

STUDENT PERCEPTIONS OF ADVANCED ACADEMIC COURSEWORK AND
ITS IMPACT ON COLLEGE AND CAREER READINESS

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Although students have more opportunities than ever before to participate in advanced academic programs while in high school, it is unclear whether this has affected their ability to succeed in college. To determine what impact the students' experiences in Advanced Placement (AP) and dual credit coursework had on their level of college and career readiness (CCR), students were asked to recall what factors influenced their ability to succeed in postsecondary education and describe what information is most beneficial for students as they select their academic pathways. This phenomenological qualitative study gathered data from students that had recently graduated from two high schools in a rapidly growing, suburban school district. Participants in the study reported that the most common benefits from advanced academic programs included more challenging expectations and learning how to navigate the various logistics of postsecondary education. By examining these students' perspectives, the findings from this study may positively influence policy and practice by increasing the likelihood that students are adequately prepared for college and have the ability to succeed at the collegiate level. Continued examination of student experiences in postsecondary education is imperative for improving CCR and may provide more insight into what factors inhibit student success after they graduate. Data collected from a more inclusive sample of participants or perhaps longitudinal data following a cohort through the transition from high school to college could help ensure that educators are able to adequately prepare students for life beyond high school.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY

While preparing students for life beyond high school is the ultimate goal of K-12 education, the rapid and continuous evolution of the world around us created unique challenges and required constant reflection and research to positively reform educational practices.

Throughout all the changes and enhanced accountability measures, the objective remains the same; however, educators have fallen short of developing a consistent and attainable vision of college and career readiness (CCR) that is applicable to all students.

For more than a century, students were deemed ready for college after successfully earning a high school diploma, scoring highly enough on college entrance exams, and earning acceptance to college through traditional admissions processes (Barnes & Slate, 2013; Conley, 2007; Conley, 2008; Maruyama, 2012; Pittman, 2010). However, meeting these basic requirements for graduation and being admitted to a college or university are no longer enough to assume that students have been adequately prepared for a postsecondary education. Even though K-12 school systems are offering more opportunities for students to participate in college-level and career-focused curricula than ever before, the number of students ready for postsecondary education appears to be declining and those requiring remediation in college is steadily increasing (Bautsch, 2013; Gaertner & McClarty, 2015; McCarthy & Kuh, 2006; Merisotis & Phipps, 2000; Sacher, 2016). In order to address the apparent decrease in CCR, it is valuable for educators to identify the necessary skills and most effective methods for bridging the gap between secondary and postsecondary education (Adcock & Surface, 2019; Bragg & Taylor, 2014; Conley, 2008; Darling-Hammond, et al., 2014; Leonard, 2013; McCarthy & Kuh, 2006).

Statement of the Problem

Under most circumstances, students lacking college readiness must take remedial courses once they enter college, and over the last three to four decades, the number of students requiring these courses has increased dramatically (An, 2013; Bautsch, 2013; Center, 2012; Gaertner & McClarty, 2015; Sacher, 2016). Although these studies did not discern between the types of institution, Chen (2016) reported that almost 40% of students beginning academic programs at 4-year universities between 2003 and 2009 required at least one remedial course, while 68% of students attending 2-year institutions required at least one remedial course. However, it is important to understand the complexity of the factors influencing students and their need for remediation (Chen, 2016).

After taking notice of this and other alarming trends, educators and policymakers called for systematic reforms of education, including the implementation of national legislation, such as No Child Left Behind (2002) and the Every Student Succeeds Act (2015), which both intended to improve curriculum standards and establish requirements for standardized academic assessments. College entrance exams, such as the former American College Test, now referred to as the ACT, and the Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT), also received an overhaul to reflect higher expectations regarding college readiness.

Educators at all levels, including K-12 and colleges and universities, have been tasked with helping to ensure that students are prepared for a collegiate education and are able to succeed in all their postsecondary endeavors, including the workforce or military. With an intentional focus on curriculum, established to improve college and career readiness, secondary educators increased the availability of advanced academic programs and career and technical education (CTE) programs (Adcock & Surface, 2019; An, 2013; Bowers & Foley, 2018; Iatarola,

et al., 2011; Kanny, 2015; Klopfenstein, 2003; Klepfer & Hull, 2012; Loveland, 2017; Mattern, et al., 2009; Shaw, et al., 2013; Taylor & Yan, 2018; Warne, et al., 2015). Specific to the proposed study, advanced academic programs include Advanced Placement (AP) and dual credit courses, which both expose students to college-level curricula and offer students the chance to earn college credits. Beyond the call for improvements within the K-12 educational system, institutions of higher education have also examined their practices and the extent to which students experience successful integration to college, both academically and socially (Camp & Walters, 2016; Coleman & Patton, 2016; Guzy, 2016; Hanson, et al., 2015; Kilgore & Wagner, 2017).

As the evaluation of college and career readiness (CCR) has quickly moved to the forefront of educational research, studies have examined countless aspects of education at all levels to identify the best way to ensure that students are prepared for life beyond high school. Furthermore, some researchers suggested earlier identification of college readiness and the most effective programs for bridging the gap between high school and postsecondary education (Adcock & Surface, 2019; Radcliffe & Bos, 2013). Compounding the issue is the challenge of establishing a working definition of college and career readiness (CCR) that applies to all contexts. In fact, very few studies have used the same functional definition or set of criteria for determining whether or not a student achieved CCR, which drastically limits the ability to generalize the findings associated with them. To highlight trends and the criteria states consider to be the most important when examining CCR, the College and Career Readiness and Success Center (2014) compared all of the states that include definitions of CCR in their state education plans.

Most of the existing research on CCR is conducted on a large scale, including data

collection across large universities (Bowers & Foley, 2018; Bragg & Taylor, 2014; Hanson, et al., 2015; Melguizo & Ngo, 2020; Millea, et al., 2018), whole states (Iatarola, et al., 2011; Lombardi, et al., 2011; Reback, 2008; Taylor & Yan, 2018; Warne, et al., 2015), or even an entire nation (Durosko, 2019; Heil, et al., 2014; Maruyama, 2012; Myers & Myers, 2017; College Board, 2009). Few studies focused on CCR utilize qualitative data collection and analysis methods (Bragg & Taylor, 2018; Durosko, 2019). Although few studies have sought to obtain data directly from students about their experiences in AP and dual-credit courses, these researchers tended to use surveys or questionnaires with limited response options rather than thoroughly exploring student perspectives through open-ended questions or face-to-face interviews (Durosko, 2019; Hanson, et al., 2015; Klepfer & Hull, 2012; Klopfenstein & Thomas, 2009). Furthermore, much of the research focused on advanced academic programs and their ability to prepare students for postsecondary education has been conducted by private companies and government organizations that stand to gain financially (College Board, 2009; College Board, 2020) and/or politically (TEA, 2020; The Center for Public Education, 2012; U. S. DOE, 1983; U. S. DOE, 2010; U. S. DOE, 2019). Studies conducted by these entities are likely to be questioned on grounds of validity and possible bias. A focus on quantitative research methods, however, limits the ability of the researcher to draw meaning from the participants' experiences and collect more subjective data based on the participants' responses than when qualitative practices are employed (Hesse-Biber, 2017).

Although some studies have identified best practices and effective methods for helping students make smoother transitions to the demands of college-level coursework, many have failed to examine college readiness from the perspective of a variety of stakeholders. Most of the existing research in this field has been limited to the educator perspective, whether it is the

teacher, counselor, professor, adviser, or administrator at either the secondary or postsecondary level (Digby, 2016; Durosko, 2019; Hanson, et al., 2015; Leonard, 2013; Loveland, 2017). While these viewpoints are incredibly valuable to educational reform, it is essential that student voice be included in the discussion about how to prepare students for an education beyond high school.

Researchers have reported correlations between considerable efforts to include student voice and improved academic achievement (Cook-Sather, 2014; DeFur & Korinek, 2010). Furthermore, numerous scholars have described the value of student contributions to comprehending the way in which challenges impact students' experiences and advise changes to policy and practice (Cook-Sather, 2014; DeFur & Korinek, 2010; Groundwater-Smith & Mockler, 2016; Nind, 2014; Pazey & DeMatthews, 2019; Quijada Cercerer, et al., 2013). Being able to listen to the perspectives of students in terms of their previous enrollment in advanced academic programs and how their participation in such courses helped to prepare them for college provided a critical piece of the puzzle. Further, the data obtained from students who shared their perspectives and experiences may assist and inform educational leaders and educational professionals who are directly responsible for the administration of advanced academic programs in their efforts to facilitate a smooth transition from high school to college for students enrolled in these programs.

Purpose of the Study

Although college readiness is influenced by an exhaustive list of variables, the ability to determine whether students who participated in advanced academic courses in high school were well-prepared and ready for college and able to achieve success in college prior to their enrollment in college courses and attendance in a minimum of one year of college is difficult. The purpose of this qualitative dissertation study was to ascertain, from the post-secondary

students' perspective, the impact that they believe their enrollment in Advanced Placement and dual-credit courses in high school had on their level of college readiness and ability to achieve success in college. By examining the post-secondary student's perspective, the findings from this study can positively influence policy and practice by increasing the likelihood that students are adequately prepared for college and can succeed at the postsecondary level. Furthermore, improved understanding of how complex variables impacted students' level of college readiness might assist educators in advising students and parents through enrollment and participation decisions.

Research Questions

The following research questions were used to guide this dissertation study:

1. From the post-secondary students' perspective, what impact did their enrollment in AP courses in high school have on their level of college readiness and ability to achieve success in college?
2. From the post-secondary students' perspective, what impact did their enrollment in dual-credit courses in high school have on their level of college readiness and ability to achieve success in college?
3. From the post-secondary students' perspective who participated in both AP and dual-credit courses in high school, which program had a greater impact on their level of college readiness and ability to achieve success in college?

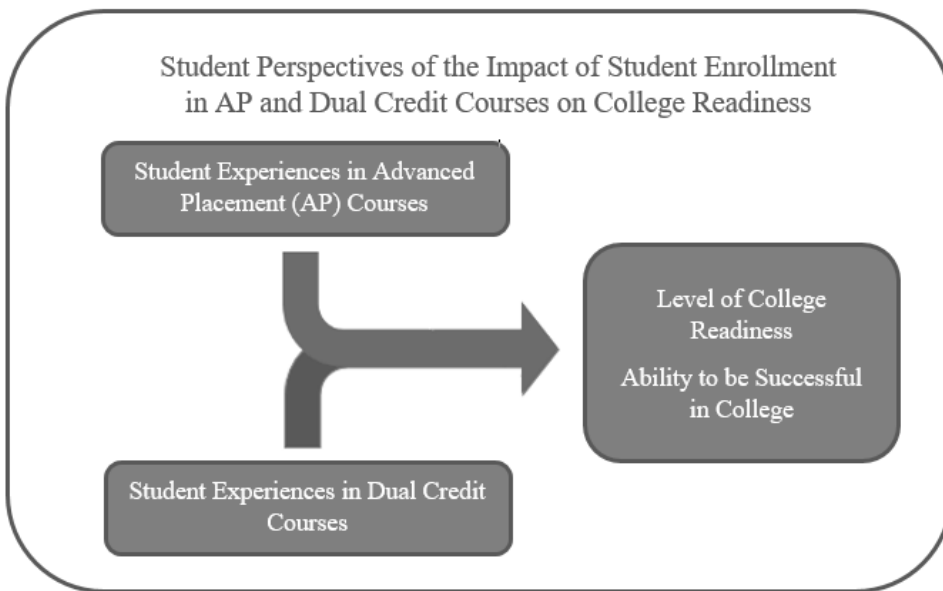
Conceptual Framework

Many students who enroll in postsecondary courses in high school do so because they plan to continue their educational career beyond high school through a four-year college or university. To strengthen the likelihood that they experience success, they select either Advanced Placement (AP) and/or dual credit courses as part of their high school program of study. The natural assumption is that the content and rigor of these classes adequately prepares them to navigate the challenges they face during their transition to undergraduate courses. To test the

accuracy and reality of such an assumption, however, an exploration of how effective AP and dual credit courses from the perspective of the students and their descriptions of what they encounter *after* they have taken their college-level classes has been needed. Although advocates of both programs claim they offer college-level content to students, the pros and cons surrounding each program can impact the students' experiences in different ways. The experiences of students who completed AP and/or dual credit courses while in high school were examined to determine the level of impact that each of the types of advanced academic courses had, from the students' perspectives, on their level of college readiness and the ability to succeed in college.

Figure 1

Conceptual Framework



Note. A conceptual framework related to postsecondary students' perspectives of the contribution and/or impact that their enrollment in AP and/or dual credit courses in high school have on their level of college readiness and ability to achieve success in college.

Significance of the Study

Although researchers have conducted countless studies focused on college readiness, AP,

and dual credit programs and/or classes, most scholars have concentrated on the perspectives of teachers, counselors, and/or administrators rather than the actual students who participated in high school AP and dual credit programs and classes. Furthermore, few researchers have conducted face-to-face interviews with students about their experiences in their advanced high school coursework as well as how these experiences affected their ability to be successful in college. More importantly, the opportunity to gain the first-hand perspectives of students beyond their high school years, while enrolled in college-level classes, has not yet been explored in any of the recent literature.

For this study, information was obtained directly from the students to gain an understanding of the effectiveness of their AP and dual credit courses on their level of college readiness. Because students were given the opportunity to share specific experiences and examples, a more accurate picture of whether the AP and dual-credit programs adequately prepared them for the rigor and challenges they faced thus far in their college experience was rendered. Findings from this study may be used to inform and assist counselors, teachers, and administrators in future discussions with students and parents about (a) the benefits of AP and dual credit programs, (b) which courses to recommend students to participate, and (c) how best to determine which students would be most likely to benefit from AP and dual credit programs for recruitment purposes. By gaining a better understanding of the benefits and drawbacks to each of these programs based on the students' own experiences, educational leaders and professionals may be able to provide better direction for students and ultimately, make changes to strengthen the likelihood that they are ready for college upon graduation from high school.

Delimitations

According to Roberts and Hyatt (2019), the parameters of a study must be explained to

provide clarity as to what the researcher decides to include and why certain aspects related to the study are not included as part of the study. Schools, and the educational programs within them, consist of a complicated web of factors that interact in unique and various ways. As mentioned previously, many of the studies on advanced academics collected data nationally, or even internationally, rather than at the local level. Each of the fore-mentioned studies failed to highlight issues influencing individual schools and, more importantly, the students. Collecting such large quantities of data does not allow the researcher to examine results specific to particular student populations which, in turn, can make it difficult for them to be able to address the specific factors that may be affecting student success at the collegiate level.

This study examined students' perspectives regarding how well they believe their enrollment in AP and/or dual credit programs prepared them for college as well as the extent to which their enrollment in AP and/or dual credit courses impacted their ability to be successful in their postsecondary, college-level courses after graduating high school. Since each of the participants completed some form of advanced academic courses while in high school, the sample was limited to mostly students with higher grade point averages and are limited in terms of generalizability, applicable to other high school students. However, findings from this study might be representative of other high schools and districts with similar demographics. In addition, due to disparities that may have existed within and across the content and quality of AP and dual credit courses, recommendations, implications, and conclusions made, based on the analysis and reporting of students' perspectives may not be representative of what students enrolled in other AP and/or dual credit courses offered by schools in other districts.

Assumptions

For this study, I examined how students perceive their enrollment and experiences in

advanced academic courses impacted their level of college readiness and their ability to succeed in college. It is important to note that this study was limited to AP and dual credit participation, rather than including all the various types of career and technical education courses or other advanced academic programs, such as International Baccalaureate. Students were only asked to reflect on their experiences in AP and dual credit courses. As mentioned previously, the sample size was small; however, based on the deliberate selection of the interview participants, the selected participants were representative of high-achieving, college-bound students who participated in high school AP and/or dual-credit courses within schools and/or districts with similar demographics that offer AP and/or dual credit courses. Regarding specific assumptions relevant to this study, I assumed that participants' renditions of their experiences were accurate, and they were able to provide a representative account of their various experiences in AP and dual credit courses and link their experiences to what they experienced in their initial years of college. Finally, I assumed that the participants believed the assurances to confidentiality and understood their right to discontinue their participation in the study at any time. As a result, they felt comfortable in answering each of the interview questions.

Definition of Key Terms

In education, as with many other fields, the vocabulary and list of acronyms can prove to be overwhelming for most people who are not full-time practitioners. Before presenting the review of literature and the methodology for my study, it is imperative to introduce the most significant terminology pertaining to this study.

- *Advanced Placement (AP)*. Advanced programs provide coursework produced and designed by the College Board to provide collegiate-level academics for high school students and to offer students the chance to earn college credit hours after successful completion of the

course and a passing score on the comprehensive AP exam (College Board, 2020).

- *College and career readiness (CCR)*. States and programs across the nation have all defined college and career readiness in their own terms, and although they include similar terminology, each definition is unique and varies slightly from the others. For this study, participants were recent high school graduates from a suburban district in Texas; therefore, this study used the definition provided by the Texas Education Agency ([TEA], 2010). According to TEA (2010), students meet the standard of college readiness when they have attained a level of preparation that makes it possible for them to succeed in entry-level math and English courses as part of the general education curriculum requirements for an undergraduate degree.

- *Dual credit or dual enrollment programs*. Students participating in dual enrollment or dual credit programs take classes on the high school or college campus, and the student concurrently earns high school and college credit for the same course (Howley, et al., 2013).

- *Gifted education*. Gifted programs provide differentiated instruction that meets the unique, individualized needs for gifted learners and vary widely from district to district and state to state (Kettler & Hurst, 2017).

- *International Baccalaureate Diploma Program (IB)*. IB programs were originally designed for students likely to participate in foreign exchange programs or who studied internationally (IBO, 2010). The coursework includes advanced curriculum similar to advanced placement courses, but the IBDP courses also intensely promote global perspectives and an appreciation for intercultural education.

Organization of the Study

This dissertation is organized into five chapters, plus appendices and references. Chapter 1 provides a brief overview of the problem, purpose, and significance of the proposed study, as

well as the research questions forming the foundation for the study. Chapter 1 also includes the conceptual framework for the study, pertinent background information, and definitions of significant terms. Chapter 2 includes an extensive review of current literature in the field and denotes the gap in research that justifies the need for the proposed study. Chapter 3 focuses on the methodology for the study, including a thorough rationale for why the selected design is the most appropriate for the specific research questions. A report of the findings of the study is included in Chapter 4. The data collected are presented relative to the research questions, and finally, Chapter 5 provides a discussion of the conclusions and recommendations for how the results of the study can positively impact policy and practice moving forward.

Summary

As educators, all of our responsibility lies in the ability to ensure that students are academically and socially prepared for life beyond school. To improve college and career readiness among students, the intent of this study was to examine student perspectives concerning the impact their participation in Advanced Placement and dual credit courses had on their college readiness and their ability to succeed in college. In the next chapter, I present a review of the literature and highlight the lack of student voice among most of the research in the field of college readiness. By incorporating student experiences, this study aimed to help improve the information we have concerning the impact of advanced academic courses and how to best prepare our students for life beyond high school.

CHAPTER 2

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Over the past few decades, education has experienced a radical increase in assessment and accountability measures as well as a stronger focus on college and career readiness (CCR) due to many factors, including the diminishing ability of American students to academically compete on the global stage (U.S. Department of Education [USDOE], 1983) and the growing need for college remedial courses in mathematics, reading, and writing (Gaertner & McClarty, 2015). In an effort to increase CCR, schools are offering more opportunities than ever before for students to expose themselves to college-level curriculum, specifically through expanding Advanced Placement (AP) programs; promoting dual credit partnerships with institutions of higher education; programs focused on the advancement of science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM), and career technical education (CTE) programs designed to provide secondary students with the skills necessary to move directly into the workforce.

The review of literature begins with a historical exploration of educational reform over the last several decades, specifically federal legislation that called for an increased focus on assessment, accountability, and college and career readiness. In this chapter, I provide a brief description of various advanced academic programs and how they are designed to prepare students for both college and career. A specific focus on the research surrounding Advanced Placement (AP) and dual credit programs offered on high school campuses and the research supporting these options as a way to increase student achievement is presented. The literature review continues with the importance of bridging the gap between secondary and postsecondary education in order to increase the benefits that students gain from participating in advanced curriculum while in high school. The importance of bridging the gap between secondary and

postsecondary education and establishing processes for smoother transitions for students is also highlighted. Finally, the conceptual framework, which highlights how the proposed study can positively contribute to the field of advanced academics and college readiness serves as the conclusion.

Background

As mentioned in Chapter 1, *A Nation at Risk* (USDOE, 1983) ignited widespread concern that children in the United States were not prepared to compete with their counterparts in foreign countries, leading to a push for educational reform that included reauthorizations of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA, 1965), including No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB, 2002) and the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA, 2015). Originally, the ESEA was established “to strengthen and improve educational quality and educational opportunities in the Nation’s elementary and secondary schools.” In 2010, the USDOE published *The College- and Career-Ready Standards and Assessments*, which provided a detailed plan for schools across the country to be more intentional with how they prepare students for postsecondary education and called for “building capacity for support at every level” (p. 7). Furthermore, recent legislative acts called for an increased capacity of educators, tighter curricular standards to ensure that all students have the same opportunities to learn, and heightened accountability measures at both the state and federal levels (Barlow et al., 2018).

Although the expressed intent of increased accountability was to improve the educational experiences of students, it remains to be seen whether or not it has achieved the desired outcome. Some researchers have discussed the possibility that accountability reform policies inadvertently resulted in declining rates of participation in advanced academic programs (Reback, 2008; Siemer, 2009). Based on similar findings, Rowland and Shircliffe (2016) reported that expanded

accountability measures fail to identify and attend to the persistent roadblocks that keep students from being successful. Also, traditional measures of student achievement, such as grade point average (GPA) and standardized college entrance exams, are no longer considered sufficient to predict student success beyond high school on their own (Adcock & Surface, 2019).

Furthermore, the need for university students to take remedial courses, especially in mathematics, reading, and writing, has grown exponentially, and people began to take notice that more and more students were not prepared for the academic challenges of college (Bautsch, 2013; Center, 2012; Gaertner & McClarty, 2015; Sacher, 2016). Even though these students were able to meet the requirements for high school graduation and acceptance to a university, the application portfolio they submitted for acceptance did not necessarily reveal the actuality that the knowledge and skills they brought with them from high school were not adequate for them to move directly into college-level courses. Similarly, reports have shown that although college enrollment continues to increase, proportionate growth in college completion rates is declining as much as 4 to 7% among students under the age of 24 (Stoltzfus, 2015). The growing lack of college readiness among high school graduates has been represented as a national problem, which further supports the need for smoother transitions between secondary and postsecondary education (Conley, 2008; Leonard, 2013; McCarthy & Kuh, 2006).

Based on data supporting the need for students to be exposed to rigorous, college-level curricula (An, 2013; Durosko, 2019; Hooker & Brand, 2010; Park, et al., 2014; Taylor & Yan, 2018), policymakers and educators have called on advanced academic programs to address their growing concerns about the ability of students to successfully shift to postsecondary education or the workforce. Moreover, numerous studies revealed that students who experienced success in high school advanced placement courses were more successful in college (Fenty & Allio, 2017;

Klopfenstein & Thomas, 2009; Scott, et al., 2010). Advanced academic programs, such as AP and dual credit, assist students in developing the strategies and persistence necessary to succeed at the postsecondary level (Klepfer & Hull, 2012; Klopfenstein, 2003).

College and Career Readiness

Although educators have purportedly intended to prepare students for life beyond high school, no agreement among educators and researchers of a working definition of college and career readiness (CCR), applicable to all students, has been reached. Consequently, it is difficult to determine the most effective strategies to use to ensure students are prepared when they graduate. In addition, an accurate method for measuring and tracking CCR among students needs to be established. In a publication for the College & Career Readiness & Success Center at American Institutes for Research, Mishkind (2014) attempted to find commonalities among the various definitions of CCR used by states in their educational standards and stated:

although preparing students for post-graduation opportunities has long been a priority for states, districts, and schools, a burgeoning global economy and ongoing labor market shifts call for renewed attention to the readiness requirements for student success in this changing postsecondary landscape. (p. 1)

With how quickly everything is changing in the 21st century, scholars have been working for decades to define such an abstract concept.

Defining College and Career Readiness

Many researchers in the field of college and career readiness (CCR) reference the works of David Conley, whom most consider to be a national expert on college readiness (Leonard, 2013). In 2014, Conley asserted students who are college and career ready should “possess the content knowledge, strategies, skills, and techniques necessary to be successful in any range of postsecondary setting” (p. 15). According to Conley, college-and-career-ready students should

be able to perform satisfactorily in more general, entry-level courses and ultimately, advance to courses required for their major field of study and degree program. Although Conley's research is widely accepted, some colleagues questioned whether or not his approach adequately addressed other factors that can negatively impact a student's ability to attend college or to graduate on time. Such factors include the financial burden and lack of a supportive network, especially for students who are the first in their family to go to college (Hernandez, 2011; Leonard, 2013).

The Texas Education Agency (TEA) defined college readiness as having attained a level of preparation that makes it possible for a student to succeed in entry-level math and English courses as part of the general education curriculum requirements for an undergraduate degree (TEA, 2010). Texas initially established their definition of CCR as part of House Bill 3, the same bill that introduced the new state assessment model for students known as the State of Texas Assessment of Academic Readiness (STAAR). Since the original establishment of CCR standards, Texas has not published an updated, more specific definition of CCR but rather shifted to a broader set of criteria that determine students' level or preparedness for college, the workforce, or the military (TEA, 2019).

Another challenging aspect of CCR is the dynamic collaboration that occurs among many individuals (Hernandez, 2011; Leonard, 2013), including students, parents, and educators. Several researchers reported that parental support and regular parent-student discussions on the student's progress in school and postsecondary education positively affected the student's likelihood of attending and succeeding in college (An, 2010; An, 2013; Kim & Schneider, 2005; Leonard, 2013). In similar studies, other scholars addressed the importance of the counseling and advising that students receive from their teachers, counselors, and administrators in determining

which courses are best suited for them and best support their postsecondary education (Digby, 2016; Duroske, 2019; Leonard, 2013; Loveland, 2017). Overall, it is essential to understand that all stakeholders meaningfully contribute to the development of students' skills that help define them as prepared for college, joining the military, or entering the workforce.

Methods for Improving College and Career Readiness

As previously mentioned, the supportive network and relationships between students, parents, and educators increases the likelihood of students attending college and the ability of students to experience success in their postsecondary endeavors. However, strengthening the partnerships among educational stakeholders is just one way that students can improve their CCR. From their research on how successful experiences in high school and college can lead to successful careers, Adcock and Surface (2019) reported on the importance of educating students about CCR and how it can impact them well beyond high school, stressing that students need to have a "better understanding about what success is and the different ways in which to achieve it" (p. 37).

Teaching students about CCR can be a challenge, especially when students may or may not be committed to their education in high school in a manner that supports their future careers or educational endeavors (Adcock & Surface, 2019). An (2013) concluded that "educational attainment" for students requires them to work through a "series of decisions", ultimately deciding whether to terminate their schooling or continue taking more advanced college courses which are more closely aligned to the "curricular pathways" (p. 409) they wish to pursue. Based on the findings extracted from these studies, it is clear that educators must encourage students to commit to their education and make sure that students are equipped to make the types of decisions that have the greatest impact on their ability to attain their goals. In order to prepare

students for life beyond high school, it is also imperative that CCR be introduced before students enter high school (Adcock & Surface, 2019; Radcliffe & Bos, 2013) and include information beyond traditional academic content, including tuition, financial aid, and programs that offer support to college students (Adcock & Surface, 2019; Hooker & Brand, 2010; Karp, 2012).

When students are exposed to college-level curricula and experiences while still in high school within a supportive environment, academic performance and college readiness is more likely to improve (Adcock & Surface, 2019; An, 2013; Iatarola, et al., 2011). According to the Consortium on Chicago School Research, high school experiences that include a strong college-going culture are the most consistent predictor of students enrolling in college (Roderick, et al., 2008). Furthermore, understanding how college works and establishing a college-going identity promotes student engagement and increases their likelihood of attending and being successful in college (Hooker & Brand, 2010). Student success in high school leads to higher self-esteem and a heightened belief that they can succeed at the college level as well (Digby, 2016; Hallett & Venegas, 2011; Warne, et al., 2015). Numerous researchers reported the importance of students developing intrapersonal skills that strengthened their ability to succeed in college (Digby, 2016; Ferguson, Baker, & Burnett, 2015; Kanny, 2015; Park, et al., 2014).

Kanny (2015) concluded that rigorous high school coursework fostered a sense of independence and freedom among students. In addition, students who participated in advanced academic programs in high school had higher expectations of themselves in college (Adcock & Surface, 2019). Although advanced academics include many different programs, the proposed study focused on Advanced Placement (AP) and dual credit and how these courses impacted college readiness for postsecondary students. Successful completion of AP and/or dual credit coursework has consistently been reported to improve college readiness and increase a student's

ability to succeed in postsecondary education (Bowers & Foley, 2018; Kanny, 2015; Loveland, 2017; Shaw, et al., 2013; Taylor & Yan, 2018; College Board, 2009; Warne, et al., 2015).

Students benefit from gaining both academic content and other skills necessary to survive in college, such as understanding tuition, financial aid, and the social capital necessary to navigate college right after high school (Hooker & Brand, 2010). Several researchers highlighted the importance of building momentum for a successful transition from high school to college and the benefits that stronger, smoother pathways provide for students (Adcock & Surface, 2019; An, 2013; Karp, 2015; Leonard, 2013; Park, et al., 2014; Peters & Mann, 2009; Taylor & Yan, 2018). Although CCR has been the focus of extensive research, Adcock & Surface (2019) state that CCR still needs to be investigated in order to establish (a) a common understanding of what “readiness” means and (b) consistent methods for determining if students are prepared for college and/or career.

Advanced Placement and Dual Credit

According to several relevant studies, student participation in Advanced Placement (AP) and dual credit increases the likelihood that students pursue a postsecondary education and achieve success in college (Kretchmar & Farmer, 2013; Loveland, 2017; Taylor & Yan, 2018). Loveland (2017) attributed the increased acceptance rates for AP and dual credit students to the fact that students had a better understanding of what to expect in college and therefore more likely to be successful. AP and dual credit courses benefit students, allowing them to explore preferred fields of study and potential college majors while still in high school (Adcock & Surface, 2019; Warne, et al., 2015). When students enter the postsecondary educational setting with college credits earned during high school, they complete their degree plan faster than their peers and reduces the financial burden that college can place on them or their families (Hallett &

Venegas, 2011; Leonard, 2013; Walsh, 2016; Warne, et al., 2015). When students experience the rigor of college-level coursework in the familiar and supportive environment of their high school, they thrived in their classes (Adcock & Surface, 2019; An, 2013; Iatarola, et al., 2011). Moreover, the transition from high school to college was marked with fewer challenges.

With all of the reported benefits that advanced academic programs offer, it is not surprising that the number of students participating in both AP and dual credit is on the rise (Taylor & Yan, 2018). Many states are even requiring school districts to offer students the opportunity to further their education and get a head-start on college while still in high school. As of 2005, Texas schools are required to offer at least 12 hours of college credit to their students (Mansell & Justice, 2014). While these opportunities are valuable, some worry that students are taking on more than they can handle, especially in their senior year (Kretchmar & Farmer, 2013). Additionally, Kretchmar and Farmer (2013) reported that students must often sacrifice other interests and activities in order to carry such a demanding course load, which might actually reduce their level of well-roundedness during the college admissions process. Although AP and dual credit courses offer benefits to students, it is important to understand how each program is structured and how they compare to each other in regard to preparing students for college.

Advanced Placement

The College Board developed the Advanced Placement (AP) program in 1952, although it was only available to students at elite private schools in the beginning (Klopfenstein & Thomas, 2009). Currently, the College Board offers 38 AP courses in seven subject categories to students in over 6,000 schools worldwide (College Board, 2020). For each of the AP courses, students have the opportunity to earn college credit when they pass the course and the

cumulative exam administered at the end of the course. AP teachers are typically provided extensive training through summer institutes and various workshops and are expected to follow a more specific curriculum determined by the College Board, all of which contribute to the benefits of taking Advanced Placement courses. Professional development opportunities for educators, a curriculum that is closely aligned with what students encounter at the college level, and a nationwide standardized exam helps to assure that AP courses are taught at a certain level of rigor and expectations regardless of where the program is located. Scholars have consistently reported the benefits to student participation in Advanced Placement courses, including increased college readiness and rates of retention throughout college (Bowers & Foley, 2018; Shaw, et al., 2013; Taylor & Yan, 2018; College Board, 2009; Warne, et al., 2015). Since their establishment, AP classes have been the most common means of exposing high school students to advanced curriculum, designed to prepare students for postsecondary education (Kolluri, 2018; Peters & Mann, 2009).

Even though researchers consistently report that AP classes help prepare students for college, it is important to note some relevant drawbacks. Participation in the Advanced Placement curriculum benefits students; however, the benefits are not the same for all students (Sadler & Sonnert, 2010; Warne, et al., 2015). For years, the College Board has adapted the AP program in an effort to create open enrollment policies and more equitable access to all students; yet gaps in participation and performance among student groups still remain (Contreras, 2011; Gagnon & Mattingly, 2016; Hallett & Venegas, 2011; Kolluri, 2018; Peters & Gentry, 2012; Roegman & Hatch, 2016). In addition, institutions of higher education control whether students are awarded credit for passing AP exam scores. Therefore, colleges and universities vary greatly in the amount of credit they award to students for their successful completion of these courses

and exams (Kolluri, 2018). Furthermore, when scholars conclude that students benefit from participating in AP courses, it might actually be due to how the class is taught, not necessarily the design of the AP program or curriculum (Warne, et al., 2015). In similar findings, students reported that their teachers were inadequately prepared for teaching AP classes and thus their instruction was ineffective at preparing them for the AP exams (Hallett & Venegas, 2011).

Dual Credit

Dual credit programs provide opportunities for high school students to concurrently take college classes that serve as both college credit hours and their high school requirements (An, 2013; Peters & Mann, 2009; Taylor & Yan, 2018). In contrast to Advanced Placement courses, dual credit is the result of a direct relationship between school districts and institutions of higher education. Students can earn credits by attending classes on the college campus or from embedded faculty members on their own high school campus who have been vetted by individuals at the college campus to ensure they are qualified to teach a college-credit-bearing class. Dual credit programs can also be referred to as dual enrollment or concurrent enrollment. Early College programs allow students to begin college coursework once they have completed their credit requirements for high school; however, they are not considered dual credit because students are not earning high school credits at the same time.

Although students are able to earn college credits through both AP and dual credit programs, it is important to understand the differences between them. Dual credit has an advantage because earning credit is only based on the student's final grade in the course, rather than having to also earn a passing score on a cumulative exam. However, colleges and universities have final say in what type of credits are awarded to incoming students, and some institutions are more selective than others (Myers & Myers, 2017). If students are planning to

attend the college or university where they earned their dual credit hours, the quandary about which credits count does not affect them. If they are going to another university, however, their credits have to be reviewed and accepted by that institution. Therefore, it is important for students to understand this caveat and how it could affect their transition from high school to college.

Like AP courses, students earning credits through dual credit classes have elevated chances of enrolling in postsecondary education and earning their degree or certificate (An, 2013; Kretchmar & Farmer, 2013; Lewis & Overman, 2008; Peters & Mann, 2009; Taylor & Yan, 2018). Yet, dual credit programs have struggled to ensure equal participation across all student groups (An, 2013; Fink, 2018). An (2013) examined how students reached the decision to participate in dual credit courses and if improved college readiness could reduce the gaps between students with college-educated parents and those without a college education. He concluded that students entering college with previously earned credits performed better academically and were more prepared for the rigor of college, but it was unclear if students were able to bridge the parental-education gaps. However, Mansell and Justice (2014) reported that dual credit has the potential to break barriers that previously prohibited some students from continuing their education beyond high school.

Numerous scholars have examined the accessibility and effectiveness of dual credit impacting students' college readiness and ability to be successful in college (An, 2013; Durosko, 2019; Kanny, 2015; Lewis & Overman, 2008; Loveland, 2017; Mansell & Justice, 2014). Students that earn college credits through dual credit programs gain numerous skills beyond advanced academic curricula (Adcock & Surface, 2019; Khazem & Khazem, 2012). Loveland (2017) reported that "perhaps the most remarkable benefit of dual enrollment is that it cultivates

a college-centric perspective - one rooted in success” (p. 34). As students gain experiences through dual credit courses in high school, especially successful ones, they are more likely to exhibit confidence and have more accurate expectations once they start their postsecondary education (Loveland, 2017). Dual credit is not limited to traditional academic content areas, and whenever career and technical education (CTE) skills are embedded within the dual credit program, students are even more prepared for college and career (Karp, 2015).

In stark contrast to AP programs, dual credit programs are uniquely established by the school district and college they serve; therefore, dual credit programs tend to be more flexible and adaptive to the instructors’ talents and students’ needs. Strengthening these relationships has a positive impact on students’ college and career readiness skills and provides a variety of advanced academic opportunities to all students (An, 2013; Karp, 2015; Leonard, 2013; Mansell & Justice, 2014; Park, et al., 2014; Peters & Mann, 2009; Taylor & Yan, 2018). Due to the flexibility of program requirements and relationships between high schools and colleges, dual credit is also a great fit for nontraditional students, including students who are homeschooled (Loveland, 2017). Strong partnerships between high schools and colleges greatly impact the success of dual credit courses and how they affect student achievement.

Bridging the Gap between Secondary and Postsecondary Education

College and career readiness for students hinges upon a smooth transition from high school to college, which has become a focal point for many researchers over the last decade (Adcock & Surface, 2019; Bragg & Taylor, 2014; Darling-Hammond, et al., 2014). Through his research, An (2013) concluded that students should not have to restart at each level and are more likely to be successful whenever the transition is seamless. Advanced academic programs, such as Advanced Placement (AP) and dual credit, are designed to provide students with the

momentum they need to successfully make the transition from high school to college (Adcock & Surface, 2019). In order to increase CCR, educators must ensure that students are academically prepared for college-level curriculum and well-equipped with the social and emotional skills necessary to thrive at the next level.

Academic Rigor

As mentioned previously, some students seem to lack the necessary skills to be successful in college courses, and the need for remedial courses in math, reading, and writing continued to rise over the last few decades (An, 2013; Gaertner & McClarty, 2015; Sacher, 2016). In addition to providing students with a head start on college at a reduced cost, advanced academic programs must prepare students for the rigor of college-level course work. If AP and dual credit classes are not taught at the same level as traditional college classes, students may enter the university at a disadvantage (Ferguson, et al., 2015). Educators must guarantee that students in AP and dual credit classes are being challenged as they would in a college course, and therefore, are prepared once they enroll at a university. At the same time, many dual credit and AP programs are balancing their efforts to ensure equitable access by implementing open enrollment policies (Bowers & Foley, 2018; Ferguson, et al., 2015; Guzy, 2016; Peters & Mann, 2009; Taylor & Yan, 2018).

Just as CCR is somewhat ambiguous to define and measure, none of the existing literature provided a set benchmark for what “rigor” means in regard to preparation for college academics (Conley, 2014). While AP curriculum establishes quality control through professional development opportunities and comprehensive (Conley, 2014), end-of-course exams that students must pass to receive credit, dual credit lacks these and is typically considered to be the easier of the two programs. However, the issue of improving CCR extends beyond curriculum

and whether a student can reach a certain benchmark. Many students may be eligible to enroll in AP and/or dual credit courses, yet they may choose not to do so (Mansell & Justice, 2014). Consequently, intentional recruitment strategies that help to increase participation and ensure that all college-bound students take advantage of early exposure to college-level courses are warranted (Leonard, 2013; Mansell & Justice, 2014).

Educating the Whole Student

Hooker and Brand (2010) acknowledged the importance of providing students with opportunities for advanced academic content; however, they also recommended that educators extend their efforts to address non-academic factors that can affect the educational pathways of students. Continued research on the social, emotional, and intellectual maturity necessary for students to be successful with accelerated curriculum and in postsecondary education is an additional concern (Camp & Walters, 2016; Kulik, 2004; Leonard, 2013; Peters & Mann, 2009). Students who are first in their families to go to college or who come from a low socioeconomic background often lack the skills necessary to navigate college and receive limited support outside of school because their family members have minimal knowledge of how college works (Hooker & Brand, 2010).

For all students, CCR can improve if they have accurate and up-to-date information so that they make the best decisions based on their needs and priorities (Park, et al., 2014; Peters & Mann, 2009). Counselors, specifically those involved in advising students on which courses to take, play a pivotal role in helping students make informed decisions about their course load. Furthermore, counselors directly improve the CCR of their students by educating them on nonacademic skills necessary to be successful beyond high school (Digby, 2016; Durosko, 2019; Leonard, 2013; Loveland, 2017). Parental involvement is also a key indicator of college

readiness. When parents regularly talk to their children about their schoolwork and college aspirations, it increases the likelihood that they apply for and ultimately, attend college (An, 2010; An, 2013; Kim & Schneider, 2005; Leonard, 2013). When all stakeholders are actively involved in deciding to participate in accelerated programs, students benefit from decisions based on finding the best educational and social-emotional match for their unique needs (Leonard, 2013; Peters & Mann, 2009).

Summary

The review of literature began with a historical look into educational reform and how to best understand our current challenges. In the past decade, college completion and retention rates have stabilized, and the lack of growth combined with an increasing need for remedial courses at the collegiate level have caused great concern among educators and researchers. In an effort to define college readiness and determine how it is most accurately measured, it is easy to see how this adds to the trials facing educators. Chapter 2 also provided a detailed look at the benefits and drawbacks to both AP and dual credit programs and suggests how these courses could have possibly influenced student experiences in college. This study was designed to learn from students how educators can bridge the gap between secondary and postsecondary education so that we can improve college readiness for all students. In the next chapter, I describe the research design and specific data collection and analysis methods that are best suited to answer the research questions posed by the proposed study.

CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this qualitative dissertation study was to ascertain, from the post-secondary students' perspective, the impact that their enrollment in Advanced Placement and dual credit courses in high school had on their level of college readiness and ability to achieve success in college. The following research questions were used to guide this study:

1. From the post-secondary students' perspective, what impact did their enrollment in Advanced Placement courses in high school have on their level of college readiness and ability to achieve success in college?
2. From the post-secondary students' perspective, what impact did their enrollment in dual-credit courses in high school have on their level of college readiness and ability to achieve success in college?
3. From the post-secondary students' perspective who participated in both Advanced Placement and dual-credit courses in high school, which program had a greater impact on their level of college readiness and ability to achieve success in college?

This chapter includes a detailed description of the qualitative research design, including sections dedicated to the methodology, sampling, instrumentation, data collection plan, and the data analysis strategies. In addition, positionality of the researcher as well as the limitations, assumptions, and ethical considerations of this study are discussed.

Research Design

This qualitative study was designed to investigate how student experiences in high school advanced academic programs, specifically Advanced Placement (AP) and dual credit, influenced their level of college readiness and ability to succeed in college. I determined that a qualitative research design was most appropriate for this study due to the open-ended nature of the research questions and my intent to conduct an exploratory study based on student perceptions. Open-ended questions provided opportunities for participants to clarify and expand upon their feelings

without feeling confined to certain responses (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Moreover, qualitative research practices allowed me to conduct this research study, using a more holistic approach where the process contributes to the learning experience as much as the findings (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Hesse-Biber, 2017). Since the intent of the study was to explore the personal experiences of students and seek meaning in how these experiences impacted their ability to succeed in college, the design and approach used for this study aligned with the interpretive approach to qualitative research (Hesse-Biber, 2017).

Within the interpretive strand of qualitative research, the study followed a phenomenological design, which was intent on discovering common themes and meaning from the lived experiences of students (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Phenomenology is a “qualitative approach aimed at generating knowledge about how people perceive experience” (Hesse-Biber, 2017, p. 26). From my perspective, it is important to note that phenomenologists approach their studies with the belief that people’s experiences are unique and implore a variety of methods to fully examine them (Hesse-Biber, 2017). Phenomenological studies promote the exploration of participant experiences rather than an explanation of events, which in turn provides a deeper understanding of how these experiences have impacted who the participants are and how they relate to the world around them (Horrigan-Kelly, et al., 2016).

In order to fully capture meaning from students’ perspectives of their high school experiences and how those experiences impacted their ability to succeed in post-secondary studies, I conducted individual interviews with each of the participants. Although student voice has often been overlooked, educational researchers have recently recounted the importance of shifting the design of educational inquiry from *on* students to *with* students (Cook-Sather, 2006; Cook-Sather, 2014; Fine, et al., 2007; Groundwater-Smith & Mockler, 2016; Quijada Cercerer,

et al., 2013). Regarding educational reform, some research projects have reported correlations between the considerable efforts to include student voice and improved academic achievement (Cook-Sather, 2014; DeFur & Korinek, 2010). Furthermore, student voice needs to become a priority for educational research, especially at the secondary level (Pazey & DeMatthews, 2019).

By incorporating the voices of former students, I intended to find meaning in their experiences and evaluate the ability of advanced academic programs in this school district to prepare students for post-secondary education. Specifically, all participants in this study were recent graduates (within four years of graduation) of one of the high schools within the sample school district. According to Mitra (2008), engaging students in research helps with their social-emotional development and is dependent on the relationships they have with the adults on their campus. In order to establish a certain level of comfort among participants, I provided a confidential and safe environment for students to reflect on their experiences and participate in conversations openly with one another. Furthermore, participants were reassured that their responses would not be shared with any teachers or administrators from the school district.

The aim of this phenomenological study was to explore the experiences of students who graduated from one of two high schools in Central ISD and continued their education at the post-secondary level. Through in-depth interviews with each of the participants, I was able to gain valuable insight into the genuine experiences of students in AP and dual credit courses and help determine which courses and experiences were the most impactful on their level of college readiness and ability to succeed in college. The information gathered and the conclusions drawn from this research study may be used to establish practices that improve the AP and dual credit programs within Central ISD and intentionally promote college readiness among the students enrolled in such courses. Furthermore, the findings may be used to inform and develop a better

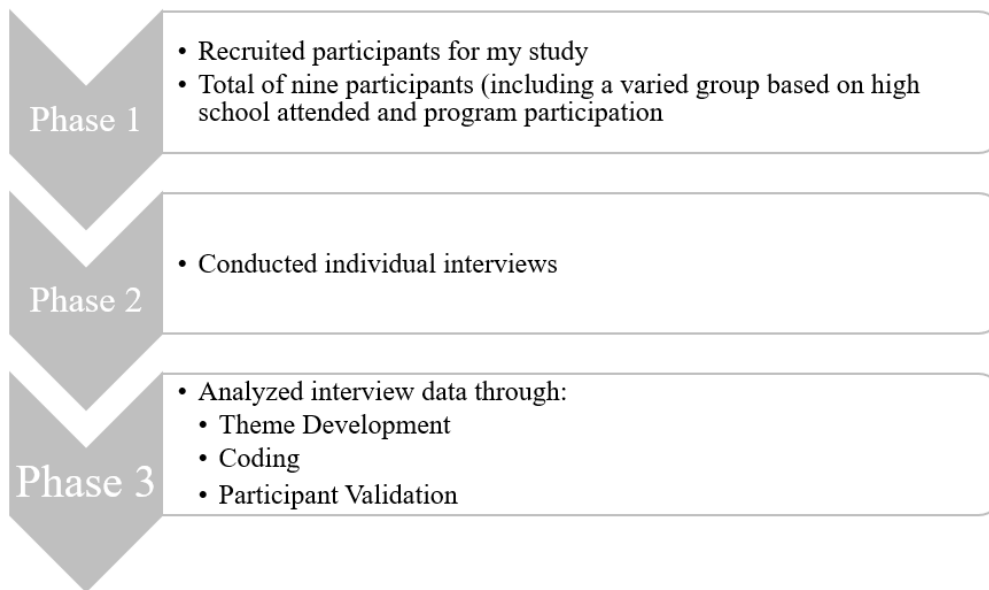
understanding of the skills necessary to succeed in postsecondary education and underscore the need for more research in this field. Even though the study is limited in generalizability, the findings may be representative of schools of similar size, location, and demographic breakdown.

Initial Phases of the Dissertation Study

This phenomenological study collected data using individual interviews, which followed a semi-structured format. While the population of this study consisted of postsecondary students that graduated from one of the high schools in the Central Independent School District (pseudonym), the sample only included those students that have graduated within the last five years and volunteered for the proposed study. In addition to the school district, pseudonyms were given to both high schools from which the participants graduated and the students themselves.

Figure 2

Phases of the Dissertation



Following approval of my dissertation committee and the University of North Texas' Institutional Review Board (IRB), I began the recruitment phase of the proposed study.

A recruitment flyer was distributed through various social media platforms by current and former employees of each high school. Potential participants completed the survey and were screened to make sure they met the criteria of the study. From this initial group, participants were selected, and then I began the data collection and analysis phases of the study. Figure 2 depicts the initial phases of this phenomenological study and briefly describes how the data was collected and analyzed.

Population and Sample

In the following section, an explanation of the sample population and the methods utilized to select the individuals who were asked to participate in the in-depth interviews is provided. In addition, a comparison of demographic data for each of the participating high schools, the combined district, and the state of Texas is described.

Description and Context of the Research Site

This study took place in the Central Independent School District (CISD), which is a rapidly growing district located in a suburban community in north Texas. Since the 2004, Central ISD (CISD) increased from approximately 7,500 students to almost 19,000 students by the 2022-2023 school year. According to the Fast Growth School Coalition (n.d.), which identifies and advocates for rapidly growing school districts in Texas, schools must meet the following criteria to be considered a fast-growth district: schools must have at least 2,500 students, must have increased student enrollment by 10% over the last five years, or have a net growth of 3,500 students. Central ISD has met all three of these criteria and has for several years. Until 2007, Central HS was the only high school in the Central ISD; however, due to their expanding student population, the CISD school board decided to open a second high school campus, Central West High School.

Whenever Central ISD opened the second high school campus, they intended to keep the demographics at both high schools comparable. A comparison of the demographic data for the entire school district, Central High School, and Central West High School is provided in Table 1.

Table 1

Ethnic Breakdown and Demographic Information for Central ISD (in %)

	Central ISD	Central HS	Central West HS
African American	15	16	15
Hispanic	23	20	25
White	46	45	50
American Indian	<1	<1	<1
Asian	12	14	7
Pacific Islander	<1	<1	<1
2 or more races	4	4	3
Economically Disadvantaged	27	22	28
At Risk	24	17	22
Gifted Education (GT)	12	17	12
Section 504	10	14	14
Emergent Bilingual (EB)	11	4	5
Special Education	12	8	10

In most areas, both high schools were relatively close to each other, with the greatest discrepancies (more than 5% difference) occurring between the populations of Asian students, students labeled as economically disadvantaged and at risk, and the students that qualified for and receive gifted education (GT) services. It should be noted that the demographic data for Central ISD, Central High School, and Central West High School were collected from the Texas Academic Performance Reports for the 2020-2021 school year. The Texas Education Agency issues these reports every year and includes vast amounts of performance data for schools and

districts, including performance rates on the State of Texas Assessment of Academic Readiness (STAAR) tests, graduation rates, attendance rates, etc.

Description and Selection of the Research Participants and Data

Participants in this study graduated from one of the Central ISD's two comprehensive high school campuses within the past five years. Table 1 also provides detailed demographic data, including the racial and ethnic student group breakdowns, for each campus and includes comparative data for the district and state levels. Although Central ISD attempted to divide the attendance zones equitably, some noteworthy discrepancies exist between the two high schools' student groups. Most notably, Central West High School (CWHS) had a substantially larger percentage of students identified as at-risk for not graduating, as well as those identified as economically disadvantaged. Variations also existed between the two high schools regarding their enrollment of African American and Hispanic students. Central High School (CHS) had a larger percentage of African American students but a smaller percentage of Hispanic students when compared to CWHS.

To recruit a heterogeneous mixture of participants, I asked each of the high school's current and former principals to post a link to the proposed study requirements and asked potential participants to fill out a brief questionnaire in order to ascertain their eligibility to participate in this study. The intent of the post on social media was to gain the attention of recent alumni, specifically those who graduated between 2015 and 2019, and directed participants to a Google Form that collected basic data, such as their name, their contact information, the name of the school they attended, their year of graduation, and whether they participated in AP courses, dual credit courses, or a combination of both programs. In addition to the basic demographic details, the form included questions about the college(s) they attended since high school, whether

they enrolled in an honors college program, and whether they were a first-generation college student in their family (see Table 2).

Table 2

Description of Participants

Participant	Initials	Description
1	ES	Graduated from high school in 2019; took only AP classes in high school; majoring in English Education
2	KH	First person in her immediate family to attend college; took both AP and dual credit courses in high school; current Ph.D. student
3	ML	Took only dual credit classes in high school; in the process of completing her student internship semester
4	MF	Pursuing a master's degree; enrolled in only AP classes in high school
5	BJ	Enrolled in both AP and dual credit courses; attended a smaller college before transferring to a larger, 4-year university
6	AW	Only enrolled in dual credit courses in high school
7	ST	Participated in both types of advanced academic classes; entered college with 45+ credit hours
8	TD	Took AP classes in high school; attending college out of state
9	LY	Participated in both AP and dual credit courses; attending college out of state

Upon reviewing all the received information, I distributed additional information to all potential participants that completed the questionnaire through email. For all those interested in participating in the study, I sent them the informed consent form (see Appendix B), which provided more detailed information concerning further requirements for participation and a brief overview of the proposed research design. At this point in the recruitment process, I also informed the potential participants of the purpose of the study and the positive impact their participation could have on the development of these programs and positive student experiences in the future.

In order to participate, individuals must have graduated from one of the CISD high

schools; completed coursework in AP classes, dual credit classes, or a combination of both; and be currently enrolled in or recently graduated from a college or university. Once I received the informed consent forms back from all prospective participants, efforts were made to select a sample that was representative of district and campus demographics. Selected participants were contacted to set up a day and time for their individual interviews. For the proposed study, interviews were conducted virtually using the Zoom platform due to the impact of the Corona-19 virus (COVID-19) and recommendations for social distancing. In addition, virtual interviews were necessary due to the logistical and scheduling challenges associated with multiple participants living in other parts of Texas or throughout the country.

Although phenomenological studies typically include data from three to ten participants (Creswell & Creswell, 2018), other qualitative research scholars stress the importance of reaching saturation during the data collection phase of the study (Charmaz, 2006; Fusch & Ness, 2015). When conducting qualitative research, the term “saturation” refers to a point in the data collection process where the researcher is no longer gaining new information from the participants (Charmaz, 2006; Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Although data saturation is different for each type of research design, it is best achieved in a phenomenological study using probing questions (Fusch & Ness, 2015). To reach data saturation and collect information from a diverse sample of the population, I included nine postsecondary students in this study. Although the sample was small, I did achieve my goal of having a diverse set of participants and collected thorough data regarding their experiences as high school students.

Data Collection

To investigate the impact that student enrollment in AP and dual credit courses had on their level of college readiness and their ability to succeed at the postsecondary level, post-

secondary students were asked to share their experiences and provide insight that could influence high school advanced academic programs in the future. For the proposed study, semi-structured individual interviews with each of the participants served as the primary source of data collection. As mentioned previously in this chapter, Figure 2 provides an overview and brief description of the data collection and analysis process.

Student participants were over the age of 18, which allowed them to provide consent for their participation in the proposed study, and intentionally represented a variety of student demographic groups, including both male and female students. Prior to beginning the interview process, I communicated through email with the selected participants to explain the purpose of the research study, to provide assurances of confidentiality, to make sure that participants are familiar with the Zoom program, and to reiterate that the student's participation in the study is completely voluntary and can be revoked at any time. This information was also reviewed with the participants prior to their scheduled interview over Zoom. Moreover, I reviewed the informed consent forms with any students participating in the interview process and ensured that all questions and concerns of the participants are addressed. Interviews lasted approximately 30-60 minutes and, with participant permission, were audio- and video-recorded through the Zoom platform to ensure accurate transcription of participant statements. As described in Figure 2, interviews for the proposed dissertation study took place during phase two of the study during the 2021-2022 school year.

Interviews, whether conducted face-to-face, over the telephone, through email, or in an individual setting, enhanced the research process when it was not possible to observe participants in a natural setting (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Furthermore, I was able to retain more control over the types of questions asked of participants during interviews and the ability to adjust the

structure of the interview based on feedback from the participants' experiences and opinions. Individual interviews "provide an opportunity for researchers to learn about social life through the perspective, experience, and language of those living it," (Hesse-Biber, 2017). Limitations for in-depth interviews included the possibility that my presence during data collection could result in bias among the participant responses, that the data collection taking place outside of the natural setting where the participant's experiences are actually happening could alter the information being gathered, and that the information provided by participants is filtered through their own views and could introduce further bias (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

Although focus groups were considered as a form of data collection for this study, I decided to conduct in-depth, individual interviews due to the onset of COVID-19. To respect the health of the participants, all but one of the participants chose to be interviewed virtually. To establish a semi-structured interview process, I developed a detailed protocol, including direct questions and options for probing questions, for the in-depth interviews (See Appendix A for the protocols used during data collection). In-depth interview protocols helped me remain on task; however, the format also provided the participants more freedom to discuss what was most interesting or important to them (Hesse-Biber, 2017). During the interviews, students were asked to describe their overall experiences in high school advanced academic courses and how these experiences impacted their level of college readiness as well as their ability to succeed in postsecondary education. In order to keep the dialogue flowing, I utilized probing questions when necessary to encourage the participants to expand upon their answers and to provide as much detail as possible.

Data Analysis Plan

For all participants of the proposed study, basic demographic data were collected prior to

the interviews, including a list of all AP and dual credit courses that the student took while in high school and how well they performed in these classes (i.e., their grades, what they scored on the AP exam, or whether they earned college credit for them). In order to fully understand the perspectives of the student participants in the proposed study, I reviewed the participants' transcript history and clarified their participation in one or both advanced academic programs.

Following the review of participant data, I transcribed the information collected during the interviews manually. Although an online software program that transcribes the audio-recorded files was considered, the decision was made to personally transcribe the data to fully evaluate the participants' responses and gain a clearer understanding of their experiences in advanced academic courses in high school. After transcription of the interview recordings was complete, each participant had the opportunity to review the transcripts of their responses to check for accuracy.

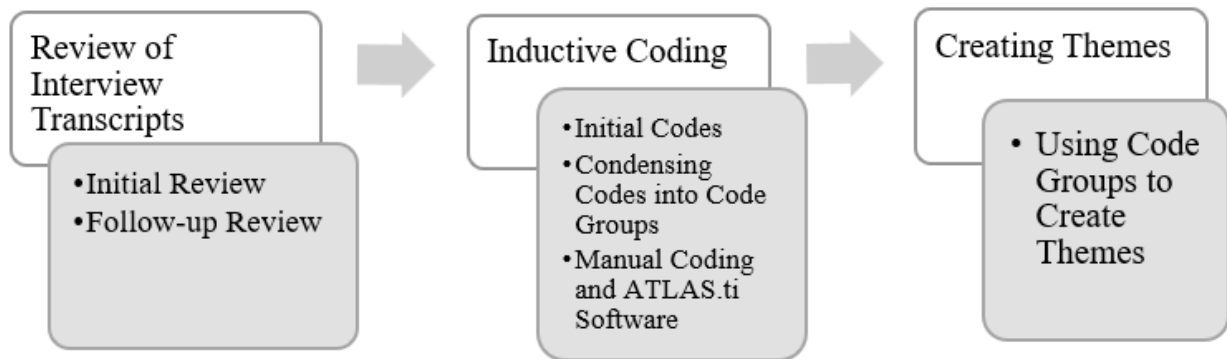
Once participants agreed that their experiences were accurately represented via the transcripts, I began coding their data. In the most basic sense, coding refers to establishing meaning from a portion of data, which can be anywhere between a single term and a paragraph of text (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Hesse-Biber, 2017). Furthermore, Hesse-Biber (2017) described the process of coding as identifying important parts of the transcribed interview data and assigning a label to each portion, which then can be used to establish critical themes and trends among participant responses. Once themes were established, I developed and assessed my interpretation of the themes, constructed meaningful ways of visualizing the data, and began to draft an accurate report of the findings (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

For this study, I employed the use of ATLAS.ti software to code the data obtained from each participant's interview. To ensure the participants' experiences as told to me during the

interview were accurately reflected in the codes provided by ATLAS.ti, I reviewed each of the transcripts and coded them independently and then compared the two sets of themes.

Figure 3

Data Analysis Process



Note. This figure provides a visual representation of the analysis process used in this study.

Positionality

When I left the classroom as a teacher, I took a position as a learning specialist, more commonly referred to as an instructional coach, supporting advanced academics for grades 5-12 in Central ISD. As I began learning about and attending conferences focused on advanced academics, I found that even though schools are offering more opportunities than ever for students to be exposed to advanced curriculum – through an extensive list of Advanced Placement (AP) coursework and booming dual credit/dual enrollment programs – students do not necessarily experience increased academic success at the postsecondary level. However, much of the research addressing this issue has been conducted on a large scale and typically overlooks the perspectives of the students themselves.

In the year prior to beginning my coaching position, Central ISD participated in the Equal Opportunity Schools program, which trained district- and campus-level staff on recruitment and

identification strategies aimed at closing opportunity gaps between groups of students, implementing open enrollment policies for all advanced courses, and removing other barriers that prevent students from being successful in advanced academic programs. Several administrators, teachers, and counselors working in Central ISD participated in this initiative and some still work with students and have influenced enrollment and participation trends among the participants of the study. As the district learning specialist for advanced academics, I spent a substantial amount of my time tracking the progress of these students while in high school and examining trends in participation and performance data for our AP and dual credit programs during the 2016-2017 school year. In addition, I also compared enrollment data for the district's Advanced Placement and Dual Credit programs and worked with district administrators on the possibility of offering an associate degree program for students in the Central ISD.

Through the experiences gained as a learning specialist and the time I spent evaluating data specific to advanced academic programs provided me with prior knowledge of the enrollment trends in Central ISD and thus could have introduced bias into my study if any assumptions or conclusions were made based on previous experience rather than solely focusing on the quantitative data that was collected during the study. As a current administrator at a Central ISD high school campus, student participants might have hesitated to be open and honest about their experiences, which could have also introduced response bias into the study. Therefore, I reminded each participant that confidentiality was ensured throughout this study and that the purpose is to inform practice and policy to improve student experiences. Moreover, I explained that absolutely none of their responses would be reported to any school personnel. Reduced anonymity and possible reactive and investigative effects are weaknesses of the interview process described by Tashakkori and Teddlie (2003), which could all influence the

integrity of the study. Even though these concerns existed throughout the research process, I felt confident that everything possible was done to reduce the amount of bias and ensure confidence among the participants.

Although my experience of working closely with the advanced academic programs in the Central ISD could have introduced some threats to the validity of the study, it was also the reason for my drive to listen to student experiences and establish effective academic programs that prepare students for postsecondary education. As a learning specialist for grades 5 through 12, I spent time on all nine of Central ISD's secondary campuses and formed relationships with administrators and counselors on both high school campuses, which proved to be beneficial as I conducted interviews during the qualitative research phase. To avoid any potential personal bias, bracketing was used "to mitigate the potential deleterious effects of unacknowledged preconceptions related to the research and thereby to increase the rigor of the project" (Tufford & Newman, 2010, p. 2). Throughout the proposed study, I utilized the writing memos method of bracketing described by Tufford and Newman. Composing notes throughout the study allowed me to explain my thoughts about the research as I was conducting the study, report how the methods of data collection influenced the findings and illustrate my own feelings toward the overall process. Bracketing allowed me to consciously reflect on how my experiences and perspectives could have influenced how the study was conducted and data were collected.

Limitations of the Study

As mentioned in the positionality section of this chapter, the Central ISD participated in the Equal Opportunity Schools Program during the 2015-2016 school year and implemented several policies in the following school year that increased access and participation in advanced academic classes. For example, the Central ISD established completely open enrollment policies

regarding the AP and dual credit programs and removed required summer assignments for AP courses. In addition, counselors and administrators at the Central ISD high schools utilized the AP Potential reports to actively recruit students for advanced academic courses. It is unclear whether these implementations affected the experiences of the students in the sample of this study. If the implementations had an effect, student perceptions could have been altered, thus creating a limitation for the applicability of the findings of this study to be generalized to other districts that do not have similar implemented policies.

Ethical Considerations

Prior to beginning the interviews, I explained the purpose of the study to all selected student participants and obtained written consent from each participant. Participants understood their rights as part of the research process, including the confidentiality of their responses and their right to remove themselves from the study at any time. In addition, I made sure that participants understood the possibility that results from the research study could be published (Hesse-Biber, 2017); however, students knew that they would remain anonymous throughout all publications of the study. Even though I continue to work within the Central ISD as a district-level administrator, none of the students I worked with on my campuses were included in the sample for this study. The lack of personal knowledge of the participants helped minimize any investigator or response bias that could have impacted the study.

Summary

In review, this study followed a qualitative, phenomenological design. I conducted individual interviews, reviewed student perceptions regarding their experiences with advanced academic classes and programs, and specifically focused on how these experiences impacted their levels of college and career readiness and ability to succeed in college courses. During the

data collection phase of this study, I collected information from students regarding their specific AP and dual credit courses taken during high school and whether they received college credit(s) for these classes. My intent was to gain a deeper understanding of student experiences while participating in advanced academic programs in high school and how they impacted the students' level of CCR and ability to succeed in college, which hopefully informs policy and practice moving forward.

In the next chapter, findings from the data collection and data analysis phases of my study are presented. The themes that were established during the review of data as well as the findings that emerged from students' elaborations of their experiences and recommendations that they offered for future generations of students are also provided.

CHAPTER 4

PRESENTATION OF FINDINGS

The purpose of this qualitative dissertation study was to ascertain, from the post-secondary students' perspective, the impact that their enrollment in Advanced Placement (AP) and dual credit courses in high school had on their level of college readiness and their ability to achieve success in college. The intent of this study was to utilize the results of this study to improve the information available for parents, students, and educators regarding the course selection process. A specific focus was placed on the choice to register for advanced academic programs and what information is most pertinent when making enrollment decisions. Based on my analysis of the data obtained from individual participant interviews conducted with nine students who formerly attended Central ISD (pseudonym), the findings substantiated the purpose of this study and are arranged, based on their response to the research questions that directed the study.

1. From the post-secondary students' perspective, what impact did their enrollment in AP courses in high school have on their level of college readiness and ability to achieve success in college?
2. From the post-secondary students' perspective, what impact did their enrollment in dual-credit courses in high school have on their level of college readiness and ability to achieve success in college?
3. From the post-secondary students' perspective who participated in both AP and dual-credit courses in high school, which program had a greater impact on their level of college readiness and ability to achieve success in college?

In this chapter, I present the themes that emerged from my analysis of the data, as they align with the research questions. The themes are followed by an overview of the participants' recommendations based on their experiences, what they might have done differently in retrospect to those experiences, and information they wish they had known to assist them in making their course selections in high school.

Presentation of Themes by Research Question

Throughout the analytical coding process, the emergent themes closely aligned with the research questions and provided a clear understanding of the impact Advanced Placement (AP) and dual credit courses had on their level of college readiness and their ability to succeed in college. The themes that emerged included a) the impacts unique to AP courses, b) the impacts associated with dual credit courses only, and c) those that were common to both advanced academic programs. In addition, participants that had experiences with both programs contributed their opinion on whether AP or dual credit courses in high school had a greater impact on their level of college readiness. Throughout the interviews, additional themes emerged from participants providing genuine and thoughtful feedback so that students can make more informed decisions when selecting their classes and educators can positively shape the AP and dual credit programs in the future (see Table 3).

Table 3

Association between the Research Questions and the Emergent Themes

Research Questions	Themes
1. From the post-secondary students' perspective, what impact did their enrollment in AP courses in high school have on their level of college readiness and ability to achieve success in college?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Higher expectations; pride in the student's academic achievement • Influence that AP exams had on the student's decision to enroll in AP courses
2. From the post-secondary students' perspective, what impact did their enrollment in dual-credit courses in high school have on their level of college readiness and ability to achieve success in college?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Learning the logistics of college – scheduling, following a syllabus, online platforms, etc. • Dual credit was a fairly new program; students may not have known what to expect as compared to current students
3. From the post-secondary students' perspective who participated in both AP and dual-credit courses in high school, which program had a greater impact on their level of college readiness and ability to achieve success in college?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Weighted GPA • Smaller class sizes • Earned college credits in high school; advancement in their college degree plan

(table continues)

Research Questions	Themes
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • More financially responsible • Increased personal responsibility for their own learning • Advanced writing skills • Impact of teachers/professors
Further Recommendations for Educators	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Promote programs more • Provide more guidance regarding course selection and the transition to postsecondary education • Distribute up-to-date information
Further Recommendations for Students	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Conduct research based on your interests and the school/major you want to pursue • Reduce stress/pressure; have fun

Note. Each theme is directly associated with the participants' responses to the interview questions, which stem from the research questions guiding this study.

Findings

This section presents the emergent themes gathered from the interviews of post-secondary students concerning their experiences in AP and dual credit classes in high school and how these experiences shaped their ability to be successful in college (see Table 4).

Table 4

Themes Collected During Data Analysis

Themes	References
[RQ 1] Higher expectations; pride in their academic achievement	11
[RQ 1] Influence that AP exams had on the student's decision to enroll in AP courses	9
[RQ 2] Learning the logistics of college – scheduling, following a syllabus, online platforms, etc.	17
[RQ 2] Dual credit was a fairly new program; students may not have known what to expect as compared to AP	9
[RQ 3] Weighted GPA for taking advanced academic courses	3
[RQ 3] Smaller class sizes as compared to college intro courses	2
[RQ 3] Earned college credits in HS; advancement in their college degree plan	13

(table continues)

Themes	References
[RQ 3] More financially responsible	3
[RQ 3] Increased personal responsibility for their learning	12
[RQ 3] Advanced writing skills	8
[RQ 3] Impact of Teachers/Professors	20
[Additional Feedback] Promote both programs	4
[Additional Feedback] Provide more guidance regarding course selection and the transition to postsecondary education	11
[Additional Feedback] Distribute up-to-date information regarding advanced academic classes	9
[Additional Feedback] Conduct research focused on your interests and schools/majors you wish to pursue	16
[Additional Feedback] Reduce stress/pressure; have fun	4

The following discussion highlights the impacts of each program individually and the advantages common to both programs. Furthermore, I describe which program is more valuable in preparing for college according to student perceptions and conclude with recommendations for how to better inform students and educators on the impacts of advanced academic programs on college readiness. Although the data gathered were overwhelmingly encouraging, this section discusses both positive and negative impacts of participating in these programs and challenges endured by some of the participants to provide a thorough and unbiased depiction of their experiences.

Impact of Advanced Placement (AP)

After brief introductions and a review of the participant's survey data, which included a listing of all advanced academics courses taken during high school, I asked them to describe their experiences in only their AP classes. For anyone who struggled with where to start, I prompted them with suggestions of discussing the teacher, level of difficulty of the courses, etc. To address Research Question 1, feedback was gathered from participants in response to their experiences in

AP classes and how these experiences shaped their ability to succeed in college. Participants reported that their experiences in AP courses provided them with a deeper appreciation and understanding of the content, but many of the participants also described the pressure and anxiety brought on by the cumulative AP exams, which serves as the sole deciding factor for whether credit is awarded or not.

AP Exams

Several participants mentioned the AP exams as the primary reason that they did not choose AP classes. For those who felt negatively about the AP exams, most described the anxiety and pressure of having to take the cumulative AP exam at the end of the year, especially since that one test was the only factor in whether they earned credit for each class. In reference to AP classes, one male participant (ST) stated that “everything hinges on this one day and you being competent on that one day...if you’re trying to prepare kids for college, that’s very dangerous because in college, you do have to be somewhat on your game every single day.” He went on to express that “the test is all that matters.” Students mentioned the lack of control and the fact that their performance in class throughout the year had no bearing on their ability to earn college credit. It simply came down to their ability to perform well on one test on one day. In reference to her own personal learning style, one participant (LY) reported that she “hated taking a test at the end of the year.” She went on to say that while she understood the need for educators to assess what students have learned, she struggled to deal with all the “anxiety leading up to the end of the year.”

Still other participants reported feeling very confident going into their test sessions and recalled that their teachers had prepared them extremely well for what was expected of them on the AP exams. One female participant (ES) stated that she “was very confident going into it” and

in “her ability to pass the AP exam.” She went on to describe the positive impact her experience in AP English has had on her ability to succeed in college. Another participant (KH) recalled how well her AP US History teacher had prepared her students for the AP exam and went on to say that it was “the most confident I’ve ever went to any test.” It was clear from the participants’ responses that their teachers played a significant role in their level of confidence going into the exams and in their overall reflections of their experiences in AP courses.

Deeper Understanding and Appreciation for Content

Challenging curriculum and content were discussed as benefits of both advanced academic programs; however, participants commented on a deeper level of understanding and appreciation for their content, specifically for the AP courses that were aligned with their future majors in college. For example, one female participant (ES) discussed the benefits of learning to write in a more sophisticated way and mentioned how her teachers taught her critical skills that “elevated my writing towards the end of high school.” She went on to describe how her experiences in AP courses helped foster her passion for English and provided her with a strong foundation on her path to a degree in English. Another participant (MF) reported that she chose to only take AP classes because she wanted to challenge herself and “was really invested in taking the most difficult courses.” She went on to express that because she cared so much about her grades and the status associated with being at the top of her class, she made the decision to take all AP classes that were offered at her high school. She described feeling an enormous sense of pride in the challenges she took on and her ability to excel in all her AP classes.

Impacts of Dual Credit

To address Research Question 2, those who participated in dual credit courses in high school were asked about their overall experiences and what impact dual credit had on their level

of college readiness and their ability to succeed in college. Participants mentioned their ability to have more control over earning credit for their courses and the importance of learning the logistics of being a college student as the overwhelming benefits of the dual credit program. Although there can be challenges associated with dual credit courses, none of the participants mentioned any elements from their experiences that had a negative impact on their level of college readiness or their ability to succeed in college.

Credits Based on Overall Performance

In contrast to the negative opinions of some participants regarding the requirement to pass the AP exams to receive credit, participants appreciated that their performance in the entire dual credit course was the determining factor in whether they earned credit for college. Multiple participants mentioned that they felt like there was less risk associated with dual credit, since they were fully responsible for the effort they put into their work and the level to which they prepared for each assignment. One participant (LY) preferred dual credit courses because she “liked having an actual grade” that would earn her credit rather than “having to have all of this anxiety leading up to the end of the year,” which referred to the AP exams she need to pass to earn credit in those classes.

Although one participant (MF) took all AP classes and felt very strongly that AP was the superior program when she was in high school, she mentioned that “dual credit courses kind of make more sense in getting a credit rather than preparing all year to take a test and then taking a standardized test to measure everything you know about something.” This participant went on to explain that the decision should be based on the individual students’ priorities. If gaining a credit for college is their focus, she felt that dual credit is a better investment. It was clear that students valued the ability to have more control over their performance and whether they were able to

earn credit in their advanced academic classes.

Logistics of College

Overwhelmingly, students reported that the greatest benefit of taking dual credit is that they already knew how to do college when they arrived on campus. Participants discussed a wide variety of nonacademic skills they learned through the process of enrolling and participating in dual credit courses in high school. Acquired skills included the typical class schedule of college, how to read and use a syllabus throughout their courses, how to navigate the online platforms such as Blackboard or Canvas, and stricter grading policies in college.

Several of the participants mentioned the advantages of already knowing how to use the course syllabus to guide their learning and the familiarity they felt with the structure of having classes on the typical college format of Monday-Wednesday-Friday or Tuesday-Thursday. One participant (AW) stated that “they don’t teach you anything prior to going to college about how to read a syllabus, how to show up for your classes, how to meet your professors, but dual credit definitely taught me how to do that.” Another participant (ST) expressed how “the process of getting a syllabus and having the entire schedule lined out” in addition to knowing the due dates for the entire semester and understanding the grading breakdown from the first day was beneficial when stepping into college classes for the first time. He went on to explain that “dual [credit] has prepared me because when I got to UNT, I was sort of already on that schedule because my senior year, I was taking like 12 credit hours.”

In addition to the class schedules and syllabi, students mentioned the benefit of being able to navigate online platforms, such as Canvas and Blackboard, for course materials and assignments. One participant (LY) described the importance of learning how to utilize Canvas during her dual credit courses. Even though her current school used a different program, she

previously developed the habit of relying on the online platform for turning in assignments, communicating with professors and peers, and knowing how to obtain most required resources for each class. This provided her an advantage as many students around her were stuck having to learn this skill in addition to everything else associated with the transition to higher education.

Several participants recalled the importance of adapting to a system where retakes of tests and quizzes are not allowed, which is drastically different from the grading policies of Central ISD. Teachers of AP courses must follow the guidelines of Central ISD, which allows for retakes of all assignments for up to a 70. However, the dual credit professors, even if they were also Central ISD staff, follow the policies of the college, which leaves these decisions up to the professors completely. Therefore, students learned the valuable lesson of how to purposefully study and prepare for tests and quizzes without the safety net of a retake policy while still in high school. One participant (ST) drew attention to this during his interview and even included this in one of the pieces of advice he believed students should know before going to college. Specifically, he warned that “if you don’t study and you’re not prepared for it, it will hurt.” It was clear from the participants’ experiences that increased academic expectations and various logistical elements of college coursework were beneficial to students and helped make the transition to college much smoother.

Some of the participants were “first generation” college students and were often solely responsible for applying to and enrolling in college. These students were the first in their immediate family to attend and/or graduate from a college or university and therefore, did not always have family to help them through the challenging steps of going to college. These participants commented on the value of learning these lessons in the familiar and supportive environment of high school, where there were numerous adults that could help them through the

challenges and complexities of this process. Students only mentioned these benefits when describing their experiences in dual credit classes, but it is unclear whether this was something students gained through their AP classes as well.

Counselors, teachers, and administrators were instrumental in making sure that students had the support and encouragement necessary to participate in advanced academic programs in high school. Even if students did not continue at the same institution where they earned their dual credit hours, participants reported they found it much easier to navigate the enrollment and registration processes at their next college after having already completed the process once. One participant (BJ) that took primarily AP courses recalled her experiences of not knowing how to look for colleges or how to complete the application and enrollment processes on her own. During her time in high school, the dual credit program in the Central ISD was just getting started and very few courses were offered to students. She indicated that she would have greatly benefited from the additional resources and supports that are available to current students beginning their dual credit journey.

Impacts of Both Programs - Advanced Placement (AP) and Dual Credit

While several of the experiences shared by participants were unique to either AP or dual credit courses, many of the benefits they discussed were common to both advanced academic programs. Participants discussed the advantages they experienced due to weighted grade point averages (GPA) for advanced classes, smaller class sizes when compared to introductory level courses at larger colleges, and the ability to earn college credits before they graduated high school. When students earned college credits ahead of schedule, they typically graduated earlier and experienced less financial burden than students who started their collegiate journey without any credits.

Weighted GPA

Although the study focused primarily on the impact of advanced academic coursework at the collegiate level, most of the participants mentioned the benefit of having a weighted grade point average (GPA) for AP and dual credit courses while in high school. For example, in the Central ISD, AP and dual credit courses were worth 6.0 on the GPA scale as compared to grade level courses that earn a 5.0. Obviously, this provided a boost in students' GPA calculations, which were used for class rankings as well as scholarship and college applications. One participant (ST) explained that many students chose to take dual credit classes since they were typically seen as being easier than AP courses, but they carried the same elevated GPA. He recalled his own personal experience where his "GPA shot up through the roof because I was taking the easier class and getting the GPA boost."

It is important to note that GPA calculations, weighted scales, and rules for class rankings are determined by each individual school district, and not all colleges and scholarships have identical requirements for their application process. Multiple participants reported that it is imperative for students to do their own research to know if the boost in GPA is applicable for them and if it benefits them at their school of choice. ST also provided a reminder that "the only GPA that matters is the college one" because your GPA for dual credit courses transfers and sets the foundation for your college GPA.

Smaller Class Sizes

For most of the advanced academics courses, regardless of them being AP or dual credit, the college credits earned by students are those at the introductory level in college. For Central ISD students, dual credit and AP classes tend to be around 30 students or fewer in each class. These smaller classes were described as a benefit when compared to the large, lecture hall

classes on college campuses that often have hundreds of students, depending on the size of the institution. One participant (ST) stated that “you got to have more in-depth conversations and you got to have that good relationship with the teacher.”

He continued to describe the benefit these relationships had on his learning and mentioned the relationships he continues with many of his AP and dual credit teachers. ST stated that the dual credit and AP teachers “were more lenient” than college professors and were also more understanding to the demands of extra-curricular activities of high school students. This experience was not limited to this one participant. Throughout the interview process, other participants also referred to large classes at their university where students might feel more like a number and never even get a chance to meet their professor personally. Another participant (ES) described the relationship she had with one of her high school teachers and how she was “incredibly influential for me and definitely helped me take my interests and focus and turn that into something that I wanted to do as a career.”

Earning College Credits

Both programs allow for students to earn college credits; however, the requirements are slightly different for each of the advanced academic programs. Dual credit courses are college courses that satisfy certain credit requirements for high school graduation while, at the same time, earning college credit hours. Since they are college courses, these credits transfer just like any other credit hours from other schools. However, each university determines whether to accept credits from dual credit courses and what courses the credits specifically count for on the student’s transcript. Several participants mentioned the belief that dual credit is better for students attending in-state universities because their courses would not be able to transfer out-of-state; however, multiple participants attending out-of-state colleges, expressed that their

institution accepted the transfer credits from the Central ISD's dual credit program. One participant (LY) reported that "all of my credits transferred" even though she attended an out-of-state university.

Another participant (TD) who attended a different out-of-state institution reported that she took AP courses since she was told that the credits would not transfer. However, she explained that she now works in the Office of Admissions at her university, and they offer an Online Transfer Catalog that allows students to verify which courses transfer and which ones do not. She reported that "every single class would have transferred had I taken dual credit." Although this participant did earn credits for some of her AP exam scores, she warned that students should thoroughly research all the schools they are considering because each school is unique in their requirements. Feedback from multiple participants echoed the importance of students researching the schools they are interested in whenever making course selections and making sure they know all the possibilities that are available to them.

Most students participate in advanced academic coursework in order to get a head start on college and complete many of the general requirements prior to attending college beyond high school. Several participants mentioned the number of credit hours they had already earned once they arrived at college. One participant (ST) explained that he was prepared for his first year on his college campus because he "was sort of already on that schedule because my senior year, I was taking 12 credit hours."

In addition to earning their degrees ahead of schedule, many of the participants mentioned that earning college credits in high school was more financially responsible because dual credit courses are much cheaper than full-time college courses and AP exams are even more cost-efficient than dual credit courses. However, it is also important to note that while getting a

head start on college can prove to be extremely valuable in terms of time and cost, some of the participants also shared concerns over completing college too quickly and having to make decisions for life beyond college much earlier than their peers. I discuss this in more detail later in the chapter.

Increased Expectations

Both AP and dual credit classes expose students to advanced content that goes beyond what typical high school students experience. Almost all the participants, whether they participated in AP, dual credit, or both programs, stated that the advanced content of these classes helped them prepare for the increased expectations of college and thus made the transition to higher education that much easier. In addition to enhanced academic experiences, one participant (MF) recalled that the skills that really transferred to college were instilling a heightened work ethic and the “mindset of being around other students that were focused on challenging themselves academically.” Another participant (ST) chose his courses based on simply wanting to fulfill the requirement on his degree plan and discussed wanting to go “straight to the stuff that is actually pertinent to your major.”

Regarding the specific advanced academic content that students gained as part of these programs, most participants focused on the advanced writing instruction they received through their AP and/or dual credit courses. Regardless of the program they participated in, the results were the same - their ability to write had grown significantly and was the most beneficial skill they needed for their transition to college. One participant (ES) discussed how teachers being more focused on writing instruction, word choice, and sentence construction “elevated my writing towards the end of high school and then it’s something that I don’t even think about anymore when I’m writing for college.” Another participant (MF) also mentioned the advanced

writing instruction she received but also wished there had been more instruction in scientific writing. She stated that “once you get to college and you’re in a science program, there’s tons of scientific writing and no one really knows how to do it.”

College also demands that students take more personal responsibility for their learning and overall, right to an education. Most of the participants noted an appreciation for increased independence in their learning in high school advanced courses. A participant (ES) expressed her appreciation for her AP English teachers that created assignments that were “exploratory” and provided the students with more independence to work outside of a more formulaic approach to research and writing. In contrast to being provided a formula and teacher-chosen resources, her AP courses provided open-ended assignments and the teachers encouraged critical thinking and the freedom to “discover and research and modify our thesis.”

Time management skills and an increased work ethic to meet the demands of more challenging curricula were also common themes among participant responses. According to another participant (ST), “your personal responsibility and your personal motivation is a much larger component” to your success as a student. Multiple participants noted the importance of finding balance between school and their other activities and adapting their schedule due to the increased workload of the advanced curriculum. Specifically, another participant (AW) described how she had to work much harder than her peers to remain eligible for band, but she felt as though her experience with more challenging coursework helped her to have a very smooth transition to college and to ensure that she could be successful.

Impact of Teachers

Perhaps the most important factor in determining how beneficial advanced academics were to their level of college readiness was the teacher in each of their classes. Almost all the

participants mentioned how much of an impact the teacher had on their learning and their overall experience in advanced classes; although the way in which the teachers impacted their students' experiences varied among the sample. One participant (KH) reported that "her AP classes also helped prepare her for the faster pace of learning required in college" and described how her teachers structured their AP classes in a way that helped them adapt to the demands of college courses. Another participant (ES) recalled how one of her teachers was "very good at teaching me and shaping me for the future." She went on to describe how "incredibly influential" the teacher was and how it "definitely helped me take my interests and focus and turn that into something that I wanted to do as a career."

Based on other participant feedback, the teacher also had a large impact on their experiences in advanced classes based on the overall learning environment the teacher created and how enjoyable the classes were. The participants mentioned how the teacher was able to make the content enjoyable and piqued student interest with their assignments. Most notably, several of the participants described the relationships they had with their teachers, how those teachers became mentors to them, and how those relationships still exist years later. One participant (ST) mentioned each of his teachers by name and how most of them have kept in touch throughout the years. He even referred to an ongoing chess match that he has with his AP Chemistry teacher and how the greatest benefit of dual credit was that "you got to have more in-depth conversations and you are able to have that good relationship with the teacher." He continued to explain that relationships do "positively impact your education, in my opinion, and I do like to get to know the profs."

Which Program is More Impactful?

Of the participants in my study, four of them participated in both AP and dual credit

classes in high school and were able to directly address Research Question 3. Three of these participants said that experiences in both programs positively impacted their level of college readiness and their ability to be successful in college. None of them felt like they would change anything about the courses they selected in high school. One participant (LY) who gained experiences through both programs suggested that students try both programs to see which is a better fit for them. Although she admitted that she “definitely preferred dual credit,” she also believed that each program had something to offer students and they should come to their own conclusions about what would have the greatest impact on their ability to be successful. She continued,

I feel like AP isn't for everybody, and I think that I learned that after I took dual credit. And I feel like dual credit isn't for everybody, and that some people prefer AP. So, I say it doesn't hurt to drop those classes and switch into different formats of the class. But I would definitely say to try it out and not just get rid of the idea of taking AP or dual credit.

Although he saw the benefits of both programs for other students, one participant (ST) expressed great enthusiasm regarding his experiences in the dual credit program, and his recommendation to future students is to take as many dual credit courses as possible while staying within the content areas they are strongest in and refraining from overextending themselves with an impossible workload. Specifically, he stated that even though a student is doing work in dual credit courses, “you aren't getting smashed into a pulp like you are in AP.” He reflected on how easy it is for students to take on too much, and he said he would like to tell future students to “not burn yourself out.” He went on to specifically recommend that they “try to have fun” and don't force themselves into situations where they might be miserable.

Post-Secondary Students' Recommendations for the Future

Feedback from the participant interviews directly addressed one or more of the research questions guiding this study; however, additional themes emerged through the coding process that extended beyond the research questions. Toward the end of each interview, I asked the participants a) if there was anything they would do differently about their experiences, and b) if there was anything they wished they could go back and tell their high school selves. From these questions and others throughout the interview process, the participants provided recommendations they believed are important to help guide the future of these programs and the experiences available to students. From the beginning of this study, the primary intended outcome was to help educators provide better guidance during course selection and to provide students with a clearer understanding of how advanced courses can impact their experiences in college.

Easier Transition to College

Every participant recounted their experiences in advanced academic courses and agreed that these experiences helped ease the transition to college. Yet, each of them had slightly different explanations for what contributed to their ability to be successful in the post-secondary setting. Regardless of whether they participated in AP, dual credit, or both types of advanced coursework, nearly every participant highlighted the advantage and benefits of the improved writing skills they acquired which they applied while they were in college. One participant (ES) spoke at length about the advantages of her advanced English courses and the more rigorous writing instruction she received from these teachers. Specifically, she recalled that her AP English instructors “taught us what it means to be a sophisticated writer.” Regardless of their

chosen majors, the advanced writing instruction they received while in high school was invaluable to them as they pursued their college diploma.

Of the participants that completed dual credit courses, most of them described the benefit of learning how to navigate and “do” college while they were still in high school. Participants of the study felt as though learning how to apply for college, enroll in classes, purchase textbooks, and follow stricter grading policies within the familiar and supportive environment of high school helped them get a head start when compared to post-secondary students without any college experience. Specifically, one of the participants (KH) recalled their experience as a “first generation” college student and reported the additional stress she experienced because she “had no clue what she was doing.”

When students participate in dual credit programs, their high school counselors and teachers become an instant support system that can guide students through the transition to college. While one participant (BJ) was appreciative of the support her high school staff provided, she suggested that they give students even more guidance regarding the basics of college and what it looks like as they make the transition to becoming a full-fledged college student. For example, she mentioned that she didn’t completely understand how the course selection process differed from high school.

While most of the participants strongly encouraged future students to enroll in AP and/or dual credit courses, a few of them expressed some caution regarding the number of credit hours students earn prior to being full-time college students. One area of concern focused on the unintended effects of obtaining most or all their basic courses while still in high school, which resulted in students going directly into courses specific to their major as first-year college students. This could put added pressure on students to be fully committed to their major upon

arriving at the university, which for some students might be unrealistic. One participant (LY) described how she partly wished she had taken more dual credit classes, but she added that if she had earned the additional credits, she would most likely be graduating this year, and she was not ready for that because, she admitted, “I’m only 20 years old, and I still don’t know what to do with my life.” While she felt academically prepared for college and confident in her degree plan, she did not feel like she was truly ready to graduate college and enter the career world just yet. Furthermore, the accelerated pace and early graduation could be even more challenging for students planning to pursue graduate degrees. Entering college with an extensive number of credits could require them to enter graduate school much earlier than some of their peers. While some students might appreciate the opportunity to complete their education earlier, others might not be mature enough to handle the pressures associated with this type of course work at a younger age.

Recommendations for Educators

Throughout the high school course selection process, students receive a variety of input from various people - their parents, teachers, counselors, administrators, coaches, classmates, etc. - and at times, it can be difficult to determine what advice is the most applicable to their unique circumstances. Multiple participants mentioned that they felt as though many of the educators providing them with guidance were biased and overtly supported one program over the other. One participant (AW) discussed her experience attending an informational session regarding AP and dual credit course options. She specifically recalled that the counselors “pushed AP classes like it was their job.” This participant felt strongly that dual credit was more beneficial for her, but she questioned her decision based on the push she received from this particular staff member. She recommended that counselors and teachers present a less-biased overview of each program

and focus more on coaching them through how to make the most informed decision based on their prospective institutions, degree plans, and individual strengths.

It is clear from the participants' experiences, however, that most educators helped them navigate the complicated course selection process during high school and provided the necessary encouragement, support, and guidance to smoothly transition to post-secondary education. Every one of the participants in this study expressed their appreciation for teachers and/or counselors that helped them throughout their advanced academic journey, especially those who have remained a source of guidance and advice even years beyond their high school graduation. As previously mentioned, one participant (ST) described his continued relationships with many of his high school teachers and the positive impact they had on his experiences in advanced classes.

The participants in this study represented a variety of colleges and universities which included schools of varying sizes and spanned almost the entire United States. Multiple participants mentioned that they made decisions about their advanced academic coursework based on information that they later found out to be untrue, specifically referencing inaccuracies regarding dual credit courses not transferring to out-of-state colleges and universities. While it is impossible for any single educator to know all the degree requirements and credit restrictions for all degree plans at all institutions of higher education, the participants recommended that educators encourage and facilitate more in-depth research done by the student to ensure that they have the most up-to-date information regarding their options for transferring their credits earned through advanced courses.

Recommendations for Students

Throughout the interview process, it was clear that each of the participants had unique experiences and had their own specific motivations for taking AP and/or dual credit courses

while in high school. In different ways, all the participants mentioned the importance of staying true to themselves and doing their own research for what classes might benefit them the most. While it is a good starting point to gather information about classes from students that have taken the class previously, it is also imperative that students evaluate multiple perspectives and reach out to teachers, counselors, and other trusted advisors that want them to have the best experience possible.

Basically, participants reminded students that they should not just take other people's advice and really make sure that they researched all their possible options. One participant (ST) suggested that students focus on what they individually need to be successful, specifically stating, "Your personal responsibility and your personal motivation is a much larger component...It's true for college, it's true for the real world, but in high school, it's not because everything is spoon-fed to you." Throughout his interview, he reiterated the importance of students being informed and making the decisions that are best for them rather than just doing what other people tell them is best. He went on to clarify that students should "only do the classes you have valid reasons to take...If you just take classes because others are doing it or someone told you to, you won't be as driven to succeed."

In another interview, a participant (LY) recommended that students test both programs to see which is the best fit for them and to determine whether the program offerings align with what they wish to get from the course. This would alleviate the student having to base their decisions on the recommendations of others and allow them to decide which program is most beneficial for them based on their own experiences and preferences.

Based on the feedback from the participants, earning college credits while in high school was more beneficial when the student had a set plan for which school they wished to attend and

what major they planned to declare. While it was not necessary, the benefits of knowing these items ahead of time seemed to resonate with most of the participants. The determination of whether college credit is awarded for AP performance depends on which college or university the student attends. One participant (AW) described how she “took a lot of classes that didn’t apply to my degree necessarily, but I ended up using those as elective hours.” Her dual credit classes did not really align with her major because, as a high school student, she did not have a set plan for her future. Her credits ended up being classified as electives on her college transcript since they did not fulfill any required courses on her degree plan.

Furthermore, some of the participants reported how colleges can be flexible in awarding credits earned through advanced coursework in high school. One example was where the participant (ST) had earned credit for four semesters of English in high school, but his degree plan only required three semesters of English. He recalled that he “only needed three out of four semester credits of English...so the fourth one she [his advisor] took and said that can knock out your psychology requirement.” Many participants recounted similar situations where their advanced academic credits fulfilled random required courses in their degree plan or otherwise counted as elective credits.

Several participants discussed the expectation they had to take all advanced courses, maintain high grades, and earn a spot at the top of their class. However, they also stressed the importance of maintaining a balance between focusing on academics and participating in extracurricular activities to ensure that students are well-rounded and appreciate all that high school has to offer. Participants additionally warned against overloading themselves with too many advanced courses where their performance may suffer in all areas just to be able to say they are in all advanced classes.

One participant (MF) stated “the only thing I would have done differently is put less pressure on myself...it’s easy to get really caught up in having a lot of pride attached to all of your grades, and it’s really jarring going to college and realizing that none of it matters.” Specifically, she was referencing her class rank and GPA and how shocking it was when she got to college and realized that all of that had gone away. She was on a completely even playing field as all her peers; therefore, the most important things were work ethic and learning how to respond in challenging situations.

Multiple participants also provided reminders for students to believe in themselves and to have fun. Specifically, one participant (ST) wanted students to know they should focus on what they are good at when they are selecting courses and keep in mind what they might want to study in the future even if they do not know for certain. He concluded his interview by saying:

Do the things you are good at. At the end of the day, try to have fun. Don’t be miserable. Only do the classes that you have valid reasons to take. If you just take classes because others are doing so or someone told you to, you won’t be as driven to succeed.

Summary

The purpose of this study was to examine the impact that advanced high school coursework has on college and career readiness and the ability of students to be successful in postsecondary education. Students that graduated from high school between 2015 and 2019 in a public school district in Texas were interviewed individually regarding their experiences in Advanced Placement (AP) classes and/or dual credit courses. Some of the participants that enrolled and completed courses in both advanced programs were also asked if they felt as though one of the programs had a greater impact on their college educational experience than the other. I analyzed qualitative data collected during the individual interviews and examined how the data provided answers to Research Questions 1, 2, and 3. After each of the interviews was

transcribed, I used inductive coding to identify dominant themes within the research data. Following a thorough evaluation of the data, various benefits of the AP and dual credit programs emerged as well as several recommendations for future educators and students. In addition, participants who had experience in both types of advanced academic programs provided their perspectives on which courses had the greatest impact on their college readiness and ability to succeed in postsecondary education.

Chapter 5 provides an overview of the problem statement, research questions, and the methodology used in this qualitative dissertation study. In addition, I present the results of the study and explain the conclusions drawn from the data analysis that took place following the collection of qualitative data through individual interviews. Furthermore, implications for how these findings can be used to improve information available to students at the time of course selection in high school are discussed along with recommendations for how this research could be expanded in the future. Chapter 5 concludes with my own personal reflections and final thoughts on how this study could have a positive impact on future generations of students.

CHAPTER 5

DISCUSSION, IMPLICATIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This chapter includes a summary of the phenomenological qualitative study, with a comprehensive overview of the research study, including a consolidated review of the literature, the problem statement, the purpose of the study, and the research questions and methodology used to guide the study. Data were collected and analyzed through the qualitative methods outlined in Chapter 3, and the findings from this study were thoroughly discussed in Chapter 4. Furthermore, this chapter describes the conclusions that have been drawn from the data and how they address the research questions, identify possible implications for action and recommendations for further research, and concludes with my own personal reflections of the study.

Overview of the Study

An exhaustive review of the literature confirmed that although more students are going to college and even though schools across the country are providing more rigorous academic opportunities to students (An, 2013; Barlow et al., 2018; Durosko, 2019; Hooker & Brand, 2010; Park, et al., 2014; Taylor & Yan, 2018), colleges and universities are continuing to notice a decrease in students being prepared for the academic challenges of college (Bautsch, 2013; Center, 2012; Gaertner & McClarty, 2015; Sacher, 2016). College and career readiness (CCR), or preparing students for life beyond high school, has always been the ultimate goal of K-12 education; however, in an ever-changing world, this seems to be more difficult to achieve than ever before. For starters, CCR is a complex concept that is challenging to define and therefore, almost impossible to develop a universal method of assessment. Further compounding the issue, traditional measures of student achievement, such as grade point average (GPA) and

standardized college entrance exams, are no longer considered adequate predictors of student success beyond high school (Adcock & Surface, 2019), and heightened accountability measures are also failing to identify and attend to the persistent roadblocks that keep students from being successful (Rowland and Shircliffe, 2016).

Although the complexities of defining and assessing CCR provide for a challenging research environment, countless studies have been conducted to determine how educators can better prepare students for postsecondary education. From the review of the literature, the following recommendations emerged – the need for students to experience more advanced coursework throughout their K-12 education and the transitions between high school and college must be smoother for students. Participation in advanced academic programs, such as Advanced Placement (AP) and dual credit, addresses both recommendations, as well as increases the overall likelihood that students pursue postsecondary education and achieve success in college (Kretchmar & Farmer, 2013; Loveland, 2017; Taylor & Yan, 2018).

Multiple researchers reported that students need to be exposed to rigorous, college-level curricula while still in high school (An, 2013; Durosko, 2019; Hooker & Brand, 2010; Park, et al., 2014; Taylor & Yan, 2018), and therefore, educators have bolstered their advanced academic programs to help increase CCR and help students be more academically prepared for college. Student participation and success in advanced academic programs in high school provides them with the necessary strategies and skills to succeed at the postsecondary level (Klepfer & Hull, 2012; Klopfenstein, 2003). Furthermore, Kanny (2015) concluded that advanced academics in high school promoted more independence and drive among students.

In addition to the more challenging content and increased academic capacity, participation in AP and dual credit courses has been found to help build momentum for

successful transitions to postsecondary education (Adcock & Surface, 2019; An, 2013; Karp, 2015; Leonard, 2013; Park, et al., 2014; Peters & Mann, 2009; Taylor & Yan, 2018).

Researchers have reported that students with previously earned college credits thrive in their college classes and reported fewer challenges during the transition from high school to college as compared to their peers (Adcock & Surface, 2018; An, 2013; Iatarola, et al., 2011). In addition to smoother transitions from high school to college, earning college credits in high school allows students to complete their degree plan faster and reduce the financial burden for them and/or their families (Hallett & Venegas, 2011; Leonard, 2013; Walsh, 2016; Warne, et al., 2015).

Beyond these two focal points, numerous researchers have reported on the importance of including all stakeholders in the process of increasing CCR for students. Teachers are responsible for ensuring that the curriculum is challenging and rigorous enough to prepare students for college course work. Educators, including teachers, counselors, and administrators, must recruit students to these programs and work to provide opportunities to all students through open enrollment policies (Bowers & Foley, 2018; Ferguson, et al., 2015; Guzy, 2016; Peters & Mann, 2009; Taylor & Yan, 2018). Furthermore, counselors can positively impact CCR by providing students with updated information and more specifically, educating them on the nonacademic skills necessary to be successful beyond high school (Digby, 2016; Durosko, 2019; Leonard, 2013; Loveland, 2017). Parental involvement is highly indicative of a student's level of CCR, specifically when parents regularly speak with their children about their schoolwork and promote their plans for attending college (An, 2010; An, 2013; Kim & Schneider, 2005; Leonard, 2013). When all stakeholders are actively involved in deciding to participate in accelerated programs, students benefit from decisions based on finding the best educational and social-emotional match for their unique needs (Leonard, 2013; Peters & Mann, 2009).

It is important to note that many varieties of advanced academic programs exist, but this study only examined Advanced Placement (AP) and dual credit due to them both being offered in the Central ISD high schools. Also, both programs are widely available to students across the entire country and provide students with the opportunity to earn college credits prior to becoming graduating high school.

Purpose Statement and Research Questions

The purpose of this qualitative dissertation study was to ascertain, from the post-secondary students' perspective, the impact that they believed their enrollment in Advanced Placement and dual-credit courses in high school had on their level of college readiness and ability to achieve success in college. By examining the post-secondary student's perspective, the findings from this study may positively influence policy and practice by increasing the likelihood that students are adequately prepared for college and have the ability to succeed at the postsecondary level. Furthermore, improved understanding of how complex variables impacted students' level of college readiness might assist educators in advising students and parents through enrollment and participation decisions.

Research Questions

The following research questions were used to guide the proposed dissertation study:

1. From the post-secondary students' perspective, what impact did their enrollment in AP courses in high school have on their level of college readiness and ability to achieve success in college?
2. From the post-secondary students' perspective, what impact did their enrollment in dual-credit courses in high school have on their level of college readiness and ability to achieve success in college?
3. From the post-secondary students' perspective who participated in both AP and dual-credit courses in high school, which program had a greater impact on their level of college readiness and ability to achieve success in college?

Review of the Methodology

The purpose of this phenomenological qualitative study was to develop an understanding of student experiences in advance academic courses and how these experiences impacted their level of college readiness and ability to be successful in college. Furthermore, the intent was to determine what information is most beneficial to stakeholders – primarily students, educators, and parents – during the course selection process for future students.

Educators from both high schools in Central ISD sent out information regarding this study through various social media platforms, including a link to a Google Form that collected basic information from potential participants and allowed me to verify their eligibility in the study. Once participants completed the initial survey and signed informed consent forms, they were contacted via email to set up a time for an in-depth, individual interview that took place virtually. During the semi-structured interviews, participants were asked to recall their experiences in AP and/or dual credit courses and describe how these experiences impacted their experiences in college. In addition to directly answering the structured interview questions, participants were asked to reflect on their own course selection process and reflect on any information they wish they had known during that time or anything they might have done differently.

After the interviews were conducted, I transcribed each one and used coding to identify emergent themes from the student responses. From the data collected during the interviews, each of the emergent themes aligned with the previously stated research questions. In addition to addressing each of the research questions, the participant responses regarding what they wish they would have known or what they might have done differently proved to be very insightful regarding the purpose of the study.

Discussion of Findings

In Chapter 4, the themes that emerged and the findings were presented and illustrated through examples of participant responses from the individual interviews. This section provides a comprehensive summary of those findings and describes the relationship between them, and the prior research presented throughout this dissertation.

Impact of Advanced Placement (AP)

While challenging content and advanced understanding of subject matter were benefits mentioned regarding both advanced programs, participants seemed to have a much deeper appreciation for the content gained through their AP courses. In addition, they felt as though their successes in AP courses allowed them to jump straight into the advanced courses in their degree plan. It was clear from these participants' experiences that they were exposed to rigorous, college-level curriculum that is recommended to help students shift successfully into postsecondary education or the workforce (An, 2013; Duroske, 2019; Hooker & Brand, 2010; Park, et al., 2014; Taylor & Yan, 2018).

Colleges and universities are in complete control of what credit is awarded to students that pass their AP courses and exams and can vary greatly from other schools (Kolluri, 2018). For example, a three on the AP exam is technically a passing score, but institutions of higher education have the flexibility to require that students earn a four or five (highest score possible) in order to receive credit. It is the student's responsibility to know what scores are required for the colleges they are interested in attending, and several of the participants reported that they disliked not being in control of whether they earned credit or not. The only deciding factor was that one test on one day. Their effort in the class had no bearing on whether or not they earned

credit, and most of the participants mentioned the negative impact of the anxiety and pressure associated with the high- stakes testing.

Impact of Dual Credit

In direct contrast to AP courses, student performance in dual credit classes is the sole factor in determining if they receive credit for the class. However, colleges and universities still have some flexibility in what credits are awarded and which classes they count for, and some institutions are more selective than others (Myers & Myers, 2017). Participants said that they appreciated feeling like they had more control of whether they earned credit in their dual credit classes and that their effort throughout the entire semester factored into them earning credit for the class.

Overwhelmingly, participants mentioned the benefits of learning how to do college through their dual credit coursework. Loveland (2017) reported that “perhaps the most remarkable benefit of dual enrollment is that it cultivates a college-centric perspective – one rooted in success” (p. 34). As students gain experiences through their dual credit courses, they are more likely to exhibit confidence and have more accurate expectations of what college is like (Loveland, 2017). Other researchers have contributed that the confidence or self-esteem often has nothing to do with the academic aspects of the courses, but rather the nonacademic factors, such as tuition, financial aid, and other support programs (Adcock & Surface, 2019; Hooker & Brand, 2010; Karp, 2012). Participants expanded on this list to include the benefits of understanding how to work within a syllabus, having a better understanding for how the online platforms like Canvas and Blackboard work, and adapting to the typical Monday-Wednesday-Friday or Tuesday-Thursday schedule of most college campuses. Even though AP teachers are required to submit a syllabus to the College Board for approval and use it throughout their

course, none of the participants mentioned the benefit of learning how to follow the syllabus in their AP courses.

Impact of Both Advanced Programs

Both advanced programs examined through this study, AP and dual credit, provide students with the opportunity to get a head start on college, and we know through the review of literature that they assist students in acquiring the skills and persistence necessary to succeed at the postsecondary level (Klepfer & Hull, 2012; Klopfenstein, 2003). In addition to completing their degree plan ahead of schedule, earning college credits through advanced coursework also reduces the financial burden of earning a college degree and provide students a familiar support system to help them navigate the challenges of college (Hallett & Venegas, 2011; Hernandez, 2011; Leonard, 2013; Walsh, 2016; Warne, et al., 2015). This is exceptionally helpful to students that are the first in their families to attend college.

Student success in high school, specifically in AP and/or dual credit courses, leads to increased self-efficacy and the development of intrapersonal skills that enhanced their ability to succeed in college (Digby, 2016; Ferguson, Baker, & Burnett, 2015; Hallett & Venegas, 2011; Kanny, 2015; Park, et al., 2014; Warne, et al., 2015). Participants reported how already being successful in advanced courses and entering college with previously earned credit hours established an additional level of confidence when they began their full-time college experiences. Several participants also mentioned how important it was to make the shift to more intrinsic motivation and taking on more personal responsibility for their learning. Researchers have been looking at the heightened social, emotional, and intellectual maturity required for students to excel in advanced courses as well as at the postsecondary level (Camp & Walters, 2016; Kulik, 2004; Leonard, 2004; Peters & Mann, 2009). Many feel the need for this research to

continue and provide us with more information about how we, as educators, can help them develop in a way that promotes CCR.

Participants of this study reflected on how helpful it was for teachers to have higher expectations of them and the importance of rising to the challenges set in front of them in their advanced courses. Hooker and Brand (2010) recommended that the increased expectations set forth by teachers not only focus on content but also the nonacademic factors that can help prepare students for the heightened rigor of college. In alignment with Adcock and Surface's (2019) findings, participants reported that they also began to hold themselves to higher expectations and push themselves more frequently once they were successful in their advanced courses.

Much of the research literature reviewed in this study reported the importance of bridging the gap between secondary and postsecondary education in order to improve CCR and ensure that students are able to be successful at the collegiate level (Adcock & Surface, 2019; An, 2013; Karp, 2015; Leonard, 2013; Park, et al., 2014; Peters & Mann, 2009; Taylor & Yan, 2018). Every participant of this study recalled how they felt like the transition from high school to college was easier due to their success in advanced courses than their peers that had not completed similar course work in high school. For years, researchers have called for smoother transitions between secondary and postsecondary curriculum (Bragg & Taylor, 2014; Conley, 2008; Darling-Hammond, et al., 2014; Leonard, 2013; McCarthy & Kuh, 2006). Adcock and Surface (2019) discussed how advanced academic programs, both AP and dual credit, are designed to help establish the momentum that students need in order to efficiently transition from high school to college.

Unexpected Findings: Postsecondary Students' Recommendations for the Future

At the end of each of the interviews, I asked the participants if they would do anything differently or if there is something they wish they could go back and tell themselves prior to the course selection process in high school. The participants' responses were a little unexpected, but what came from them are powerful recommendations to both educators and students on how to navigate the course selection process and how to know which advanced courses might be the best fit for them.

For educators, the participants recommended that they focus on promotion of their courses and recruitment of students that would benefit from being in their classes. Prior research also supports the need for educators to be very intentional in their recruitment practices and open enrollment policies so that all college-bound students can take advantage of the opportunity to earn college credits while still in high school (Leonard, 2013; Mansell & Justice, 2014). One participant did warn against the effects of educators being biased toward one program more than the other. They emphasized the importance of all educators and parents remaining focused on the individual student's strengths and goals and to always make sure that they present pros and cons for both types of coursework.

Some of the participants explained situations where they received incorrect information regarding whether advanced courses were eligible to transfer to the colleges they planned to attend, specifically regarding dual credit courses being accepted at institutions in other states. While it is impossible for any one person to be able to know every school's policy on accepting credits from AP or dual credit courses, the participants suggested coaching students on how to look up the information or who they should reach out to at their prospective universities in order to get the most updated and accurate information. This ensures that all students are capable of

making the best decisions for their futures and increases overall CCR (Park, et al., 2014; Peters & Mann, 2009). Furthermore, CCR improves when educators, specifically counselors, can educate students on the nonacademic skills necessary for success beyond high school (Digby, 2016; Durosko, 2019; Leonard, 2013; Loveland, 2017).

Participants recalled numerous personal experiences and provided specific recommendations for students as they begin the course selection process. One participant recommended that students try courses in both programs to get an idea for which one might be the best fit for them and help them achieve their personal goals. Another participant warned against trusting other students or even what one educator might tell them to do. He emphasized that they should do their own research and talk to as many students and/or educators as they can until they have a good idea if the class is a good fit for them or not. Many of the participants that reported having positive experiences tended to have a predetermined major and/or college when making their course selections. Overall, participants recommended that students avoid making themselves miserable by taking on more than they are capable of and to leave room for the extra-curricular activities that they enjoy.

Implications for Action

The results of this study can support educators, parents, and students when selecting and recommending advanced academic courses. Hopefully, the participant feedback can be used to provide genuine anecdotes and facilitate more in-depth discussions between stakeholders regarding what decisions are best for students. After gaining a better understanding of the potential benefits and drawbacks from each program, educators can reflect on their involvement in students' academic experiences and reinforce strategies that promote the development of skills necessary for students to be adequately prepared for college and/or career.

Previous research in this area focused on feedback from primarily the educator's perspective or used closed-ended research questions as part of a large-scale survey, which almost completely ignored the voice of the student and failed to provide them room to openly reflect on their experiences and how they feel their experiences in high school have impacted their level of success in college. The semi-structured nature of the interviews and intentional open-ended research questions in this study provided students the opportunity to explain what they took into consideration when they chose their advanced courses and how those decisions affected them academically as they transitioned to full-time college students. These findings add to the current research on the impact of advanced academic courses on college and career readiness by giving students a voice rather than only looking at student achievement data.

Although the sample was small, several recommendations emerged when reviewing the findings of this study. Combined with what has been learned from prior research, the data collected and subsequent findings of this study have the potential to positively impact student experiences in both high school advanced academic programs as well as when they move on to be full-time college students. The aforementioned results suggest that the responsibilities of each stakeholder need to be slightly modified and more clearly defined in order to ensure that students leaving Central ISD high schools are gaining the necessary experiences in their advanced academic classes to be thoroughly prepared for college and career. While we know from numerous studies that parental involvement is key to overall student success (An, 2010; An, 2013; Kim & Schneider, 2005; Leonard, 2013; Peters & Mann, 2009), these recommendations focus primarily on the roles and responsibilities of the students and educators.

Based on the participants' experiences and what we have gained through previous studies, when students take ownership of their learning in high school and have clear plans for

their future, they are more prepared for college and their future careers. While it might be unfair to expect every high school student to know exactly which college they hope to attend and/or what major they wish to pursue, the participants in this study that had a solid plan prior to selecting their AP and/or dual credit courses appeared to have experienced smoother transitions to life beyond high school. Furthermore, their credit hours transferred easily, and they were able to start out well ahead of their peers regarding their degree plans. Although earning college credits in high school is definitely a benefit of these advanced programs, it is imperative to remember one of the participants' warning about the negative impact that earning college credits can have on the other side of college. By gaining such a head start on college, students are now forced to choose their career pathways much earlier than before, even if they are not necessarily ready or prepared to do so. Students entering college with 30+ hours would also mean that they might have to enter high stakes graduate programs, such as medical school or law school, much earlier than their peers.

From the experiences of the participants, it seems as though it was more valuable to know which college the students planned to attend versus settling on one specific major. For the students that are unsure of their future, the participants strongly recommended that students research each of the institutions they are considering for their policies on accepting AP credits and/or dual credit transfer hours. Most colleges and universities have this information readily available on their websites, and there are people available on both the high school and college campuses to help students navigate through the challenging process. Students should also speak to those they typically seek out for advice, such as teachers, parents, and counselors, regarding what types of classes would be best suited to them, their learning styles, and their future plans. It is also beneficial for them to speak with other students that have taken these classes, especially

those that have gone off to college and could share their experiences much like the participants of this study. Although more is not always better, the participants of this study strongly recommended that students gather as much knowledge as possible in order to make their decisions regarding advanced course selection.

Educators spend their entire careers helping students prepare for the next phase of their lives, and more specifically, their path to college or career following high school. For teachers, they design engaging lessons and share their content knowledge in a way that helps students learn what they need to be successful as they move on to the next grade. Counselors assist students in their journey by assuming the role of advisor, which includes supporting them academically, socially, and emotionally throughout their physical and intellectual development. At the secondary level, typically grades 7 through 12, counselors also take on the role of helping students prepare for their lives beyond high school. Campus and district leaders ensure that policies are in place to promote the success of all students and to ensure students can pursue all their goals. In addition, administrators support teachers, counselors, and other leaders by providing updated professional learning and the resources necessary for them to effectively support students. Each of these educators fills a vital role in the educational process and contributes to the success of all students. In order to ensure that all students have the chance to leave our high schools with the skills necessary to be successful in college or career, it is imperative that educators in all positions understand how they can positively impact student experiences.

From the student experiences gathered during this study, teachers play a very powerful role in not only providing content instruction to their students but also as mentors and advisors. Teachers naturally have the most direct interactions with students, and therefore have the most

time to develop relationships with them and get to know them on a much deeper level than counselors or administrators. They know their learning styles, how they perform on tests, what types of situations cause them anxiety, and what types of challenges they are ready to face. Therefore, it is not unexpected that all the participants in this study recalled specific interactions with teachers that impacted their experiences in advanced courses and for some, their experiences beyond high school.

Teachers are a common source of advice whenever students begin the course selection process for the upcoming school year, and more specifically AP and dual credit teachers play an active role in recruiting students to their classes. Based on some participant experiences, it is clear that teachers must be kept aware of changes in course offerings and other pertinent information that would impact CCR for their students. Some participant feedback highlighted a concern that some teachers appeared to be biased toward one program over the other, which made the students feel like they didn't support them if they picked the less favorable courses or led the students to pick courses that may not have been the best fit for them personally. Updated, accurate, and unbiased information is imperative for all educators to be able to support students on their path to college and career, and CCR can improve if all students have access to the information in order to make the decisions that best suit their individual needs and priorities (Park, et al., 2014; Peters & Mann, 2009).

Counselors and administrators, both at the district and campus level, must also do their part to make sure that the information being shared with students and parents presents all options for students to complete their graduation requirements and more specific to the results of this study, the various advanced academic courses offered to high school students in Central ISD. In addition to basic information shared during the course selection process, counselors and

administrators must be more intentional about creating new and innovative ways to get the information to the stakeholders. Specifically, several participants from this study reported that they wished they had more information about what to expect once they arrived at college. The review of literature in Chapter Two highlighted several studies referring to the benefits of smoother transitions between high school and college and the nonacademic skills that students can acquire through advanced academic programs, such as AP and dual credit, all of which improve the college readiness of our students.

Campus and district administrators have the added responsibility of implementing policies and practices that create a culture where all students feel encouraged and supported to pursue their goals for after high school. This includes ensuring that all staff have access to the resources and training necessary to help students achieve a satisfactory level of college and career readiness and all students feel as though they have what they need to be successful beyond high school. Throughout the data collection phase of this study, it became apparent that the needs of students are very diverse and include a variety of academic and nonacademic factors, and educators still have a long way to go to fully prepare all students for a world that is constantly changing. Therefore, it is imperative that researchers continue to incorporate student voice into their projects and use student experiences to guide the future of education.

Recommendations for Further Research

The data collected during this study are particularly limited due to the size of the sample and the fact that it provides a tiny glimpse into the experiences of students once they leave high school to pursue a career and/or college degree. A broader study with a larger sample size would be ideal for a school district to gain a better understanding for how well their students are prepared for college and if they are able to succeed beyond high school. It would be extremely

beneficial to begin communicating with students prior to graduation in order to gather personal contact information rather than relying on them to respond to a post on social media. Having a larger sample would most likely include more diverse experiences and give the researcher a more complete understanding for how advanced academic programs have impacted the college and career readiness of our students.

Starting prior to the students leaving their high schools would also give the researcher a chance to compare the students' perspective prior to starting college, throughout their college years, and possibly even after they graduated college and transitioned into their careers. This type of longitudinal data would also provide school districts with data on college completion rates and other useful data gathered through open-ended surveys and/or interviews. Smoother transitions between high school and college improves college and career readiness and have been linked to higher college completion rates (Adcock & Surface, 2019; An, 2013; Karp, 2015; Leonard, 2013; Park, et al., 2014; Peters & Mann, 2009; Taylor & Yan, 2018). More in-depth student experiences through this type of transition would give educators a much clearer picture of what factors contribute to students making these shifts more seamlessly.

Another option to expand this line of research would be to include all graduates rather than limiting the sample to students that completed AP and/or dual credit courses in high school. This would provide an opportunity to examine whether or not student participation in these courses actually improved their ability to be successful in college and their perceptions of whether they were adequately prepared for college and/or career. A more inclusive study would give researchers and educators a deeper understanding for what decisions these students are making beyond high school and allow them to look more intently at the effectiveness of our advanced academic programs. Moreover, an expanded study could provide a more confident

answer to Research Question #3 – which program had a greater impact on their level of college readiness and ability to achieve success in college? Including all students would also allow the researcher to examine how students perceived their level of CCR for those who did not participate in advanced academic programs in high school and even more specifically, those students who were required to take remedial courses in college.

The framework for this study could be adjusted and applied to a problem of practice lens, where educators from both the K-12 and postsecondary environments could work together to evaluate what is keeping districts and schools from reaching the CCR goals set through federal and state accountability systems. In addition, it would be valuable for educators to further examine what is causing students to not be successful in college and more specifically, their reasons for not completing their degree plans. Although several participants mentioned various challenges they faced in their journey, all of the participants in this study have been successful in college and are on track to graduate. Researchers should extend this line of research to all students in an effort to identify the factors that have kept students from being successful or persisting through to graduation.

Although it would be impossible to conduct individual interviews with everyone in an expanded study, it would still be feasible to collect open-ended data through surveys of student experiences. This would enable researchers to gather data across multiple districts or for colleges and universities to conduct similar studies of the level of college readiness among their students. Although numerous researchers have highlighted the importance of creating smoother transitions between secondary and postsecondary education, it is unclear if anything has been done to create change and ensure that students entering college are fully prepared to succeed there. In order to truly bridge the gap between high school and college, researchers must continue to study CCR,

and K-12 and postsecondary educators need to ensure that students have what they need in order to succeed at every level. Based on the overall results of this study, the most important recommendation is to remain dedicated to giving students a voice and to always consider their perceptions and experiences when making changes to policy and practice.

Researcher Reflections

When I set out to examine the impact that AP and dual credit courses have on students' level of college readiness and their ability to achieve success in college, I was a brand-new learning specialist (which is similar to an instructional coach) tasked with overseeing our district's secondary advanced academic programs for grades 5 through 12 and began to see a shift in opinions toward our AP and dual credit programs. Our AP program had been extremely successful, but our numbers had started dropping due to the addition of several new course offerings in our dual credit program. As a former AP teacher, I was probably a little biased with my original feelings, and I felt a calling to make sure that our AP program remained as strong as it had been for years. In all honesty, I felt as though AP was a superior program and what our top students should choose, and that dual credit was a better fit for students that were college-bound but weren't necessarily at the top of their class.

However, now that I'm on the other side of this journey, I realize that I could not have been more wrong about almost everything. The one view that I continue to feel strongly about is that there is value in both programs, and I believe that it is in our students' best interest to ensure that they have both options to choose from when they reach high school. I've seen multiple school districts strongly promote one program over the other, and while I understand that smaller schools may not have any other choice, I feel that offering and supporting both programs provide more students with the opportunity to bridge the gap between high school and college.

AP courses provide our top students with a chance to shine as compared to other students around the world, and there are many top-tier schools that are extremely selective and typically do not accept transfer credits from dual credit programs. Even universities that refuse to award credits for AP courses still value the effort that the student put into passing the course and scoring well on the AP exam at the end of the year. Dual credit, on the other hand, varies greatly from program to program, and it is more difficult for colleges to discern whether or not the course was taught at an appropriate level of rigor that would warrant credit hours being given to students. For our school district, the dual credit program has blossomed over the last decade, and currently, we offer more than ten dual credit courses at each high school campus. Although there is no official data to support this, I feel that the efforts made by the district to secure embedded dual credit faculty rather than rely on adjunct faculty from the college has increased both the rigor and popularity of these courses.

Overall, the most influential part of this experience was having the chance to talk to some of our former students and listen to their experiences. I was blown away by all that they have accomplished in just a few years, including one of them finishing up school to be a teacher, another graduated in three years with a degree in crisis management, and at least two of them have begun graduate programs in biology. Listening to their experiences reminded me that, as educators, we are doing so many things right, and I'm so proud of how each of these students challenged themselves and achieved success in high school and college. Although they are all doing very well, they each faced obstacles in their journey, and I'm extremely grateful that they were willing to share them with me. Throughout the interviews, I found myself thinking that we need to make more time to sit down and listen to our students and ask them about their experiences. They provided outstanding feedback that can be used to help guide our advanced

academic programs moving forward, and they were genuinely happy to offer recommendations to future students and educators on how they can make their own experiences better.

Conclusion

The results of this study contribute to the research regarding advanced academics and college readiness by presenting the perspectives of postsecondary students regarding their experiences in AP and/or dual credit classes and how they impacted their performance in college. Both programs helped students prepare for their experiences in college; however, it seemed as though it was a personal preference about which program did a better job of helping them acclimate to the expectations of college. Based on the feedback from participants of this study, it is clear that educators need to ensure that all stakeholders are presented with updated, accurate, and unbiased information regarding their options for advanced academic courses and the benefits of participating in these programs. In addition to addressing the research questions, participants also contributed useful recommendations for future students as they consider the course offerings available to them. The findings of this study are useful for district and campus leaders looking to provide advanced academic opportunities to their students, and this study could be adapted to any circumstances in order to gain a better understanding of students' experiences. With additional research focused on student perceptions and experiences, it is likely that educators at all levels will continue to find ways to bridge the gap between secondary and postsecondary education.

APPENDIX A
QUESTIONNAIRE FOR POTENTIAL PARTICIPANTS

1. What is your full name? (Please include first and last names.)
2. Please include your contact information.
 - a. What is the best number to reach you at?
 - b. What is your email address?
3. From which high school did you graduate?
4. Did you take AP courses during high school?
 - a. If so, what classes did you take?
5. Did you take dual credit courses during high school?
 - a. If so, what classes did you take?
6. Since graduating from high school, which college(s) have you attended?
7. While enrolled in college were you admitted to an Honors College program?
8. What is the highest level of education of your mother and father?

APPENDIX B
INDIVIDUAL INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

1. Did you participate in AP courses in high school? [RQ 1]
2. Please tell me a little about your experiences in AP courses, such as experiences with teachers, level of difficulty of the courses, etc. [RQ 1]
3. Do you feel like your experiences in AP classes in high school have impacted your level of college readiness or your ability to succeed in college? If so, can you describe that for me? [RQ 1]
4. Did you participate in dual credit courses in high school? [RQ 2]
5. Please tell me a little about your experiences in dual credit courses, such as experiences with teachers, level of difficulty of the courses, etc. [RQ 2]
6. Do you feel like your experiences in dual credit classes in high school have impacted your level of college readiness or your ability to succeed in college? If so, can you describe that for me? [RQ 2]
7. Which type of advanced academic coursework, specifically AP or dual credit, had the greatest impact on your level of college readiness or your ability to succeed in college? [RQ 3]
8. If you could change something about your experience, what would it be? Is there anything that you would have done differently? [RQ 1, 2, 3]
9. Is there anything else you would like to share about your experiences in AP or dual credit? [RQ 1, 2, 3]

APPENDIX C

INFORMED CONSENT FORM - ADULTS

TITLE OF RESEARCH STUDY: Student Perceptions of Advanced Academic Coursework and its Impact on College and Career Readiness

RESEARCH TEAM:

Principal Investigator – Barbara L. Pazey and Student Investigator – Rachel A. Doty

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You are being asked to participate in a research study. Taking part in this study is voluntary. The investigators will explain the study to you and will answer any questions you might have. It is your choice whether or not you take part in this study. If you agree to participate and then choose to withdraw from the study, that is your right, and your decision will not be held against you.

You are being asked to take part in a research study about student experiences in advanced high school coursework and the impact they had on their level of readiness and ability to succeed at the collegiate level.

Your participation in this research study involves your participation in a focus group, and possibly a follow-up, individual interview to provide details of your experiences in advanced academic courses at the high school level. We are conducting this study in order to help educators – teachers, counselors, and administrators – provide more informed discussions with students and parents about which types of courses are more beneficial in helping students prepare for collegiate coursework. More details will be provided in the next section.

You might want to participate in this study if you feel that you could have benefitted from this knowledge and better discussion during your own selection of high school Advanced Placement (AP) and/or dual credit courses. However, you might not want to participate in this study if you do not have enough flexibility in your schedule to participate in the focus groups or if you did not feel like your advanced high school coursework had any impact on your college and career readiness.

You may choose to participate in this research study if you are a recent graduate of [*redacted*] and completed Advanced Placement (AP) and/or dual credit courses during your high school years in [*redacted*].

The reasonable foreseeable risks or discomforts to you if you choose to take part are minimal and would only include the possible discomfort you might feel in detailing your experiences among a group of your peers, which you can compare to the possible benefit of helping future generations of students prepare themselves for the challenges and expectations of post- secondary education. You will not receive guaranteed compensation for participation in this study; however, you will be entered into a drawing for an Amazon gift card.

DETAILED INFORMATION ABOUT THIS RESEARCH STUDY: The following is more detailed information about this study, in addition to the information listed above.

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY: Although college readiness is influenced by an endless list of variables, the purpose of this qualitative dissertation study is to determine, from the college students' perspective, the impact that they believe their participation in Advanced Placement (AP) and dual-credit courses in high school had on their level of college readiness and ability to succeed in college. By examining the college student's perspective, the findings from this study may positively influence policy and practice by increasing the likelihood that students will be prepared for college and have the ability to succeed beyond high school. Furthermore, improved understanding of how factors impact students' level of college success might assist educators in advising students and parents through enrollment and participation decisions.

TIME COMMITMENT: Participation in this study requires approximately one hour for the initial focus groups and the possibility of a follow-up, individual interview, which would last less than forty-five minutes. Beyond this initial time commitment, participants will be given an opportunity to review their contributions to the discussions and could require an additional time commitment of less than an hour, but this would be completely optional.

STUDY PROCEDURES:

1. Recent high school graduates from the specific school district will be recruited using social media.
2. If they are interested in providing feedback on their personal experiences, the participants will complete a Google Form to provide the researcher with basic contact and background information for recruitment purposes. All information provided by participants will remain protected throughout the entire research process and all information used in the publication of the data collected during this study will be confidential. At the end of the Google Form, participants will answer whether they wish to participate in the interview process. If they choose "yes," then the researcher will send them the required consent form and contact them to schedule a focus group interview.
3. Once all required consent forms have been collected by the researcher, then focus group dates/times will be scheduled and conducted via Zoom. Focus groups will aim to include 4-6 participants each and will include groups of participants based on whether or not they participated in AP classes, dual credit courses, or a combination of both. Thus, participants will be grouped based on their common experiences with advanced academic courses in high school. Focus group interviews will be conducted during the spring of 2021 upon approval from the Institutional Review Board for the University of North Texas.
4. After data is collected through a focus group setting, the researcher may contact participants for follow-up, individual interviews in order to gain understanding and/or clarification on certain details of their experiences. These interviews will also be conducted through Zoom and will take place during the spring of 2021.
5. All focus groups and interviews conducted through Zoom will be audio- and video-recorded by the investigators in order to capture the participant responses accurately. This data will be transcribed and coded through software programs that guarantee confidentiality. Other than these programs, the data collected during the focus groups and individual interviews will only be shared with the primary investigator throughout the research process and even after the study has been published.
6. As the researcher completes the focus group/interview process, all data will be

transcribed and coded in order to develop common themes among the participants' experiences and conclusions will be drawn based on these themes. This research will be published as a dissertation study, but as mentioned before, no identifiable information will be shared with anyone other than the investigators for this study.

7. At any time throughout the entire process, participants will have the option to omit information or not respond to certain questions if they feel uncomfortable sharing in response to that topic.

AUDIO/VIDEO/PHOTOGRAPHY:

- I agree** to be audio recorded/video recorded as appropriate during the research study.
- I agree** that the audio/video recordings can be used in publications or presentations.
- I do not agree** that the audio/video recordings can be used in publications or presentations.
- I do not agree** to be audio recorded/video recorded during the research study.

You may still participate in the study if you do not agree to be video recorded, but your responses will still be audio recorded for proper transcription and coding. If you do not wish to be video recorded, you may only use computer audio and not your computer camera during the Zoom focus groups and/or interviews.

The recordings will be kept with other electronic data in a secure UNT OneDrive account for the duration of the study.

Rev.com will be used as a third-party transcription service during the data collection phase of this study. Researchers have provided UNT IRB with a non-disclosure agreement and a link to the third party privacy policy for review.

POSSIBLE BENEFITS: Participants may gain a better understanding of their own experiences and how they have shaped their further academic experiences in college. In addition, participants may benefit from listening to other students and how their experiences were similar or different and how they have been able to adapt to beyond high school.

POSSIBLE RISKS/DISCOMFORTS: The only discomforts foreseen by the researchers include a possible discomfort in sharing personal experiences with others that they do not know or trust. Although confidentiality is guaranteed, participants may doubt that the information will be protected and may hold back from being completely truthful and open with sharing their experiences. Participation in the online Google Form does involve risks to confidentiality similar to a person's everyday use of the internet, with which there is always a risk of breach of confidentiality. Remember that you have the right to withdraw any study procedures at any time without penalty, and may do so by informing the research team. This research study is not expected to pose any additional risks beyond what you would normally experience in your regular everyday life. However, if you do experience any discomfort, please inform the research team.

Participating in research may involve a loss of privacy and the potential for a breach in confidentiality. Study data will be physically and electronically secured by the research team. As with any use of electronic means to store data, there is a risk of breach of data security.

If you experience excessive discomfort when completing the research activity, you may choose to stop participating at any time without penalty. The researchers will try to prevent any problem that could happen, but the study may involve risks to the participant, which are currently unforeseeable. UNT does not provide medical services, or financial assistance for emotional distress or injuries that might happen from participating in this research. If you need to discuss your discomfort further, please contact a mental health provider, or you may contact the researcher who will refer you to appropriate services. If your need is urgent, helpful resources include UNT Mental Health Emergency line at 940-565-2741 and the National Suicide Prevention Hotline at 1-800-273-8255.

COMPENSATION: All participants will be entered into a drawing for a \$100 Amazon gift card, which will be delivered electronically after the data collection phase has been completed. If you choose not to complete all study procedures, you will still be eligible for the drawing for the gift card.

Internal Revenue Service (IRS) considers all payments made to research subjects to be taxable income. Your personal information, including your name, address, and social security number may be acquired from you and provided to UNT System Tax Office for the purpose of payment. If you are an employee, we will be collecting your employee ID. If your total payments for the year exceed \$600.00, UNT will report this information to the IRS as income and you will receive a Form 1099 at the end of the year. If you receive less than \$600.00 total payments in a year, you are personally responsible for reporting the payments to the IRS.

CONFIDENTIALITY: Efforts will be made by the research team to keep your personal information private, including research study data, and disclosure will be limited to people who have a need to review this information. All paper and electronic data collected from this study will be stored in a secure location on the UNT campus and/or a secure UNT server for at least three (3) years past the end of this research in a locked file cabinet and password protected hard drive in the primary investigator's campus office. Research records will be labeled with a pseudonym, and the master key linking names with codes will be maintained in a separate and secure location.

Please be advised that although the researchers will take these steps to maintain confidentiality of the data, the nature of focus groups prevents the researchers from guaranteeing confidentiality. The researchers would like to remind participants to respect the privacy of your fellow participants and not repeat what is said in the focus group to others.

Participation in this online survey involves the potential for the loss of confidentiality similar to a person's everyday use of the internet.

The results of this study may be published and/or presented without naming you as a participant. The data collected about you for this study may be used for future research studies that are not described in this consent form. If that occurs, an IRB would first evaluate the use of any information that is identifiable to you, and confidentiality protection would be maintained.

While absolute confidentiality cannot be guaranteed, the research team will make every effort to protect the confidentiality of your records, as described here and to the extent permitted by law. In addition to the research team, the following entities may have access to your records, but only on a need-to-know basis: the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, the FDA (federal regulating agencies), the reviewing IRB, and sponsors of the study.

This research may use a third party software called Rev and NVivo and is subject to the privacy policies of this software noted here: <https://www.rev.com/security> and <https://www.qsrinternational.com/legal-and-compliance/mynvivo-portal-terms-and-conditions>

CONTACT INFORMATION FOR QUESTIONS ABOUT THE STUDY: If you have any questions about the study you may contact Rachel (Andie) Doty at rad0216@unt.edu or Barbara Pazey at barbara.pazey@unt.edu. Any questions you have regarding your rights as a research subject, or complaints about the research may be directed to the Office of Research Integrity and Compliance at 940-565-4643, or by email at untirb@unt.edu.

CONSENT:

- Your signature below indicates that you have read, or have had read to you all of the above.
- You confirm that you have been told the possible benefits, risks, and/or discomforts of the study.
- You understand that you do not have to take part in this study and your refusal to participate or your decision to withdraw will involve no penalty or loss of rights or benefits.
- You understand your rights as a research participant and you voluntarily consent to participate in this study; you also understand that the study personnel may choose to stop your participation at any time.
- By signing, you are not waiving any of your legal rights.

Please sign below if you are at least 18 years of age and voluntarily agree to participate in this study.

SIGNATURE OF PARTICIPANT

DATE

***If you agree to participate, please provide a signed copy of this form to the researcher team. They will provide you with a copy to keep for your records.**

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