Sablan, 2014; Strayhorn, 2011). However, the literature review for this study showed that macro solutions only benefited overall conditions and did not necessarily address minorities (Droogsma-Musoba, 2011; Sablan, 2014). Previous researchers have not examined or considered many of the external and environmental factors that influenced student success (Bower, 2013; Munnell-McHugh et al., 2013). Examining these factors in depth was important in developing reform efforts to address and decrease academic achievement gaps in the United States (Drewry et al., 2010; Levine-Brown et al., 2014; Nichols et al., 2010; Munnell-McHugh et al., 2013).

In this study, students' accounts highlighted many outside influences that they perceived as contributing to their success and that put up obstacles to that success. Although previous studies have investigated the success of CRPs and their influence on the academic success of identified at-risk students, these studies have tended to overgeneralize the outcomes and only report outcome data based on quantifiable information (Koyoma, 2012; Munnell-McHugh et al., 2013). Few examined students'

perceptions based on their participation in a CRP and how their participation influenced their graduation from high school and entrance into a postsecondary institution. As a result, programmatic evaluations of CRP have not captured the lived experiences of high school student participants, creating a gap in the literature. Addressing this gap was necessary to determine whether or not high school students' participation in the program was actually beneficial from their perspective, and whether or not they considered this participation as a key experience that positively influenced their high school graduation and college entrance.

Six themes emerged in this research study and provided a framework through which to view high school students' descriptions of their experience with the Project GRAD CRP, and its influence on high school graduation and college attendance. Those themes were:

1. Summer Institute
2. Lack of consistent program support
3. Family as strong support system
4. Project GRAD Scholarship
5. Unable to recall specific events with Project GRAD
6. Project GRAD, fun, exciting, beneficial

Themes were derived from the interview answers, which stemmed from questions linked directly to both research questions. This study highlighted the importance and significance of a strong and consistent support system. This study also identified which

systems, programs, and resources had the most influence on high school students' graduation from high school and entrance into college.

This chapter provides an interpretation of the research findings, with specific emphasis on how the body of literature supports and coexists in relation to the results and phenomenon of college readiness programs, student experiences, high school graduation, and college entrance. This chapter includes some of the limitations found in the study. Next, I provided recommendations for further research on this topic and discuss its implications for social change. Finally, the chapter concludes with a complete summary of this research study.

Interpretation of Findings

Ecological systems theory was the conceptual framework to interpret the findings from this study. Bronfenbrenner developed ecological systems theory (EST), which focused on individuals within their environment (Wallace & Chhuon, 2011). Ecological systems theory has been useful for researchers investigating educational disparities, academic achievement, and other education issues. Bronfenbrenner's (2009) theory's predictions correlates to system influences on data. Data analysis for this study showed that individual students' personal accounts attributed their high school graduation and college attendance to the family system. However, the specific system identified by the students that had been the most consistent and with the most influential factors made the most impact on individual student educational decisions and plans. This significantly impactful system was the family unit.

The findings in this research study confirmed the importance of hearing the voices of those most impacted by a specific programmatic response to larger societal issues. For example, all the students expressed the ultimate goal of breaking the stigmas that your environment is the ultimate determining factor for educational success. More specifically, dispelling the myth within many low-income neighborhoods and communities the implication that familial background dictates ones future. Eight-percent of the student participants were the first in their families to graduate high school. Ninety-five percent of the student participants were first-generation college students. As such, these students are already creating a different societal image. Additionally, some of the participants mentioned a desire to be more active and vocal in program planning throughout high school and beyond.

Implications were that CRP and program participation for the sake of monetary gain and the social aspect created some feelings of abandonment.. The findings further showed that students need a consistent support system in order to be successful academically. Although the participating students benefited when they were participants in a school-wide college readiness program, not all students responded in the same manner. Many students need individualized programs and problem-specific programs to assist with their academic success.

For example, if Student A, enrolled in a CRP, had a history of academic excellence, consistent parental involvement, enrolled in college preparatory courses, and not at-risk of dropping out of high school, the likelihood of Student A needing the services of the CRP was very minimal. On the contrary, if student B, enrolled in a CRP,

had a history of poor academics, lack of parental involvement, never taken any college preparatory courses, and mentioned dropping out of school, then a greater need existed for CRP providing an intervention specific to this student.

College readiness programs in the United States have been useful to individual states and the Department of Education as a means of addressing and decreasing the academic achievement gap (Contreras, 2012; Domina, 2013; Lee, 2012; Strayhorn, 2014; Watt et al., 2013). Beginning as early as the late 1960s with their introduction, these programs addressed the high school dropout epidemic and educational disparities (Heinrich et al., 2010; Koyama, 2012).

During the early 1990s, a nationwide push began for increasing minority attendance in postsecondary educational institutions (Koyama, 2012; Munnell-McHugh et al., 2013; Sablan, 2014). During this same period, this goal became the focus of most school-wide CRPs (Glennie et al., 2014; Sablan, 2014). Historically, the focus of education has been on the whole person (Archer, 2014; Glennie et al., 2014). This entailed utilizing the environment to educate and teach students (Archer, 2014; Munnell-McHugh et al., 2013) and proved to be the most successful and relevant way of allowing students to learn (Ortiz et al., 2012). The findings from this research study confirm these teachings.

The participants in this study were all members of minority groups and were considered at-risk students based on their socioeconomic status, family unit, and neighborhood composition. Earlier research i.e., Glennie et al., 2014; Munnell-McHugh et al., 2013; Sablan, 2014) showed that all systems of the environment should be

considered when creating programs to address an issue. One's environmental system, especially for minority students, many of whom have a lower socioeconomic status, and whose families lacked formal education should be of careful consideration for program development (Glennie et al., 2014). Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory further provided support for the notion that all systems were necessary and ultimately defined the person (Duerden & Witt, 2010; Levine-Brown et al., 2014; Wallace & Chhuon, 2014).

The findings traditionally used to demonstrate the effectiveness of and need for CRPs historically based on quantifiable data and large sample sizes (Strayhorn, 2011; Strayhorn, 2014). The resulting aggregated data reports on large samples of the student population did not capture the perceptions and real identities of students, particularly those of students who had not successfully graduated high school or been influenced by such programs (Strayhorn, 2011). As a result, the reported data is misleading and incorrect. Additionally, the reported data promoted the notion that the academic achievement gap always exist because the real issues impacting this disproportion are not being properly addressed. Moreover, any solution to address educational disparities is a farce and based off data that is a misrepresentation of the actual results.

Summer Institute

The summer institute examined in this study was a mentoring and bridge program to support the ultimate mission of reducing the academic achievement gap. The summer institute was very instrumental and a memorable experience for the participants in this study. They stated their appreciation of this opportunity to experience college life while

also gaining additional academic skills and tools. High school students' participation in summer bridge-type programs did have some influence on college readiness and other educational outcomes (Domina, 2009; Glennie et al., 2014; Strayhorn, 2010).

Participation in similar programs increased the likelihood of college attendance (Domina, 2013; Sablan, 2014; Strayhorn, 2014).

While students did not necessarily attribute their graduation from high school and college attendance to their participation in the summer institute, they did say the experience was beneficial. Therefore, this research study cannot prove that participation in a summer institute had an influence on high school students' graduation and college entrance.

However, many of the students did report that their attendance at a summer institute was their first experience on a college campus. The summer institute promoted life skills and provided an opportunity for students to network. Many students who had never considered college and never visited a college, or who were first-time generation college students, had an opportunity to experience college life. The reality is, though, that some of the students attending summer institutes will not graduate high school or college because various environmental, and systems will interfere with such educational goals. Without the proper support and interconnectedness of appropriately individualized programming, many of the historic educational disparities will continue to persist.

Lack of Consistent Program Support

Mentoring, after-school programs, and college readiness programs are all support systems that aid in decreasing the high school dropout rate (Durlak et al., 2010). Such

programs provided more academic opportunities for minority students both in secondary and postsecondary education (Smith & Stormont, 2011; Wood & Mayo-Wilson, 2012). However, program effectiveness is the key determining factor in measuring the success of the program. Researchers (e.g., Lincoln, 2011; Poulos, 2014; Sablan, 2014) showed that when students become connected with consistent and regularly involved programs, they were more likely to have a better experience and succeed.. The participants in this study did report their disappointment in the amount of relational support they received from Project GRAD after graduating high school. While some levels of support and access to the staff were available, it was primarily in regards to their scholarships.

Family as Strong Support System

The family system has been the core of the African American community for centuries (Munnell-Mchugh, 2013; Poulos, 2014). This microsystem within the environmental constructs had the greatest influence on a child's future (Jeynes, 2011). African Americans often attributed much of their academic and personal success to the support they received from their family (Giroux & Shannon, 2013; Ortiz et al., 2012). The participants in this study attributed much of their current academic success to their family. Their family was one of the most consistent variables and their greatest motivator. The participants felt as though, without the support and presence of their families, their academic accolades would not have been possible. Influence from their families helped students to ultimately graduate high school and attend college.

Future research should examine the direct ways that families influenced educational success. The students in this study did not detail how their family attributed

to their success. Therefore, this study could not make a general determination about the level or actual extent of family support.

Project GRAD Scholarship

Many factors can affect a student's decision to attend college (Strayhorn, 2014). Some of those reasons are external motivators, while others are internal. The Brumley Scholarship is one of the rewards for participation in Project GRAD. Students must meet all criteria before receiving this award. Even when some students gain acceptance into a postsecondary educational institution, they often do not have the financial means to pay for college. Participants did discuss the necessity and helpfulness of this scholarship. The majority of the participants expressed their appreciation for receiving this scholarship, because it was beneficial and helped to fund their college career. It should be noted that students also said that much of their participation in Project GRAD was simply to receive the scholarship.

While the scholarship was instrumental, students also lamented that the scholarship funds were often received after the payment deadlines established by their postsecondary institutions, so they were forced to initiate contact with the program to ensure that the promised funds would be delivered. They further noted that this was their only "direct" connection to the Project GRAD office post high school graduation.

Programs that fall under the umbrella of college readiness must consider all future implications as related to students' satisfaction and comfort with a program (Sablan, 2014; Strayhorn, 2014). This supports the notion that as students become more enmeshed

and directly connected with a program, they are more likely to meet program objectives and discuss with others their satisfaction.

Unable to Recall Project GRAD Events

The experiences of the participants were often very detailed and rich, in particular when they recounted their summer institute experience. However, the participants were often unable to recall programs, activities, events, or even staff related to Project GRAD. This reveals the importance of consistent involvement from programs and systems that are aimed at dropout prevention. Students are more likely to recall and spread the word about their experiences when the CRP is consistent, and when staff are regularly involved in students' lives and attentive to their needs. This theme identified how students viewed the importance of having and remembering someone that contributed to their success.

This particular theme seemed to be one of the more direct blows to the purposes of the program. According to national data reported from Project GRAD, the program provides various workshops, one-on-one support to students, mentoring, internships, and other programs for students (Project GRAD, 2014). However, when students report on such experiences, their reports conflict with the aggregate results from the organization. Programming to prevent dropout prevention must be geared specifically for individuals (Strayhorn, 2011; Walsh, 2011). Some program participants may not benefit from a workshop on the college application process, but rather need one-on-one support (Bower, 2013; Sablan, 2014; Strayhorn, 2014).

Project GRAD Was Fun, Exciting, and Helpful

Many of the student participants described their Project GRAD experience as a great experience that they would remember forever.. Although education is a serious variable, other factors influence the experience. Students who have diverse and varied experiences do well (Flores & Park, 2-13; McDaniel et al., 2011; Sablan, 2014). In addition, if students are able to enjoy their educational experience they do better.

Project GRAD is a great program. The affiliate referenced in this research study has reported graduating nearly 3,000 students to date and providing scholarships (Project GRAD, 2014, “Annual Report”). The reports from students in this research project supports the idea that such programs are appreciated and beneficial for some students (Strayhorn, 2014). However, their accounts may be only related to their experiences with the residential component of the summer institute.

Limitations of the Study

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to explore student perspectives and experiences based on their participation in the Project GRAD school-wide college readiness program. Moreover, the purpose was to further examine how high school students’ participation in this program had an influence on their graduation from high school and college attendance. Chapter 1 included the limitations of the researcher’s role in this study. In the past, I was affiliated with Project GRAD and the Green County School System. My knowledge of the program and the school system provided a deeper understanding of student accounts and experiences.

The second limitation of this study had to do with the interview questions to the participants. The interview questions were somewhat broad, which required the students to respond with their own interpretation. The questions could have been more specific, in particular pinpointing specific programs and activities associated with the Project GRAD program. Some of the participants had a difficult time recalling events with Project GRAD. However, this too could have been due to the lack of a consistent and regularly involved program or time passing.

The third limitation of this study had to do with the group of participants selected. The participants graduated high school in 2012, two years before our interview, and some had a difficult time remembering Project GRAD and its programs or recalling some events of high school. While I did provide a general explanation to assist students with understanding the interview questions, I could have chosen students that graduated more recently. However, that would not have provided data on whether students who participated in a CRP actually went on to attend college or university. As a result, I chose a graduation date that was recent enough for participants to remember much of their high school experience, yet distant enough that they were into their post-high school years.

The fourth limitation of this study had to do with the race and ethnicity of the students. The majority of the participants were African American, with the exception of one Hispanic male. The three Project GRAD schools drawn from for this study were primarily African American. While other races and ethnicities were a part of the sample population, when chosen, they were not available for the study.

The fifth limitation of this study was the number of Project GRAD affiliates chosen. Several Project GRAD affiliates were located throughout the United States. However, access to the Green County affiliate was more feasible and realistic regarding access to data and students. While all Project GRAD affiliates have the same program focus and initiatives, all Project GRAD affiliates are functionally different. Thereby, influencing program outcomes and student experiences. The study's limitation to one Project GRAD affiliate, limits qualitatively reported information from the other sites. As a result, focusing the study on one Project GRAD affiliate does not account for the overall program perceptions and program outcomes.

The sixth limitation to this study was the actual population of students chosen. Project GRAD only provided the names of those students who met the criteria for their scholarship. Project GRAD was a school-wide program with nearly 85% of the student population being program participants (Project GRAD, 2014 "Annual Report"). However, the office did not track the data of students who did not meet the criteria for the scholarship. So students could be were participants throughout their entire high school year, but during their senior year, discrepancies were noted with completing certain requirements of the program, they would not have appeared in the database received from Project GRAD.

Recommendations for Future Research

Based on the participants' accounts and experiences, the results of this study were that former high school students' participation in Project GRAD did not have any

significant influence on their decision to graduate high school and attend college. Instead, various factors influenced this decision.

Many participants told of their experience with the program, from what they could remember, along with some programs of which they may or may not have been participants. However, such programs did not necessarily attribute to their high school graduation or college enrollment. As a matter of fact, when students were to respond to tell of any programs, resources or activities that influenced their graduation from high school and college entrance, no participants mentioned Project GRAD. However, when Project GRAD was mentioned in later questions, some accounted their experiences. Students also discussed the lack of follow-up and of consistent and regular involvement from the program post-graduation.

This study revealed that while school-wide CRPs were beneficial to students and created great experiences, no data supported direct linkage of individual participation in a CRP to high school graduation and college attendance. Moreover, it is telling that, when asked an open-ended question about what affected their decision to graduate high school and attend college, no accounts from students mentioned Project GRAD.

As a result, the first recommendation for future research was regarding the tools used to measure the effectiveness of college readiness programs. While the students in this study would have been included in the statistics and outcomes reported, the basis of this report was quantifiable data only. The student accounts did not actually support the outcome reports that the CRP reduced high school dropouts and college attendance. The sample for this study was limited to only those students who had successfully participated

in the program, meaning they met the criteria for the scholarship. However, considering CRP is a school-wide many high school students are left out of the data. Future research on this topic should inquire about those students who, based on defining characteristics were participating in a CRP, but not included in the reporting data.

An additional recommendation for future research surrounds the entire Project GRAD program, not just one affiliate. This research should focus on students sharing their experience with the program and how it influenced high school graduation and college attendance. The Project GRAD affiliate in this study had different dynamics than other affiliates and therefore may yield different results.

Implications for Social Change

The academic achievement gap has been in existence for a long period of time (Bower, 2013; Nichols et al., 2011; Sablan, 2014; Strayhorn, 2011). Although many efforts to address this societal issue created programs, there has been minimal progress. There have been innumerable solutions created to address the high school dropout rate and the disparity in college attendance for minority students. Based on the literature, data regarding college readiness programs indicates success (Droogsma-Musoba, 2011; Sablan, 2014; Strayhorn, 2011).

However, we are doing an injustice to the students and to society by inaccurately reporting such figures. The reported numbers are misleading and lead society to think the problem is being alleviated when, in fact, there is still a major issue regarding educational disparities. There are still minority students who fail to receive the proper educational support and services they need. When those students drop out because they do not fit the

mold for the face of the program, data about them goes unreported. Capturing the individual stories of those who need specific, catered services will eventually produce optimal results for college readiness programs.

Until such programs begin to adequately address the need to accurately report data and measure program effectiveness, we will continue to put a band-aid over the issue and continue to moderately appease society. The academic achievement gap still remains, as do other educational disparities.

It's unjust for a majority group to create a program with the intention of fixing problem that has, in part, been created and fed by decades of institutional racism. During the introduction of this study I discussed the near impossibility of eliminating the academic achievement gap. This is a near impossible feat simply because of the policymakers who create the programs and the underlying reasoning behind such creations.

Conclusion

In this research study I explored the experiences of high school student participants in the Project GRAD college readiness program. Participants reflected on whether their participation influenced their graduation from high school and college attendance. Research on the topic of the effectiveness of college readiness programs typically reports a successful outcome for those students who participate in the program. The reporting measures indicate the positive impact such programs have made on the dropout epidemic and the racial and ethnic disparity in college attendance. While the

reports yield positive results, a failure exists to include what students perceive as contributing factors to their success.

The findings in this study yielded totally different results than what is historically reported. While CRPs were beneficial and instrumental to some extent, they were not the sole contributing factor to academic success, in particular, high school graduation and college attendance. The participants in this study reported that the family unit was their primary support system and influence on their academic success.

This study was not to disregard the school reform efforts created, but rather to address the need to consider student voices and to adjust reform efforts based on that data. In this study, students reported a relationship with Project GRAD and its program components that was inconsistent and irregular, at best, or nonexistent, at worst. This further leads to the assumption that perhaps the formation and operation of the college readiness program needs to be tweaked in order to report accurate data, not simply for the sake of appearance, but because it might actually make a difference in the lives of children.

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Appendix A: Interview Questions

1. Are you currently enrolled in a postsecondary educational institution?
2. Tell me about your experience with Project GRAD.
3. What activities did you participate in with Project GRAD?
4. Tell me what things you would change about Project GRAD (if any) that would impact your experience.
5. Which activities or resources (if any) do you believe influenced your successful graduation from high school?
6. Which activities or resources (if any) do you believe influenced your decision to attend college?

Appendix B: IRB Approval

Dear Ms. Stephens,

This email is to serve as your notification that Walden University has approved BOTH your dissertation proposal and your application to the Institutional Review Board. As such, you are approved by Walden University to conduct research.

Please contact the Office of Student Research Administration at research@waldenu.edu if you have any questions. Congratulations!

Libby Munson

Research Ethics Support Specialist, Office of Research Ethics and Compliance

Leilani Endicott

IRB Chair, Walden University

Appendix C: Raw Data

The following themes were linked to the two research questions.

Research Question 1

How do high school students describe their experience as participants in the Project GRAD CRP? Research question one was formed to determine how former high school student participants in PG equated their success in graduating high school and entering college to their participation in the Project GRAD program while in high school. From this research question, five themes emerged:

Theme 1. This first theme emerged as a result of students talking about Summer Institute being a defining experience with Project GRAD. Students stated that Summer Institute was the highlight of Project GRAD; this activity helped them to determine they wanted to attend college. In addition, it was a fun and great experience.

“Well first of all I missed the opportunity in 9th grade...so my sophomore year I had to go [Summer Institute]. (P1).

“It was helpful and made me realize that I kinda wanted to go to college because I didn’t want to” (P3).

“It was fun, hanging with White people, things like that, kinda like college for real because we couldn’t act a fool down there” (P1).

“We should have had more students talking to us instead of these adults, just pretty much babysitting us on campus” (P5).

“Like when we went to the computer lab to do stuff and things like that, we should have had people.”

Theme 2. When students told the researcher about their experience with Project GRAD, their greatest complaint was the lack of support since graduating high school, and the lack of interaction while in college. Participants had this to say:

“In college not too much experience” (P10).

“When I was in the Smallville and attending college there, I would talk to the people to try to get like my scholarship” (P6).

“My only contact is with Ms. Jones, but that’s typically regarding my scholarship” (P1).

“Only during my freshman year while I was at another institution did someone really check up on me” (P8).

“I would be helpful if someone checked up on me to say, Susan how you doing, you need anything, just somebody you can vent to that’s outside of your family and friends” (P4).

“It really pushed me” (P12)

“I haven’t heard anything from them while I was in college except the scholarship they offer us, but nothing to see if we are on track” (P7).

While there was some correspondence with the Project GRAD office, based on the majority of student accounts, it was initiated by the student and was typically about their scholarship.

Theme 5. When students were introduced to the study, there appeared to be some initial confusion, particularly with Project GRAD’s involvement. However after a thorough explanation, students gained more clarity. There was, however, a group that had a hard

time recollecting any experience(s) with Project GRAD. It's important to note that the students graduated high school in 2012.

“From what I can remember, Project GRAD was very helpful” (P7).

When participant 12 was asked about their experience with Project GRAD while in high school and college, there was silence. The student appeared to be unsure or confused about who they'd had experience with who actually worked with Project GRAD, as well as which activities were part of the Project GRAD program: “I can't remember, I don't think I did anything” (P12). The researcher had to give an overview of the program. This appeared to help the student recall Project GRAD enough to be able to detail their experiences.

Theme 6. Student participants described their experience as fun, beneficial, and memorable, more so in high school than college. No student recalled this same level of experience in college. More particularly, students discussed their Summer Institute experience, and how it created the opportunity for them to meet new peers and engage socially while also having the college experience.

“It's a great program, I just wish they were more organized” (P1).

“It was helpful, it helped a lot of people realize they wanted to go to college” (P11).

“My second experience was at Smallville State, inside of the classes, the classes were like being on a big college campus” (P5).

“Well my experience in high school with Project GRAD, it overall was fun and interesting; like the summer programs” (P6).

“It was a great learning experience, like when we did the Summer Institute at the school” (P8).

“It was a great experience, so some of the stuff we learned, we seen it again when we started back school” (P3).

“My first Summer Institute was boring, my second one was great, I made new friends. I was depressed so this helped” (P4).

“My experience with Project GRAD was overwhelmingly well, and I definitely like in high school. It greatly prepared me for what I’m seeing in college” (P11).

Research Question 2

How do former high school participants in Project GRAD perceive and link program participation to high school graduation and college attendance? As students began to share their experiences regarding Project GRAD’s impact and influence on them, three distinct themes emerged, two of which overlap with themes from Research Question 1.

Theme 1. The Summer Institute was fairly instrumental in shaping student perspectives on college. Many of the students are first generation high school graduates and college students.

“I definitely recommend high school students to participate in Project GRAD. Summer Institute are helpful and prepare you” (P1).

“My experiences was really good, I actually like it. In high school there was a lot of pressure as far as me getting my work down. So Summer Institute was more relaxed. I actually received the Site Coordinator award “ (P8).

“It was fun, we interacted with other students that we knew. It was just a fun experience it was better than being in a regular classroom in high school” (P4).

“It was beneficial because it kinda put me ahead of my class because I was able to take these classes in about two months” (P6).

Theme 3. All participants attributed the support of their family, in some capacity, as being a contributing factor to them finishing high school and attending college. While Project GRAD programs were instrumental, based on student experiences and accounts, family was the most influential and impactful.

“My mom told me all that stuff, she attended college as well” (P5).

“My family, brother, mother, and mentor all pushed me to go forward” (P8).

“My family, aunt, were all really encouraging” (P7).

“My biggest motivation was my family, especially my sister because at first I wanted to go to the same college as her, she is a big motivation” (P6).

“My family, I had several women in my family that graduated high school, but it’s really outnumbered as far as males in our family, so it was more of motivation” (P1).

Theme 6. The participants found their experiences with Project GRAD to be fun. Former students really enjoyed their time and mentioned that just the fact that they were involved was very helpful.

“I went to Smallville Tech for a college tour with Project GRAD, this helped me as this was the first time I went on a college campus” (P11).

“I’m glad I had the opportunity to be a Project GRAD scholar. Being able to do tours, summer programs, at multiple universities made my transition to college way easier than I expected” (P13).

“I was able to network with other students and faculty from other schools who were doing the same thing, this was influential and helpful. I created many memories and made new friends” (P5).