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Ready or Not, Here I Come: Understanding the Cohort-Based College Readiness Experiences of Economically Disadvantaged First-Generation Latinx Early College High School Students

Dianna Rios
University of Texas at El Paso

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READY OR NOT, HERE I COME: UNDERSTANDING THE COHORT-BASED COLLEGE
READINESS EXPERIENCES OF ECONOMICALLY DISADVANTAGED FIRST-
GENERATION LATINX EARLY COLLEGE HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS

DIANNA RIOS

Department of Educational Leadership and Foundations

APPROVED:

Edna Martinez, Ph.D., Chair

Teresa Cortez, Ed.D.

Rodolfo Rincones, Ph.D.

Don P. Schulte, Ed.D.

Stephen L. Crites, Jr., Ph.D.
Dean of the Graduate School

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2023

Dedication

1 Corinthians 16: 14 Let all that you do be done in Love. Love is a powerful tool that uplifts you, gives you hope, and brings you faith that anything is possible. The love I have received through this journey made it possible for me to achieve my dream. To my former, current, and future students, remember to always believe in yourself and in the beauty of your dreams. To my amazing sister Joyce, thank you for being there for me and loving me the way you do. This project would not have been possible without your constant love and support. To my parents, Humberto and Olivia, thank you for all of your sacrifices over my lifetime that gave me the opportunity to achieve my goals. Dad, thank you for loving me the way you always have and being there whenever I needed you. To my beautiful Mami, eres el mayor ejemplo de ser una mujer fuerte gracias a tu duro trabajo y a tus sacrificios. To my daughter Charlotte, I have waited all my life to be a mother, and God granted me this beautiful wish through you. You are my muse, my love, my everything. My hope for you is that you have learned through the great examples of your grandmother, aunt, and me that a woman who is determined to achieve her goals is unstoppable. I love you forever, and thank you for believing in me even when I did not believe in myself. Thank you, my sweet daughter, for sacrificing everything you did to help me accomplish this goal. To one of the most important people in my life, my love, Ramon. My husband, you are the reason I accomplished this goal. You inspire me daily and always gave me the strength to keep going. Thank you for making me smile, forcing me to take breaks, and giving me a shoulder to cry on when I needed it. You never doubted I would achieve this milestone. Thank you, my best friend, for loving me unconditionally and always believing in me and my dreams. I thank God every day for you. I love you today, tomorrow, and always.

Charlotte and Ramon, this was a work of our love.

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GENERATION LATINX EARLY COLLEGE HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS

by

DIANNA RIOS, B.A, M.Ed.

DISSERTATION

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Abstract

Economically disadvantaged Latinx students have continued to graduate high school at higher rates; however, despite various college readiness initiatives, colleges and universities have been least successful in retaining and graduating Latinx of any group. Several studies have indicated that too many high school students are graduating ill-prepared to handle the demands of post-secondary education and successfully earn a college degree. Given the increase in national and state goals to improve college readiness outcomes, this study examined the college readiness experiences of economically disadvantaged, first-generation Latinx students in cohort-based practices such as ECHS, AVID, and NTN. In addition to understanding how cohort-based practices shaped the college readiness experiences of economically disadvantaged, first-generation Latinx students, this study sought to explore how cohort-based practices activate and build on students' community cultural wealth, particularly their social and cultural capital. The research was completed for this study using an interpretive phenomenological approach. The seven first-generation Latinx students who participated in this study shared their stories through semi-structured interviews. The findings from this study highlighted the three overarching themes: (a) Stressful Transitions: From Middle School to College, (b) In Family We Trust, and (c) Confidence in Taking on the World. This study raises implications for research, policy, and practice.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Educational experiences for students in K-12 schools across the United States have changed over the years (Gándara, 2020). Policies, such as providing services to students learning the English language and offering free meals to economically disadvantaged students, have been introduced to expand equitable access to education (Thompson & Thompson, 2018). However, while the changes in education have been significant, not enough has been done to address the persistent inequities plaguing students who are historically underrepresented and underserved in higher education (Thompson & Thompson, 2018), including students of color (Espinosa et al., 2019), low-income students (Crawley et al., 2019), and first-generation college students (Brookover et al., 2021; Schak & Nicholas, 2018). One of several changes specific to addressing college access disparities has been implementing college readiness practices, such as using cohorts, in high school (Barnett et al., 2012). In addition, college readiness standards, such as Texas House Bill 5, have been enacted to address college readiness issues in the K-12 systems (Sikes, 2018; Thompson & Thompson, 2018).

Frequently, educational policymakers implement interventions and programs intended to support a specific population of students, yet these students are seldom asked about their experiences with these practices (Barnett, 2016). Moreover, insufficient research is lacking to understand student experiences with college readiness practices (Foxen & Mather, 2016; Gonzalez, 2015). As such, the goal of this project was to understand the lived experiences of economically disadvantaged, first-generation Latinx students in cohort-based practices such as the Early College High School (ECHS), Advancement via Individual Determination (AVID), and New Tech Network (NTN). Cohort-based practices enhance college readiness by building upon students' social and cultural capital, which is often overlooked (Acar, 2011; Albert et al.,

2020; Plagens, 2011). Furthermore, community cultural wealth (Yosso & Burciaga, 2016) will be used in connection to social and cultural capital as students experience becoming college-ready through the support of their educational cohorts.

Background

Definitions and conceptualizations of college readiness abound. Conley (2012) once defined college ready as "a student who is ready for college and career who can qualify for and succeed in entry-level, credit-bearing courses leading to a baccalaureate or certificate, or career pathway-oriented training programs without the need for remedial or developmental coursework" (p. 1). While Conley (2012) highlights the importance of students being able to handle collegiate coursework, Albert et al. (2020) affirm that it is equally necessary to focus on other factors such as stress handling, understanding the importance of collaborating with peers, and managing health and mental wellness. Other scholars have also emphasized the implications for student success in terms of college readiness through the lens of social and cultural capital (Acar, 2011; Albert et al., 2020; Bryan et al., 2019; Clayton et al., 2019; Crawley et al., 2019; Dika & Singh, 2002; Plagens, 2011; Yosso, 2005).

One component that college-readiness practices attempt to address is giving students the resources necessary to navigate the transition from high school to college (Foxen & Mather, 2016). Although college readiness initiatives in high schools are meant to assist students who would benefit the most, systemic issues persist (Brookover et al., 2021). Implementing college readiness initiatives does not always address the equity issue for students beginning with a significant disadvantage from the beginning of their educational journey (Mokher et al., 2018). When continual deficits impair all students from accessing all forms of education equally, it can affect the economy (Molock & Parchem, 2020). Even with the added resources through

programs and college readiness initiatives, Latinx students continue to fall behind in college graduation rates (Elengold et al., 2020).

College readiness has become a multi-faceted system of best practices meant to support students who are typically underrepresented in post-secondary institutions of learning (Atwell et al., 2019; Barnett et al., 2012; Brookover et al., 2021; Xu et al., 2018). In addition to curriculum and program initiatives, high school graduating standards have also highlighted the relevancy of being college ready through multidimensional support, such as the use of cohorts, for students who need it the most: economically disadvantaged Latinx students (Xu et al., 2018). Cohorts are a current educational practice that enhances career pathways through social and cultural capital (Boat et al., 2021).

Latinx Underrepresented in Higher Education

Even when high school graduation rates continue to rise for low-income Latinx students, enrollment in higher education lags in comparison to White students (Errisuriz et al., 2022; Espinosa et al., 2019). Figure 1.1 indicates the graduation rates of Hispanic students compared to their more advantaged White peers from 2018 - 2019 (National Center for Education Statistics, 2022). Between 2018 and 2019, the national high school graduation rate was 86%. The Hispanic rate was only four percentage points below that average at 82% and seven percentage points below the White graduation rate (National Center for Education Statistics, 2022). The high school graduation data indicates that more Latinx students are graduating from high school who have the potential to transition into a post-secondary institution; however, the numbers do not translate to college enrollment and completion (Elegold et al., 2020). The continual gap in the transition process between high school and college has created curriculum and program changes,

such as adding dual-enrollment classes which offer students the opportunity to earn college credit as high school students (Edmunds, 2012; Mokher, 2020).

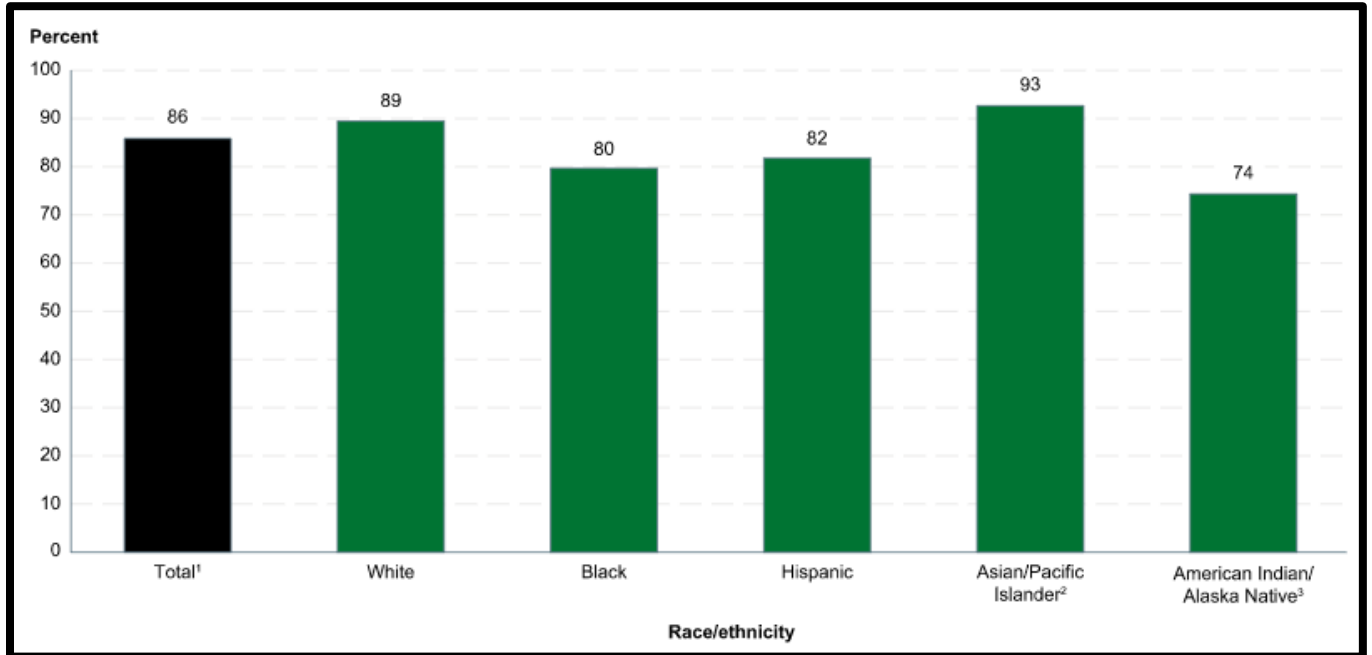


Figure 1.1 Note: Comparison of graduation by Race/Ethnicity. Copyright 2022 by National Center for Education Statistics.

Due to the continual need to address equity gaps, numerous secondary schools, including those which are under-resourced and classified as Title 1 in the U.S., now offer high school students the opportunity to enroll in programs that will allow them to earn an associate degree or accumulate college credit through dual enrollment (Atchinson et al., 2021; Barnett et al., 2013; Edmunds, 2012; Nodine, 2011 Struhl & Vargas, 2012). The premise of the dual enrollment initiative is to allow high school students the opportunity to earn college credit which translates to savings in tuition costs which typically target underrepresented students (Atchinson et al., 2021; Edmunds et al., 2020). Even when dual enrollment is meant to assist underrepresented students, enrollment rates have not significantly changed, especially at 4-year universities

(National Center for Education Statistics, 2022). Practices like dual enrollment are implemented to lessen the equity gaps. However, underrepresented students are not transitioning to post-secondary education at the same rate as White students. (Elengold & Agans, 2020; Martinez et al., 2020; Melguizo & Ngo, 2018). The concern is that while more Latinx students are graduating from high school, those same students are not enrolling and persisting in institutions of higher learning.

Latinx and students of color are least represented in institutions of higher learning (Schak & Nichols, 2018; Sikes, 2018; Thompson & Thompson, 2018). With the recent COVID-19 pandemic surge, these same students continued to not only lag behind their White counterparts but increasingly did not continue with their collegiate studies or did not even attempt to enroll (Onyema et al., 2020; National Center for Education Statistics, 2022). College readiness plays a pivotal role in preparing students for post-secondary challenges, especially for those students who are least represented in institutions of higher learning (Elengold et al., 2020). Students who are often perceived as not being college-ready because they are taking remedial college courses or have not completed specific requirements do not complete more than one year of college, leading to the non-completion of a college degree (Gaetner & McClarty, 2015).

Furthermore, students who are Latinx and economically disadvantaged have higher rates of enrollment at 2-year community colleges than at 4-year universities (National Center for Education Statistics, 2022). However, even when underrepresented students, such as Latinx and economically disadvantaged, choose to attend a 2-year versus a 4-year university, the college graduation rates continue to lag (Foxen & Mather, 2016). Figure 1.2 shows enrollment rates of Hispanic students compared to their more advantaged White peers in both 2-year and 4-year universities for Fall 2019 (National Center for Education Statistics, 2022). In 2019, the total

college enrollment rate for White students was 53% compared to Hispanic students, which was 22% (National Center for Education Statistics, 2022). More specifically, the enrollment rate for White students at four-year and two-year institutions was 54% and 48%, compared to 21% and 28% for Hispanic students (National Center for Education Statistics, 2022).

Community college students are a vastly growing population of students who are underrepresented in post-secondary institutions (Jabbar et al., 2019). However, when students select to begin their collegiate studies at a community college, they do not always transfer and persist in obtaining a bachelor's degree. For example, Jabbar et al. (2019) explain that "Over 80% of community college students desire to transfer to a 4-year institution; however, within six years, less than 35% of students will achieve that goal" (p. 1). Furthermore, when underrepresented students select to attend a community college, they often do not persist in transferring to a 4-year college to obtain a bachelor's degree (Jabbar et al., 2019).

Selecting a two-year college, often for economically disadvantaged Latinx students, is seen as more affordable and accessible (Gonzalez, 2015; Jabbar et al., 2019). When underrepresented students choose to attend a community college first, it becomes significant in their persistence in transferring to a 4-year college. Latinx students are more fearful about going to college because of the costs, which institutions have not done enough to address (Elengold et al., 2020). This equity gap continues to plague underrepresented students (Elengold et al., 2020). In 2019, Hispanic student enrollment at four-year institutions was 21 % compared to 28% in public institutions. The numbers continue to decrease for private institutions, with only 12% enrollment (National Center for Education Statistics, 2022).

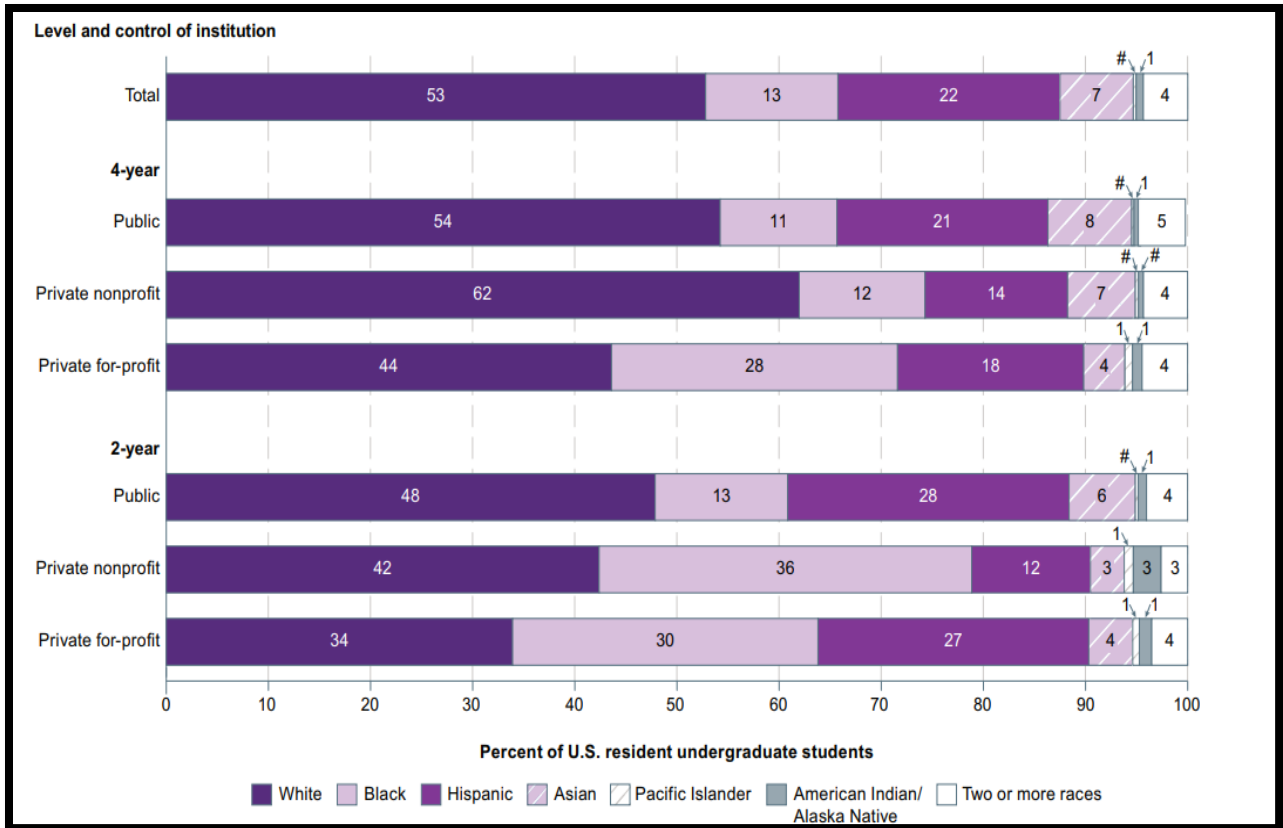


Figure 1.2 Note: Enrollment rates in 2-year vs. 4-year by Race/Ethnicity. Copyright 2022 by National Center for Education Statistics.

Unfortunately, while college-readiness practices have excellent potential, the targeted Latinx students, those classified as economically disadvantaged and first-generation, are from the same population the system has failed, leading them to struggle since primary school (Elengold et al., 2020). In addition to some students living in poverty and commanding a second language, economically disadvantaged, first-generation Latinx students are also expected to navigate collegiate courses after attending public school without adequate preparation (Conley, 2008). Furthermore, college choice for economically disadvantaged Latinx students is often influenced by accessibility and lower cost, which community colleges offer versus other four-year institutions (Clayton et al., 2019).

In addition to financial barriers, first-generation Latinx students do not have the same support as non-first-generation students, who have someone who has gone through the process and can guide them in the college-going process (Bryan et al., 2017). Therefore, they often seek to attend a community college which can be less overwhelming and more cost-effective than a four-year institution (Clayton et al., 2019). Other factors, such as losing credits, which can lead to additional costs in enrolling in more classes, are also a factor for non-transfer from a community college (Belfield, 2017).

College Readiness Initiatives

College readiness is not an issue that can be solved only through initiatives or policy implementation (Duncheon & Tierney, 2015). College readiness is not just about making curriculum and program changes and expecting those changes to address inequities for all students (Conley, 2008). Students who are already disadvantaged need support to overcome pre-existing inequities to succeed in college readiness courses in high school. To address these educational inequities, initiatives such as early college high schools, which allow students to earn college credit while still in high school, and other programs such as AVID and NTN have been implemented in schools (Edmunds et al., 2020).

Early college high schools were designed and implemented to address the inequity crisis in education (Edmunds, 2012). When first implemented, early college high schools provided opportunities for students to earn college credit while still enrolled in high school. Establishing a support system, through peers and staff, for students classified as most in need will ensure that college-readiness programs create equity in being college-ready and earning a degree (Acar, 2011; Bernhardt, 2013). In addition to early college high schools, the AVID and NTN programs were established to meet the needs of economically disadvantaged students by providing support

networks through peer collaboration and school personnel on the requirements to enter colleges and universities (Adams & Duncan Grand, 2019; Morley et al., 2021).

Like the early college initiative, AVID structured its practices on the idea that collaboration through peer support and interaction could improve student success (Bernhardt, 2013). In addition, these programs seek to address equity gaps, such as disparities in educational outcomes across race and ethnicity, by providing specific practices targeting students who are least likely to attend a post-secondary institution (Thompson & Thompson, 2018). For example, one approach to address equity gaps is placing students in cohorts so they may receive support from peers and educators to navigate all aspects of college readiness. (Acar, 2011; Morley & Silva, 2021; Plaguens, 2011). The use of cohorts provides the opportunity for students to receive both academic and social support from their peers (Acar, 2011).

While college readiness practices, such as the use of cohorts, have been implemented in programs like ECHS, AVID, and NTN to support underrepresented students in enrolling and persisting in college purposefully, students are still faced with numerous barriers and continue to lag in obtaining a college degree (Elengold et al., 2020). College readiness studies emphasized the importance of addressing the barriers for economically disadvantaged, first-generation students. However, what is lacking in the research is addressing how support systems build upon social and cultural capital through programs such as ECHS, AVID, and NTN and can be used to address the needs of these underrepresented students in a post-secondary setting (Adams & Duncan, 2019; Bernhardt, 2013; Edmunds et al., 2020; Morley et al., 2021). Therefore, addressing college readiness is crucial in understanding how strategies and policies affect those targeted for improvement and equity through said changes.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to understand the lived experiences of economically disadvantaged, first-generation Latinx students in cohort-based practices such as ECHS, AVID, and NTN. In addition to understanding how cohort-based practices shape the college readiness experiences of economically disadvantaged, first-generation Latinx students, this study seeks to explore how cohort-based practices activate and build on students' community cultural wealth, particularly their social and cultural capital (Yosso, 2005; Yosso & Burciaga, 2016). Community cultural wealth recognizes the knowledge, skills, experiences, abilities, and contacts of Latinx as assets rather than deficits (Yosso, 2005; Yosso & Burciaga, 2016). Research has found that building on students' community cultural wealth increases college confidence and facilitates student success in college (Bryan et al., 2017; Clayton et al., 2019; Doran & Hengesteg, 2020). As noted by Kolluri (2020), "College success necessitates fluency in dominant cultural capital and community cultural wealth" (p. 1).

Critical factors contributing to Latinx students enrolling but not persisting in college include: being economically disadvantaged, feeling the pressure to help sustain the family instead of attending school, and being a first-generation college student with no prior knowledge or assistance in navigating school resources (Errisuriz et al., 2022). To further understand how students can use cohort-based practices to support each other through their academic endeavors while also supporting the transition from high school to college, it is critical to understand how peer support plays a role in managing the numerous facets of applying and ensuring all requirements are met to enter a post-secondary institution of learning (Elengold et al., 2020).

While college-readiness programs are currently being implemented to address the shortage of Latinx economically disadvantaged students persisting in higher education and

earning a college degree, there is a need to study why these issues continue to persist even when practices, such as the use of cohorts, are created to address them (Elengold et al., 2020; Gonzalez, 2015). Therefore, this qualitative study was centered around Latinx economically disadvantaged, first-generation high school students currently enrolled in an early college setting, AVID, and NTN. Cohorts within early college high schools, AVID, and NTN programs are purposefully used to promote college readiness. Cohorts allow students to engage with one another with the same educational goals and are intended to support students academically and socially (Almeida et al., 2021). Furthermore, students placed in cohorts continually seek one another for both academic and social support, which can lead to further success in high school and in persisting in enrolling in a post-secondary institution (Almeida et al., 2021; Bryan & Woods, 2017).

Although it was once believed that a high school diploma provided adequate preparation for the job market, college degrees are now more frequently associated with higher job rates, increased pay, and even satisfaction (Duncheon & Tierney, 2015). As a result, the high school-to-college pipeline has increasingly been scrutinized and reorganized to include more opportunities for students historically underrepresented in higher learning institutions to obtain a degree (Mokher, 2018). However, despite the apparent need to address the inequities in the K-12 educational system, college readiness seems to elude policymakers from effectively implementing and evaluating programs concerning how it affects students and their college-readiness goals. (Duncheon & Tierney, 2015). The issue remains that students who are least likely represented in post-secondary institutions are not successfully transitioning or persisting in obtaining a bachelor's degree even when programs exist to address these issues (Duncheon & Tierney, 2015).

Research Questions

College readiness programs such as ECHS, AVID, and NTN seek to serve students who are underrepresented in colleges and universities (Berger et al., 2013; Bernhardt, 2013; Stocks et al., 2021). Students currently enrolled in these programs are purposefully placed in cohorts (Berger et al., 2013; Bernhardt, 2013; Stocks et al., 2021). The purpose of these cohorts is to provide peer support in becoming college-ready (Bernhardt, 2013). In addition, within these cohorts, students have the opportunity to activate their social and cultural capital to maximize their knowledge in transitioning to post-secondary institutions (Boat et al., 2021). Furthermore, many students, often those underrepresented, have difficulties connecting their high school college readiness experiences to their first year of college (Martinez et al., 2020; Mokher et al., 2018; Oneyrna et al., 2020). Therefore, the following three research questions guided my study:

1. In what ways do cohort-based practices shape the college readiness experiences of economically disadvantaged, first-generation Latinx early college students?
2. How do cohort-based college readiness practices activate students' community cultural wealth and build on their social and cultural capital?
3. How does the activation of community cultural wealth through cohort-based practices influence college readiness?

Significance

This study is significant as it has been previously acknowledged that Latinx students are less likely to attend colleges/universities and, even more significantly, not finish their degrees (Bernhardt, 2013; Martinez et al., 2020; Morley et al. (2021). Furthermore, while high school graduation rates for Hispanic students continue to rise and closely match the White population,

enrolling in post-secondary institutions continues to lag even with implementing college-readiness efforts (Errisuriz et al., 2022; Espinosa et al., 2019). Thus, it is crucial to understand how students experience ECHS, AVID, and NTN to inform college readiness policies and practices more effectively.

Investigating college readiness is a continuing concern within education (Barnett, 2016; Edmunds et al., 2020; Gaertner & McClarty, 2015; Martinez et al., 2020; Mokher, 2020). Policies and programs continue to be implemented, yet economically disadvantaged Latinx students who attend and graduate from higher learning institutions continue to lag behind their White counterparts (Errisuriz et al., 2022; Espinosa et al., 2019). In an attempt to address this disparity, one of the additions to incorporating college readiness efforts at the high school level is to offer college credit through dual enrollment and ECHS (Atchinson et al., 2021; Berger et al., 2013; Strul & Vargas, 2012). Other college readiness components that students can participate in high school are AVID and NTN. Similar to ECHS, which offers dual enrollment, AVID's curriculum provides students with the skills necessary to prepare for post-secondary education (Bernhardt, 2013; Watt et al., 2002). In addition to ECHS and AVID, NTN also incorporates college readiness components specifically geared towards underrepresented students in colleges and universities. The three programs, ECHS, AVID, and NTN, work through cohort-based models to incorporate student support systems (Edmunds et al., 2020; Morley et al., 2021; Stocks et al., 2021).

Students who form relationships within a network with similar goals and expectations have a better opportunity to accomplish those goals. The concept of educational networking is supported by Acar (2011), who reflects that academic success can be found when students have social connections between their families and the school that provides a climate of success. In

addition, Acar (2011) has observed that social capital is essential to students' academic success. The concept of social capital stems from the idea that networks that lead to social capital within schools and peer groups positively affect students' academic achievement outcomes (Dika & Singh, 2002). The fundamental concept of social capital is that social networks have educational value, and individuals can use these networks to access knowledge and reach common goals (Plagens (2011). Currently, programs such as ECHS, AVID, and NTN use the concept of social capital by purposefully placing students in cohorts to increase peer networking and advancement toward being college-ready.

While the premise for college readiness, both at the state and local level, has attempted to address the issue of college readiness among economically disadvantaged students, it has not always been successful (Barnes & Slate, 2013; Conley, 2008; Duncheon & Tierney, 2015; Gandara, 2020; Martinez et al., 2020; Melguizo & Ngo, 2018; Mokher et al., 2020). As a result, students are often underprepared to complete college courses in high school, leading to failure and dropout rates in these classes (Barnes & Slate, 2013; Barnett, 2016; Conley, 2008; Duncheon & Tierney, 2016; Martinez et al., 2020). Multiple studies include data that show incorporating the college readiness component into the high school curriculum has improved high school graduation rates for underrepresented populations, such as economically disadvantaged students (Atchinson et al., 2021; Berger et al., 2013; Morley et al., 2021; Nodine; 2011); however, the data often does not include student perceptions, cohort-based practices, nor significant outcomes for college enrollment or degree obtainment (Gonzalez, 2015; Elengold et al., 2020; Matos, 2021; Schak & Nichols, 2018).

While the responsibility of implementing college readiness has continued to shape the curriculum and program implementation, the issues of supporting students through this system

have not been thoroughly addressed (Duncheon & Tierney, 2015; Mokher, 2020). Students who do not have a support system cannot fully take advantage of the college readiness component of high school (Albert et al., 2020; Barnes & Slate, 2013; Brookover et al., 2021). Using capacity building through social and cultural capital for students will allow for support systems through cohort-based practices to be established so students can benefit from college readiness practices (Almeida et al., 2021; Bryan et al., 2017; Clayton et al., 2019; Crawley et al., 2019; Dika & Sing, 2002; Matos, 2021; Plagens, 2011; Rogošić & Baranović, 2016).

Additionally, understanding how community cultural wealth enhances the college readiness experiences of Latinx students can further support the understanding that students have capital that is often overlooked, which can be used to improve enrollment and graduation rates at post-secondary institutions of learning (Matos, 2021; Yosso, 2005). Furthermore, the findings from my study could be used to inform policies and practices about the importance of peer support, through community cultural wealth, as a form of college readiness.

Definition of Terms

Several terms used throughout this study should be defined. These terms have been used in educational literature, some of which have been used in different contexts. While the terms are generally understood, it is essential to understand their deliberate meaning and usage for this study. In order to have consistency and clarity within my study, I have included a list of key terms and their definitions.

- **Advancement via Individual Determination (AVID)** – a college readiness program that targets economically disadvantaged, first-generation students to close the achievement gaps (Morley et al., 2021).

- **Cohorts** – an educational practice in which students are purposefully grouped through courses/programs (Bernhardt, 2013).
- **College Readiness** – when a student is ready to succeed in an entry-level credit-bearing course leading to a baccalaureate degree without needing remedial coursework (Conley, 2012).
- **Community Cultural Wealth** – the total extent of an individual’s accumulated assets and resources (Yosso, 2005).
- **Cultural Capital** – cultural knowledge that enhances experiences and opportunities (Matos, 2021).
- **Early College High School (ECHS)** – is an open-enrollment high school that allows students to receive both a high school diploma and an associate degree (Atchinson et al., 2021).
- **Economically Disadvantaged** – a student who lives at or below the U.S. poverty line (Calderón et al., 2011).
- **First-Generation Student** – a student whose parents did not attend or graduate from a college/university (Boden, 2011).
- **New Tech Network (NTN)** – a college readiness system that targets underrepresented students in obtaining college access (Stocks et al., 2021)
- **Post-Secondary Education** – education and training obtained after completing secondary education (Vega, 2016).
- **Social Capital** – a form of capital gained through peers and social contacts (Yosso, 2005).

- **Underrepresented Student** – a student who is a first-generation, economically disadvantaged, and a minority (Albert et al., 2020).

Summary

I begin Chapter 1 by introducing college readiness, its importance to underrepresented students, and its correlation to economically disadvantaged Latinx students. Next, I explained how college readiness is defined and continued by describing how graduation rates have changed for Latinx students, specifically those economically disadvantaged. I then explain that although more Latinx students graduate from high school, they are not always enrolling and persisting in colleges and universities. I continued this chapter by explaining why specific barriers may prevent first-generation, economically disadvantaged Latinx students from obtaining post-secondary degrees. I further explained the purpose of my study and included the research questions that guided my study. Finally, I concluded the chapter by explaining the significance of my study and included a definition of terms for clarity.

Chapter 2: Review of the Literature

The purpose of this study was to understand the lived experiences of economically disadvantaged, first-generation Latinx students in cohort-based practices such as ECHS, AVID, and NTN. In addition, to understanding their experiences, this study sought to explore how cohort-based practices build on students' social, cultural, and overall community cultural wealth (Yosso & Burciaga, 2016). In order to complete this study, a comprehensive understanding of crucial colleges readiness elements needs to be addressed: (a) history of educational reform impacting college readiness, (2) defining college readiness, (c) demographics of college enrollment and completion as it applies to the definition of being college-ready, (d) how schools, both K-12 and college/universities, are addressing college readiness, if at all, and (e) the conceptual framework guiding this study, including social, cultural, and community cultural wealth, as it applies to becoming college-ready. The review of literature on social and cultural capital includes an examination of how these practices have been applied in educational research on college readiness.

Educational Reform and College Readiness

Research has shown that implementing college readiness standards is not a simple, one-size-fits-all solution to the continual problems of students' inability to navigate a collegiate career successfully and the lack of resources within their high school and college tenure. These same students, who continue to struggle, are not given adequate resources to better prepare for the transition (Duncheon & Tierney, 2015; Martinez et al., 2020; Melguizo & Ngo, 2018; Mokher et al., 2018; Thompson & Thompson, 2018; Vega, 2016). While policies and programs continue to be modified and implemented, Latinx have the lowest completion rate of any group. Furthermore, higher education continues to be the least successful in retaining and graduating

Latinx of any group (Mokher, 2020). Research by Barnes and Slate (2013) argues that educational reform and college readiness can be traced to events such as the launch of Sputnik.

This event, which propelled the United States to evaluate the educational system and its effectiveness in producing individuals who would be ready to contribute to the improvement of society, caused the government to question the emphasis on the educational system and thus propelled the creation of the National Defense Education Act (NDEA) in 1958 (Barnes & Slate 2013). The passing of the NDEA allowed large sums of money into the educational system to encourage all students to study science, math, computer technology, and even foreign languages (Barnes & Slate 2013). In addition, the NDEA was the catalyst for the beginning of a standardized educational system for students who are not standard at all. However, the inequities plaguing economically disadvantaged Latinx students in accessing an equitable education continued not to be addressed through this act (Barnes & Slate 2013).

Barnes and Slate 2013 point out that in 1983 the publication of *A Nation at Risk: The Imperative for Educational Reform* once again highlighted the many inconsistencies and lack of preparation of students in schools. This awareness of the educational system failing to compete with other nations caused immense concern and even more educational reform: No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB). Similarly, NCLB was created again to prepare students to enter colleges and universities, with the objective being to produce individuals who would contribute to the economy without concern for understanding learners' diversity (Barnes & Slate, 2013; Duncheon & Tierney, 2015). Not acknowledging the diversity of learners in our education system is a critical factor in college readiness plaguing students from successfully entering college and obtaining a degree (Barnett, 2016; Boden, 2011; Brookover et al., 2021; Elengold et al., 2020).

The Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), a reauthorization of NCLB, was enacted in response to repurposing the goals of the educational system to address continual barriers for marginalized students (Barnes & Slate 2013). More significantly, ESSA purposefully included English Language Learners as an accountability factor for all students and allocated funds to specifically target this population of students (Adler-Greene, 2019). To address the demands of college readiness, ESSA also revised accountabilities for all schools by adding that all districts must prepare students for college and vocational programs as part of the state standards (Adler-Greene, 2019). To achieve this college and career readiness goal, ESSA eliminated using core academic subjects as a basis for preparing all students (Adler-Greene, 2019).

The location for this study is in Texas; therefore, it is essential to include cases that have impacted Latinx economically disadvantaged students' educational experiences. In the 1973 Supreme Court case of *San Antonio Independent School District v. Rodriguez*, the families of students from San Antonio, Texas, adamantly believed that using property taxes to fund schools was unconstitutional (Walsh, 2011). The plaintiffs of the lawsuit, low-income children and families of color, felt that their “school district was dramatically unequal in every respect when compared to the local, wealthy, white school district” (p. 133). Specifically, the families believed using property taxes to fund schools was unconstitutional because poor communities, such as the Edgewood School District, provided less capital than wealthy communities (Walsh, 2011). Underfunding through property taxes caused educational disparities between poor and affluent communities. Ultimately, the courts ruled in favor of the school districts to continue using property taxes to fund schools which continued to create disparities for economically disadvantaged students (Walsh, 2011)

Due to the continued disparities from the *San Antonio Independent School District v. Rodriguez* case, specifically for economically disadvantaged students, families, and communities, a new set of plaintiffs filed a lawsuit to fight the funding of schools through property taxes. The *Edgewood ISD v. Kirby* case, which was filed on behalf of the school district and tried in the state courts, claimed that Texas school funding was unconstitutional (Kauffman & Rumbaut, 1990). When analyzing the financing of schools through property taxes, the litigants found that “property value per student ranged from \$20,000 per student in the poorest school district to \$14,000,000 per student in the wealthiest district (Kauffman & Rumbaut, 1990, p. 4). Furthermore, the defendants found that poor school districts raised \$100 per student through property taxes, while the wealthiest school district raised \$70,000 per student (Kauffman & Rumbaut, 1990). On June 1, 1987, Judge Clark ruled that the Texas school finance system was unconstitutional and declared judgment granting injunctive relief for the plaintiffs (Kauffman & Rumbaut, 1990).

Additionally, Judge Clark added that the unconstitutionality of this case allowed for the Texas finance system to enforce rather than ameliorate the inequalities between students in property-poor and property-rich districts (Kauffman & Rumbaut, 1990). Through the ruling, the state was given time to rectify the problem. The court granted the state until 1990 to begin implementing a new school finance plan that would be more equitable for economically disadvantaged communities. The *Edgewood ISD v. Kirby* indicated that several preexisting inequities continued to plague students who are typically underrepresented in post-secondary institutions. To a significant extent, educational reform has continued to evolve, but the relevance of how it affects individual learners and their specific needs has not (Adler-Greene, 2019).

Defining College Readiness

Conley (2012) once defined college readiness as "a student who is ready for college and career who can qualify for and succeed in entry-level, credit-bearing courses leading to a baccalaureate or certificate, or career pathway-oriented training programs without the need for remedial or developmental coursework" (p. 1). Conley (2012) highlights the importance of students being able to handle collegiate coursework in order to be college ready. Conley's definition of college readiness is one of the most widely used (Barnes & Slate, 2013; Barnett, 2016; Chapa et al., 2014; Convertino & Graboski, 2018; Duncheon & Tierney, 2015).

Previous research has established that a crucial component of college readiness is the implementation of rigorous courses at the high school level to prepare students for college-level work (Atchinson et al., 2021; Barnett et al., 2012; Berger et al., 2013; Edmunds et al., 2020; Melguizo et al., 2018; Struhl & Vargas, 2012). For example, close to 40% of students enrolling in four-year institutions and 68% of students enrolling in two-year institutions had to enroll in remedial courses, classes which students must first take to build academic skills before enrolling in college-level classes, in areas such as reading, writing, and math (Mokher, 2020).

While college enrollment rates have continued to rise consistently, the completion rates of college students remain stagnant (Mokher, 2020). As a result, students lack the necessary skills to persist in college. Community colleges and non-selective four-year colleges designated open-access institutions do not require students to submit test scores, such as SAT and ACT (Mokher, 2020). Instead, students are required to take placement tests to establish their college-readiness level in courses such as English and math. Students are more likely to encounter higher stress levels when placed in remedial classes and not continue obtaining a degree (Martinez et al., 2020).

In addition to remedial coursework, the recent pandemic has exacerbated enrollment and persistence rates for students, especially Latinx students who are economically disadvantaged and first-generation (Errisuriz et al., 2022). College enrollment is a continual problem plaguing students who are dealing with stress levels of coursework and personal stress levels (Albert et al., 2020; Duncheon & Tierney, 2015; Martinez et al., 2020). Albert et al. (2020) added to the definition of college readiness by stressing that other factors, such as being able to handle the stress of collegiate work, are just as crucial as completing the work successfully.

In their quantitative study, Albert et al. (2020) examined school-based interventions that targeted social and emotional skills to increase college readiness for underrepresented students in post-secondary institutions. Two-sample t-tests, overlapping t-tests, and mixed measures ANOVAs were used to analyze the data (Albert et al., 2020). Data collected in this study highlighted the advantages of examining social and emotional skills, such as dealing with stress and peer support, as a crucial component of college readiness. In addition, the quantitative study collected data from underserved students who participated in GEAR UP, a program specifically designed to enhance college readiness skills such as time management, organization, support groups, and stress management (Albert et al., 2020). Unfortunately, while this study adds to the knowledge that college readiness is not just about coursework, it failed to include specific student perspectives on using strategies, such as cohorts, to better prepare for college.

Albert et al., 2020 also provided an overall analysis of how the participants gained more effective social and emotional learning skills by participating in GEAR UP, such as greater college entrance exams and coursework success. However, the data failed to explicitly illustrate how individual students used social-emotional to persist in college. Specific individual experiences and outcomes are just as crucial in understanding how students translate those

experiences into being successful with college classes and obtaining a degree. Students must be able to conceptualize all facets, such as collegiate course work, organization of materials, handling stress, and navigating college enrollment, of becoming college ready to translate those skills into success in college (Brookover et al., 2021). Students want to be prepared to take on the challenge of high school and need more than educational reform to achieve this task (Albert et al., 2020).

College readiness has been critical in targeting a particular population of students, such as first-generation students whose parents have never attended college or obtained a degree (Brookover et al., 2021). Understanding how college readiness affects first-generation students is crucial in understanding that the most underrepresented students are also likely not to enter college (Chapa et al., 2014). When first-generation students feel supported and informed about the college-going process, they are more likely to pursue and persist in college (Brookover et al., 2021). Consequently, Brookover et al. (2021) argued that college readiness is multifaceted and must include stakeholders such as counselors, administrators, family members, and the community. To fully prepare students, who are least likely to enroll and attend college and universities, must entail the organization of multiple sources and individuals.

The phenomenological study completed by Brookover et al. (2021) emphasized that college readiness can be highly effective, specifically for first-generation students, when multiple stakeholders take accountability for fully participating in this endeavor. Brookover et al. (2021) completed a study involving five students, two counselors, and one administrator to understand the college readiness of first-generation students. Of the five students who participated, three were women, two were men, one identified as Hispanic, one was Latino, two were White, and one was American Indian. The two counselors and the administrator were all women. Students

who are underrepresented in institutions of higher learning are also often first-generation students (Brookover et al., 2021).

Brookover et al. (2021) conducted semi-structured interviews. They identified five themes within their study: (1) student agency fostering resilience, (2) cultural values, (3) family and friend involvement, (4) synergy in the school community, and (5) school community stakeholder perspective on college readiness for first-generation students (Brookover et al., 2021). This study supports evidence from previous observations by Barnes and Slate (2013) that college readiness is not just as simple as implementing educational reform and expecting it to impact students who typically feel unprepared and disregarded. Through their study, Brookover et al. (2021) also acknowledge that college readiness is associated with individual students' perception of whom they can receive help from, including teachers, counselors, and the community.

Additionally, Brookover et al. (2021) discussed that college readiness is a process that should begin with the preparation of stakeholders, teachers, counselors, administrators, and the community in order to understand how working with first-generation students can often entail different barriers than other populations such as having little to no support at home. Furthermore, Brookover et al. (2021) also suggested that college readiness should begin as early as elementary school with underrepresented students to support college readiness further. Thus, college readiness cannot be, nor should it be, the student's sole responsibility.

Another critical component of college readiness is student ownership. While being able to master the curriculum is crucial for students, Conley and French (2014) suggested that student ownership is yet another factor for college readiness. When students take ownership of their learning, they can succeed in various educational environments, including online classes (Conley

& French 2014). Student ownership has not been more relevant than in the past two years when the COVID-19 pandemic altered the way students were learning and how they became college-ready (Onyema et al., 2020).

Fundamental to student ownership are crucial elements Conley and French (2014) have identified as cognitive strategies (thinking skills), content knowledge (understanding the structure of content being presented), learning skills and techniques (ownership of learning through self-regulatory skills), and transition knowledge and practices (understanding how to apply, understand financial demands, and understand the role of a college student). Of the four elements identified by Conley and French (2014), the focus for student ownership centered on motivation, engagement, goal orientation, self-direction, self-efficacy, self-confidence, self-monitoring, and persistence. This study adds to the research on college readiness because it again emphasizes that college readiness is not just about content knowledge but student ownership.

Furthermore, Conley and French (2014) argued that when students can see the value in coursework, this causes motivation to excel, which translates to seeing the importance of learning. In addition to student ownership, Conley and French (2014) also indicated that college awareness is a crucial component of college readiness. Students are less likely to participate if they are unaware of the prerequisites of attending a college or university. College awareness adds to the literature on college readiness because college awareness is often overlooked as a college readiness component (Conley & French 2014). Similar to understanding the rigor of collegiate work, Conley and French (2014) argued that students must also understand the complexities of attending a college/university.

Students who do not understand the prerequisites for attending college may never aspire to do so. Therefore, schools must prepare students for collegiate work and understand the

necessity of teaching students how to complete all the necessary paperwork to enter a college or university. Understanding all aspects of being a college student is also part of the major components of being college-ready for all students, especially those who are underrepresented.

Challenges of Addressing College Readiness

Even when high school graduation rates for Latinx students have continued to rise steadily, enrollment rates do not (Barnett, 2016). Research has shown that one main issue for students, often those who are underrepresented, in successfully transitioning from high school to college is the difference between their high school experiences and college expectations (Conley, 2007). High school rigorous academic courses often do not translate to the rigor of collegiate work. Furthermore, not all high schools offer a complement of courses that allow students to experience the same academic rigor they may experience in college (Barnett, 2016). Due to these inconsistencies, there is a continual gap between what students experience in high school and college. Gaertner and McClarty (2015) argue that preparing for collegiate work should begin prior to high school to address these inconsistencies.

Gaertner and McClarty (2015) completed a quantitative study to address college readiness emphasizing that it should begin before high school. Gaertner and McClarty (2015) used data from the National Education Longitudinal Study of 1988 to complete this study. They used the data of eighth-grade students sampled every two years, beginning in 1988 and ending in 2000. Data were derived from student, parent, and teacher surveys in addition to students' high school and college transcripts (Gaertner & McClarty, 2015). One of the most significant challenges in addressing college readiness is the time frame in which the skills are introduced. In most cases, being college ready is a topic that students often engage with in high school but should begin in middle school, as Brookover et al. (2021) suggested.

Gaertner and McClarty (2015) argued that college readiness should be emphasized as early as middle school, if not sooner. Unfortunately, some of the indicators for college readiness, such as the Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT) and American College Testing (ACT) scores and grade point averages for college acceptance, are unavailable to students until the 11th grade. Since students do not attempt the SAT until their junior year of high school, this gives students little time to make any likely changes to increase their college readiness and life after high school (Gaertner & McClarty, 2015).

In addition, scores and grades only provide a number for academic achievement and do not include items such as motivation and behavior, which, as noted previously, are also crucial components of college readiness (Gaertner & McClarty, 2015). This quantitative study adds to the literature by bringing awareness that college readiness is influenced by other factors such as behavior, motivation, social engagement, family circumstances, and school characteristics. What students can accomplish in school is just as important as what influences them outside school.

To determine the challenges of college readiness for middle school students, Gaertner and McClarty (2015) analyzed data using SAT and ACT scores since they are the most widely used indicators for college readiness and created middle school indicators. Then, using the breakdown of the data, Gaertner and McClarty (2015) analyzed it to see if middle school students' outcomes could be used to predict college readiness once they entered and completed high school. Unfortunately, while this study has value in bringing awareness to the issue of college readiness being targeted too late in a student's high school career, it failed to show how the data can be applied today since it is over twenty years old.

The challenges middle school students face today in education are not necessarily comparable to what middle school students faced in 1988 (Gaertner & McClarty, 2015). While

the research Gaertner and McClarty (2015) completed examines the significance of preparing for college as early as middle school, the results of this study do not explain how students are affected by the implementation of college readiness standards or even their perceptions of being college-ready at the middle school level.

Why College Readiness is Important

College readiness has become a central issue for producing individuals who can contribute to the new global economy. However, while recent research has led to a greater understanding of what students need to enroll successfully and complete college, very little has been done on student preparation (Barnett, 2016). Research by Barnett (2016) offers some critical insights into the factors affecting college readiness. These include academic knowledge and skills, such as critical thinking and writing, as well as non-cognitive skills, which include time management, perseverance, and goal-setting—additionally, college cultural capital is needed to navigate the transition from high school to high school college (Barnett, 2016).

More specifically, Barnett (2016) argued that using momentum through experiences and attainment goals ensures that students become self-aware of their college readiness goals and therefore take ownership, as previously discussed by Conley and French (2014). Research has already established that one key component of college readiness for high school students is to enroll in rigorous classes (Barnett, 2016; Chapa et al., 2014; Mokher, 2020). Unfortunately, not all high schools offer a full complement of rigorous courses and are even less available to students who need it the most, economically disadvantaged and first-generation (Barnett, 2016).

Barnett (2016) highlighted the importance of partnerships between high schools and colleges/universities. The research by Barnett (2016) argued for developing a system of shared responsibility for student momentum in enrolling in college and successfully transitioning.

Particular initiatives underlined by the study include an alignment in courses taken during the senior year of high school and the first year of college, which can lead to a discussion of relevancy to college expectations (Barnett, 2016). In addition to course work, Barnett (2016) argued for partnerships between high schools and colleges/universities that explicitly develop non-cognitive skills, such as time management and stress management, which can enhance the first year of college.

Included with the non-cognitive skills suggested by the study, high schools and colleges must work together to develop students' time management skills, prioritize responsibilities, and seek help from faculty when needed (Barnett, 2016). Students are more likely to persist in their colligate endeavors when they feel supported and have the necessary skills. The research by Barnett (2016) adds to the body of literature on college readiness because it most notably brings an awareness that college readiness is not just the student's sole responsibility. High schools and colleges/universities must take ownership of their role in preparing students to transition from one institution to another with skills that will allow them to persist and obtain a degree.

As educational reform continues, college readiness remains a topic of concern, with more significant efforts to close the achievement gap between high school and post-secondary expectations (Martinez et al., 2020). With such demand on promoting college readiness among all students, Martinez et al. (2020) explored issues plaguing all students: stress and even attempting everything and anything, cheating at all costs, to achieve success. The qualitative multi-site case study involved research at three high schools with demographics consistent primarily with Latinx students and a high percentage of economically disadvantaged students.

The primary data sources included semi-structured interviews with 59 students, school documents, field notes, observations, and archival data (Martinez et al., 2020). This study aimed

to examine the effects on students when they are pressured into being college-ready. One of the key features analyzed in the study was the implementation of a college-going culture and its impact on underrepresented students in colleges/universities. While the literature supports the importance of college culture in high schools as a critical factor in college readiness, as stated by Bryan et al. (2017), this study emphasized that the effects and pressure of this environment can lead to a factor that can be counterproductive in becoming college ready.

Martinez et al. (2020) found that while students were appreciative of the strong college culture at their campus and all of the efforts implemented to ensure they were college-ready, they were also in constant fear of failure, which led to an increase in stress. Furthermore, the findings of this study illustrated that while the students were aiming to be college-ready, they were also worsening in other areas. Martinez et al. (2020) described these areas as feeling overwhelmed, scared, and stressed. Unfortunately, students did not know how to cope with these feelings, which strongly impacted their college-readiness path.

Dealing with the pressure of being college-ready often causes students to cheat in desperation to maintain a high-grade point average, which is often considered an indicator of college readiness (Martinez et al., 2020). The results of the study indicated that college readiness should not just be about academic readiness. Other non-cognitive factors, such as dealing with stress, seeking help, and even talking to an adult, are just as crucial in college readiness (Barnett, 2016). Understanding these non-cognitive factors adds to the literature on college readiness because it provides a detailed examination of college readiness from the lens of students, which is often left out.

Demographics of High School and College Enrollment/Completion

High School graduation rates from 1870 to 1980 rose significantly from 2% to 77% (Gaertner & McClarty, 2015). The graduation rates continue to increase overtime; subsequently, economically disadvantaged students made up 47.2% of those graduating high school in 2017 (Atwell et al., 2019). Figure 2.1 shows the adjusted cohort graduation rate (ACGR) for Hispanic students from 2018–2019 compared to their White peers across all 50 states (National Center for Education Statistics, 2022a). The Hispanic population is the most significant growing minority, which is the catalyst for the steady increase in graduation rates, and in 2017 four states, Kentucky, South Carolina, Texas, and West Virginia, achieved a graduation rate of 85% for economically disadvantaged students (Atwell et al., 2019). Graduation rates for students, especially Hispanic and economically disadvantaged, continue to rise, which is promising; however, the enrollment rates for colleges and universities are inconsistent. Low enrollment rates could be due to socioeconomic status, language barriers, cultural differences, systemic barriers, and even limited representation.

Hispanic students have made gains in degree completion in recent years. A significant portion of Hispanic college students are first-generation college students, meaning they are the first in their families to attend college, which often poses a challenge. Despite the gains in graduation and enrollment rates, Hispanic students still face significant challenges in accessing and completing college. These challenges include financial barriers, language barriers, lack of access to college preparatory resources, and lack of representation in higher education.

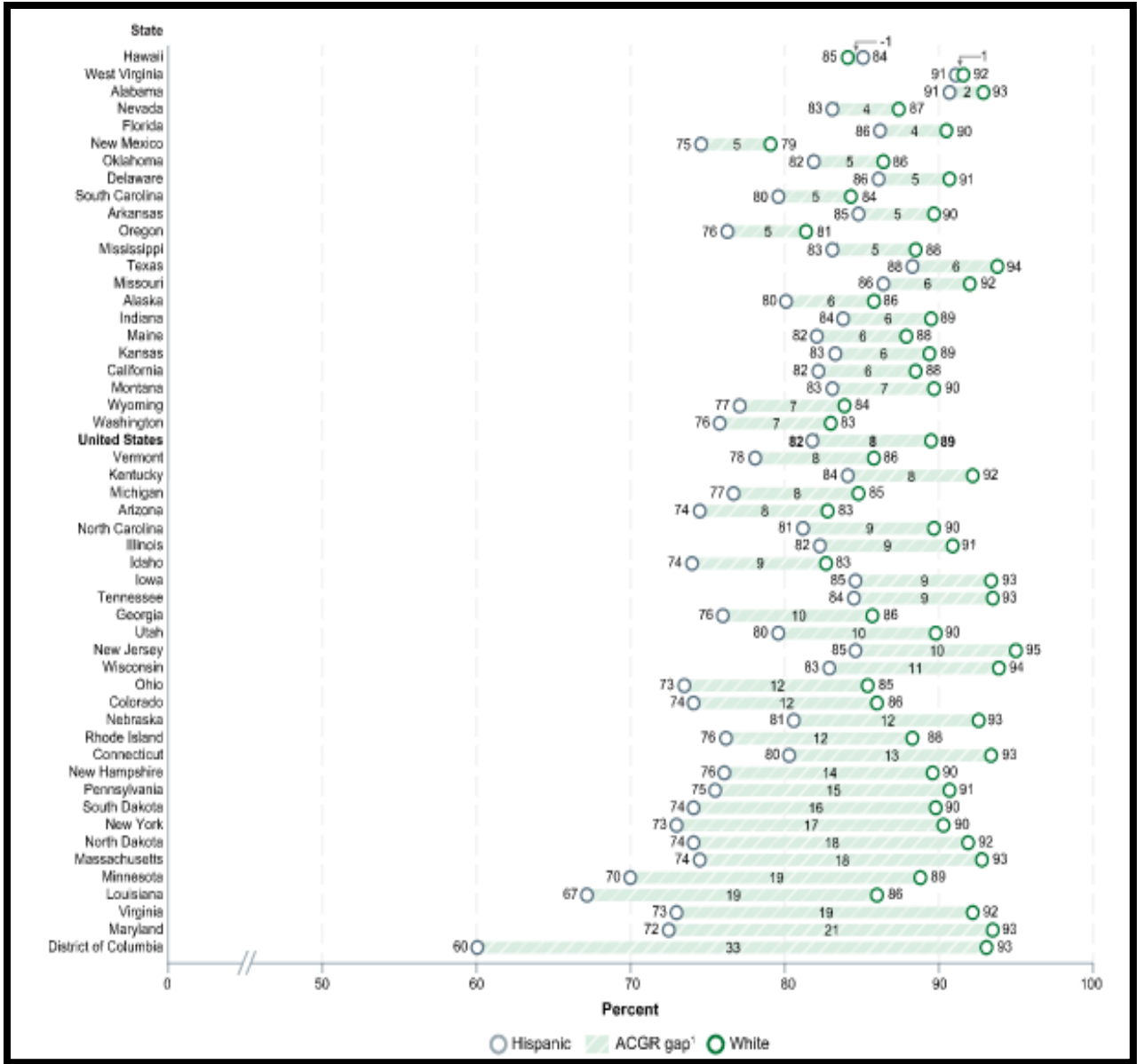


Figure 2.1 Note: Adjusted Cohort Graduation Rates by Race. Copyright 2022 by National Center for Education Statistics.

In comparing the data, the overall Hispanic graduation rate of 82% to the White graduation rate of 89% across the United States indicates the rising high school graduation rates for Hispanic students (National Center for Education Statistics, 2022b). Figure 2.2 shows undergraduate collegiate enrollment rates for Hispanics compared to other races/ethnicities

(National Center for Education Statistics, 2022). However, while the graduation rates for Hispanic, economically disadvantaged students continue to rise and closely match the White population, enrolling in post-secondary institutions continues to lag even with college-readiness efforts (Errisuriz et al., 2022; Espinosa et al., 2019). The reasons Hispanic students enroll but do not persist in college include being economically disadvantaged, feeling pressured to help sustain the family instead of attending school, and being first-generation with no prior knowledge or assistance in navigating school resources (Errisuriz et al., 2022).

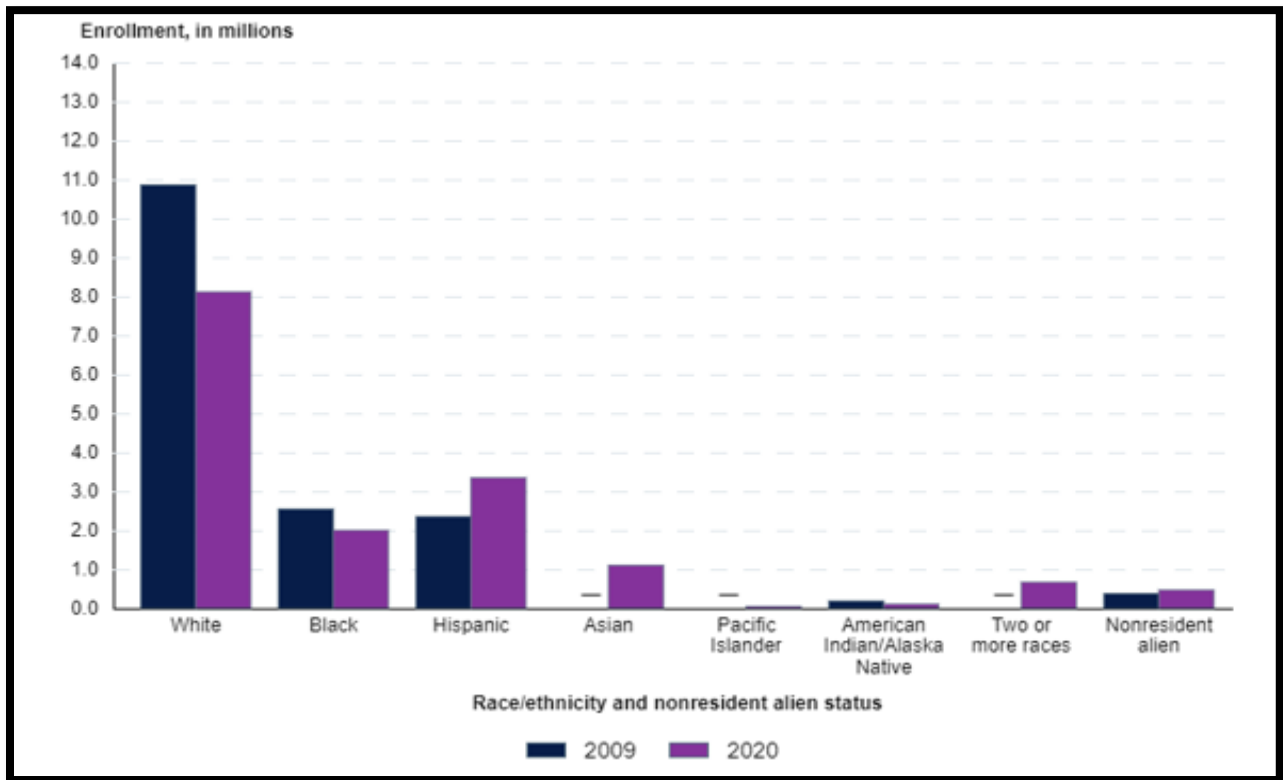


Figure 2.2 Note: *Graduation Comparison from 2009 to 2020*. Copyright 2022 by National Center for Education Statistics.

In comparing enrollment rates from 2009 to 2020, there was a rise in undergraduate enrollment for Hispanic students from 2.5 to 3.5 million, an increase between 2009 and 2020 compared to White students (National Center for Education Statistics, 2022). Conversely, white

undergraduate enrollment decreased between 2009 and 2020; however, White students still enroll at a much higher rate than all other races (National Center for Education Statistics, 2022). In Texas, 41% of the population is Hispanic compared to 38% of the White population (Paredes, 2019).

Even when the population is higher for Hispanics, this does not translate into obtaining at higher education or certificate; as a result, 49% of the White population hold a degree or certificate compared to only 26% of the Hispanic population (Paredes, 2019). Moreover, in Texas, Hispanics are more likely to enroll at 2-year institutions and are less likely to transfer to four-year institutions (Paredes, 2019). Overall, in Texas, Latinx students are still unrepresented in higher education, with only 37.5% at enrollment at four-year institutions, and only 32.5% of Hispanics had a degree conferred as compared to their more advantaged White peers who had 42.7% (Paredes, 2019). Even when the population of Hispanics is higher in Texas, enrolling to obtain a degree is still significantly lower than the White population; this trend can be seen across all states.

Not only are Hispanic economically disadvantaged students enrolling in post-secondary education at a lower rate than their more advantaged White peers, but they are also more likely to enroll in a two-year community college and never transfer into a four-year institution out of fear of failure and debt (Elengold et al., 2020). Figure 2.3 indicates the percentage of bachelor's degrees and sub-baccalaureate credentials obtained by race/ethnicity (Espinosa et al., 2019). Even when economically disadvantaged Latinx students enroll at increasing rates, they continue to lag in graduation rates compared to their more advantaged White peers (Elengold et al., 2020). A significant difference exists between entering a post-secondary institution and finishing a degree (Elengold et al., 2020).

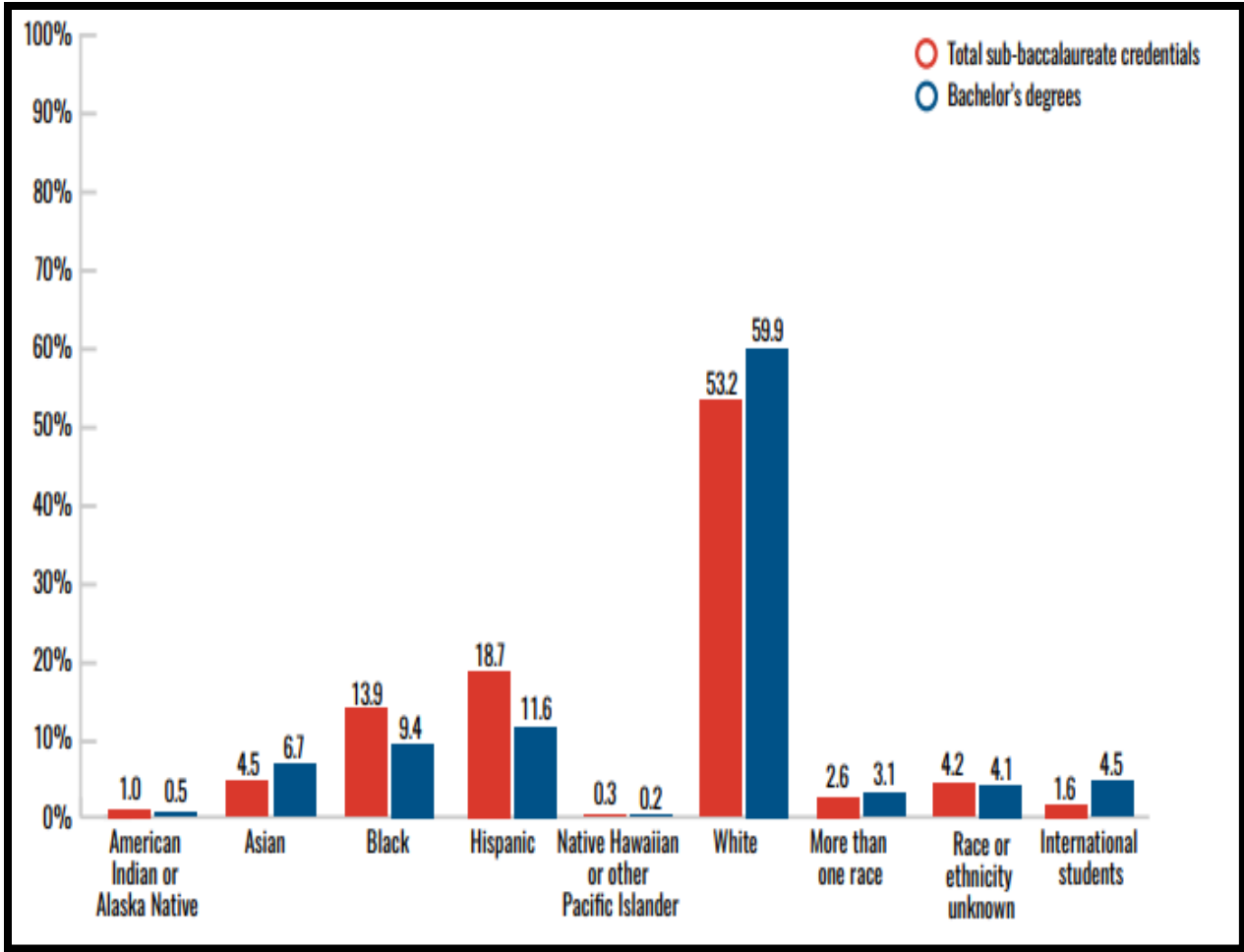


Figure 2.3 Note: *Graduation Rates by Total Sub-Baccalaureate Credential and Bachelor's Degrees.* Copyright 2022 by National Center for Education Statistics.

Even when the Hispanic population continues to grow, and more students are graduating from high school and obtaining a degree, there is still a significant difference between 59.9% of the White population earning degrees compared to 11.6 % of Hispanics nationally (Espinosa et al., 2019). Various factors, including socioeconomic status, language barriers, cultural differences, and system barriers, continually influence the issue of low Hispanic enrollment in colleges and universities.

In order to address the systemic issues plaguing economically disadvantaged first-generation Latinx students, colleges and universities must begin to understand their student population and develop plans through college readiness initiatives that are more inclusive and open to the diversity of learners (Matos, 2021). Not only do economically disadvantaged first-generation Latinx students struggle to obtain a college degree successfully, but they are also faced with the stress of finances and family uncertainties because of the COVID-19 pandemic (Molock & Parchem, 2020).

College Readiness Initiatives

College readiness has transformed the educational environment significantly (Edmunds et al., 2020; Gonzalez, 2015; Thompson & Thompson, 2018). With new programs and initiatives, college readiness has specifically been used to target underserved students (Berger et al., 2013) through early college high schools, Advancement via Individual Determination, and New Tech Network, which all use cohorts as a means to support underrepresented students in transitions to post-secondary institutions (Adam & Duncan Grand, 2019; Atchinson et al., 2021; Bernhardt, 2013). The literature review on college readiness programs examines strategies, best practices, and continual reform for improving college readiness at the secondary level.

Early College High Schools (ECHS)

A growing body of literature recognizes the importance of college readiness for students who are typically underrepresented in colleges and universities. Early college high schools (ECHS) have been established in reaction to the demands of better preparing students to enter college. The Early College High School Initiative (ECHSI) was enacted to provide funds for the creation and implementation of ECHS by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation in 2002 (Berger et al., 2013). The primary goal of ECHS is to provide an opportunity for underserved students

economically disadvantaged to earn a two-year degree while simultaneously receiving a high school diploma. The premise for this initiative is that if students are enrolled in rigorous courses through a college-going program, they will be more likely to attend a four-year college, pursue a post-secondary degree, and save money (Berger et al., 2013). When implemented with fidelity, ECHS has impacted the college readiness initiative significantly. The early college high school initiative has been implemented differently across all states; for this study, I will focus on ECHS in Texas.

For example, the Texas Education Agency (TEA) has created a blueprint for implementing and evaluating ECHS in Texas. The ECHS initiative can play an essential role in addressing the issue of college readiness because it purposefully targets students "that are historically underrepresented in college courses, first-generation college-goers, students of low socioeconomic status, English learners, and students with disabilities" (TEA, 2021, para 2). In order to ensure all access to all students, ECHS uses a lottery system when selecting students. This mandate by TEA provides equitable access to all students so that "all students have an equal opportunity for acceptance, regardless of background or academic performance" (TEA, 2021). The ECHS initiative through TEA ensures that students have the opportunity to be enrolled in a rigorous academic program enveloped in a college-going culture to promote college readiness among all its students.

To further understand the dynamics of an ECHS, Duncheon (2020) examined the logistics of the recruitment process and the overall impact of college readiness in five ECHS in Texas. The case study, qualitative in nature, relied on interviews, observations, and school documents. More specifically, Duncheon (2020) used semi-structured interviews to understand the perspective of principals and educators involved with the ECHS to understand further how

students are affected by this initiative. The setting was purposefully set in Texas since the state has been a leader in the ECHS with over 200 designated campuses (TEA, 2021). The study was constructed mainly through interviews with principals and adults and lengthy observations of the admissions process of the five ECHS in the study.

The examination looked deeper into which students were selected to participate in the ECHS program based on specific criteria: interviews, grades, discipline reports, essays, and attendance. Of the five schools, only two used a lottery system prescribed by the ECHS blueprint (TEA, 2021). The findings highlighted which students were granted admission to the ECHS program and which were not through the recruitment and selection process. This study adds to the body of research on ECHS as it correlates to college readiness because it underlines yet another initiative that purposefully targets underrepresented students in institutions of higher learning.

While the findings provided by Duncheon (2020) extend the conversation on the importance of ECHS in serving students who have been identified as least represented in institutions of higher learning, it also brings forth the consistent barriers that continue to exist for this population of students. Through the themes of casting a wide net, encouraging self-selection, finding the right fit, and benefiting from self-selection, Duncheon (2020) found that students who needed the ECHS program the most were excluded from the selection process for a myriad of reasons. For example, when presenting the ECHS program, Duncheon (2020) noted that some of the information "encouraged particular kinds of students because economically disadvantaged parents might not have the time or transportation resources" (p. 102). In other instances, even the application was made to dissuade students who did not have the resources to understand the application process.

Duncheon (2020) discussed at length that the findings of this case study should bring awareness to the continual disparities of marginalized students and their quest for college readiness. Whereas the blueprint for the ECHS program in Texas calls for inclusion specifically of low-socioeconomic and first-generation students, Duncheon (2020) found that often, the perceptions of educators and principals of the five high schools in the case study admitted students whom they believed would be more likely to achieve the ultimate goal of the ECHS program: an associate degree.

Duncheon (2020) also noted that "eighth-graders whom the education system has marginalized may be less able and/or willing to apply to a high school that requires extra work" (p. 18). The lack of enrollment from certain middle school students is primarily due to the lack of resources and support from home (Duncheon, 2020). This study demonstrated that even a program such as the ECHS continues to pose barriers for students seeking to advance through college-ready initiatives, which are meant to support them in their endeavors to overcome the pre-existing barriers, such as being first-generation students in an economically disadvantaged family.

A concern for any student working towards attaining a collegiate degree is the cost, tuition, and other supplies needed to attend college. Atchinson et al. (2021) completed a six-year study to analyze the cost-effectiveness of implementing ECHS and the direct benefit for those students who graduate from these programs. While the economy constantly demands individuals with post-secondary credentials, barriers exist between economically disadvantaged students and their more advantaged peers (Atchinson et al., 2021). This quantitative cost-analysis study aimed to determine the outcomes of students attending ECHS and the benefits derived for students who were in the program that are also low-socioeconomic and marginalized. In addition, the study

also analyzed the benefits of public institutions implementing ECHS as they are costly. The most prominent finding that emerged from this analysis is that the benefits for both the students and institutions "resulted in benefits of almost \$58,000 per student, with nearly \$34,000 of benefits going to the individual student and approximately \$24,000 of benefits going to the public at large" (Atchinson et al., 2021, p. 659). This quantitative study found that students who are pursuing being college-ready benefit from enrolling in ECHS.

In their comparison, Atchinson et al. (2021) found that both students and institutions can benefit from implementing ECHS. Students, in particular, can save money by taking college classes while still enrolling in high school. The return value for their investment in ECHS also benefits institutions. However, this study fails to show the direct impact on students enrolled in ECHS, a rigorous program, to assist students in becoming college-ready. As Martinez et al. (2020) discussed, students enrolled in such programs often have added stress due to the demands of the collegiate courses they must complete.

In addition, the study by Atchinson et al. (2021) failed to indicate if students placed in cohorts benefited more than just saving money for their future college careers. While students may benefit financially from enrolling in ECHS, the study fails to address the non-cognitive skills that can be addressed within the cohorts that students need to succeed in college. College readiness, through an ECHS, should not be just about saving money. It should be about developing cognitive and non-cognitive skills through cohorts so that students not only enter colleges/universities but also persist in attaining a collegiate degree (Bryan et al., 2017).

Various sources now well-established that implementing ECHS has been one key factor in addressing the issue of persisting in colleges/universities (Atchinson et al., 2021; Berger et al., 2013; Duncheon, 2020). Consequently, Berger et al. (2013) analyzed the effectiveness and direct

experiences of students enrolled in ECHS. This quantitative impact study purposefully included ECHS that had already been established, used the lottery system, and had students already graduating and matriculating into their first year of college. The study aimed to assess the degree to which students who participated in the ECHS program improved student outcomes through participating in cohorts, attaining college credits, and persisting into their first year of college (Berger et al., 2013).

Berger et al. (2013) found statistical data showing that students in the ECHS program scored higher on math and English language arts tests. The data also showed that students in the ECHS program were more likely to graduate high school than their counterparts: 86% to 81%, respectively (Berger et al., 2013). To further explain the impact of ECHS on college enrollment, Berger et al. (2013) also quantified that students in the program were more likely to enroll and persist in college than students from the same high school who were not enrolled in the ECHS program. The study completed by Berger et al. (2013) clearly shows a correlation between college readiness through cohorts and understanding the enrollment process due to being enrolled in the ECHS program.

In addition to the statistical data on the impact of ECHS, Berger et al. (2013) also gathered data on student perception of being enrolled in the ECHS. This data was completed and analyzed through open-ended surveys. The findings indicated that students felt the impact of a college-going culture on their perceptions of being able to attain a college degree. Specifically, the surveys examined college exposure, rigorous academics, and support from the perspective of ECHS students (Berger et al., 2013). The outcomes clearly indicated that students from the ECHS had earned more college credits than their peers, students did not have fear, unlike previously mentioned by Martinez et al. (2020), nor felt pressure to take rigorous courses in

order to obtain college credit, and they felt supported by their teachers to succeed and supported by their school to apply for college after high school.

Berger et al. (2013) did caution that they found schools in their study that specifically chose students for their ECHS program, similar to Duncheon (2020), students they believed were more capable of undertaking a demanding program as opposed to following the blueprint of providing the opportunity for marginalized students. However, the results of this study add to the body of literature on college readiness through ECHS because it specifically illustrates how students who are underrepresented in institutions of higher learning, for those schools that used a lottery system to ensure underrepresented students had equitable access, can overcome consistent barriers in obtaining a college degree.

Advancement Via Individual Determination (AVID) Program

Similar to the goals of the ECHS initiative, the AVID program, which began in one classroom with one teacher in 1980, was developed to address the inequities for first-generation, economically disadvantaged students (Watt et al., 2002). The AVID program is a nationally recognized in-school academic support system, through cohorts, that incorporates an elective class to target historically underrepresented, economically disadvantaged, and first-generation students and encourage and support them in pursuing a collegiate degree (Bernhardt, 2013). The AVID program's purpose is to provide academic and social support through the curriculum of the AVID elective class, non-cognitive skills such as peer collaboration, access to college access support, community service opportunities, and presentations.

Bernhardt (2013) explains that "the primary goal of the AVID program is to motivate and prepare underachieving students, from underrepresented linguistic and ethnic minority groups or economically disadvantaged students of any ethnicity, to perform well in high school and to seek

a college education" (p. 204). Students in the AVID program are enrolled in an AVID elective class as a part of their course schedule. In this classroom, students are supported in their efforts to undertake rigorous courses. Still, social support is also scaffolded into the curriculum to provide students with the non-cognitive skills needed to be college-ready (Watt et al., 2002). The hidden curriculum of college readiness, collaboration, the application process for college and financial aid, social and emotional support, and college culture is introduced as a part of the AVID curriculum.

Just as ECHS has been examined to demonstrate the impact on college readiness (Atchinson et al., 2021; Berger et al., 2013; Duncheon, 2020), other programs have also been implemented to prepare students for college readiness. While studies have indicated that economically disadvantaged and first-generation students have steadily increased enrollment into colleges/universities, Bernhardt (2013) argues that this population of students continues to fall behind their middle and upper-class peers in not only persisting in college but obtaining a degree as well. Existing research recognizes the critical role played by AVID in helping students become college-ready when implemented with fidelity.

According to Morley et al. (2021), studies have shown that "minoritized, low-income, and first-generation college students have lower baccalaureate attainment rates than non-minoritized, high-income, or non-first-generation college students" (p. 3). In their phenomenological study, which used logistic regression analysis, Morley et al. (2021) analyzed how the AVID program was used, in one school district with four high schools, to implement college-readiness best practices in order to improve college-readiness standards based on the Texas Success Initiative (TSI) and AP scores. Tests such as these are often used as indicators of college readiness.

The study also included an analysis of dual enrollment, courses that students can take to earn both high school and college credit, in the AVID program. In their findings, Morley et al. (2021) reported that students enrolled in the AVID program showed significant gains in test scores. Specifically, students in the program indicated more significant improvement on standardized tests and achieved higher grade point averages than their non-AVID peers (Morley et al., 2021). Additionally, of those students who had already graduated from high school, the AVID population consistently enrolled in a four-year university. The study on the AVID program is significant as economically disadvantaged students who enter a two-year college often fail to transfer to a four-year university to obtain a bachelor's degree.

The study completed by Morley et al. (2021) adds to the body of literature on college readiness as it emphasizes how a program, such as AVID, that is purposeful in selecting and supporting marginalized students can impact college readiness and persistence. However, the study did not include the non-cognitive skills in their analysis that the AVID program provides, such as support, peer collaboration, college culture, and college awareness (Bernhardt, 2013). Student perceptions of how the AVID program has helped them in high school by being placed in cohorts are just as crucial to college readiness as analyzing test scores. In the recommendations for this study, the authors did note that including a qualitative component, even using a mix-methods approach, could be added to add a more robust perception of being college-ready (Morley et al., 2021). This study recognizes that student perceptions in research are needed to fully understand what college readiness means from the point of view of a student.

The academic literature on the AVID program has emerged concerning college readiness for minoritized students. To determine the effects of college readiness through the AVID program, Bernhardt (2013) argued that implementing this program can substantially improve

college readiness for students who are typically underrepresented in colleges and universities. Their qualitative research found that students who were enrolled in the AVID program were more likely to attend college than their peers who were not in the program. In addition, the AVID program has helped families break the barriers to college access that has plagued many economically disadvantaged students, such as an inability to secure financial aid, limited support from family members in the application process, and insufficient academic preparation (Bernhardt, 2013).

To further understand how the AVID program increases college readiness for economically disadvantaged students, Bernhardt (2013) analyzed the research through a cultural capital lens. This body of research uses cultural capital as a socialization process through certain cultural practices, norms, expectations, and assumptions (Bernhardt, 2013). Furthermore, Bernhardt (2013) explained that cultural capital can provide certain social and academic advantages but is often unequally distributed. This context frames the concept of college readiness, the existing barriers, and how AVID can overcome those barriers. The themes that emerged within the research to foster AVID as a form of cultural capital were: fostering meaningful connections with families, developing a web of relationships through cohorts, concerted cultivation, and shaping identity (Bernhardt, 2013). These non-cognitive skills must be developed concurrently with a rigorous course of study to give economically disadvantaged, first-generation students a more significant opportunity to enroll and persist in college.

In addition to recognizing that access to rigorous coursework is necessary for college readiness, Bernhardt (2013) also acknowledged that students need a school-based social support network, which AVID provides through the implementation of cohorts, not just for college access but for other non-cognitive skills, such as dealing with stress and having someone to talk

to about accessing college information. Through these themes, the research has illustrated that the AVID curriculum provides ample opportunities for students to connect with an academic-focused peer group through cohorts and have an opportunity to develop meaningful relationships (Bernhardt, 2013). This research adds to the literature on college readiness because it emphasizes the need to substantially develop a student's ability to connect with peers and adults to become college-ready.

Additionally, Bernhardt (2013) pointed out that while the AVID program's mission is to prepare the whole child, educators often are more focused on the rigor of college readiness and do not understand the importance of including other factors, such as discussing post-secondary options and collaborating with peer and adults about the college-going process. Highlighting the non-cognitive skills added through the AVID program is crucial in the quest to help economically disadvantaged students access post-secondary choices. However, the research by Bernhardt (2013) did not include specific student perceptions on how the AVID program has enhanced their college readiness which could add to the body of literature about how particular programs such as ECHS and AVID can be used simultaneously in breaking barriers for underrepresented students in colleges and universities. Similar to Bernhardt (2013), Cortright et al. (2015) completed a study that analyzed using the AVID program to prepare students for college.

Just as continual barriers prevent students from attaining specific educational trends, other obstacles, such as gender inequality, are also a primary concern. Historically, even when boys have been granted more significant educational opportunities, they are less motivated than their female classmates (Cortright et al., 2015). The motivation of male students was the focus of Watt et al. (2017) in their mixed methods study on the gender disparity within high schools that

implement the AVID program. Although the AVID program provides access to courses of rigor and collegiate opportunities, the study found that the program struggles to recruit and retain boys more than girls. The study also found that participants specified that leadership and mentoring opportunities, peer and family support, academic indemnity, and male role models influence male participation in AVID (Watt et al., 2017).

Watt et al. (2017) purposefully chose to complete the study using high schools because the gender disparity is more evident at the high school level than in middle school. This selection could be due to the different recruitment criteria at each level or the male student's perspective of what it means to be in the AVID program from middle to high school (Watt et al., 2017). In addition, using a mixed-methods approach allowed for a more rounded approach to answering the proposed research questions: (a) When does gender disparity become significant in AVID schools? (b) When promoting students into a rigorous curriculum (AP courses: included courses in AP Science, English, History, and Foreign Language), do schools with poor recruitment of boys differ significantly from schools with equal recruitment of boys? (c) When promoting students into rigorous courses, do schools with poor retention of boys differ significantly from schools with good retention of boys? and (d) What do AVID coordinators report to be factors related to a gender-balanced AVID program? (Watt et al., 2017). The data used in the study were obtained from historical data through the AVID data collection (quantitative) and a gender disparity questionnaire (qualitative). This study brings awareness to the continual barriers that exist, even in programs constructed to overcome them, and the need for constant improvement of the practices within the programs to ensure that issues such as gender disparity are addressed.

The study discovered that the academic identity of female students differed from that of male students (Cortright et al., 2015). Watt et al. (2017) found that specific trends, such as

academic success in rigorous courses or applying to college, were not affected by gender. This trend shows that students, regardless of gender, were successful in becoming college-ready by being placed in cohorts through the AVID program. Recommendations were given to address the gender disparity, including more male educators and purposefully creating recruitment plans with male role models. Although successful in addressing the achievement gap, this study brings an awareness of how a program must continue to refine its practices so that barriers, such as gender disparity, can be addressed.

This study adds to the literature by bringing awareness to another facet of college readiness and the existing barriers that certain students face. In addition, this study raised the question of why a program meant to give equitable access to all students continues to face the issue of gender disparity when recruiting and retaining male students (Watt et al., 2017). This study is crucial to the research on college readiness because it highlights how a program that has given significant opportunities, through the use of cohorts to address peer support, to minoritized students continues to struggle with barriers of its own. Similar to AVID, the New Tech College Access Network purposefully targets underrepresented students in institutions of higher learning (Adams & Duncan Grand, 2019).

New Tech Network

Evidence suggests that college readiness is one of the most important factors for students in the K-12 system (Albert et al., 2020; Barnett, 2016; Brookover, 2021; Chapa, 2014).

Understanding that underrepresented students need more support and resources became the starting foundation for New Tech Network (NTN). Founded in 1996, NTN began with a concern that high school students were ineffectively prepared to be self-directed problem solvers and could not collaborate in contemporary workplaces with high demands (New Tech Network,

2022). The mission of NTN is to serve as a non-profit organization that empowers schools and educators to purposefully engage underrepresented students in better preparing them to persist in college and enter the workforce. In continual efforts to address the achievement gaps that persist with economically disadvantaged, first-generation students, the program added a new branch, The NTN College Access Network, in September of 2019 under the Networks for School Improvement (NSI) grant from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation (BMFG) (New Tech Network, 2022).

The NTN College Access Network's mission is to increase enrollment rates for Black, Latino, and economically disadvantaged students at participating network schools (New Tech Network, 2022). With this goal, NTN was established to purposefully target low-income, first-generation students and the initiative to provide schools with an opportunity to engage this population in becoming college-ready. The ECHS, AVID, and NTN programs share similar initiatives: providing equitable access to all students, most especially economically disadvantaged, first-generation, that will allow students to be empowered in their post-secondary journeys (Adams & Duncan Grand, 2019; Atchinson et al., 2021; Bernhardt, 2013).

In the literature on college readiness, the relative importance of addressing the needs of minoritized students has been the subject of considerable discussion. Stocks et al. (2021) specifically addressed this issue in their quantitative quasi-experimental design to investigate the impact of the NTN design on academic achievement. Data were collected from eight high schools, four treatment, and four matched control schools: NTN schools versus non-NTN schools. In addition, Stocks et al. (2021) specifically analyzed test scores data to understand if schools that provide students with the NTN program outperformed those that did not. The results indicated that students in schools that use the NTN program scored higher and were more

reliable than those from other schools (Stocks et al., 2021). This study confirmed that students attending schools that support the NTN program are more likely to be better prepared to enter institutions of higher learning and be prepared for the workforce than their peers.

These results reflect those of Berger et al. (2013) and Morley et al. (2021), who also found that when students, specifically underrepresented students, are targeted and involved in programs geared towards providing equitable opportunities to enter colleges and universities, they will succeed at a similar rate than their peers who are not minoritized (Stocks et al., 2021). Furthermore, it is not specified how students and educators used the NTN framework to achieve better test scores, nor was it determined if underrepresented students comprised a large part of the studied population. This study could have presented more compelling findings by including qualitative data such as student experiences and outcomes using the college readiness frameworks provided by NTN.

A number of studies have begun to examine the effectiveness of implementing the NTN system in K-12 schools to address the continual disparities of underrepresented students (Adams & Duncan, 2019; Cuilla et al., n.d.; Stocks et al., 2021). As Adams and Duncan (2019) mentioned, research suggests that meaningful learning occurs when students develop positive relationships with adults and peers; however, despite these findings, “far too few students – especially students of color, students living in poverty, and students with disabilities – attend school utilizing a pedagogical approach that supports meaningful learning” (p. 5). In this context, Adams and Duncan (2019) approached their qualitative case study to provide first-hand experiences of college readiness practices from stakeholders such as principals, educators, district officials, and network leaders.

Adams and Duncan (2019) used semi-structured interviews and observations of K-12 campuses, professional development through NTN, organizational documents, and meetings. Consistent with the literature, this research found that participants who reported using the NTN framework of college readiness for all students through equitable learning opportunities had developed a culture of shared responsibility for all students (Adams & Duncan, 2019). Specifically, the study found that schools that continually foster positive change in an equity-oriented educational environment must be willing to participate in a continuous learning framework (Adams & Duncan, 2019). This study confirmed that educational stakeholders willing to participate in reflective practices and purposefully work to change disparities in education will create a culture of equitable learning for all students, especially those who are often minoritized. However, this study could have presented more detailed findings by including students as stakeholders.

Much of the current literature on college readiness pays particular attention to programs such as NTN due to the increasing call to address inequities, especially for underrepresented students in colleges and universities. Cuilla et al. (2012) completed a mixed-methods study using comparative analysis and ethnographic informed in-person interviews to assess the effectiveness of the NTN on rural schools in addressing the disparities for rural schools that serve economically disadvantaged communities. The study aimed to examine how the NTN framework was implemented in rural schools to assess students' readiness for post-secondary and career experiences and what effect this had on the local community (Cuilla et al., 2012).

The data were analyzed in terms of attendance, test scores, graduation rates, and enrollment in institutions of higher learning. The quantitative data for these parameters indicated that schools that utilized the NTN program outperformed other schools' attendance and

graduation rates and test scores in end-of-course exams and college entrance tests such as the SAT (Cuilla et al., 2012). Most notably, schools that used the constructs of NTN to empower students had a graduation rate of 100% as compared to the non-NTN schools, 74.4%, and the district, 71% (Cuilla et al., 2012). This percentage was primarily due to attendance rates being significantly higher at NTN schools, which is a strong indicator of students being present to learn (Cuilla et al., 2012). In addition, in analyzing the college readiness component of NTN, Cuilla et al. (2012) also observed that average SAT scores, which is one indicator of college readiness, were also higher at 1300 in comparison to non-NTN schools at 1157 and the district at 1226.

The study conducted by Cuilla et al. (2012) is significant specifically from the student perspective because when they were interviewed, these students clearly stated that being in an environment with the NTN framework, with high expectations, purposeful actions, and meaningful relationships through cohorts, was a high contributing factor to their post-secondary readiness (Cuilla et al., 2012). This study adds to the literature on college readiness as it highlights how, when implemented with fidelity, targeted instruction and programs can significantly impact student achievement in terms of college readiness. Coupled with test scores, students also attributed their college readiness to engaging in post-secondary coursework and dual enrollment in high school. Comparing the findings with other studies confirms that significant gains in equitable access can be made when programs such as NTN purposefully target minoritized students and close the achievement gap compared to their more advantaged peers.

One of the missions of programs such as ECHS, AVID, and NTN is to empower economically disadvantaged first-generation students who are typically underrepresented in colleges and universities with the opportunity to gain more equitable access to their post-

secondary choices. However, pre-existing barriers such as access to rigorous courses, support systems in applying for college and financial aid, and collaborative educational settings have often been deficient for marginalized students (Albert et al., 2020; Atchison et al., 2021; Bernhardt, 2013; Martinez et al., 2020; Stocks et al., 2021). Therefore, college readiness programs such as ECHS, AVID, and NTN have proposed that using cohorts and purposefully placing students in groups can have implications on college readiness for students typically underrepresented in colleges and universities.

Similarly, the AVID program's primary focus is establishing a support group for students typically underrepresented in higher learning institutions (Bernhardt, 2013). Developing collegial relationships is a crucial component of college readiness programs to provide outside support for students. Forming groups is an essential principle of social capital theory. This theory explains how individuals gain greater access to knowledge and understanding in an academic setting (Acar, 2011). Using social capital theory can provide a framework that can be used to analyze student perception of college readiness through a collaborative environment. Even when programs such as the ECHS, AVID, and NTN are created and implemented to benefit students, their voices are often left out.

Student Voice

College readiness programs are designed to help students develop the skills and knowledge necessary to succeed in a post-secondary setting; however, student voices are often left out of these programs (Cook-Sather, 2020; Skerritt et al., 2020). Students must be allowed to voice their concerns and suggestions concerning their learning and educational environments. Cook-Sather (2020) argued that students must be included in "meaningful processes of analyzing teaching and learning such that their voices and perspectives inform classroom practices (p. 4).

Involving students can create research opportunities that lead to changes that can have positive outcomes in their learning environment. Additionally, involving students in the decision-making process “has the potential to open up spaces and capacities for racial and ethnic historically marginalized youth to play key roles in school change and hybrid learning spaces” (Cook-Sather, 2020). While including student voices is crucial, it also presents several challenges that are often deficit-based.

A crucial challenge of including student voices is that some students will be more willing to speak out than others, while other students may be seen as being difficult because they are attempting to voice their concerns and ideas (Skerritt et al., 2022). Incorporating student voices must include a change in the decision-making process, which is often something that is difficult for stakeholders because students are seen as unreliable, and their concerns are often questioned as necessary (Skerritt et al., 2022). Additionally, speaking with adults often overwhelm and intimidates students, which can influence what they share. Including student voices in developing and implementing college readiness practices are crucial. Doing so can lead to more effective programs, improved outcomes, and increased student engagement and motivation. By promoting student voices in education, we can create a more inclusive and equitable learning environment that meets the needs of all students (Cook-Sather, 2020; Skerritt et al., 2020).

Conceptual Framework

Conceptually, my study was guided by social capital and cultural capital (Acar, 2011; Almeida et al., 2021; Bernhardt, 2013; Boat et al., 2022; Crawley et al., 2019; Matos, 2021) and community cultural wealth (Yosso, 2005). As previously cited, “college success necessitates fluency in dominant cultural capital and community cultural wealth” (Kolluri, 2020, p. 1) as colleges and universities, including Hispanic-Serving Institutions, are grounded in Whiteness

(Garcia, 2019). I elaborate on each concept and how they have been used in education research below.

Social Capital

A growing body of literature recognizes the importance of social capital in education, which can be used to develop college readiness (Acar, 2011; Almeida et al., 2021; Boat et al., 2022; Crawley et al., 2019). First introduced by Pierre Bourdieu, social capital theory is defined as purposefully aggregating potential resources obtainable within a network of mutual interest to perpetuate progress further (Portes, 2009). In other words, people intentionally build relationships for the benefits they will provide later. Since Bourdieu initially published his findings in French, they did not garner attention, which Portes (2009) argued is unfortunate because Bourdieu's definition of social capital is grounded in theory more so than others who have introduced the concept more recently. Shortly after Bourdieu introduced the social capital theory, economist Glen Loury believed neoclassical theories focused only on individual human capital (Portes, 2009). The work of Bourdieu and Loury paved the way for a more recent use and definition of social capital by James Coleman (Portes, 2009), which has permeated education research (Rios-Aguilar & Kiyama, 2017). Coleman (1988) defined social capital as "a variety of entities with two elements in common: they all consist of some aspect of social structure, and they facilitate certain actions of actors...within the structure (as cited by Portes, 1998, p. 8).

The influence of social capital on individual academic achievement has been a topic of recent research (Almeida et al., 2021; Bryan et al., 2017; Crawley et al., 2019; Rogošić & Baranović, 2016). Utilizing Coleman's conceptualization studies focused on the academic achievements of underprivileged students to understand better how networks influenced student outcomes (Rogošić & Baranović, 2016). According to Coleman's definition, social networks,

which begin with the family, can be used for progression in school and life. Coleman's interpretation of social capital includes three forms: (1) a level of trust between members, which includes specific obligations and member expectations, (2) social networks have information channels that can be used to excel, and (3) social capital networks have explicit norms and sanctions that group success over self-interest (Dika & Singh, 2002; Plagens, 2011). Plagens (2011) also argues that the theories of social capital on education through both Bourdieu and Coleman have implications for success in education.

Students who form relationships within a network with similar goals and expectations have a better opportunity to accomplish those goals. This concept is supported by Acar (2011), who reflects that educational success can be found when students have social connections between their families and the school that provides a climate of success. In addition, Acar (2011) has observed that social capital is essential to students' academic success. This concept stems from the idea that networks that lead to social capital within schools and peer groups positively affect students' academic achievement outcomes (Dika & Singh, 2002). The fundamental concept of social capital is that social networks have educational value, and individuals can use these networks to access knowledge and reach common goals (Plagens, 2011). Currently, programs such as ECHS, AVID, and NTN use the concept of social capital by purposefully placing students in cohorts to increase peer networking and advancement toward being college-ready (Atchinson et al., 2021; Bernhardt et al., 2013).

Crawley et al. (2019) found that college enrollment and graduation rates among economically disadvantaged students are significantly lower than their more advantaged peers. In their research, Crawley et al. (2019) examined the role of social capital in providing college access for minoritized students. The use of social capital, as defined by Crawley et al. (2019),

“encompasses accumulated resources, networks, values, and relationships that mobilize a student’s access, abilities, and success in attaining post-secondary education” (p. 2). The absence of dominant social capital in economically disadvantaged students has been identified as a leading contributor to lower graduation rates; one way to increase enrollment and graduation rates is to increase dominant social capital (Crawley et al., 2019). In addition, post-secondary attainment is more achievable when students have a network of peers and adults who are simultaneously working towards the same goal and relationships have been established to ensure trust and reliability.

In their research, Crawley et al. (2019) proposed three policy alternatives in addressing post-secondary attainment for economically disadvantaged families: (1) build relationships between students preparing for college, (2) build relationships between high school alums and students preparing to enter college, and (3) build relationships between parents of graduates and those preparing to enter college. These recommendations aim to build networks for economically disadvantaged students and their families to access additional assistance and support. Limited understanding of the complexities of entering a post-secondary institution for economically disadvantaged students, and lack of access to information, have led to disparities in access to a college education (Crawley et al., 2019). Building the social capacity of this targeted population could lead to greater success in overcoming the perpetual barriers that exist for minoritized students.

Central to the entire practice of college readiness is the concept of social networks as a means for improvement and success. Bryan et al. (2017) argued that schools could be seen as social networks comprised of students, educators, counselors, and administrators who work together using the same sources and imposing value on a common educational goal.

Accordingly, Bryan et al. (2017) completed a quantitative study using dependent and independent variables to analyze the preponderance of social capital in high schools and its effects on college expectations and post-secondary attendance. Specifically, they were looking at the campus-going culture through two themes: (1) college expectations from teachers, counselors, and coaches, and (2) college talk with counselors, teachers, and coaches (Bryan et al., 2017).

The research concluded that school networks that purposefully communicate information about college and then set high expectations have students more likely to graduate high school and attend college. Data also explicitly showed that students were more likely to take action in applying for college when information and directions were given to them in their school networks. Bryan et al. (2017) argued that a significant positive correlation exists between school social networks, college expectations and talk, and students using those networks to attend and persist in college. However, this study did not include specific student perceptions on how being in those social networks explicitly helped them pursue post-secondary choices. Including qualitative data can provide a more robust analysis of the implication of social capital and student success.

Investigating college readiness is a continuing concern within the educational field, particularly for economically disadvantaged first-generation students. Boat et al. (2021) contended that “peers within relationally-rich workforce and education support programs can be an important source of social support that emerging adults require when working towards their education and career goals” (p. 1289). Through this hypothesis, Boat et al. (2021) completed an analysis through a quantitative multi-group study using a survey of participants who had used social networks to advance their education and career goals. The survey results indicated that

participants acknowledged using peer and near-peer social groups to reach their education or career goals. These findings show that building strong relationships through social networks has substantial implications for success in education and career fields (Boat et al., 2021).

Additionally, Boat et al. (2021) found that the study demonstrates that peers and near-peers can succeed “by building emerging adults’ skills and agency to mobilize and expand their social capital” (p. 1301). This study has substantial implications for the use of social capital for student success in college and beyond; nevertheless, it is essential to emphasize that explicit examples from participants were excluded, which could have provided more conclusive results on how social capital is a factor for educational success in college and beyond.

College readiness is often associated with high school and first-year college students. It is for this reason that Almeida et al. (2021) initiated a study of first-generation college students (FGCS) and the implication of social capital on academic success. The quantitative study was completed using surveys of students who identified as first-generation. The survey explicitly asked about peer and faculty support through social networks in achieving academic success. The study also analyzed which was more critical to FGCS: grit, defined as individual perseverance to complete an educational goal or social capital (Almeida et al., 2021).

Through the results, Almeida et al. (2021) discovered that FGCS valued social capital over grit in achieving academic success. Noting that determination was relevant to persistence, it is through the answers to the survey that the authors concluded that being able to network with other college students and faculty garnered more implications for success (Almeida et al., 2021). This study has implications for college persistence for FGCS, who are often the least likely to graduate from college (Barnett, 2016). While social capital refers to the resources and benefits

gained from social networks and relationships, cultural capital refers to the knowledge, skills, and cultural assets individuals possess which can be leveraged to achieve academic success.

Cultural Capital

Bourdieu argued that cultural capital plays a significant role in social mobility and the reproduction of social inequality (Rogošić & Baranović, 2016). He suggested that individuals from higher social classes possess more cultural capital, which gives them an advantage in accessing resources and opportunities. In terms of dominant cultural capital, Bourdieu emphasized that the cultural values, tastes, and practices of the dominant class tend to be positioned as the norm and hold the most prestige in society (Rogošić & Baranović, 2016). Other research argued against Bourdieu's idea that only the privileged have capital that can be leveraged (Yosso, 2005). Even when Latinx students are the first in their families to attend college, they have other forms of capital that allow them to continue to succeed even when society dictates that they will not (Yosso & Barciaga, 2016). In her study, Matos (2021) argues that cultural capital can be used to recruit and retain Latinx college students. Latinx students who possess cultural capital, such as understanding social and institutional norms, may have a greater sense of belonging and feel more comfortable navigating the academic and social aspects of college life. This can lead to higher levels of academic achievement, increased participation in campus activities, and stronger connections to the institution, all of which can contribute to student retention. In 2010, the Latinx community was the most prominent, second to only the White population (Matos, 2021). Even when the Latinx community is projected to grow steadily, their access to undergraduate and advanced degrees does not (Matos, 2021). When the conditions in which the Latinx community is able to gain greater access to recruitment, retainment, and

graduation resources, Matos (2021) argues that the U.S. economy will ultimately benefit the most.

Matos (2021) used Yosso's (2016) community of cultural wealth, explicitly focusing on cultural capital, to argue that the narrative of deficits for the Latinx community is false because "while Latinx parents may not be engaged in the same manner as white parents, they are still actively engaged in the positive educational outcomes for their children" (p. 3). Using the cultural capital lens shows that high-achieving Latinx students credit their families for academic achievement (Matos, 2021). Matos (2021), in her qualitative study, used cultural capital to analyze how Latinx college students utilized cultural capital explicitly gained from their parents.

Matos (2021) completed her study at a selective all-women's college, a small community college, and a large university. In order for participants to be eligible for this study, they had to meet the following criteria: (1) identify as Latinx, (2) have completed a minimum of one semester in college, (3) and had to be able to list at least one person who is their caregiver as Latinx (Matos, 2021). Participants were given consent forms, and the data was collected using semi-structured interviews and focus groups (Matos, 2021). A total of 20 students participated in the semi-structured interviews, and 32 participated in the focus group from the three colleges/universities (Matos, 2021). All students were invited to participate in the semi-structured interviews and focus groups; however, they were not expected to participate in both. Matos (2021) completed the study using grounded theory.

Matos (2021) found that all six forms of cultural capital – aspirational, social, familial, navigational, linguistic, and resistant – were found within the experiences and responses of all participants. More specifically, Matos (2021) found that participants had two forms of cultural capital that emerged: replication of family structures and finishing. Replication of family

structures was evident when the participants replicated their family structure with people at the college/university, and finishing was evident when participants continually used the phrase “when I finish,” as this was an expectation of their family (Matos, 2021). The limitations discussed by Matos (2021) included the location of the study, more women participated than men and only first-generation Latinx students were interviewed as opposed to also including second and third-generation.

The study completed by Matos (2021) adds to the literature because it clearly shows that while Latinx students continue to be underrepresented in institutions of higher learning, this can be an issue that the institutions themselves can resolve. Students who create partnerships and relationships within their learning cohorts are more likely to succeed and ultimately finish their degrees (Matos, 2021). The narrative that Latinx students are beginning with a deficit in their education has to change, and creating more inclusive campuses and utilizing Latinx cultural capital can be used to increase college graduation rates (Matos, 2021).

Increasingly, scholars have argued that all groups of students possess some form and degree of cultural capital (Rios-Aguilar & Kiyama, 2017). Cultural capital and community cultural wealth are two related concepts that highlight individuals' and communities' cultural assets and resources. While cultural capital focuses on individual assets such as knowledge, skills, and education, community cultural wealth emphasizes the collective resources, networks, and experience of historically marginalized communities (Matos, 2021). Yosso (2005) challenged traditional interpretations of cultural capital and introduced the concept of community cultural wealth.

Community Cultural Wealth

In 2005, Tara Yosso provided a different perspective on social and cultural capital and introduced the community cultural wealth framework (Matos, 2021). Community cultural wealth contains six dynamic overlapping forms of capital used by underrepresented communities: aspirational, linguistic, social, navigational, resistant, and familial (Yosso, 2005; Yosso & Barciaga, 2016). Yosso (2005) argued that deficit thinking, which states that minority students and their families are to blame for their poor academic performance and lack of college enrollment, was widely accepted because the belief was that students “enter school without the normative cultural knowledge and skills and parents neither value nor support their child’s education” (p. 75). In addition, Yosso (2005) explained that race is often seen as a cultural difference that influences how educational practices are implemented.

Different groups of people often interpret cultural capital differently (Yosso, 2005). Cultural capital is often associated with monetary value and other knowledge, such as learning to speak two languages. Yosso (2005) further explained that “cultural capital is not just inherited or possessed by the middle class, but rather it refers to an accumulation of specific forms of knowledge, skills, and abilities that privileged groups in society value (p.76). Figure 2.4 indicates the six types of community cultural wealth described by Yosso (2005), which recognized the knowledge of oppressed communities rather than create deficits.

Aspirational capital is the ability to dream of a successful future even when failure is possible (Yosso, 2005). Linguistic and familial capital, the use of more than one language, and the knowledge nurtured from memories are forms of capital often seen as deficits because they hold no value (Yosso, 2005). Finally, navigational and resistant capital, the ability to maneuver through social intuitions and the skills to foster oppositional behavior, are often used by

underrepresented minorities in their educational journeys (Yosso, 2005). In education, the community cultural wealth framework recognizes that students bring a wealth of knowledge and assets into the classroom and that educators should work to build on and validate these assets. This educational approach can lead to more inclusive and culturally responsive teaching practices that help to empower students from diverse backgrounds to succeed academically and beyond.

Since Yosso (2005) introduced the notion of community cultural wealth, other scholars have sought to advance our understanding of community cultural wealth and identify additional forms of capital that serve as sources of strength for communities of color (Acevedo & Solorzano, 2021; Perez Huber, 2009). In addition to the different capitals mentioned above, spiritual capital is a concept that refers to the intangible assets that individuals, organizations, and communities possess that contribute to their spiritual and moral well-being (Acevedo & Solorzano, 2021; Guest, 2016; Perez Huber, 2009). It is based on the idea that spiritual and moral values, beliefs, and practices can positively impact individuals' lives. Spiritual capital is a form of social capital that can significantly impact education, as it provides a foundation to develop a sense of purpose and meaning.

According to Perez Huber (2009), spiritual capital includes a sense of connection to one's faith or spirituality, a belief in a higher power or purpose, a sense of moral and ethical values, and a connection to one's cultural heritage and community. These assets can help Latinx students find meaning and purpose in their college experience, build a sense of belonging and community, and navigate the challenges of academic and personal growth. Perez Huber (2009) argued that recognizing and valuing spiritual capital is essential for promoting the success and well-being of Latinx students in college, as it provides a source of strength and resilience that is often

overlooked or undervalued by mainstream institutions and researchers. Furthermore, colleges and universities can promote a more inclusive and supportive environment for all students by acknowledging and supporting the spiritual capital of Latinx students.

Similarly, Acevedo and Solorzano (2021) argued that spiritual capital is essential for students, particularly those from historically marginalized communities, because it provides a source of strength and resilience that can help students navigate the challenges of college life. Spiritual capital is not limited to religious beliefs or practices but includes cultural traditions, values, and beliefs that help students connect with their heritage and community (Acevedo & Solorzano, 2021). Spiritual capital is essential for promoting the success and well-being of marginalized students as it can provide a sense of belonging and purpose that is often lacking in higher education institutions.

Incorporating spiritual capital into education can help create more supportive, inclusive, and effective learning environments that foster students' growth and well-being (Guest, 2016). Spiritual capital can help students develop a sense of community and belonging in educational settings. It can involve fostering supportive and inclusive learning environments, encouraging peer-to-peer support and collaboration, and promoting a sense of shared purpose and values (Guest, 2016). Incorporating spiritual capital into education can help create opportunities for students to utilize resources they already have to succeed. By recognizing and valuing the spiritual wealth of students and their communities, educators can help to build a strong sense of community and support for student success.

Yosso's (2005) work on community cultural wealth highlights the importance of recognizing and valuing the cultural assets and resources that historically marginalized communities possess and the role that these assets can play in promoting success for students in

higher education. Yosso (2005) has argued that underrepresented students are often marginalized by deficit thinking and assumptions that they cannot succeed in post-secondary learning institutions. Latinx students who are economically disadvantaged and first-generation have a wealth of knowledge that continues to be underutilized in closing college and university enrollment and graduation rates.

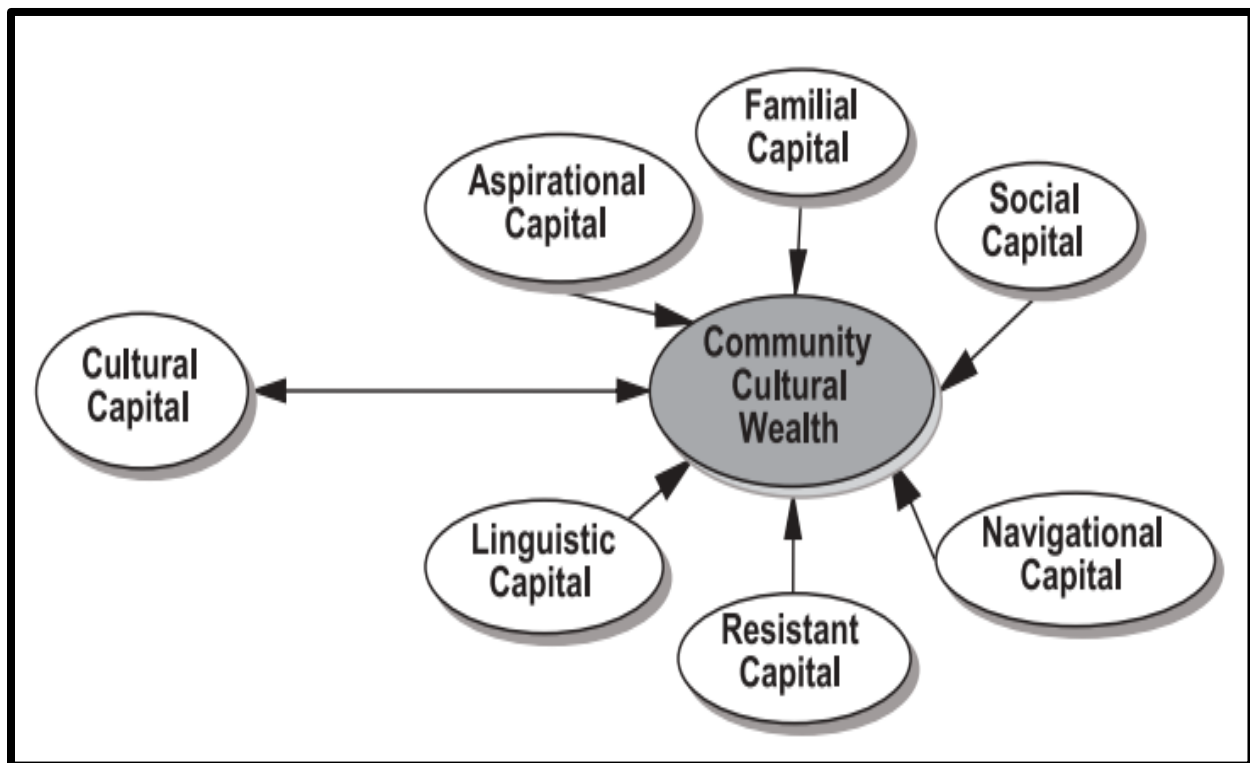


Figure 2.4 Note: *The six different aspects of community cultural wealth.* Copyright 2005 by Yosso.

Summary

I began this chapter with an overview of college readiness through educational reform and its implications on students classified as economically disadvantaged, first-generation college students. The literature review also included an overview of specific programs currently addressing college readiness: ECHS, AVID, and NTN, and an overview of social capital and

cultural capital due to its use of networking in college readiness programs previously mentioned and community cultural wealth to emphasize that deficit thinking continues to identify Latinx students as not college ready. I included an overview of these programs because of the interconnectedness with college readiness in ECHS, AVID, social capital, cultural capital, and community cultural wealth. Chapter three will include how qualitative inquiry, methodology, study participants, data collection, and data analysis, trustworthiness are used for this study.

Chapter 3: Methodology

This chapter outlines the research methodology utilized to examine and analyze the cohort-based experiences of Latinx economically disadvantaged early college students. I begin this chapter with a review of the problem statement, the purpose of the study, and the research questions guiding the study. Subsequently, I review the significance of the study as it conveys a justification for the study. I then present my research design and methodology. Next, the data collection methods are examined, including semi-structured interviews with the setting at a high school campus currently implementing an ECHS model with concurrent enrollment in AVID and using NTN to address college readiness for economically disadvantaged Latinx students.

Problem Statement

Understanding the transition between high school and post-secondary institutions is a continuing concern. Additional attention has been recently focused on college readiness for high school seniors and their transitions into their post-secondary education (Barnett, 2016; Brookover et al., 2021; Chapa et al., 2014; Gaetner et al., 2015; Martinez et al., 2020; Mokher, 2020; Sikes, 2018). The college readiness of high school seniors is a concern because numerous high school students, often those underrepresented, are entering colleges and universities unprepared and unable to handle the demands of collegiate work (Xu, 2018). While enrollment rates in post-secondary institutions have increased over the past few years, first-generation, low-economic Latinx students continue to fall behind in persisting and obtaining a collegiate degree (Clayton et al., 2019). In addition, Latino students, who are also low-economic and first-generation, continue to fall behind in obtaining a college degree even when college readiness practices are implemented (Foxen & Mather, 2016; Melguizo & Ngo, 2018).

Of the college students over 25 who obtain a college degree, 33% are White, compared to 16% of Hispanics (Hansen, 2022). Additionally, 56% of Hispanic students obtain a four-year degree within six years, compared to 72% of White students (Hansen, 2022). Furthermore, economically disadvantaged first-generation students are more likely to enroll in a community college or a four-year college with less selective requirements than their more advantaged peers (Foxen & Mather, 2016; Hansen, 2022, Melguizo & Ngo, 2018). Moreover, Martinez et al. (2020) argue that students are now feeling more stressed and are even resorting to cheating to become college-ready.

Even when college readiness practices have been implemented in programs such as ECHS, AVID, and NTN to support underrepresented students in enrolling and persisting in college purposefully, students are still faced with numerous barriers and continue to lag in obtaining a college degree. College readiness studies have been completed emphasizing the importance of addressing the obstacles for economically disadvantaged, first-generation students (Adams & Duncan Grand, 2019; Albert et al., 2020; Atchison et al., 2021; Bernhardt, 2013; Foxen & Mather, 2016). However, what is lacking is addressing cognitive and non-cognitive skills through college readiness programs such as ECHS, AVID, and NTN to address the needs of these underrepresented students in a post-secondary setting.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this study was to understand the lived experiences of economically disadvantaged, first-generation Latinx students in cohort-based practices such as ECHS, AVID, and NTN. In addition, to understanding how cohort-based practices shape the college readiness experiences of economically disadvantaged, first-generation Latinx students, this study seeks to explore how cohort-based practices activate and build on students' community cultural wealth,

particularly their social and cultural capital (Yosso, 2005; Yosso & Burciaga, 2016). Community cultural wealth recognizes the knowledge, skills, experiences, abilities, and contacts of Latinx as assets rather than deficits (Yosso, 2005; Yosso & Burciaga, 2016). Research has found that building on students' community cultural wealth increases college confidence and facilitates student success in college (Bryan et al., 2017; Clayton et al., 2019; Doran & Hengesteg, 2020). As noted by Kolluri (2020), "College success necessitates fluency in dominant cultural capital and community cultural wealth" (p. 1).

Critical factors contributing to Latinx students enrolling but not persisting in college include being economically disadvantaged, feeling the pressure to help sustain the family instead of attending school and being a first-generation college student with no prior knowledge or assistance in navigating school resources (Errisuriz et al., 2022). To further understand how the use of cohort-based practices are used to support students through their academic endeavors while also supporting the transition from high school to college, it is critical to understand how peer support plays a role in managing the numerous facets of applying and ensuring all requirements are met to enter a post-secondary institution of learning, one of which is how to pay for college (Elengold et al., 2020).

While programs are currently being implemented to address the shortage of Latinx economically disadvantaged students earning a college degree, there is a need to study why these issues continue to persist even when practices, such as the use of cohorts, are created to address them (Elengold et al., 2020; Gonzalez, 2015). Therefore, this qualitative study will be centered around Latinx economically disadvantaged, first-generation students currently enrolled in an early college setting, AVID, and NTN. Cohorts within early colleges, AVID, and NTN programs are purposefully used to promote college readiness. Cohorts allow students to engage with one

another with the same educational goals and are intended to support students academically and socially (Almeida et al., 2021). Furthermore, students who are placed in cohorts continually seek one another for both academic and social support, which can lead to further success (Almeida et al., 2021; Bryan & Woods, 2017).

Although it was once believed that a high school diploma provided adequate preparation for the job market, college degrees are now more frequently associated with higher job rates, increased pay, and even satisfaction (Duncheon & Tierney, 2015). As a result, the high school-to-college pipeline has increasingly been scrutinized and reorganized to include more opportunities for students historically underrepresented in higher learning institutions to obtain a degree (Mokher, 2018). However, despite the apparent need to address the inequities in the K-12 educational system, college readiness seems to elude policymakers from effectively implementing and evaluating it in connection to how it affects students. (Duncheon & Tierney, 2015).

Research Questions

College readiness programs such as ECHS, AVID, and NTN seek to serve students who are underrepresented in colleges and universities (Berger et al., 2013; Bernhardt, 2013; Stocks et al., 2021). Students currently enrolled in these programs are purposefully placed in cohorts (Berger et al., 2013; Bernhardt, 2013; Stocks et al., 2021). The purpose of these cohorts is to provide peer support in order to become college-ready (Bernhardt, 2013). In addition, within these cohorts, students have the opportunity to activate their social and cultural capital to maximize their knowledge in transitioning to post-secondary institutions (Boat et al., 2021). Furthermore, many students, often those underrepresented, have difficulties connecting their high school college readiness experiences to their first year of college (Martinez et al., 2020;

Mokher et al., 2018; Oneyrna et al., 2020). Therefore, the following three research questions guided my study:

1. In what ways do cohort-based practices shape the college readiness experiences of economically disadvantaged, first-generation Latinx early college students?
2. How do cohort-based college readiness practices activate students' community cultural wealth and build on their social and cultural capital?
3. How does the activation of community cultural wealth through cohort-based practices influence college readiness?

Significance

This study is significant as it has been previously acknowledged that Latinx students are less likely to attend colleges/universities and, even more significantly, not finish their degrees (Bernhardt, 2013; Martinez et al., 2020; Morley et al., 2021). Furthermore, while high school graduation rates for Hispanic students continue to rise and closely match the White population, enrolling in post-secondary institutions continues to lag even with implementing college-readiness efforts (Errisuriz et al., 2022; Espinosa et al., 2019). Thus, it is crucial to understand how students experience ECHS, AVID, and NTN to inform college readiness policies and practices more effectively.

Investigating college readiness is a continuing concern within education (Barnett, 2016; Edmunds et al., 2020; Gaertner & McClarty, 2015; Martinez et al., 2020; Mokher, 2020). Policies and programs continue to be implemented, yet economically disadvantaged Latinx students who attend and graduate from higher learning institutions continue to lag behind their White counterparts (Errisuriz et al., 2022; Espinosa et al., 2019). In an attempt to address this disparity, one of the additions to incorporating college readiness efforts at the high school level is

to offer college credit through dual enrollment and ECHS (Atchinson et al., 2021; Berger et al., 2013; Strul & Vargas, 2012). Other college readiness components that students can participate in are AVID and NTN.

Similar to ECHS, which offers dual enrollment, AVID's curriculum is intended to provide students with the skills necessary to prepare for post-secondary education (Bernhardt, 2013; Watt et al., 2002). In addition to ECHS and AVID, NTN also incorporates college readiness components specifically geared towards underrepresented students in colleges and universities. The three programs, ECHS, AVID, and NTN, work through cohort-based models to incorporate student support systems (Edmunds et al., 2020; Morley et al., 2021; Stocks et al., 2021).

Students who form relationships within a network with similar goals and expectations have a better opportunity to accomplish those goals. This concept is supported by Acar (2011), who reflects that educational success can be found when students have social connections between their families and the school that provides a climate of success. In addition, Acar (2011) has observed that social capital is essential to students' academic success. This concept stems from the idea that networks that lead to social capital within schools and peer groups positively affect students' academic achievement outcomes (Dika & Singh, 2002). The fundamental concept of social capital is that social networks have educational value, and individuals can use these networks to access knowledge and reach common goals (Plagens 2011). Currently, programs such as ECHS and AVID use the concept of social capital by purposefully placing students in cohorts to increase peer networking and advancement toward being college-ready.

While the premise for college readiness, both at the state and local level, has attempted to address the issue of college readiness among economically disadvantaged students, it has not

always been successful (Barnes & Slate, 2013; Conley, 2008; Duncheon & Tierney, 2015; Gandara, 2020; Martinez et al., 2020; Melguizo & Ngo, 2018; Mokher et al., 2020). As a result, students are often underprepared to complete college courses in high school, leading to failure and dropout rates in these classes (Barnes & Slate, 2013; Barnett, 2016; Conley, 2008; Duncheon & Tierney, 2016; Martinez et al., 2020).

Multiple studies include data that show incorporating the college readiness component into the high school curriculum has improved high school graduation rates for underrepresented populations, such as economically disadvantaged students (Atchinson et al., 2021; Berger et al., 2013; Morley et al., 2021; Nodine, 2011;); however, the data often does not include student perceptions, cohort-based practices, nor significant outcomes for college enrollment or degree obtainment (Gonzalez, 2015; Elengold et al., 2020; Matos, 2021; Schak & Nichols, 2018). Unfortunately, there is little documentation in the educational field that reports on college readiness from the perspective of students concurrently enrolled in multiple college readiness programs in pursuit of post-secondary education (Almeida et al., 2021; Barnes & Slate, 2013).

While the responsibility of implementing college readiness has continued to shape the curriculum and program implementation, the issues of supporting students through this system have not been thoroughly addressed (Duncheon & Tierney, 2015; Mokher, 2020). Students who do not have a support system cannot fully take advantage of the college readiness component of high school (Albert et al., 2020; Barnes & Slate, 2013; Brookover et al., 2021). Using capacity building through social and cultural capital for students will allow for support systems through cohort-based practices to be established so students can benefit from college readiness practices (Almeida et al., 2021; Bryan et al., 2017; Clayton et al., 2019; Crawley et al., 2019; Dika & Sing, 2002; Matos, 2021; Plagens, 2011; Rogošić & Baranović, 2016). Additionally, understanding

how community cultural wealth enhances the college readiness experiences of Latinx students can further support the understanding that students have capital that is often overlooked, which can be used to improve enrollment and graduation rates (Matos, 2021; Yosso, 2005).

Furthermore, the findings from my study could be used to inform policies and practices about the importance of peer support, through community cultural wealth, as a form of college readiness.

Research Design and Methodology

My qualitative study was grounded in the interpretive paradigm, and I employed an interpretive methodology. There is an interconnection between qualitative research and interpretive paradigm in that the researcher seeks to understand, through perceptions of individuals, a reality (Thanh & Thank, 2015). Bhattacharya (2017) asserted that qualitative research “aims to work within the context of human experiences and the ways in which meaning is made out of those experiences” (p. 6). Additionally, qualitative researchers endeavor to understand by interpreting people’s stories and experiences (Bhattacharya, 2017). Similarly, Alharahshesh and Pius (2020) explain that qualitative research applied to a specific phenomenon is aimed at obtaining a deep understanding that is not “examinable through quantity or amount” (p. 40).

As explained by Rehman and Alharthi (2016), interpretive methodology necessitates that a social phenomenon is understood through the eyes of those who are experiencing the phenomena instead of the researcher because “the goal of interpretive methodology is to understand social phenomena in their context” (p. 56). The specific interpretive methodology I used for this study is phenomenology. Bhattacharya (2017) explains that through phenomenology, the researcher seeks to understand a distinct phenomenon and then finds new ways to understand those particular experiences to make new meanings or gain new insights. In

addition, Bhattacharya (2017) clarifies that the purpose of a phenomenological study is to “explore what a particular experience means for people who have experienced a shared phenomenon so that the structure of the experience can be understood, and the essence of the experience can be abstracted” (p. 27).

More specifically, I conducted an interpretive phenomenological study (Lopez & Willis, 2004). Lopez and Willis (2004) clarified that phenomenology could be further explained through a descriptive or interpretive approach and that a primary difference is “how the findings are generated and in how the findings are used to augment professional knowledge” (p. 727). Interpretive phenomenology aims to explore and understand the subjective experiences of individuals through an in-depth analysis of their lived experiences (Lopez & Willis, 2004). It involves conducting in-depth interviews with individuals who have experienced a particular phenomenon (Lopez & Willis, 2004). Specifically, interpretive phenomenology is guided by the participants' experiences more than what they know (Lopez & Willis, 2004). Unlike descriptive phenomenology, which calls for bracketing, the interpretive phenomenological approach recognizes the researcher’s knowledge and expertise on the topic. Further, it allows for the use of a theoretical or conceptual framework (Lopez & Willis, 2004).

According to Noon (2018), Interpretive phenomenology is helpful when a researcher is seeking to understand the uniqueness of a personal experience and for “researching individuals or groups of individuals whose voices may otherwise go unheard” (p. 80). Frechette et al. (2020) assert that an interpretive phenomenological study “aims to explore the lived experience of a phenomenon” (p. 5) to discover new knowledge of the experience. The discovery of this new knowledge can lead researchers to gain insights that can inform the development of new practices that are more effective and responsive to the needs of the participants (Noon, 2018).

Participant Selection

As noted by Sargeant (2012), participant selection is purposeful and, for qualitative purposes, selected because they “can best inform the research questions and enhance understanding of the phenomenon under study” (p. 1). Selecting participants must be based on research questions for the study, theoretical perspectives used, and evidence informing the study (Sargeant, 2012). For this interpretive phenomenological study, I interviewed seven high school students who are also: (1) Latinx, (2) first-generation students who will be the first in their family to attend a college/university and determined by graduating questionnaires completed at the beginning of the semester, (3) economically disadvantaged determined by free/reduced lunch school data, (4) enrolled in an ECHS AVID and using NTN protocols.

The ECHS, AVID, and NTN students enrolled in these programs are placed in cohorts to receive support in their transition to post-secondary choices. Students who are economically disadvantaged early college high school Latinx students are being deliberately chosen because they are part of a large population of students who are least represented in institutions of higher learning and who are one of the catalysts for the implementation of programs and policies such as ECHS, AVID, and NTN who use cohorts to provide support (Bernhardt, 2013; Edmunds et al., 2020; Stocks et al., 2021). I chose this set of participants to interview because they simultaneously have a unique experience using three college readiness programs. I used school data to include free and reduced lunch applications and a senior questionnaire about college enrollment to confirm that the students selected for this study meet the inclusion criteria. All seven students were interviewed separately at their home campus. I used a school report that indicated that students were enrolled in the free and reduced lunch program to determine their

status as economically disadvantaged and a school survey that indicated they were also first-generation college students.

Interview questions were specific in gathering data about the cohort experiences of Latinx, first-generation, economically disadvantaged, and currently enrolled students in an ECHS, which also uses AVID and NTN to address college readiness. Table 3.1 indicates the demographics of the participants. Of the seven participants in this study, five were females, and two were males. All participants were interviewed using semi-structured interviews, allowing me to ask additional follow-up questions (Kallio et al., 2016). Each participant was given a consent or assent form, depending on their age, to sign before participating in the study. Additionally, participants who were 17 also submitted parental consent forms prior to beginning the study. All participants were given pseudonyms to protect their identity, as stated in the consent forms they or their parents signed.

After completing the interviews, the recordings were transcribed, and each participant was allowed to read and review the transcription for the authenticity of their responses to the questions they were asked about their experiences with the different college readiness programs they are enrolled in as an ECHS student. Allowing the participants to read the transcriptions allowed the seven high school students who participated in my study to be active in their roles for this project (Candela, 2019). The participants also took part in a follow-up session to provide clarity and further explanation of the responses they provided. The participants were also allowed to review their responses from the follow-up session. The participants were given every opportunity to ask questions, review all documents that pertained to their responses, and were allowed to review the findings. Participants were also given the opportunity to ask questions

about the findings; however, they were not privy to who the other participants were or to their specific responses.

Table 3.1

Participants for the Study

Pseudonym	Gender	Age	First-Generation College Student	Free or Reduced Lunch	Associate degree before HS Graduation?	4-year university after high school?	Family Portraits
“Yvette”	Female	18	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	Single Parent Home with multiple siblings
“Abigail”	Female	17	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Has encouraged mom to finish school
“Nicolas”	Male	17	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	First on both sides of the family to attend college
“Amanda”	Female	17	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	Will be attending college with her brother
“Yvonne”	Female	17	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Is helping to raise siblings
“Anna”	Female	18	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Single Parent Home with multiple siblings
“Tony”	Male	18	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	His grandfather inspired him to seek a degree

Note. This table illustrates the demographics of the seven participants, including pseudonyms, gender, age, whether they will receive a two-year degree before graduating high school, and their academic plans.

Data Collection Methods

Woodgate et al. (2017) maintain that researchers must be sensitive in dealing with and interviewing children. Attention and consideration must be used because the research can often uncover sensitive information or disrupt intrafamilial relationships (Woodgate et al., 2017). Therefore, consent forms for parents to authorize the study will be provided so that there is a clear message and understanding of the purpose of the study and why the students were primarily selected (Miles et al., 2020). Paradis et al. (2016) explained that data collection is crucial to a study as it will inform and generate new ideas based on the methodologies used.

Interviews were semi-structured, allowing me to build rapport and reciprocity with the participants and allowing for improvised follow-up questions based on participants' responses (Kallio et al., 2016). The questions I used (Appendix A) were specific to the lived experiences of economically disadvantaged Latinx early college students who are attempting to become college-ready by enrolling in these programs, which incorporate the use of cohorts that can build social, cultural capital, and cultural capital wealth. Therefore, I first asked questions that allowed the participants to brief me on who they are and what makes their learning experience unique. I then proceeded to specifically ask about the learning experiences of enrolling in an ECHS and AVID while completing NTN protocols for college access, specifically in cohorts.

While providing college-readiness programs is crucial to meeting the needs of students, I purposefully asked questions highlighting how students feel about being placed in cohorts (Albert et al., 2020; Barnes & Slate, 2013; Barnett et al., 2012). Specific questions were asked about how effective or challenging it is to navigate multiple programs. I also asked questions about additional support students have received through cohorts and whether these programs and support systems enable their college readiness journey. I also asked questions about their

perceived college readiness through their participation in ECHS, AVID, and NTN and their immediate plans after graduating high school. Using semi-structured interviews afforded me the flexibility and opportunity to ask additional questions (Kallio et al., 2016).

In order to maintain the authenticity of what the participants shared with me (Brown & Danaher, 2016), I used a personal recording device and software to capture every word during interviews. In addition, considering that I would be interviewing early college high school students, I developed interview questions that will help the interviewees explain their college-ready experiences as Latinx first-generation and economically disadvantaged students while ensuring that I do not overwhelm them with a demanding conversation (Woodgate et al., 2017). Interviews lasted approximately 45 – 60 minutes which gave me the opportunity to build rapport, ask questions, and allow for follow-up discussions (Kallio et al., 2016). I completed each interview at the student's current school, which enabled them to be in a familiar place during an unfamiliar task (Woodgate et al., 2017). Additionally, the interviews provided a safe space for each participant to feel comfortable answering questions about their personal experiences in being enrolled in multiple programs which aim to address college readiness.

Setting

The research setting for this phenomenological study was an early college high within a comprehensive school in the border region of West Texas. The location for this study is embedded in a city rich with a mixture of Mexican-American heritage with a considerable Hispanic population of residents who speak both English and Spanish (*U.S. Census Bureau, 2022*). The area is also located near the U.S-Mexico border, which has caused an influx of students from Mexico to cross over to attend school (Gandara, 2020). This area also houses several families living below the poverty line, with only 25% of residents having a college

degree (*U.S. Census Bureau, 2022*). Due to these living conditions, several students within this community are classified as economically disadvantaged. Specifically, high schools in one particular school district currently serve students through an early college setting that incorporates the AVID and NTN programs within their curriculum. I used pseudonyms for the district and school for this qualitative study.

Desert Valley Independent School District (a pseudonym), which first opened in the 1950s, currently serves over 48,000 students, of which 93% are Hispanic, and 72% of the total student population is economically disadvantaged. The district currently houses twelve ECHS using the AVID and NTN programs. Selecting this specific school district will allow my study to focus on social and cultural capital as a form of learning and achieving college readiness. Programs like ECHS and AVID use cohorts that enable students to use social capital to gain greater access to resources. Desert Valley High School (a pseudonym), a school within Desert Valley Independent School District, currently houses over 2,700 students, of which approximately 2,500 are Hispanic. Approximately 66% of students are classified as economically disadvantaged, and this school uses ECHS, AVID, and NTN to address college readiness through cohorts on its campus.

Data Analysis

Bhattacharya (2017) defined data analysis as the method that “involves creating processes that would allow for deep insights that reflect how the researcher integrated theoretical and analytical frameworks, previous understand of literature, and the focus of the research and questions” (p. 150). Similarly, Miles et al. (2020) explained that completing a comprehensive and explicit data collection can create room for concurrent data analysis, allowing for more depth in reporting the findings. To ensure I captured all the data correctly, I transcribed the interviews

daily to begin, as Mile et al. (2020) explained, with systematic data analysis of what participants shared through their personal experiences with college readiness. Reading and re-reading transcripts (Bhattacharya, 2017) is critical to internalizing the data and documenting patterns. Therefore, I also annotated the transcripts to use those notes as part of the analysis. This annotation allowed me to chunk the data and make it more manageable for coding purposes (Bhattacharya, 2017).

I used NVIVO to help me organize and establish themes from the data. I analyzed the data using emotion, values, evaluation, and deductive coding (Saldaña, 2019). Additionally, I also manually coded each transcript (Saldaña, 2019). As Miles et al. (2020) described, emotion coding emphasizes the experiences and the importance added to those experienced by the participant. I chose emotion coding because I asked specific questions about how the participants felt about being an early college student and about potential stress. Values coding can represent how the participant interprets the value of the lived experience, while evaluation coding is purposeful for coding a program such as the early college high school.

In addition, values coding can be related to how the participant assessed college readiness. For example, I sought to understand student perceptions of being college-ready by participating in ECHS, AVID, and NTN, which use cohorts as a means of support; values coding would emphasize this attribute. In addition, evaluation coding underscored how students perceive and evaluate how college-readiness practices, such as cohorts used in ECHS, AVID, and NTN, assisted with becoming college-ready. As trustworthiness is a critical aspect of qualitative research because it refers to the extent to which the findings of my study are credible, transferable, dependable, and confirmable, I further explain how I established trustworthiness.

Trustworthiness

In order to establish trustworthiness, Hays and Singh (2012) approach the idea using reflexive journaling. In order to establish trustworthiness through my study, I journaled as I began and completed the study. Journaling allowed me to monitor my subjectivities in what I heard during the semi-structured interviews and how I analyzed the findings. Hays and Singh (2012) also explain that when a researcher uses confirmability, they must be open to the data and report it. Therefore, reporting on my findings using confirmability helped to establish valuable findings from my study. I also used member checking; as Candela (2019) explains, it is an integral part of qualitative studies. I ensured the participants had an opportunity to review what I transcribed and the findings from the data.

I wanted the high school students in my study to be active participants and have the opportunity to verify their interviews' transcription to ensure that what they said and meant was accurately stated (Candela, 2019). I believe it is crucial that I allow the high school students I worked with an opportunity to see what I have learned and transcribed from their interviews to ensure it is precisely what they said to me. Since I purposefully investigated a phenomenon, I used what Shenton (2004) describes as a “thick description of the phenomenon under scrutiny” (p. 69). A detailed thick description of the phenomenon promotes credibility and helps convey the actual situations that have been investigated (Shenton, 2004).

I wanted to understand and thoroughly analyze what students explain to me from their personal experiences with cohorts in the college readiness programs they participate in throughout high school. I used my literature review to “assess the degree to which the project’s results are congruent with those of past findings” (Shenton, 2004, p. 69). Finally, the subjectivity statement below helped me monitor my subjectivities (Peshkin, 1994).

Researcher as Instrument Statement

As individuals, we are often influenced by significant events before entering the educational system. My most notable endeavor, becoming a teacher, began with finding an identity in a world where I did not speak or understand the English language. As a result, while I have fond childhood memories, I also have brutal ones riddled with embarrassment and trauma. I grew up in central El Paso, Texas, most notably known for being poor, and I always had a sense that my mother and I were different, primarily due to the clothes I would wear and where I lived. Even though my mother worked hard to give me everything I needed, I always felt somewhat different than the other children in my classes.

My drive to pursue college degrees stems from the inability to understand the educational system as a student and not feeling accepted and worthy of an education. In addition, I was often ridiculed because of my accent when speaking English and even called stupid by an educator for mispronouncing certain words. However, as an educator, I now know and believe all children deserve an education that challenges their intellect while providing a safe environment to learn from their mistakes.

I am fortunate to have built a life alongside my husband, which allows us to provide for our daughter. While I am no longer socially identified as economically disadvantaged, I will always place myself in that category. Growing up knowing I was treated differently in the educational system for being poor will always resonate with me. From riding the city buses from my elementary school to my mother's job because I did not speak English to being issued secondhand books because I did not have a backpack, I always believed that I did not deserve to be treated the same as other students.

Likewise, the experience of being denied afterschool care due to being an English learner will be an experience that continues to trouble me because I constantly endeavor to include all students in all aspects of their educational journeys. These experiences, through hearing their stories, will impact my research as I seek to bring a more precise understanding and awareness of the continued inequities students continue to face.

I was born and raised as a Hispanic woman. However, I identify as a Mexican-American with deep Hispanic roots in my culture and language. This identity will impact my goals of bringing awareness and change to the educators I represent. I am an English language learner and only mastered the second language in the third grade. I clearly remember several times in my educational experiences being ridiculed for mispronouncing words or even for my accent. While I have a better command of the English language in speaking, writing, and reading, I still identify as an English learner.

In addition to English Learners, countless students in our schools are economically disadvantaged and first-generation. Several of these students are the ones who are affected by this new determination in the educational system to have all students be college and career-ready. My drive to give a voice to economically disadvantaged and first-generation students is situated in the circumstances and experiences I continue to witness, even when policies are implanted to address this issue. I want to know why this continues to happen and how we can work to make meaningful changes.

My experience as a K-12 educator has helped to develop my identity as a lifelong learner and advocate for all students. Being an educator means constantly learning and renovating the best practices used in the classroom. Being a lifelong learner is also my identity as a researcher; my goal is to add to the already established research by adding additional findings, perspectives,

and new ideas. Additionally, advocating for students is my passion and drive to understand better educational initiatives such as college readiness and the implementation of early college high schools. As an AVID coordinator, I can see first-hand how college readiness initiatives “look great on paper” but often do not make meaningful changes. For example, it is now a requirement to complete the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) in order to provide opportunities for all students to be college-ready; however, students who are underrepresented in institutions of higher learning are continuing to have difficulty in accessing resources to fulfill this requirement.

I am an educator who drives to create learning environments conducive to learning and growing. I want to further research and understand how initiatives to support and grow students affect teachers. Educational practices are centered around increasing both students and teachers. As an educator, I want to grasp an enhanced perception of the college-readiness component as it affects school culture in terms of teachers and students. Teachers are affected by these mandates as fulfilling these requirements, such as completing FAFSA, is added to their curriculum with the expectation of completion. My goal is primarily to tell the stories of students like myself, who are often not given the same opportunities even when afforded to all students, yet still expected to succeed.

Limitations

One of the limitations I encountered was time. Due to state testing schedules, school districts often do not allow students to miss out on instructional time. Therefore, I was not afforded the time to interview all students during the school day and had to resort to the participants being available before/after school and even on weekends. I purposefully selected to work and interview students from specific indicators. When speaking with students about being

labeled economically disadvantaged, I ensured that I developed a rapport and shared my experience of growing up economically disadvantaged in pursuing a college degree to allow them to understand why I was interested in interviewing them for this study.

While I am no longer considered economically disadvantaged, I found that students had a difficult time trusting me in the beginning stages of this study. Additionally, my role within the campus could have had an influence on how students answered the questions. However, as the interview continued, we were able to build a rapport of trust and understanding of why this study was important to the students and me. I wanted the participants to trust that I was working with them to share their stories about equitable access to becoming college-ready. Working in the same setting as the students was a limitation because students often asked if anyone else was coming into the interview, and I had to assure them that no one would know their identity or would be joining the interview. Another limitation I encountered was the students trusting that I was at one point just like them: an economically disadvantaged first-generation student seeking to obtain a college degree. Once we developed a rapport, they began to slowly open up and tell me their stories.

Summary

This chapter begins with the purpose statement addressing the importance of this study. This study aimed to understand the cohort-based college readiness experiences of economically disadvantaged, first-generation Latinx high school students. Next, I reviewed the research questions guiding my study and included the significance. I then explained why my study would be qualitative and why I am using interpretive phenomenology. Then, I explained that the participants were enrolled in a school district on the Texas-Mexico border and were selected based on school data identifying them as economically disadvantaged, first-generation college,

and Latinx students. I then explained that I collected the data via semi-structured interviews and that caution was taken to inform all parties – parents, students, counselors, and administration – due to the sensitivity of working with a protected group. Data was collected via a personal device and transcribed using the computer software NVIVO. Finally, I examined trustworthiness as it applies to my study and included my subjectivity statement.

Chapter 4: Findings

As previously stated in Chapter 3, the purpose of this study was to understand the lived experiences of economically disadvantaged, first-generation Latinx students in cohort-based practices such as OAVID and NTN. In addition, to understanding how cohort-based practices shaped their college readiness experiences, this study sought to explore how cohort-based practices activate and build on students' community cultural wealth, particularly their social and cultural capital (Yosso, 2005; Yosso & Burciaga, 2016). Community cultural wealth recognizes the knowledge, skills, experiences, abilities, and contacts of Latinx students, which are often overlooked as assets rather than deficits (Yosso, 2005; Yosso & Burciaga, 2016). Based on my interviews with participants, I identified three interrelated themes: (a) Stressful Transitions: From Middle School to College, (b) In Family We Trust, and (c) Confidence in Taking on the World.

Stressful Transitions: From Middle School to College

Stress can have a negative impact on a student's ability to prepare for college. If a student is dealing with high-stress levels, focusing on their studies and staying motivated can be challenging. Stress can also affect a student's physical health, impacting their ability to focus during classes and complete assignments (Martinez et al., 2020). When entering the ECHS, participants expressed feeling stress even before entering high school. While in middle school, participants had the opportunity to visit the high school and learn about the ECHS program, and in doing so, they felt the immensity of too much information given to them all at once. "Tony" shared feeling, "like it was too much too fast. I remember being told about everything that the program had. It just felt so fast, and honestly, it felt like we were being herded from room to room to learn about everything." Like a herd, "Tony" and his peers followed the group, but they did not know where they were heading or what would be expected of them.

All participants felt the stressors of entering the ECHS even before beginning their freshmen year. “Anna” and “Tony” similarly described their experiences as good and bad concerning their high school experiences. “Tony” mentioned that he felt he was “on a roller coaster all of the time trying to figure out the whole [name of ECHS], which is probably why I fell into academic probation.” “Anna” also stated that it has been “really hard and stressful but also good. I am proud to say I graduated already from [name of community college], and that feels amazing to say.” All participants were open to sharing their beginning experiences which facilitated the conversations. In addition, they were open to sharing some of their most painful experiences, often about figuring out how to handle their college courses. When “Anna” and “Tony” began to express how they felt about their high school experiences, it was evident that the theme of stress was significant. Concerning their experiences with college readiness, both participants expressed the anxiety they felt when enrolling in the ECHS. In trying to understand their lived experiences further, these participants described that enrolling in college readiness, such as the ECHS, can be stressful and overwhelming from the beginning.

Other participants also shared their experiences of feeling overwhelmed. For example, “Nicolas” shared that “the first three years of high school definitely have been really stressful. It has been really hard trying to balance both high school courses and college ones.” Just like “Nicolas,” “Amanda,” and “Yvonne” used words just as “scary,” “stressful,” “overwhelming,” and “lost.” In addition, “Amanda” stated, “Freshmen year was probably the toughest year. I didn’t know anyone, and once school started, I felt a lot of pressure with the college classes I was given.” “Yvonne” also added that she felt “rushed to learn how to manage all of my classes and learn how to communicate with professors at [name of community college] when I didn’t even know how to be a high school student yet.” Like Yvonne, all participants shared that they felt

pressured into understanding the ECHS program requirements even though they were learning how to adjust to being high school students.

All of the participants shared that from the beginning of entering the ECHS, they immediately felt the pressure of understanding it all and having to navigate the program with little to no guidance. The theme of stress was evident as the participants continued to answer questions about their experiences in classes and within the programs. When speaking about their overall experiences within the past four years, participants often separated those experiences based on being both high school and college students.

The theme of stress was often associated with feeling alone, dealing with the transition of the learning environment due to COVID-19, the rigor of classwork, time management, and their identity as both high school and college students. Speaking to participants about their experiences, they identified various stressors that impacted them at the beginning of their ECHS experience: (1) entering college readiness programs, (2) navigating the high school and college environment, (3) high school teachers vs. college professors, (4) COVID online learning and (5) finding their identity as high school and college students.

Entering College Readiness Programs

The setting for this study was “Desert Valley High School,” a comprehensive high school with an ECHS program. Within the ECHS at “Desert Valley High School,” students have the opportunity to obtain both a high school diploma and an associate’s degree. When students are in the eighth grade, they learn about the prerequisites for being in the ECHS and what they must do to complete the program successfully. In addition, students learn about other opportunities, such as participating in extracurricular activities, while enrolled in the ECHS. Participants clarified what elements of high school, or the college readiness programs they were currently participating

in, were causing stress. When “Anna” first entered high school and was immersed in the college readiness program, she felt lost and afraid, which caused her to feel anxious at the beginning:

When I first entered the [name of ECHS], I felt kind of scared and alone because everything was happening so fast. I had to learn about what classes I needed to graduate high school, but I also needed to learn about the classes that I would have to take to earn a degree. I didn’t have enough time to understand all of that when I was quickly told to prepare to take a test, which I honestly don’t remember the name of right now, in order to be able to take college classes. I didn’t know that I would have to take college classes so soon. It felt like it was too much information on top of having to figure out what I would declare my major to be. I was excited at the idea of earning a degree before graduating high school, but I didn’t know how I was going to be able to handle it all.

In her description of entering the ECHS, “Anna” indicated that from the beginning, she was already feeling overwhelmed in attempting to manage the expectations of the ECHS. Even though “Anna” had gone through the presentations about all the requirements of being a student in the ECHS, she did not have the opportunity to understand all its components. The entrance requirements for the ECHS were causing “Anna” stress before she began the program. Just like “Anna,” the other participants shared feelings of feeling “rushed,” “lost,” and even “scared” because they were given so much information with little time to figure it all out (Martinez et al. 2020). Nevertheless, “Anna” and the other participants remained optimistic that even with the stress of learning all aspects of the ECHS, they would have the opportunity to earn a college degree in high school. Some participants mentioned wanting to be the first in their family to go beyond high school and remained determined to do so even when they felt “scared” and “lost.” Being determined to continue even when they were afraid is a clear example of aspirational

capital. This is an example of the participants remaining hopeful in the face of real or perceived barriers (Yosso, 2005).

Another participant, “Nicolas,” also mentioned feeling “really stressed about having to handle being a high school and a college student.” He explained, “I wanted to participate in other high school activities, but I wasn’t sure if that would be possible.” Even though “Nicolas” was informed that he could continue participating in sports while in the ECHS, he was already feeling the stress of trying to figure out how he would handle both. The experience of “Nicolas” feeling stress shaped his college readiness outlook with uncertainty. The participants shared that they frequently felt unsure about how to handle the ECHS program and even doubted if they would be able to do so (Mokher et al., 2018). In addition, students shared that they were unsure how to ask for support as this was never made clear to them. When students feel unsupported and stressed, their college readiness experiences can be counterproductive to what they are expected to do (Mokher et al., 2018).

As the participants continued sharing their stories, it was evident that they all had the same type of experiences. They were feeling “lost,” “unprepared,” and had even felt unsure about how they were going to be able to handle the demands that were already too much for them to understand, which has been found in the existing literature regarding early college high school students (Melguizo & Ngo, 2018). Students need support and guidance to facilitate the development of the skills they will need to succeed in college courses. This is even more crucial when students still in high school are trying to navigate a program requiring them to think and behave at a higher level (Mokher, 2020).

“Yvonne” also shared her experiences with feeling anxious about starting the ECHS program. “Yvonne,” stated, “it was more than I expected when I first learned about [name of

ECHS]. When I went to a bridge camp for the [name of ECHS], I found out quickly how scary and lonely it would be. I had to make fast decisions, and when it [bridge camp] was over, I felt really overwhelmed.” Even before beginning the ECHS program, “Yvonne” already felt the pressure of knowing a complex system in order to be successful (Mokher, 2020). Yvonne felt lost, unsupported, and confused about how to handle entering the ECHS program.

Other participants shared similar stories of feeling overwhelmed by the manner in which they were introduced to the ECHS program. “Anna” explained that it seemed like the perfect way to complete high school, and when she entered the program, it was more stressful than “exciting.” All participants shared similar stories of going from feeling excited about entering the ECHS to feeling the stress of knowing how to handle it. The participants' college readiness experiences continued to be stressful because they did not know how to navigate the school resources they were given during the bridge camp. The participants explained that they were never really taught how to use these resources, only that they were given brief instructions on how to use them. Schools must ensure that students are given the necessary tools to complete college-level classes to be successful (Struhl & Vargas, 2012). Students are more likely to fail at becoming college ready when they cannot understand how to use the resources within a system intended to help them further their education (Errisuriz et al., 2022).

Similar to the experience of “Anna,” “Amanda” mentioned that her freshmen year was the most challenging. “Amanda” stated, “Freshman year was definitely the hardest for me, which is weird to say because I think having to do homeschool because of COVID was pretty hard too.” “Amanda” and the other participants had to endure beginning college-level courses while also understanding how to transition their educational environments because of COVID. Coupled with the stress of COVID, the participants shared that they felt even more stressed during those

years trying to handle their college classes (Molock & Parchem, 2020). The participants, who had just started the ECHS program, had not had the opportunity to establish their support groups yet, which they later shared that they used to feel confident. Several studies have claimed that students supported through social capital, academic and social support from peers can be more successful with college readiness initiatives (Acar, 2011; Albert et al., 2020; Almeida et al., 2021; Bryan et al., 2017; Crawley et al., 2019).

While “Tony” stated, “Obviously, coming from middle school to high school, it’s hard to know what to expect. It’s very intimidating once you arrive to your new school and you see so many new faces, and then you are given all sorts of papers and information to understand. Honestly, it was a lot for me.” “Tony” and the other participants shared that navigating the uncertainty of entering high school and learning about the college requirements of the ECHS was stressful. While college readiness is critical for students who are often underrepresented in colleges and universities, the pressure of such initiatives often creates undue stress for students (Martinez et al., 2020). All of the participants were experiencing high levels of stress even before entering high school, and that stress continued to increase as their first year began. In addition to the stress of entering a new school with college readiness programs, participants also felt pressure to navigate high school and college classes.

Navigating the High School and College Environment

A student enrolled in an ECHS must understand both the high school and college environment. High school students are attempting to navigate the experience of classes specific to each grade level, elective classes they can take, and even extracurricular activity classes they can participate in during their high school years. Students enrolled in the ECHS learn about the college experience and understand the requirements for registering and taking college-level

classes toward earning a degree. A crucial component of college readiness is the implementation of rigorous courses at the high school level to prepare students for college-level work (Atchinson et al., 2021; Barnett et al., 2012; Berger et al., 2013; Edmunds et al., 2020; Melguizo et al., 2018; Struhl & Vargas, 2012). Because taking college courses is a critical component of college readiness programs such as ECHS, participants explained how they simultaneously handled their classes.

Participants found their college classes more complicated than they anticipated. “Tony,” explained: “I was having a hard time handling my college classes. I thought that it would be hard, but honestly, it was more stressful than I realized.” Although “Tony” acknowledged that taking college classes would be difficult, he did not anticipate the stress it caused him. “Anna” also shared her experiences with the college classes: “During the bridge camp for [name of ECHS], we were briefly told about the college classes and how they were not like high school classes. I wish I had known more about the difficulty because I was always stressed about my college classes.” Like “Anna,” the other participants shared their struggles with the college curriculum and the uncertainty it brought them. “Yvette” shared that she felt like “I was just pushed into those classes without even being told how to do them.” Likewise, “Amanda” shared that she never thought being in the ECHS would be problematic until she began her college classes. She shared that “they made it seem like it was going to be the best thing for me. I wish, though, that they could have told us more about how the college classes would work and maybe even spent some time learning about them.” All participants shared their frustration in feeling lost and confused about their college classes. ECHS students can experience heightened stress as they navigate both the high school and college coursework at the same time, however; if students

are given the opportunity to develop their academic and coping skills, they will be more likely to understand how to handle the stress and workload (Albert et al., 2020).

“Tony” later acknowledged that once he established his support group with his fellow ECHS peers, he became more confident and less stressed in navigating the program. This is an example of what Yosso (2005) described as social capital. Tony and the other participants created social networks for academic support, such as establishing study groups and checking for understanding when a new assignment was given. In other instances, participants shared how having the comfort of their peers also provided the emotional support they needed to feel confident and not alone in their educational journeys. The other participants echoed this sentiment. As the participants began to establish their cohorts, they learned to seek each other out for both academic and social support. For example, “Yvette” shared that she began to feel less stressed when she started to work with the peers in her cohort. Similarly, “Abigail” explained, “I felt really happy knowing that I had my [name of ECHS] to help me. We leaned on each other for help and to keep going with our work.” Cohorts, which build on students’ existing social capital, can provide a safe space for individuals to share their struggles, fears, and success, which can help to alleviate the feeling of isolation and provide a sense of belonging (Xu et., 2018). In addition, the network the participants learned to establish in later years created an environment conducive to learning and success in navigating high school and college courses.

Another aspect participants felt stressed about initially was navigating the high school and college management systems. For example, “Yvette” stated that it “was really hard to understand how to use [name of college management system] as a freshman, and then on top of that, I had to learn how to use [name of high school management system] at the same time. I also had two different emails that I had to use, passwords to remember, and it was just hard having to

manage them both at the same time.” In addition to the stress caused by the college coursework, “Yvette” was having difficulty in trying to learn how to use the college management system in order to participate in and submit work. “Yvette” shared that she was never taught how to use it and struggled to meet the class requirements. “Similarly, “Abigail” felt the stress of “needing to use two different school programs to check for emails, enter assignments, and even how to check my grades. At first, I was having a hard time remembering which program to use for my different classes.”

Other participants shared similar stories about trying to figure out how to use two different systems to manage their high school and college courses. The stress of understanding two management systems can deter the development of skills needed to be successful which can cause students to feel defeated and incapable of being college-ready (Martinez et al., 2020). In addition to having to navigate two different management systems for their classes, participants also elaborated on their experiences in having to handle the expectations of high school teachers and college professors, which often differed significantly.

High School Teachers vs. College Professors

One of the provisions of the ECHS model is that it is housed at a local high school in partnership with a local community college (Atchinson et al., 2021). The ECHS model is designed to allow students to experience college classes at their original high school campus. In addition, the program is designed to provide students, particularly those traditionally underrepresented in higher education, with an opportunity to earn college credits, possibly even an associate’s degree, while still in high school (Edmunds, 2012). High school teachers who teach dual credit classes are responsible for instructing students in both high school and college-level material. Dual credit classes are courses taught at the high school level but also offer

college credit. High school teachers that teach college-level classes must ensure that their course meets the standards and expectations of the college or university that is awarded the college credit.

Participants shared their experiences in learning from their high school teacher, who was also their college professors. All of the participants shared stories of often feeling confused and stressed because expectations were so different between high school and college classes. Participants often used words such as “stressful,” “a lot to handle,” and “really hard” when explaining that it was stressful to understand the expectations from high school teachers and college professors because they often differed significantly. For example, “Tony” stated, “Having two different types of teachers is hard, you know, because some of my teachers understand and give me extra time while others are extremely strict.” “Tony” explained that the teachers he saw in the high school setting gave him extra time, and the professors online did not.

Similarly, “Yvette” stated that it was difficult to “manage the different expectations from my high school teachers and college professors. I think that is why I sometimes failed to get full points for my college assignments. I thought if my high school teachers gave me more time, then my professors would too. But, boy, was I wrong.” Both “Tony” and “Yvette” experienced the uncertainty of the expectations from their high school teachers and college professors.

Students had difficulty managing two sets of expectations, which caused anxiety of not understanding different expectations without support, which they did develop later in high school. Similarly, “Anna” stated, “My high school teachers were actually pretty cool about extending deadlines, but my professors were not. I think that’s where I had the hardest time because I did not know that I needed to learn how to manage my time better from the beginning.” The participants experienced hearing different messages about class expectations

and feeling stressed about being able to handle them. The participants explained that their high school teachers, who were also their college professors, were more flexible and understanding than the professors they had online. The expectations the participants experienced with their high school teachers, who were also their college professors, differed significantly from what they experienced with online professors from the local community college.

Unfortunately, if a teacher is not qualified to teach the class, students are enrolled in an online class to meet the requirements (Edmunds et al., 2020). All participants shared a similar experience with having high school teachers who were also their college professors and professors they had assigned because the class was online. The participants who had to take online classes expressed their concern about navigating that experience. Some of the participants experienced not seeing their professor during the day, which prevented them from seeking help and caused a disconnection from the college class. “Yvonne” shared that it “felt weird to take online classes as a freshman. I never got to see the professor in person, and everything was done on the computer. I don’t know if I even learned anything.” “Yvonne was experiencing a disconnect with the classes she was assigned to take as a requirement for the ECHS. She never had the opportunity to connect with her professors, which is critical in developing skills for college success.

“Amanda” mentioned the stress she felt: “The first time I had to email my professor was when I was a freshman. I had never emailed a teacher, and then without knowing how to do it, I had to email my professor about a missed deadline.” When asked to clarify why she was emailing a professor instead of speaking with them in person, “Amanda” stated, “I was taking an online college class because there were no teachers on campus to teach it. I didn’t know how to write an email and felt scared about doing it.” In addition to reaching out to professors, “Abigail”

mentioned that she felt unease between her professors whom she saw on campus daily and the professors she only communicated with via the class management system because it was an online class. When asked to clarify this statement, “Abigail” stated:

I really liked my professors that were teachers in the [name of ECHS]. I could see them in person and ask questions about assignments. They also understood about us still being in high school, so they were really nice about helping and giving us more time. My online professors seemed really scary to me. I never really knew how to ask them for anything, and it always seemed very scary to try to email them. Honestly, it was really hard having to take online classes because you never really got to know the professor. I think that is why I did better with the college classes I took in school with real teachers. Even though they were my professors, they knew that we were still in high school and still needed help.

“Abigail” explained that she never had to email her teachers in middle school, and when she was forced to do so in high school, she had no idea had to handle that school requirement. Other participants shared similar experiences of expectations they had to complete without any prior knowledge of how to do so. “Abigail” was experiencing the stress of understanding the high school and college environment. In high school, she had teachers she could communicate with and ask questions; however, she did not have the same rapport with her college professors. “Abigail” had difficulty navigating the college environment because she did not have the necessary tools. The participants shared that through the ECHS program, they were never taught how to handle certain situations, just as emailing professors or using the class management system for their courses. Additionally, the participants shared that not having the opportunity to

build relationships with their college professors caused uncertainty and fear in completing the class.

Connecting with college professors can be a valuable part of a student's academic and personal growth. It can provide them access to resources, mentorship, and networking opportunities to help students achieve their educational goals (Atchinson et al., 2021). The participants shared their experiences with the lack of interaction they had with their online professors. Just like "Yvonne," the other participants had similar experiences. "Nicolas," explained, "I felt like I didn't even take a class. It went by so fast, and all I did was submit work on [name of college management system]." "Nicolas" also experienced a disconnect with the class and felt as if he did not learn or accomplish anything in that class. All of the participants shared that when they had to take online courses, they often felt extremely confused and lost.

All participants shared their experiences of feeling disconnected from their online professors, whom they never got to interact with in their classes. "Abigail" mentioned that she "felt like I was talking to a robot and not a human most of the time." Other participants shared the same experiences of not being able to interact with their online professors in person. The interaction between students and faculty is exceptionally critical in promoting a positive learning environment, fostering academic success, and creating a sense of community within the educational institution (Duncheon, 2020). When students have the opportunity to interact with their faculty, they can get a deeper understanding of the subject matter, ask questions, and receive feedback that can help them to grasp the material better (Duncheon, 2020). Students who feel connected to their faculty are likelier to be engaged in their coursework, creating a more dynamic and stimulating learning environment that can benefit all students (Atchinson et al.,

2021). In addition to having stress from being dual-enrolled, students also had to deal with a new learning environment due to COVID-19.

COVID Online Learning

Students who participated in this study had to overcome numerous obstacles, including spending almost two years learning from home due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The COVID-19 pandemic significantly impacted education with the shift from attending classes in person to online (Errisuriz et al., 2022). The participants shared their experiences coping with the change from in-person classes to online for all classes. “Nicolas” stated, “When we had to go home for school, it was weird and hard at the same time. I remember that my high school teachers really didn’t give us a lot of work at the beginning, but my college professors didn’t really change anything about their class.” Similar to “Nicolas,” the other participants also shared their experiences with their high school teachers and online professors. “Anna” explained that her high school teachers, who were also her professors, decided to change the course sequence while her online professors made no exceptions. Other participants shared how the shift to online learning affected their learning. “Tony” mentioned that he was:

At first, relieved about being at home because of COVID, but I quickly learned that being at home was not a good thing for me. Unfortunately, I ended up getting a little too lazy about school and ended up failing some of my college classes. I was really worried about not being able to finish on time or being able to get my degree. I had a hard time pushing myself to do the work, and I didn’t know how I was going to be able to finish. This was really bad for me, and I ended up being put on academic probation. When I was told, I didn’t even know what that [academic probation] meant. All I was told was that I was not going to be able to enroll in all of the college classes I had registered for. Then I also

learned that I was going to have to go to summer school because I lost credit for my high school classes too. Honestly, this was pretty bad for me, and now after this, I know that doing classes from home is not for me. I like to be in school with people, and it was a pretty hard lesson for me to learn about managing all of my classes.

The experience of completing online classes gave “Tony” the understanding that online courses perhaps are not suited for the type of learner he is. Unfortunately, he did not have peer support at home, which he was later able to establish, which created a stressful learning environment that unfortunately put him off track to earn his degree in high school. Through his experiences, it became clear that that “Tony” was unable to deploy his navigational capital at the time to manage the stress of reorganizing his learning environment and classes; however, “Tony” did share that as his confidence grew through the support of his now established cohort, he was able to regain some of the credit he has lost during the pandemic.

“Amanda” had similar feelings about online learning because of the COVID-19 pandemic. “Amanda” stated, “At first, I thought it would be nice to not have to get up every day and get ready for school. That feeling went away when I realized how hard it is to be at home by yourself trying to do the work. Doing school at home is not easy at all.” Through her experience, “Amanda” realized she needed peer support and would be more productive and successful in an environment where she could collaborate. Similarly, the other participants expressed concern and fear about completing all the high school and college class requirements during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Having to navigate collegiate classes in person and online, “Anna” and “Yvonne” mentioned that it was challenging to understand college expectations when they had the opportunity to turn in late assignments. “Anna” stated that she felt “worried that I wouldn’t be

able to handle college classes because the college classes I am taking here in the [name of ECHS] seem too easy compared to the ones I had to take online.” In addition to the mix-messages students were receiving about the expectations about collegiate classes, Yvonne acknowledged, “I had to figure out when I could ask for more time and when I couldn’t. Honestly, it’s like I had to know when I was a high school student and when I was a college student. It was really hard trying to be two different students, but at the same time.” When students receive mix-messages from their high school teachers and college professors, they become more stressed and less capable of understanding how to navigate two different forms of expectations and experiences.

Another student mentioned that she felt lost and disengaged with the professors she had never had the opportunity to meet. Reflecting on their experiences, several participants indicated that they felt ill-prepared to enter college classes and did not have any skills to access support from their professors. Students mentioned feeling ill-prepared to begin the program and doubted their abilities to succeed. Participants indicated this resulted in several missed opportunities to ask for help and course information that could have led to greater success with their college classes.

Finding an Identity as a High School and College Student

Finding an identity as a high school and college student in an ECHS can be a dynamic and complex process. Students may need to navigate multiple academic, social, and cultural contexts while balancing the demands of high school and college coursework (Atchinson et al., 2021). Finding an identity as a high school and college student in an ECHS can be a unique and complex experience. Additionally, to managing rigorous courses, the study participants elaborated on their experiences attempting to find their identities as high school and college

students. Participants were having difficulty finding themselves as two different types of students. In one instance, the participants had to understand what it meant to be in high school and the excitement of that role. In some other cases, their identity had to be serious and focused with the maturity of an older student enrolled in a college class. Participants spoke about being able to participate in extracurricular activities as a part of the experience of being in an ECHS, which offers both the high school and college experience. Having the opportunity to participate in sports is often the appeal for students to enroll in an ECHS: participate in high school activities, earn college credit, and save money and time for college (Atchison et al., 2021; Edmunds et al., 2020). While it was important for the participants to have the opportunity to experience high school, several of them shared experiences of having to decide if they wanted to be high school students or college students.

One of the participants, “Amanda,” shared her experiences with her extracurricular activities: “I wanted to participate in [name of clubs], but I found it difficult to do it. I had to miss meetings or explain I couldn’t go to the [name of event] because I had to finish an assignment for my college class.” Amanda had to choose between being an active participant in her organization or being a responsible college student. She had difficulty in balancing both. Participants mentioned words such as “difficult,” “time management,” “lost,” and even “unsure” when speaking about having to be two types of students at the same time. Similarly, “Nicolas” spoke about trying to handle being in an extracurricular activity while managing both his high school and college classes:

I really enjoyed playing [name of sport] since I was little, so I knew that when I got to high school, I was going to continue playing. When I learned about [name of ECHS], they told us that we were going to be able to participate in sports at the same time.

Honestly, that is probably why I applied to the [name of ECHS]. I thought it would be great to play [name of sport] and earn college credit. Then when I was actually doing it [playing sports and taking college classes], it became really hard. I also remember having to choose between going out with my friends after practice or a game and coming home to do homework for my college classes, and I'm going to be honest, when I say I didn't always choose the right thing to do. I probably could have done a better job of managing my time, but at the time, I honestly didn't know how. When they told us we could do sports and college at the same time, they never mentioned how difficult it would be to do both.

When presented with the idea of "doing it all" while still in high school, "Nicolas" believed it was the best decision he could make. Once he understood the difficulty of playing a sport and taking college classes, he realized it would not be easy. "Nicolas" was given an idea of how high school would be while enrolling in the ECHS and playing sports; however, that idea was not as easy as it seemed. Like several of the participants, "Nicolas" was excited about earning a degree in high school, saving time and money, and being able to play sports. However, that excitement quickly disappeared when he had difficulty blending his two identities.

Likewise, "Tony" and "Yvette" shared their experiences about playing a sport while being an ECHS student. "Tony," a sports team member, stated that he often "felt really stressed in trying to be the top player and also be a college student. "I think this stress came from having my high school teachers give me extra time to complete my work, and my professors were really strict on due dates." "Tony" did not understand how to manage his dual identity in attempting to be successful both as an athlete and a college student who is still in high school. Having different expectations from high school teachers, who also serve as college professors and college

professors from the local community college, impacts the student experience outside the classroom. Another aspect of navigating their high school and college identities was finding the balance between still being a “kid” and having to be an adult at such a young age. The participants are exposed to adult roles and responsibilities at a young age, which can impact their development and transition to adulthood (Howley et al., 2013; McDonald & Farrell, 2012).

Other participants had similar experiences finding their identities as high school and college students. One student mentioned missing several meetings for her club because she had deadlines to meet for her college classes. Not being able to manage her activities and classes caused her stress as she felt the pressure of not being an active participant. “Abigail” noted that she was “really worried that I would not be able to continue with the [name of club] because I had to often say I was unable on certain days because I had to complete projects for my college classes.” “Anna” also shared that she came close to exiting an extracurricular activity she decided to participate in. Still, she was fortunate that the classes she took were being taught by a teacher on campus who understood and gave her more time to complete her assignments.

Even when the participants continued to disclose their experiences entering the ECHS setting and the struggles they encountered, there seemed to be a substantial shift in their attitudes and experiences about how they learned to overcome their initial difficulties, during their freshmen year, in navigating being high school and college students. Participants shared experiences of realizing that they were, in fact, “not alone” and had a support system in their families and cohort of peers that were willing and able to help them. As students continued to share their experiences, the support they established and used from their home families and cohort families began to shift their experiences significantly.

In Family We Trust

Family played a crucial role in shaping the ECHS student experience. First, the participants began activating their familial capital, including immediate family and peers, for academic and emotional support (Yosso, 2005). The participants expanded the concept of family “to include a more broad understanding of kinship” (Yosso, 2005, p. 79). Their experiences with their families and the family they had established at school through their ECHS cohort helped them stay motivated and achieve their goals. In both instances, participants revealed that the guidance they received from both families helped establish strong support in navigating through being both a high school and college student. The following sections will explain the family theme as it relates to the subthemes of (1) home family and (2) cohort family.

The Home Family

The home family for the participants of this study provided numerous forms of support. The participants of this study spoke of family support, which came in several forms. For example, some of the participants spoke of the encouraging words they received from their parents. Others spoke of having to translate documents and meetings for their parents, which helped develop their linguistic skills, while others spoke about not feeling overwhelmed by inevitable failures because they knew their families believed in them regardless of said failures.

Participants shared stories of the love and support they received from their families. Some spoke of encouraging words, while others spoke about the human touch and its power on their well-being. For example, “Abigail” shared a powerful moment when her mother gave her support without even saying a word. “Abigail” shared the encouragement she received from her mother when she “felt her rub my back. My mother didn’t tell me anything, but I felt her telling me it was going to be ok when she rubbed my back.” At that moment, when she needed it the

most, “Abigail’s” mother showed her daughter support, an example of familial capital, with a simple yet powerful gesture.

The participants’ attitudes about their abilities, successes, and even possible failures began to shift as they shared stories of how their families, including their peers, supported them through coursework. “Abigail” explained the support she received from her mom even though she did not speak English:

I am responsible for translating everything for my mom since she doesn’t speak English. Whether it is paperwork for herself or paperwork for my school, she depends on me to help her understand it. I know that my mom gets really frustrated sometimes with not being able to understand English, but it is nice that she is always telling me how proud she is of me and that I am going to do great things, better things than she ever did. My mom is always asking me about how school is going, and when she sees me getting really upset about school, she always tells me, ‘si se puede mija’[my daughter, you can do it]. My mom is my biggest supporter, and everything that I am doing is to make her proud. I know that even when I get upset and not getting a good grade on some assignment I am working on, she always tells me that I am smart and that I will be able to do anything I work for.

“Abigail’s” mother encouraged her and never allowed her to doubt her abilities to manage her classes and finish her associate’s degree. “Abigail” deployed both linguistic and aspirational capital to continue her education even when she felt she was failing (Yosso, 2005). She was gaining valuable experiences in translating for her mother as well as the support to overcome obstacles she encountered in the ECHS. The familial support the participants receive is a crucial factor in their pursuit of college readiness. “Abigail” also elaborated on the support she receives

from her mom: “My mother never went to college, so she is always telling me how important it is for me to go. She always tells me that I will have more opportunities than she ever did and that she just wants a better life for me.” In her experiences, “Abigail” used the aspirational capital within the familial context to continue to strive to reach her educational goals. “Abigail” continued to believe she could persist because her mother believed she could.

Similarly, “Tony” shared that he felt the support he received from his family helped him get through the struggles of online learning: “My parents have always told me that they are on my side, good or bad. They never stopped believing that I would go to college and become a [name of career]. My parents are always telling me that even when I start to feel like I am going to fail, I will make it.” Even when “Tony” felt defeated, he found ways to resist the temptation of giving up because he had the support of his family. The aspirational capital within “Tony’s” family continued to drive him to continuously achieve his goals of receiving his degree and beginning his career.

Other participants mentioned feeling relieved knowing that their family was supportive and always rooting for them to succeed and be the first in their family to go to college. “Anna” went on to explain how proud her parents were when she received her associate’s degree last December: “After the ceremony, my mom couldn’t stop crying, and my dad was just talking about the great career I was going to have. They both kept talking about all of the great things I was going to do.” “Anna’s” family activated their aspirational capital by telling her that receiving her associate’s degree was just the beginning of many future successes (Yosso, 2005). “Anna” further explained that even when she struggled with the last class to graduate, her parents always told her that she was going to finish and get the career she wanted. Aspirational capital

allows parents to share their hopes and dreams for their child's future without the doubt that they can become a reality (Yosso, 2005).

In other instances, participants shared their experiences receiving support when they encountered obstacles with their college classes. For example, "Tony" shared how his parents supported him after he had fallen into academic suspension due to failing college classes:

When COVID started, I thought it was going to be pretty easy to do school. We were going to be home and not have much work to do. I was doing pretty good with my high school classes, but I started to struggle with my college classes. I was doing two online classes and never had to log in to class. I think this is where I began to struggle. I was on my own, and I didn't know how to manage the classes. I was afraid to tell my parents about failing the classes and being put on academic suspension. I was relieved when my parents weren't mad and told me that it was ok. Even after I told them that I was not going to be able to graduate from [name of community college], my parents said that I was still going to college and one day become a [name of career]. Even though I am upset knowing I won't get my degree before high school, it's nice to know that my parents still support me and that they are there for me going forward after high school.

"Tony" experienced adversity and even failure during COVID; however, he did not allow that to deter his educational goals of attending a four-year university and beginning his future career. Instead, "Tony" utilized the familial and resistant capital he received from his family, who supported him to continue even when he realized his short-term goal of earning a two-year degree in high school was out of reach. "Tony" also resisted the idea that he would not succeed because of the support he received from his family, which allowed him to continue towards graduating from high school and enrolling in a four-year university. "Tony" deployed resistant

capital, which is another form of capital used to overcome challenges by not accepting failure (Yosso, 2005).

“Amanda” shared her struggle with finding the courage to apply for her dream school. “Amanda” explained that she had always dreamt of going to a particular college and was afraid of being rejected:

I always planned on going to [name of university], and right now, I’m afraid to turn in my application. When my mom asked me if I’d done it, I told her no because I was afraid I would get rejected. She hugged me and said that it would be ok and that if that university didn’t take me, there would be hundreds of others that would. She then offered to help me complete my application because there was nothing that was going to stop me from going to college.

“Amanda” believed she was not good enough for a college to accept her, but her mother did not. Instead, “Amanda’s” mother encouraged her to resist the idea that she would not be accepted, to submit her application, and offered support in applying to other universities. Latinx first-generation economically disadvantaged students often fear rejection, doubt their abilities, and even believe they are not worthy of validation because of their background (Elengold et al., 2020). These students also experience invalidation of their academic abilities due to negative stereotypes or low expectations from their professors and even financial insecurity at being able to cover the cost of attending college (Ellengold et al., 2020). “Amanda’s” aspirational, navigational, resistant capital, and familial capital, helped her to overcome her insecurities and persist in moving forward with her collegiate goals (Yosso, 2005). In fact, all participants relied on and deployed these forms of capital as ECHS students.

Even when they struggled through the requirements of an ECHS program and entrance into a four-year institution, parental support fostered resilience in surviving, recovering, and thriving in adversity (Yosso, 2005). Equally, participants shared how they began to use the academic support of their peers to overcome educational obstacles. Just as the home family became a source of support for the participants, the cohort family also became a resource for the participants.

The Cohort Family

Cohorts are a common feature ECHS program because students enter the program together and move through the program as a group, taking classes and completing coursework together (Atchinson et al., 2021). Cohorts, an example of social capital, provide an array of support for students, such as building a supportive community, academic support, accountability, and a sense of belonging which build on existing social capital (Atchinson et al., 2021). As the participants continued to share their experiences, they began to explain how their peers began to play a pivotal role in the growth of their confidence and resilience within the ECHS program. Participants spoke about the peer support in completing collegiate courses and the support when they felt they needed someone to talk to who understood their experience in the ECHS program. Cohorts are prominent in programs such as the EHCS, AVID, and NTN because they offer the support through peers that students seek and use to navigate their college-readiness experiences successfully. In addition, cohort-based practices are expected to enhance college readiness by building upon students' social and cultural capital, which is often overlooked (Acar, 2011; Albert et al., 2020; Plagens, 2011).

In addition to curriculum and program initiatives, high school graduation standards have also highlighted the relevancy of being college ready through multidimensional support, such as

the use of cohorts, for students who need it the most: economically disadvantaged Latinx students (Xu et al., 2018). Cohorts are a current educational practice that enhances career pathways through social and cultural capital (Boat et al., 2021). Cohorts allow students to engage with one another with the same educational goals and are intended to support students academically and socially (Almeida et al., 2021). Furthermore, students who are placed in cohorts continually seek one another for both academic and social support, which can lead to further success (Almeida et al., 2021 & Bryan & Woods, 2017).

Participants shared their experiences about being placed in cohorts when they enrolled in the ECHS program. Students were placed in cohorts from the beginning, meaning they had several high school and college classes together. In addition to being placed in a cohort, participants also discussed their placement in an AVID elective class. AVID is often implemented in ECHS programs as a way to provide additional support and resources for students (Morley et al., 2021).

When asked about this experience, the participants noted that they developed stronger bonds with their peers in the AVID class. They felt the support with their college classes, always had someone who understood their fear and frustrations, and even provided a safe space for venting and celebrating. For example, “Tony” stated, “At first, I didn’t understand why I always had the same people for class, but then it was actually kind of nice. I realized that if I missed something, I could always ask someone for help.” He also explained that as he got older, he realized he was in classes with “friends who had the same goals and are focused like you in trying to get as many college classes done.” “Tony” further explained that as a freshman, he was told that he had certain classes that were mandated as part of his schedule, but he never fully understood why. Even with the unclarity of being in the AVID elective course, “Tony” realized

how helpful it was because he could use the social capital of the class to support his learning and confidence in succeeding in those classes. As a result, “Tony” began to feel confident, less stressed, and eager to continue his educational goals, fully aware that he had peer support.

Similarly, “Yvette” and “Amanda” shared how they used the AVID class to motivate them and find the academic support they needed. “Amanda” shared that she had problems with being successful with her math courses but found a way to be successful with the support of her peers. “Amanda” shared, “I always struggle with math, and at one point, I hated it. Then I found my friend [name of friend], who was really good at math. I always knew I could go to him for help when I struggled.”

Similarly, “Yvette” shared her struggle with her science courses, her fear of failure, and the excitement she felt when she formed a study group: “I had to take a biology course from [name of local community college], and I was afraid of failing it. Then I found a bunch of people in my AVID class who were also taking it, and we used tutorials to get through the class.” She also explained, “It was nice that we had formed a study group because I liked being able to talk about the assignments since we didn’t have an actual class because it was online.” The participants deployed their social capital to overcome learning insecurities (Yosso, 2005).

Like “Tony,” “Abigail” began to capitalize on the social capital gained in the AVID elective class. “Abigail” and others explained how being in AVID helped them navigate through their college classes. Of this, Abigail shared:

Being in AVID was actually nice. We were given the opportunity to get into study groups and review the assignments from our classes. This was actually really helpful with the classes I had online with professors I never really got to talk to. We learned how to review the material and how to make sure to take good notes in class. Honestly, this place

[AVID classroom] was like my therapy sometimes. I could talk to my friends about how worried I was about my classes, and they helped me. It's like they understood what I was going through, and we were just there for each other.

“Abigail” deployed social capital, which gave her the confidence to reach out to her peers for academic and social support. “Abigail” began to capitalize on the familial capital fostered in the AVID classroom to support her and reduce the stress of independently navigating a college readiness program.

Students explained that being in AVID class gave them an opportunity to help one another, a place to share frustrations, and even a place to celebrate each other's accomplishments. For example, “Yvonne” shared, “It was nice because I always knew that someone in that class was going to be able to help me. Sometimes I was really stressed about an assignment, and then I would always find someone who knew how to help me. I made some of my best friends in this class.” Similarly, “Anna” and “Abigail” shared stories of how they were able to capitalize on being enrolled in the AVID class helped them. “Anna” shared that she became “better at her classes because I would teach others,” and “Abigail” explained that having the AVID classroom “to talk about classes helped to ease my mind about not being able to pass them.” Both students utilized social capital for academic and emotional support (Yosso, 2005).

Using the AVID classroom in an ECHS setting provides students with the needed support through familial, social, navigational, and resisting capital (Yosso, 2005) to be successful with a rigorous curriculum that includes college-level classes (Bernhard, 2013). Students supported, provided encouragement, and cheered each other on completing their educational goals. “Nicolas” shared his experience about the celebration in the AVID class when his classmates were told they had completed all requirements to earn their associate's degree:

One of the best days in AVID is when my friends were told they were graduating. Even though it happened last year, I still remember it. It was nice to know that something we all were working for, some of our classmates were able to do. We celebrated their graduation and felt so happy that they would be getting their degrees. It pushed me to make sure I finished all of the classes, and just this past semester, I was celebrated by the same friends because I also got the chance to graduate. This is why I love my family. We help each other, and we cheer each other on.

Being able to graduate, celebrate, and show each other support, a form of aspirational and navigational capital, is one of the critical components of AVID. Students build bonds not just for academic support but also for social support (Bernhardt, 2013). All of the participants aspired to earn an associate degree before their high school graduation and navigated through several obstacles, such as learning to use two classroom management systems, and were able to capitalize on the aspirational and navigational capital from their home and cohort family.

In addition to speaking about their experiences in the AVID classroom, participants also discussed how being placed in cohorts helped them deal with the overwhelming stress often associated with taking college-level classes in high school. “Anna” spoke about how being in a cohort offered safety:

At the beginning, I didn’t know what the purpose of placing us together all of the time was. Then I started to get to know the people in my classes and found that I could ask them for help. It’s weird to say, but sometimes I understand the class assignments much better from my friends than I do from the teachers. It’s like we speak our own language and can explain things in a way that makes more sense. I also remember getting our new schedules, and we would always check to see if we were in the same classes. I always felt

better knowing that the people I trust and have been helpful to me were in the same classes that I was in for that semester. It's like we always look for each other.

“Anna” was able to appreciate her placement into a cohort, even though she did not understand it at first, to use the security and reassurance it provided to feel less stressed and more confident about completing her collegiate courses. In sharing their experiences with cohorts, participants explained that they often thought they were more helpful to each other than their teachers.

“Yvette” shared her experiences about helping each other out. She mentioned that her friends often “explained things better than my teacher” and that she “could always find someone who took the time to explain things to her in a way that made sense.” All participants shared experiences of being able to talk to each other about their coursework in a way that made sense to them. Participants deployed linguistic capital to create a more inclusive learning environment that fostered academic success (Yosso, 2005). Additionally, several participants shared that they purposefully looked at their schedules to ensure they had classes with their peers. Participants were using the group's social capital to continue their successful journey in the ECHS.

Students relied on each other to ease their fears, very much like they relied on their home families. Knowing they could depend on their network of peers offered a sense of comfort. They were no longer “alone.” At times supports and resources were not made available by the schools, not teacher or professors, but students had each other to help “figure things out.” Of this, “Yvonne” explained that taking college classes “was scary at first, but once I knew I can check with my classmates about the work, it wasn't that scary.” “Yvonne” further explained, “I guess I thought at first I was going to have to do this [take college classes] by myself and figure things out on my own, but then I realized I had a lot of people, like my classmates, that were with me the whole time. You know they were always there, ready to help.” “Yvonne” further explained

that she could always depend on her [name of ECHS] family to be there. “Tony” also shared that his friends “were always there to help me. I get very easily frustrated, but they always calm me down and then help me. “Anna” shared that her “family at school is one of the reasons I like my classes. We get to talk about assignments and then find fun ways to understand the hard stuff.” The participants evolved from feeling overwhelmed to feeling confident with the support they were receiving from their “ECHS family.’ The participants realized they had support from their peers to help them with classwork; they felt safe and gained the confidence they needed to avoid fearing additional college classes.

Familial capital refers to the immediate family and the extended family created through a commitment to the well-being of a community built through similar ambitions (Yosso, 2005). The participants of this study all recounted instances where their confidence levels increased, they experienced greater success in their coursework, and they developed closer bonds with one another. For example, “Nicolas” explained his experience with his peers:

I enjoyed being in the same classes with the people in the [name of ECHS] because I got to see like a lot of the same people, and we got to grow up together. We shared the same struggles as far as like college classes go, but we helped each other through it. We also had the same experiences, and like I’m friends with a lot of people in [name of ECHS], and we all know each other very well. We are very close, and at the end of the day, we just all cheer for each other to be successful. When one of us is able to say they are getting their degree, we all feel excited and proud. We actually have become like our own little family.

“Nicolas” experienced being in an environment conducive to collaboration, a place where students were excited for one another in achieving goals, such as obtaining an associate’s degree

and developing meaningful relationships. All of the participants shared stories of how their “ECHS family” became a necessary form of academic and social support. “Amanda” shared an experience of feeling defeated after she failed a test and her peers telling her, “You can retake it, and we’ll help you. You can’t give up and decide to drop the class.” “Tony” also shared his experience when he told his “family” he was going to be one of the students who was not going to receive an associate’s degree: “I remember [name of friend] telling me that it was going to be ok and just because I was not graduating from college now, it didn’t mean I never would.” For all of the participants, the support they received, both academic and emotional, became a source of strength to continue even in the face of adversity. The participants of this study were experiencing how community cultural wealth through their cohorts was building upon all of their skills for shared successes.

Students helped each other in various ways, including coursework. “Anna” shared her experiences with her college calculus class and how her peers helped her to reach the final milestone in earning her associate’s degree:

One of the most memorable experiences I had was when I had to take one final class to earn my college degree before high school. I had to enroll in an online calculus class because we did not have a teacher at [name of high school] to teach it. I remember there was about 30 students in the class, and we did have to log in to see the professor for the class. I had about ten other students from [name of ECHS] in that class too. I remember feeling nervous about the class, and at one point, I thought about dropping it. Honestly, the only reason I didn’t drop it was because my friends wouldn’t let me.

“Anna” took a problematic class and succeeded with her cohort’s support. “Anna” admitted that she attempted to drop the course several times and resigned to not obtaining her degree.

However, her peers fostered resistant capital, which “Anna” used to continue with the class. She was able to deploy her resistant and navigational capital through a stressful situation with the support and encouragement of her peers.

When asked to clarify what she meant by “my friends wouldn’t let me,” “Anna” explained, “We actually formed study groups and would spend a lot of time together studying.” “Anna” also mentioned that her peers were a source of consent support and encouragement: “I remember days and even weekends that we would spend together going over assignments. “Anna” and her cohort refused to give up on passing the course by using their strengths to support and guide one another through study groups. “Anna” also explained that she “spent more time with my school family than with my own family.” “Anna” concluded her story by explaining that it was with her school family's support that she successfully completed the class and earned her associate’s degree a semester before earning her high school diploma. “Anna” felt her group's safety and support, giving her the courage to continue the course.

Other students explained how they used their social capital in the cohorts during their last year of high school. For example, “Amanda” explained her experiences with taking summer classes:

We got so used to each other that we even made sure to register for the same classes. One of the best summers I’ve had so far in high school was this past summer when I took classes with my [name of ECHS] friends. I know it’s weird to say summer was fun being in college, but for me, it really was. I remember sitting down with my friends and looking at the courses that were available, and we were all desperately trying to register for the same classes. We got lucky and got the same classes. We spend the whole summer

together, working on our assignments and helping each other out. We were our own little family, and it was just so nice to share that with my friends.

“Amanda” transitioned from being a scared freshman to a confident senior. “Amanda” was no longer afraid of taking college courses and was excited about it. “Amanda’s” confidence and resilience grew as she began understanding her peers' critical role in her continued success within the ECHS program. “Amanda” developed her skills in navigating challenging courses by ensuring she capitalized on the academic and social support she knew she would be able to use to take additional college courses.

Other students mentioned feeling a sense of comfort and easiness knowing that they were always around their peers. Of this, “Abigail” shared her experience with being in a cohort and mentioned that “being with the same people helps to build your confidence because they know what you’re going through” When asked to explain this statement further, “Abigail” stated, “your friends are going through the same thing [taking college classes], and they know how to help you, and then you can help them too.” “Abigail” was clear in acknowledging that the social capital of her peer group was giving her confidence in her classes and in being able to help other students as well. The participants have shared their experiences with their cohorts. As a result, they have experienced the academic and emotional support they needed while completing more difficult classes.

Other participants shared their experiences with finding success and a sense of safety from their cohorts. “Yvonne” mentioned, “We have become like our own family, and we take care of each other. It’s like we understand each other on a different level because we have been together since the beginning.” “Yvonne,” along with the other participants, was experiencing the effects of mobilizing their community cultural wealth to fight against the predetermined barriers

they have existed since they entered school, their fear of failure, and the constant demands of the college readiness programs.

The participants began recognizing and valuing the community cultural wealth they each brought to the cohort. Even when this wealth is overlooked in the classroom, the participants began to recognize it and leveraged it to become more successful in their rigorous courses and used it to help each other, which built their confidence. The participants created an environment for themselves that is often not created for them by schools (Yosso, 2005). Participants began to understand and acknowledge that they had support from multiple people in their lives that wanted them to succeed as much as they did. As students continued to share their experiences, it was clear that their confidence levels were rising as they continued to support each other in their cohorts.

Confidence in Taking on the World

Building confidence is critical in ensuring ECHS students' academic success and future aspirations. Building on students' community cultural wealth increases college confidence and facilitates student success in college (Bryan et al., 2017; Clayton et al., 2019; Doran & Hengesteg, 2020). Furthermore, when students develop other college readiness skills, such as being able to work in a collaborative setting, high school students are more likely to take ownership of their learning and translate those skills into further success (Conley & French, 2014). When the participants began sharing their stories from when they first entered the ECHS program, their fears and doubts began to change to positive affirmations that they were capable of succeeding. As the participants progressed in sharing their stories about their experiences, it became evident that their confidence levels grew in their abilities to handle collegiate classes and in planning for their future as well. The support they received from their home and cohort

families helped elevate their confidence levels. In the following sections, the theme of confidence will be explained as it relates to the subthemes of (1) confidence as a college student and (2) ownership of college plans.

Confidence as a College Student

The primary goal of ECHS is to provide an opportunity for underserved students economically disadvantaged to earn a two-year degree while simultaneously receiving a high school diploma. The premise for this initiative is that if students are enrolled in rigorous courses through a college-going program, they will be more likely to attend a four-year college, pursue a post-secondary degree, and save money (Berger et al., 2013). When students are given a rigorous curriculum through college credit courses with the support they need, they are more likely to attend a post-secondary institution of learning and persist in earning a four-year degree (Albert et al., 2020; Atchinson et al., 2021; Berger et al., 2013; Boat et al., 2021; Bryan et al., 2017; Matos, 2021; Xu et al., 2018). As the participants of this study continued to share their experiences, it became evident that they were more confident as college students.

Participants were asked about their experiences from when they first began the ECHS to their current roles. The participants are current seniors in the ECHS program and have completed several college courses since their freshmen year. Participants shared their experiences of feeling more confident about being able to take college courses. “Anna” stated, “I feel more ready to take on college classes. Honestly, they don’t scare me as much as they used to. I mean, I know college is hard, but I know I can do it.” “Anna’s” confidence and awareness of college expectations are evident as she knows college will not be easy, but she feels more than ready for that challenge. Other participants shared similar stories of feeling confident in completing their current college classes and moving to the university level. “Yvonne” confidently stated that she

felt “more ready to go to college. I already earned one degree while I was a high school student, and I feel pretty good about earning another. So, you know, it feels good to say that. I am starting college with a degree and only a couple of years away from earning my second one.” “Yvonne” is ready to earn a second degree and is not afraid of the challenge.

One of the various reasons underrepresented students are unable to transition from high school to college is that they do not have the necessary skills to do so (Elegikd et al., 2020). However, “Yvonne” is confident in navigating the transition from high to school and is not afraid to take on that next step. When asked why she felt ready to attend a four-year college, “Anna” explained, “I think I’ve learned so much already about college; I’m not going into it blind and not knowing how it works.” Therefore, “Anna” has gained the necessary knowledge about the college-going process and feels confident in her transition into a four-year university. Similarly, “Abigail,” was asked about how ready she felt to enter college, and she confidently replied that she was excited about the next chapter:

I feel extremely prepared because I’ve already been in the [name of ECHS], which has showed me so much about college. I know how it works, how to work with my study groups, how to communicate with the professors, and how to register for classes. I have already done a lot of what other college students do, but I did it in high school. I feel mentally prepared for the work that will be asked of me because I’ve already had classes with professors who have demanded a lot, and I was able to do it. It has been difficult at times, but I know that everything I’ve been through is going to benefit me in college once I leave high school. I am ready to be a full-time college student, and I believe I know more about what to expect since I was in the [name of ECHS].

“Abigail” has been exposed to the college-going process and has developed the necessary skills to enter a four-year university. “Abigail” explained that she had already had practice with enrolling in classes, speaking with her professor, understanding the rigor of college classes, and being confident in moving on to a university. Other participants shared similar stories.

“Unfortunately, students who struggle with the transition into colleges and universities often fail to persist in obtaining a four-year degree because they have not developed those skills (Mokher, 2020).

Other students were asked about their college readiness experiences, and “Nicolas” explained he felt “pretty prepared for college. “Nicolas” shared his experience with different types of professors and why he feels confident in entering a university because of this. He shared experiences of having professors who were willing to help while other professors wanted him to be more independent. Of this, “Nicolas” shared, “I’ve already taken quite a bit of college classes while I was in high school, and I’ve had the experience of having different types of professors.” When asked to explain what he meant by different professors, “Nicolas” stated, “I’ve had college professors that were open to helping and other professors who really wanted you to be independent. I’ve been able to do well with the different professors, so I feel ready to move on to a bigger college.” Through their shared experiences, students have shown significant growth in understanding the demands of a college curriculum and the expectations from different professors.

When comparing their college experiences from when they first entered as freshmen to their experiences now as seniors, “Yvette” stated, “In the beginning, I doubted if I was going to be able to do it, but now I feel good and ready. I’ve learned about how to ask my friends for help, how to take good notes, how to manage my time, and even how to reach out to my professors.”

“Yvonne” shared that she felt better prepared as compared to her freshman year because her confidence had grown. She has gained valuable skills in her cohort that she plans on using at the university level. Other participants shared similar stories about feeling confident about entering colleges and universities after high school. “Amanda” explained that she feels more confident:

I felt lost, like I’m sure a lot of students did. I doubted myself almost all of my freshman year. But now, I feel like I’m ready. I’ve learned to use [name of college management system], and I’m actually teaching it to the other younger students. I know how to handle the work from my professors. I’ve learned so much being in the [name of ECHS], and I know that I’m ready to graduate from high school and continue on to getting my degree.

“Amanda” has experienced the activation of community cultural wealth to develop her college readiness skills and is confident in becoming a mentor to other students. “Amanda” shared her experience from feeling insecure to using the support from her peers to develop her skills for the college environment. “Amanda” has developed her confidence level so much that she now uses that knowledge and confidence to give peer support to the first-year students in the ECHS program. In addition, she uses the capital she gained to help other students develop their college-readiness skills.

As the participant's knowledge grew about college courses, so did their confidence. Participants shared that they began to feel less fearful of the college curriculum and more capable of success because of the confidence they gained. Of this, “Abigail” stated she “no longer was afraid of my dual-credit courses. I know what to expect from reading the syllabus and how to organize my time to get it all done.” “Abigail” has developed the necessary skills to succeed at a university. She is confident in what she has learned about college, such as understanding the importance of a class syllabus, to navigate the transition successfully.

“Abigail” has been exposed to the college environment, used the skills she developed through the cohort, and is now more confident about managing her college classes.

Similarly, “Tony” also explained, “I learned from the mistakes I made as a sophomore about my college classes, and now I’m proud to say I am getting really good grades. It’s sad knowing I won’t be able to get my degree now, but I know that I will definitely get my degree at [name of local university]. Even though “Tony” recognizes that his past mistakes have cost him the opportunity to earn an associate’s degree, he has developed the college-going skills to help him reach his goal of obtaining a bachelor’s degree. “Tony” has developed his resistant capital in not giving up and will use the aspirational capital he has gained through the support of his immediate family and his peers to continue his chosen career. Other participants shared similar stories about overcoming their initial fears about the ECHS program.

The participants began their stories about their experiences in the ECHS program with a sense of feeling “lost,” scared about the demands of the college classes they took during their freshmen year, and doubtful they would be able to handle the program. However, as the participants continued sharing their stories, the fear began to disappear. The participants began to understand that their “family” in the program, the cohort, was a valuable tool for academic success. Each participant was able to share a moment when they understood that they had an ally in the program that understood the experience and, most importantly, was always willing to help. Of this, “Nicolas” shared that his friends were there for him when he realized he “would not be able to earn my degree,” and he felt supported when they said, “It’s ok, you’re still going to graduate from [name of university] and become a [name of career].” Similarly, other participants shared feelings of “I can do this,” “I’ve got a friend who could help me,” and “I’m not as worried anymore,” as they shared their stories of no longer feeling afraid. The confidence levels grew as

the participants understood each other's roles within the cohort. They were building each other up through their skills and abilities to support each other.

Participants were confident in their ability to not only be college students but handle the work as well. When students build confidence through their community cultural wealth, they can break the stigma that they are entering the school environment without any knowledge or support and use that wealth to persist in college (Yosso, 2005). In addition, being exposed to college coursework from an early age has positively affected the participants' view of themselves as future college students who will be successful in their endeavors to earn a bachelor's degree.

Ownership of College Plans

Ownership of college plans is essential because it helps students to take responsibility for their academic and personal goals. It involves encouraging students to take an active role in planning and pursuing their college goals rather than relying solely on the guidance and direction of others. When students take ownership of their college plans, they are more likely to have a clear sense of purpose and direction and be motivated to work towards their educational goals. In addition, they may feel more confident in their abilities to make informed decisions and take action to achieve their desired outcomes. In addition to asking about their college readiness in transitioning into a university, students were asked if other factors led to their confidence in moving past high school.

“Tony” explained that using NTN to research colleges was very helpful. “Tony” described that while he intended to enroll in the local four-year college, he is considering enrolling at a different university: “When I used the NTN program to research colleges, I was surprised at knowing graduation rates from different colleges. It made me think that it might be better to go to a college that has higher graduation rates.” “Tony” also stated that “most of my

friends are going to [name of local university], but since I was able to use this program to find scholarships, I'm thinking of going somewhere else." "Tony" was able to use the skills he gained about the college-going process to understand that it was possible for him to attend a college away from home. In addition to learning about scholarships, "Tony" became aware of the importance of researching a college in terms of graduation rates to ensure he enrolled in a collegiate environment that would allow him to be successful and graduate.

Likewise, other participants shared their experiences deciding where to go to college. The participants shared what they learned from using the NTN program to research colleges; some chose not to attend the local university because of this. Of this, "Nicolas" explained that he used NTN to research colleges, and that is how he finalized his decision about where to go:

Just like most students, my plan was to go to [name of local university], and then at the end of my sophomore year and beginning of junior year, we were able to use the NTN program to match to schools based on our interest. I was very shocked to learn that [name of local university] did not have the major I wanted. I always assumed that every college offers everything, but using the program taught me that's not always true. It was nice to enter all of the information about my interests, and the program matched me to several schools. I then used it to find more information about admissions and scholarships, and before I knew it, I had applied and have been accepted. Being able to use this program in our class was really helpful in learning about what schools are best for what you want to study.

"Nicolas understood the importance of finding a collegiate environment that would allow him to obtain the desired career. When students are able to attend a university that is well-matched to

their educational goals, they are more likely to persist in obtaining a bachelor's degree (Stocks et al., 2021)

All participants expressed their ability to be more informed about choosing which college they would attend because they had the opportunity to use the NTN program. Furthermore, “Yvette” explained that she “never knew how many options I could have when it comes to going to college. I thought, like everyone else, that I’d probably go to [name of local university], but even though that may still be an option, I think I found something better for myself.” “Yvette” has understood the importance of attending a school that will allow her to achieve her career goals. She knows she does not have to attend a university just because everyone else does; “Yvette” is more concerned with attending a university that gives her more options. When students understand how to research a college that is best suited for them, they are more likely to attend and work towards earning a degree (Adams & Duncan, 2019).

Other participants shared how they were able to be better informed about where to attend college using the NTN program. “Abigail” explained that she was able to use the program to learn that a nearby university offered a scholarship that would make attending affordable. She explained, “I always wanted to go away for college but was afraid it was too expensive. I found [name of university], which offers in-state tuition, so I will be going there and live out my dream!” Another participant shared her experience with researching and finding scholarships to help cover the costs of college. “Yvonne” shared that she was able to find several scholarships that she qualified for and is currently awaiting whether or not she will receive them. “Yvonne” shared, “I applied for a bunch of scholarships to help me pay for everything, I think. I don’t want my mom to worry about it [tuition] being too expensive.”

The participants' confidence had grown in their ability to be successful in college classes and plan for their future. Participants shared how they used the NTN program to research different colleges and scholarships. While some participants shared that they were planning to attend the local university, others were planning to leave home to attend college. All of the participants in the study shared their post-high school plans. Each student had a genuine and confident answer:

Nicolas – “I am not planning to stay here. I have been accepted to [name of college] and plan to study [science major] and work as a [name of career].”

Anna – “I thought at first that I was going to stay with my parents and go to [name of college], but after I earned several scholarships, I’ve decided to experience being away from home and earn a degree as a [name of career].”

Abigail – “I kind of always wanted to do the whole college experience, so I will be attending [name of college] and major [science major]. I am excited because I feel this college will be good for me.”

Amanda – “My family is so supportive that they will be moving with my brother to [name of city] so that I can attend [name of college]. I plan on majoring in [business major], and I definitely don’t plan on stopping with just my bachelor’s degree.”

Tony – “I plan on attending [name of college] because I want to become a [name of career]. I am glad my parents are supportive because you don’t see many males in this profession.”

Yvonne – “I am already attending [name of college] since I earned my associate’s degree last semester, and I am majoring in [education]. From there, I’m not sure if I want to stay

at [name of college] or move to earn my master's degree because I want to go into [name of career].”

Yvette – “I plan on going to [name of college] and majoring in [education]. I am excited about moving away for college and experiencing a new city. My mom really wants me to stay, but she is supportive in my decision to move. She's always tells me to never let anything stop me from achieving my dreams.”

Of the seven participants, only two plan to stay home and attend the local university. The other five participants are planning to move away for college. Latinx students have a higher percentage rate of attending a local community college rather than attending a four-year university (Jabbar et al., 2019). Furthermore, Latinx students who transition to a four-year university stay close to home (Umbach et al., 2019). When asked about their plans after graduating high school, all participants did not hesitate to give specific answers. Most of the participants in this study are choosing to attend a university away from home, which is significant because it indicates their confidence and college readiness skills in transitioning from high school to college. The confidence to enter a university away from home is clearly indicative of the support they have constantly received from their family and the skills gained about the college-going process from their participation in college readiness programs.

All participants have clear aspirations about their future collegiate plans and careers. Aspirational capital is the “ability to maintain hopes and dreams for the future, even in the face of real and perceived barriers. This resiliency is evidenced in those who allow themselves to dream of the possibilities beyond their present circumstances” (Yosso, 2005, pgs. 77-78). Their immediate and compelling answers demonstrate the resiliency that all participants in this study have overcome substantial barriers and are determined to persist in college and earn a degree.

They have capitalized on their community cultural wealth to develop their college-readiness skills. The participants feel confident and have had the support from their family and peers to move forward with their collegiate plans. These students have grown from fearful high school students to confident college students who will not stop until they reach their career goals. Furthermore, these participants have gained the knowledge and skills to overcome the inequalities that have consistently deemed them unprepared to enter an institution of higher learning (Yosso, 2005).

Summary

In this chapter, I presented the findings from this study of understanding the lived experiences of economically disadvantaged, first-generation Latinx students in cohort-based practices such as ECHS, AVID, and NTN. Data from qualitative semi-structured interviews conducted with seven Desert Valley High School students were used to describe how their experiences enhanced their perception of college readiness. Three overarching themes were found in the data: (a) Stressful Transitions: From Middle School to College, (b) In Family We Trust, and (c) Confidence in Taking on the World. Each theme was further explored and discussed with sub-themes. Finally, each topic was discussed using the students' experiences and stories, explaining individual factors that challenged them and helped them develop as college students. Chapter 5 offers discussions, conclusions, and recommendations for future research.

Chapter 5: Discussion and Recommendations

Conley (2012) once defined college readiness as "a student who is ready for college and career who can qualify for and succeed in entry-level, credit-bearing courses leading to a baccalaureate or certificate, or career pathway-oriented training programs without the need for remedial or developmental coursework" (p. 1). As previously stated in Chapter 1, educational policymakers implement interventions and programs intended to support a specific population of students. However, these students are seldom asked about their experiences with these practices (Barnett, 2016). Furthermore, insufficient research has been conducted to understand student experiences with college readiness practices (Foxen & Mather, 2016; Gonzalez, 2015). Cohort-based practices are expected to enhance college readiness by building upon students' social and cultural capital, which is often overlooked but contributes to student success (Acar, 2011; Albert et al., 2020; Plagens, 2011). In Chapter 2, the review of the literature included definitions of college readiness and its different components.

As such, the purpose of this research was to understand the lived experiences of economically disadvantaged, first-generation Latinx students in cohort-based practices such as ECHS, AVID, and NTN. In addition to understanding how cohort-based practices shaped the college readiness experiences of economically disadvantaged, first-generation Latinx students, this study also sought to explore how cohort-based practices activate and build on students' community cultural wealth, particularly their social and cultural capital (Yosso, 2005; Yosso & Burciaga, 2016). I used an interpretive phenomenological approach because I wanted to understand students' common lived experiences. Conceptually, this study was guided by social and cultural capital (Acar, 2011; Almeida et al., 2021; Bernhardt, 2013; Boat et al., 2022; Crawley et al., 2019; Matos, 2021) and community cultural wealth (Yosso, 2005). Community

Cultural Wealth recognizes that marginalized students have capital that is often overlooked and underutilized (Yosso, 2005). The following research questions guided the study:

1. In what ways do cohort-based practices shape the college readiness experiences of economically disadvantaged, first-generation Latinx early college students?
2. How do cohort-based college readiness practices activate students' community cultural wealth and build on their social and cultural capital?
3. How does the activation of community cultural wealth through cohort-based practices influence college readiness?

This research was driven by the desire to understand how students experience becoming college ready through cohort-based practices and how those experiences shaped their plans after high school. I was interested in learning directly from the students because the voice of students is critical in any conversations or research related to college readiness. However, in many cases, student perspectives are often left out of the conversation or given less importance in research studies (Brookover et al., 2021). Students have unique insights into the barriers they face in preparing for college and the resources and support they need to succeed. By leaving out student perspectives, researchers and educators may miss important information and strategies for improving college readiness programs and policies.

Therefore, I purposefully chose to interview students currently experiencing three college readiness programs simultaneously: ECHS, AVID, and NTN. I chose these college readiness programs because they have similarities: specifically designed to address the disparities in college readiness initiatives for students who are underrepresented in college/universities and to develop the college-going skills for students so that they attend and persist in college. This study revealed that participants had experiences that challenged them emotionally, socially, and, most

importantly, academically. Moreover, the participants shared that their high school experiences, coupled with collegiate experiences, helped to develop their college readiness skills, which they used and will continue to use as they transition into post-secondary institutions of learning.

Additionally, participants shared how they activated their community cultural wealth (Yosso, 2005) to become more confident and successful. They shared experiences with cohorts, family support, developing their own academic language to help with courses, refusing to give up even when they failed, and learning to overcome the obstacles they first encountered as freshmen. In this chapter, I will revisit the themes I constructed from the data, discuss the findings as they relate to my conceptual framework and existing literature, and provide policy, practice, and future research recommendations.

Summary of Findings & Discussion

Interviews were conducted with students enrolled in three college readiness programs: ECHS, AVID, and NTN. After concluding the interviews with the seven participants and analyzing the data, three themes became evident: stressful transitions: from middle school to college, In Family We Trust, and Confidence in Taking on the World. In chapter four, each theme was further discussed using the lived experiences of students working towards graduating from high school and simultaneously attempting to earn an associate degree. Participants shared their experiences, from being fearful in the beginning to becoming more confident in making decisions about their education and future. Finally, each theme is briefly summarized and discussed concerning current literature on college readiness.

Stressful Transitions: From Middle School to College

Participants experienced several forms of stress. Stress persisted as they enrolled in an ECHS, which also houses the AVID and NTN programs, and learned how to navigate

simultaneously being a high school and college student. Participants expressed feeling “overwhelmed,” “unsure,” and even “lost.” The stress felt by the students came from several areas in their experiences with ECHS: (1) entering college readiness programs, (2) navigating the high school and college culture, (3) high school teachers vs. college professors, and (4) COVID online learning, and (5) finding their identity as high school and college students. When students feel stressed and overwhelmed, the college readiness efforts implemented become counterproductive (Martinez et al., 2020). My study supports the literature on the stress often caused by college readiness initiatives. Similar to Martinez et al.’s (2020) study on economically disadvantaged students who are currently experiencing a college-going culture, my participants experienced feeling overwhelmed and pressured into being successful within the ECHS program.

As noted by Martinez et al. (2020), college readiness programs such as the ECHS are designed to promote developing skills to pursue a college education; however, they become a part of the problem when students are not able to capitalize on the skills, they should be developing because they are overwhelmed and stressed. For example, participants felt overwhelmed trying to figure out what classes they were required to take as freshmen in high school and the college classes needed to earn an associate’s degree. Not only did they feel stressed about beginning a new school and learning about their high school courses, but they also felt unprepared to handle the demands of the ECHS program. This finding is consistent with Martinez et al. (2020), who argue that when students are stressed and overwhelmed, they can no longer benefit from programs meant to help them. In addition, when students feel stressed about the college entrance requirements and do not have the support needed to overcome these barriers, they are more likely not to complete those requirements (Barnett, 2016). Participants also expressed uncertainty about navigating the college management system for their college classes,

completing their college courses successfully, communicating with their professors, and managing extracurricular activities.

Students shared their experiences with learning about the high school management system for their high school courses and the college management system for their college courses. The stress the students felt in learning these systems caused fear and doubt in their ability to be successful in the ECHS. In addition, students were not taught how to navigate the college management system, creating anxiety about accessing it for their college courses. These results further support that when students are not explicitly educated about the ECHS requirements, they cannot use them effectively (Edmunds et al., 2020). This study supports that even when college readiness experiences are constructed to enhance students' abilities to develop skills to transition into post-secondary institutions, they will become counterproductive if those experiences do not include support structures (Bryant et al., 2017).

Other students shared that they felt unprepared to begin the ECHS program after only a few days of learning about the requirements. In addition, the participants felt anxious about being able to handle the demands of college because they were being enrolled in college classes as high school freshmen. Previous research has established that a crucial component of college readiness is the implementation of rigorous courses at the high school level to prepare students for college-level work (Atchinson et al., 2021; Barnett et al., 2012; Berger et al., 2013; Edmunds et al., 2020; Melguizo et al., 2018; Struhl & Vargas, 2012). However, when students feel the stress of handling the demands of collegiate-level work without the support they need, they are less likely to be successful (Albert et al., 2020). The participants of this study endured feeling overwhelmed and stressed; however, when they activated their social, familial, navigational, linguistic,

aspirational, and familial capital, they overcame those doubts and became confident and successful in their educational goals (Yosso, 2005).

Another factor that caused the students to stress in entering the college readiness program was understanding the high school and college requirements. For example, students felt overwhelmed about taking a test to qualify for college classes. Other participants explained they felt rushed and almost “herded” as they were trying to navigate entering high school and understanding the ECHS requirements. Albert et al. (2020) argued that students must understand how to manage their stress and college readiness skills to succeed in a post-secondary setting; however, when students are not given the opportunity to learn about resources that are meant to help them, they become impractical. The participants were able to use the support they had built through the cohorts to manage their stress and understand the requirements for their college classes rather than using resources from the school.

Participants shared that one of the reasons they decided to enroll in the ECHS program was the possibility of acquiring college credit while being able to participate in sports and other extracurricular activities. The participants explained that they felt excited at the idea of playing sports while also earning college credit. However, the excitement of being able to “do it all” quickly diminished when they realized that it would not be as easy. Additionally, participants shared their concerns and struggles in navigating a new learning environment brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic. The stress the participants expressed came from their experiences attempting to be both a high school and college student. As a result, students were forced to conceptualize all facets of the program, such as collegiate course work, organization of materials, handling stress, and navigating college enrollment, of becoming college ready to translate those skills into success in college (Brookover et al., 2021).

In Family We Trust

The second overarching theme identified was family, both the family from home and the family the students had established with their cohort peers. Often in the literature, students classified as Latinx, economically disadvantaged, and first-generation are associated with deficits in their preparation and knowledge about transitioning into a post-secondary institution. The results of this study support the research on first-generation students who often struggle with managing the college-going process because they have little to no support from parents who have never attended college (Clayton et al., 2019). While this has been a prominent claim about first-generation students, the results of this study found that families of first-generation students provide a wealth of capital that comes in the form of aspirational, cultural, familial, social, resistant, linguistic, and navigational, which can be used to enhance college readiness (Yosso, 2005).

The false narrative of the Latinx community's inability to support first-generation students is solely based on active participation through college exposure. It does not include the forms of support they receive from their families (Matos, 2021). This study supports the work by Matos (2021) in highlighting how students are able to capitalize on their familial capital to succeed in a rigorous program. Similar to Matos's (2021) study on retaining Latinx students in high education, participants in my study related their experiences of receiving familial support which allowed them to transition from feeling stressed to feeling more capable of success within the ECHS community.

As the participants continued to share their lived experiences, it became evident that the support they received from their home families and peers had significantly changed their outlook and perceived readiness to handle both their high school and collegiate courses. Participants

shared experiences with their parents that reassured and validated their ability to be successful. As Rendon (1994) has pointed out, both interpersonal and academic validation are essential to Latinx student success in higher education. Participants shared stories of how their parents never allowed them to “give up” or to “keep going.” Participants also shared stories of their parents, who had never attended college, helping simply by “believing” in them. My participants’ families served as validating agents for the participants of this study. Other participants shared stories of learning from their parents because they had to translate documents that developed their skills. These results support Yosso (2005), who argues that students, even when they are first-generation and from communities of color, come with a wealth of capital – familial, linguistic, and resistant – from their families, which they used to be successful.

In addition to the support the participants were receiving from their parents, they also developed relationships with their fellow EHCS peers which helped them to create a cohort family. Participants developed close relationships with their peers through their purposeful placement in cohorts, which they used as a support system. All participants shared that they felt they had created a “family” with their peers, and it was through this family that they began to support one another. The cohorts fostered students' familial and social capital. As Yosso (2005) explained, family extends beyond traditional understandings of a family; it can also include friends. Not only did participants’ peers become family, but they became a network that provided various forms of support, which helped them succeed.

Students who form relationships within a network with similar goals and expectations have a better opportunity to accomplish those goals (Acar, 2011; Albert et al., 2020; Bernhardt, 2013; and Yosso, 2005). Success in building educational relationships is supported by Acar (2011), who reflects that academic success can be found when students have social connections

between their families and the school that provides a climate of success. In addition, Acar (2011) has observed that social capital is essential to students' academic success.

Participants created networks through "study groups." The study groups helped them overcome the challenges of the college courses they were taking. In addition, they used the network of support to build upon their own skills. Educational networks that lead to social capital within schools and peer groups positively affect students' academic achievement outcomes (Dika & Singh, 2002). The findings of this study support this research because the participants shared their experiences of developing bonds with their peer cohorts and using those bonds to overcome obstacles and began to feel confident, leading to their success with the ECHS program. They initially shared experiences of feeling afraid of college classes, but that fear became confident as they continued to complete college classes together.

Participants felt more at ease with navigating the ECHS program because they knew other classmates were experiencing the same issues and were willing to help each other through the process. The comradeship the students felt helped create a "family," which created a safe space to help each other out. Boat et al. (2021) contended that "peers within relationally-rich workforce and education support programs can be an important source of social support that emerging adults require when working towards their education and career goals" (p. 1289). This study confirms that peer support in cohorts can help establish a collaboration network for mutual success. The participants began to feel more confident, and their experiences transferred from being entirely stressful to achievable through the support of their peers. Participants began to feel less stressed because they had their cohort's support, who could "teach the lesson in a way that made sense." Participants acknowledged building support through their own academic language

when helping each other with courses. These findings support those of Yosso (2005), who argues that academic success can be achieved through communication in a different language.

Participants felt less stressed about being in the ECHS program because they knew their peers understood what it was like to manage the program, and they provided each other with academic and social support. These results reflect those of Matos (2021), who also found that students who can establish academic and social support through their peers and use those support groups are likelier to succeed in their educational endeavors. In addition, the participants were able to capitalize on the support from their parents and peers to continue to be successful within the ECHS program. These results reflect those of Yosso (2005), who argues that underrepresented students have a wealth of capital often unutilized in education. As the participants continued to work with their peers to elevate their ability to thrive in their collegiate classes, their confidence levels began to rise.

Confidence in Taking on the World

The various experiences students had built on and activated their community cultural wealth, including their familial capital, aspirational capital, resistant capital, social capital, and linguistic capital. Research has found that building on students' community cultural wealth increases their confidence and facilitates student success in college and beyond (Bryan et al., 2017; Clayton et al., 2019; Doran & Hengesteg, 2020) which my results further support. One of the most prominent themes from the data was the participants' confidence as they spoke about their (1) current status as high school students and their (2) future as college graduates.

While the participants expressed their initial uncertainties about being a student in the ECHS program, their confidence grew as they learned to use programs such as AVID and NTN and relied on their cohorts for academic and emotional support. As a result, the participants in

the study became more confident about how to handle themselves in their collegiate courses and how to communicate with their professors because they used the cohorts to help each other. Participants shared stories of how they began forming groups in the AVID class to study, work on projects together, and support each other. This finding is consistent with that of Morley et al. (2021), who assert that students who build social groups in the AVID classroom for academic and social support are more likely to achieve their educational goals. Participants also shared that they felt lost and unsure initially; however, they became more confident as they learned to ask for support from their peers through the elective class. Students who use the social support provided through academic college readiness programs such as AVID can feel more confident in achieving their educational goals (Morley et al., 2020). In addition to feeling confident about being successful with their college classes in high school, participants expressed that they were ready to move on as full-time college students.

All participants answered with specific plans when asked about their future college plans. Each participant very confidently was able to name the college/university they were planning to attend, their major, and even their future careers. These results support previous research on students feeling confident and prepared to pursue future academic goals when they have built their college readiness skills with the support they have used through their social networks (Albert et al., 2020). Participants were asked if they could go back in time and would be willing to enroll in the ECHS again. All seven participants answered “yes,” with one participant adding, “Yes, I would enroll again in the [name of ECHS] because it got me where I am today, and I like who I am and where I am now.”

My study was guided by social capital and cultural capital (Acar, 2011; Almeida et al., 2021; Bernhardt, 2013; Boat et al., 2022; Crawley et al., 2019; Matos, 2021) and community

cultural wealth (Yosso, 2005). As previously cited, “college success necessitates fluency in dominant cultural capital and community cultural wealth” (Kolluri, 2020, p. 1). Students overcame insecurities about being successful in their college classes after understanding how to work with their peers. Recall “Amanda,” who explained that she felt excited about taking summer college courses in her junior year because she knew she would have her peers' support. All participants shared stories of feeling “relieved” and “not so stressed” when they mentioned being able to use the support from their peers in their cohorts. The participants were asked to tell their stories and use their voices to describe their experiences in college readiness programs and how those programs influenced their perception of college readiness. Through their experiences, each participant was able to describe not only their struggles but how they were able to be successful in their college readiness endeavors because of their cohorts which ultimately led to their confidence in persisting in college and pursuing a bachelor’s degree.

One crucial component of college readiness is the implementation of rigorous courses at the high school level to prepare students for college-level work (Atchinson et al., 2021; Barnett et al., 2012; Berger et al., 2013; Edmunds et al., 2020; Melguizo et al., 2018; Struhl & Vargas, 2012). All of the participants of this study experienced the rigor of dual-credit courses in addition to their high school courses. These courses are also considered rigorous due to the high demands of collegiate work and the expectations that students must complete. Participants recalled spending hours after school and on the weekends together to earn credit for these classes; therefore, students shared that they felt more academically prepared for the rigor they would be experiencing at the collegiate level.

Participants relied on peer support for their rigorous courses. When students were able to capitalize on the academic and emotional support from their cohort peers, they found greater

success. Watt et al. (2017) argue that students who find academic success in rigorous courses often do so because they have capitalized on the social support of their peers. The results of this study support this because participants were able to share stories of how they overcame the struggle of these courses by capitalizing on the academic support from their peers. Participants shared feeling less stressed and “more confident” because they knew they did not have to complete the classes “alone” and without help. Participants began to feel less stressed and more confident because they had the support of their peer cohort.

Several participants expressed their confidence in attending a 4-year university because they had experience with college. In addition, the four participants who have already earned an associate’s degree expressed that they felt ready for the next step because they had already experienced several college-going components that most students do not until they enroll at a college or university: applying for admissions, enrolling in college classes, earning college credit while still in high school, applying for graduation, and sending transcripts.

When first-generation students feel supported and informed about the college-going process, they are more likely to pursue and persist in college (Brookover et al., 2021). All of the participants of this study indicated that they became more informed about the college-going process from being a part of an ECHS and from having the opportunity to engage in research about the process with the NTN program. Furthermore, each participant shared their experiences with the support systems, both family and peers, which further increased their confidence and ability to pursue a college degree. Students expressed their gratitude for being able to research colleges and find which was the best match for them. Being able to select a college or university purposefully also led four of the seven participants to apply and commit to colleges away from home. The participants who committed to moving away from home all expressed that one of the

primary reasons for this decision was that they were able to use NTN to research colleges and found that the university within their hometown did not offer the major they wanted to declare.

The primary goal of ECHS is to provide an opportunity for underserved students economically disadvantaged to earn a two-year degree while simultaneously receiving a high school diploma. The premise for this initiative is that if students are enrolled in rigorous courses through a college-going program, they will be more likely to attend a four-year college, pursue a post-secondary degree, and save money (Berger et al., 2013). All of the participants of this study were enrolled in an ECHS program with the primary goal of helping them to become college ready. Through their descriptions, each participant detailed their positive and negative experiences about being a student in the ECHS. My study adds to the body of literature on college readiness because it included the experiences of students attempting to navigate three college readiness initiatives simultaneously and sharing their failures, success, and feelings about that experience. Each student was able to describe how their experiences were not always successful, but they found ways to overcome their struggles with the support of their family and peers. My study has given a platform for students to explain what it means to be a high school and college student in an ECHS.

Similar to the goals of the ECHS initiative, the AVID program was developed to address the inequities for first-generation, economically disadvantaged students (Watt et al., 2002). Through cohorts, the AVID program is a nationally recognized in-school academic support system incorporating an elective class to target historically underrepresented, economically disadvantaged, and first-generation students and encourage them to pursue a collegiate degree (Bernhardt, 2013). The participants of this study were all enrolled in an AVID elective class. Through their experiences, participants could explain how they could use their cohorts created in

the AVID classroom to build their academic abilities in completing college classes. For example, one student explained that it was in the AVID elective course that they began to understand how helpful and meaningful it was to be in the same classes together. In addition, the participants used the AVID classroom as a means of academic and social support. Morley et al. (2020) explain that students experience significant gains in achieving academic success when they use the support systems of the AVID elective class. My study supports the literature on AVID, highlighting how peer support is a crucial component of college readiness.

The NTN College Access Network's mission is to increase enrollment rates for Black, Latino, and economically disadvantaged students at participating network schools (New Tech Network, 2022). With this goal, NTN was established to purposefully target low-income, first-generation students and the initiative to provide schools with an opportunity to engage this population in becoming college-ready. All of the participants in this study were also using the NTN program to research colleges and become better informed about the college-going process. Several participants indicated that they were able to use this program to inform themselves better about which colleges matched their post-secondary needs better. Participants commented that using NTN influenced their decision to attend a university outside their hometown. Some participants found that the local university was not offering the major they intended to declare because they used NTN to complete research about which universities did offer that specific major. My study supports this body of literature because the participants in my study were able to make informed decisions, through the use of NTN, about where they were going to college, and several students found better options outside of their hometowns.

Yosso (2005) has provided a different perspective on social and cultural capital with a community cultural wealth framework. Yosso (2005) has also argued that underrepresented

students are often marginalized by deficit thinking and assumptions that they cannot succeed in post-secondary institutions. Latinx students who are economically disadvantaged and first-generation have a wealth of knowledge that continues to be unrecognized and overlooked in efforts to close college and university enrollment and graduation rates. My study on the lived experiences of Latinx, economically disadvantaged, first-generation students supports the literature on community cultural wealth (Matos, 2021) because students were able to explicitly share how they were able to use social, familial, aspirational, linguistic, navigational, and cultural capital in their pursuits in not only becoming college ready but also in their successes as high school students.

Participants shared stories of the familial capital they relied on as parents provided support and the feeling of not being alone while they attempted to complete college classes. Participants also shared stories of messages they received from their families about not giving up and the encouragement they received in finding ways to succeed despite failures. Additionally, participants shared their experiences with the family they had established in their cohorts. They shared experiences of working in their cohorts to complete college classes successfully, persisted in the ECHS program through the encouragement of family and peers, developed their skills through having to translate for their parents, and developed a “family” at school, which they heavily depended on for academic success.

The participants in this study also shared stories of overcoming academic obstacles through social, navigational, and aspirational capital. Participants shared stories of the social capital they activated through the use of their peer cohorts. They also shared experiences with their peers in navigating the expectations and classes in the ECHS program. Additionally, participants shared stories of the hopes and dreams their home families had for them and their

future academic careers. As previously mentioned, participants were able to capitalize on the cohorts they had established, which they used for academic and social support. In addition, participants were able to share their hopes and dreams about continuing their education with confidence in obtaining a degree and beginning a new career. My study adds to the body of literature on community cultural wealth (Matos, 2021; Yosso, 2005) because the participants were all able to share their experiences in using the different forms of capital to overcome persistent barriers to becoming college ready. Even when the participants of my study were deemed not to succeed because of their background – Latinx, economically disadvantaged, first-generation – they have all overcome those obstacles and feel ready for their next educational journey.

The findings of this study show how participants were able to activate many forms of capital, which led to achieving academic success and feeling emotionally supported. Through their commitment and concrete plans for entering an institution of higher learning, participants indicated they are ready to enroll successfully and persist in obtaining a four-year degree. However, the participants, who are all economically disadvantaged, still carry the burden of how to cover the costs of attending college. While participants have become more confident in their ability to handle collegiate courses, that confidence continues to lack when considering the financial aspect of being college-ready.

Recommendations

As previously stated, college readiness has become a multi-faceted system of best practices meant to support students who are typically underrepresented in post-secondary institutions of learning (Atwell et al., 2019; Barnett et al., 2012; Brookover et al., 2021; Xu et al., 2018). With new programs and initiatives, college readiness has specifically been used to target

underserved students (Berger et al., 2013) through early college high schools, Advancement via Individual Determination, and New Tech Network, which all use cohorts as a means to support underrepresented students in transitions to post-secondary institutions (Adam & Duncan Grand, 2019; Atchinson et al., 2021; Bernhardt, 2013). All of the participants of this study were a part of these three programs. Through their lived experiences, students were able to explain how each program helped them become college ready. I used their stories to advance the following recommendations for policy, practice, and future research.

Policy and Practice

The participants of this study explained how each of these programs, separately and together, were a critical component of their success in navigating their experiences in high school. Each participant explained how using these programs helped build their confidence, become better college students, and ultimately decide which college/university best suited their post-secondary goals. Each ECHS implementation is different; however, it is evident through this study, and more specifically through the experiences of all of the participants, that including AVID and NTN with the ECHS program can be an effective way to ensure that all students not only acquire the necessary skills to be successful in high school but are also able to translate those to the college environment they are exposed to within the ECHS. Students need to be taught how to use these programs instead of being placed in them to maximize their academic success.

Additionally, it is crucial that students are informed about all of the ECHS requirements and components and have the necessary skills to complete them (Martinez et al., 2020) successfully. Several of the participants explained that they were unaware of how to navigate through the course management system and even how to reach out to a professor. Students

entering programs such as the ECHS must be given the opportunity to learn all of its components prior to the beginning of the first classes so they can be better equipped to handle the demands of a rigorous curriculum (Melguizo & Ngo, 2018). Opportunities can include workshops on college classes, including how to use the different online tools, learning how to use a syllabus to understand the requirements for college classes, and opportunities to build peer support before beginning the program. Additionally, students struggled to use two different class management systems and would benefit from only having to use one. Therefore, a policy that allows ECHS students to use only one system instead of two should be implemented.

My study highlights the importance of implementing staff development, which targets the needs of high school students who are also attempting to be successful with college courses so that students are not receiving mixed messages about course requirements at the high school and college level, which can cause undue stress. Educators tasked with supporting students in completing college courses need the opportunity to work with college professors so that all classes are taught with the same rigor and expectations. Policies need to be implemented that fund the opportunity for high school teachers to participate in staff development that will ensure college classes taught at the high school are similar to those in college.

As all stakeholders should be involved in the college readiness of all students, district and college personnel, such as the superintendent and the college president, should be involved in the implementation of these policies to ensure funding and purposeful training to support vertical alignment between high schools and colleges is occurring. Educational leadership programs should also include K-20 preparation across the entire education continuum, from kindergarten to higher education. K-20 leaders should be responsible for overseeing the development and

implementation of policies, programs, and initiatives that promote student success at all levels of education.

All of the participants of this study were active participants in their cohorts and credited their families (familial capital) and peer networks (social capital) with contributing to their numerous successes and increased confidence. Family and parent workshops should be included so that families have an opportunity to become active participants in the college-going process. Additionally, programs such as the ECHS must ensure that students have the opportunities to build upon their community cultural wealth through the use of cohorts in order to facilitate college readiness (Yosso, 2005). Including programs such as AVID and NTN can provide students with the necessary skills and supports to navigate a high school and college curriculum. Including more opportunities for students to learn how to use college systems for email, assignments, and even how to use college resources can be helpful to ensure students develop skills to complete college courses. Furthermore, students need the opportunity to understand their role as high school and college students so they can simultaneously obtain a high school diploma and a college degree.

Future Research

The purpose of this study was to understand the lived experiences of economically disadvantaged, first-generation Latinx students in cohort-based practices such as ECHS, AVID, and NTN. In addition to understanding how cohort-based practices shape the college readiness experiences of economically disadvantaged, first-generation Latinx students, this study sought to explore how cohort-based practices activate and build on students' community cultural wealth, particularly their social and cultural capital (Yosso, 2005; Yosso & Burciaga, 2016). The data for this study was collected through semi-structured interviews of seven students currently enrolled

in an ECHS using AVID and NTN. Of the seven participants, five were female, and two were male. Another similar study could be conducted with more male participants. Latinx males are more underrepresented in higher education than females, and there is a need to learn and understand from them to enhance their experience with the goal of earning their degrees.

A different recommendation for future research is to conduct a similar study with a focus group of participants to gather data about the lived experiences of students currently enrolled in college readiness programs. The participants of this study were initially intimidated in sharing their stories, and a group setting of a focus group may allow students to feel more at ease at the beginning about sharing their stories (Glense, 2016). Additionally, a study can be completed with the addition of spiritual capital, which I did not consider in my study, and the implications it can have on fostering additional support for ECHS students. The participants of this study are all part of a cohort that uses ECHS, AVID, and NTN. Not all ECHS incorporate AVID and NTN as a form of supporting students. A study can be completed using an ECHS that does not currently use AVID or NTN to compare the data to see if students from both ECHS, those that do use AVID and NTN and those that do not, are able to experience becoming college ready in the same way and if they had similar experiences.

Another important study that could be conducted would be to explore how students who have graduated from an ECHS are able to navigate through college and earn a degree successfully. A five-to-ten-year longitudinal study can be conducted that tracks students as they enter college after completing these college readiness programs. Additionally, as this study focused on the capital that families provide, which is often undervalued and overlooked, a study could be conducted by interviewing parents. A study through the lens of parents could also provide knowledge on what students need in their pursuit of becoming college-ready. We need to

explore further students who participate in these college readiness initiatives in the K-12 system and how many successfully persist in earning a bachelor's degree. Currently, we are using resources to fund programs, provide staff development for teachers, and promote college readiness. We must explore further how these initiatives improve the disparities plaguing enrollment for underrepresented students in colleges and universities.

Finally, one of the most critical recommendations for future research is to conduct a study to understand what colleges and universities are doing and preparing to be student ready. Students need to stop being solely responsible for being college ready. Colleges and universities have students who enroll with different learning styles, backgrounds, and abilities. They, too, must do more to provide resources for students to enroll and persist in earning a degree.

Summary

The purpose of this study was to understand the lived experiences of economically disadvantaged, first-generation Latinx students in cohort-based practices such as ECHS, AVID, and NTN. The findings from this study highlighted the three overarching themes: stressful transitions: from middle school to college, In Family We Trust, and confidence in taking on the world. Research continues to highlight the importance of college readiness, especially for those underrepresented in colleges and universities. Postsecondary readiness must continue to be a priority for all students, especially those who continue to lag in college graduation rates. Findings from this study provide a better understanding of the use of cohort-based college readiness experiences and how community cultural wealth can be used to elevate Latinx students who are often overlooked and underrepresented in institutions of higher learning.

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Appendix

Appendix A: Interview Questions

Interview description: Interviews will be semi-structured. The interview process will follow the subsequent protocol.

1. Hello, my name is Dianna Rios, a doctoral student at The University of Texas at El Paso in the Educational Leadership and Foundations Department. I am here today to interview you for my dissertation study (a dissertation is a big research project), which is a requirement for a doctoral degree.
2. I want to learn about your experiences in the ECHS, which also uses AVID and NTN.
3. If the participant is under 18 years of age:
 - a. Your parent (s) have already been informed about his study and given consent or permission for you to participate, but you can still decide if you want to participate or not. It's your choice. That's called assent. I will be asking that we review together the Child Assent form. At this time, if you have any questions about me or my study, please do not hesitate to ask.
 - b. Once I receive the Child Assent form, I will begin recording the interview as I ask you the questions.
4. If the participant is 18 years of age or older:
 - a. You will be given the opportunity to review the consent form and decide whether or not you wish to participate. At this time, if you have any questions about me or my study, please do not hesitate to ask.
 - b. Once I receive your consent form, I will begin recording the interview as I ask you the questions.

I will use the following questions to guide the interview:

- Tell me about your experiences in high school.
- What are your plans once you graduate from high school?
- What does college readiness mean to you/what do you feel it takes to prepare for college?
- How prepared for college do you feel?
- What has prepared you most for transitioning into college?
- Reflecting on your experiences, what messages did your family and community send you about going to college?
- How has being an ECHS, AVID, and NTN student shaped your perception of being college-ready?
- How would you describe your experiences from your first year compared to your senior year?
- Tell me a little about your cohort (your group of peers). With AVID? NTN?
- What is the most memorable experience you've had in this cohort?
- What advice what you give to your principal about preparing kids for college?
- What advice would you give to an 8th grader about entering ECHS?

Vita

Dianna Rios was born in El Paso, Texas. The eldest daughter of Humberto and Olivia Gonzalez, she graduated in May of 1993 from Montwood High School in El Paso, Texas. She was a first-generation and economically disadvantaged student in high school and college. She enrolled at the University of Texas at El Paso in the fall of 1993 and was a proud member of the marching band, where she also served as the drum major. She earned her Bachelor of Arts in English and American Literature in 1998. In 2004 she earned a Master of Education degree in Educational Administration.

Dianna Rios began her career as an English teacher and proudly served in that capacity for 16 years. As an advocate for all students and college readiness, she currently serves as the AVID and Rams ECHS Coordinator is a member of the NTN College Access Team, and is the advisor for the National Honor Society. She is also an adjunct professor for El Paso Community College.

While working as a teacher, Dianna Rios was awarded the Secondary Teacher of the Year in 2016 and was a finalist for Region 19 Teacher of the Year. In addition, her students have chosen her as an honored educator for her contributions to all students. She is married to her husband of 20 years, Ramon Rios III, and is the mother to a teenage daughter, Charlotte.