A CASE STUDY: STUDENT EVALUATIONS OF AN EARLY COLLEGE SUPPORT SYSTEM—
A QUALITY IMPROVEMENT INITIATIVE

by

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September 2017

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ABSTRACT

This early college case study, a qualitative improvement initiative, sought to understand why students left their high schools to attend Midwest Early College (MEC), how students valued the support structure offered at MEC, how the designed program supports contributed to perseverance and completion, and what educational or occupational paths students pursued after completing the early college. This study, embedded within the larger context of increasing college readiness and the number of students completing postsecondary degrees, sought student voices for program improvement. The researcher collected feedback from students who attended three different cohort groups from 2011 through 2016. The early college supports examined included the effectiveness of high school courses in preparing students for college courses, the *Success Skills Curriculum*, assigned mentor relationships, organized college and career readiness activities, and the community college setting. Fifty-three students participated in an online survey, and 20 students were interviewed face-to-face or by telephone.

Students confirmed that early college supports contributed to perseverance, college course completion, and earning a college credential. The *Success Skills Curriculum*, while of value to the majority of students, needed adjustment to provide maximum effectiveness for all students. The planned college and career activities were helpful to students, but students sought greater diversity in career exploration beyond STEM fields. Students reported that college visits were helpful in determining universities where they would transfer. Students also
reported high ratings for having the early college located on a community college campus.

Determining if students enrolled in universities, or became employed after the early college, served as a measure of support structure effectiveness. Results of this research will allow improvements of supports offered at MEC and provide a model for early college programs seeking to aid students in completion and obtaining a college credential.

KEY WORDS: Early college, middle college, completion
DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to the Lord Jesus Christ, who is able to do “abundantly above all that we ask or think, according to the power that worketh in us” (Ephesians 3:20-21, KJV). Jesus said, “Ask, and it shall be given you; seek, and ye shall find; knock, and it shall be opened unto you” (Matthew, 7:7-8, KJV), and the Apostle Paul stated, “I can do all things through Christ which strengtheneth me” (Philippians 4:13, KJV). Thank you, God, for seeing me through this work and for the support that you sent my way.

Also to my loving and faithful wife, Pam, of 38 years, who listened to all my frustrations and participated in countless hours of dissertation discussions. Thank you for your support and sacrifices over the years as I pursued my educational endeavors.

To all the administrators and teachers laboring diligently to provide an early college alternative for students who may never go to college under different circumstances and for providing an opportunity for motivated students to advance toward a college credential and a rewarding career.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank Dr. Judy Berry, President of Technical Education Services and Training, for getting me started on the dissertation, and Dr. Michael Ennis, Professor at Ferris State University and Committee Chair, for helping me to complete. Thank you, Dr. Sandy Balkema, DCCL Dissertation Director at Ferris State University, for all your support and encouragement, and to Dr. Lisa Webb-Sharpe, Senior Vice President, Finance, Administration & Advancement at Lansing Community College, and Dr. Barbara Rose, Professor at Spring Arbor University, for serving on my Dissertation Committee and offering many helpful suggestions. Hope Smith was of great help in preparing this document. Thank you to Dr. Roberta Teahen, Director of the Community College Leadership Program, and to the DCCL Board of Directors, faculty, and support staff for their vision and professional work in developing leaders.
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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

INTRODUCTION

According to the U.S. Department of Education’s National Center for Education Statistics (2016b), in the fall of 2015, approximately 75.8 million students were enrolled in American schools and colleges, with 4.6 million full-time teachers, and 5.6 million full-time administrators and support staff. Public elementary and secondary enrollments have increased 28% from 1985 to 2015, with a student population of 39.4 million in 1985, to a population of 50.3 million in 2015. During the same period, private school enrollments have declined from 5.6 million to 5.3 million, a decrease of 5%. Elementary and secondary enrollments are expected to continue to increase to record levels through 2025, with secondary enrollments (grades 9 through 12) increasing 3% between 2015 and 2025 (U.S. Department of Education, 2016b).

A small portion of the growth in public education has been in the creation of middle and early colleges, offering an alternative to traditional high schools by giving students an opportunity to earn college credits or a college credential while still in high school. The first middle college opened in 1974, and early colleges began in 2001 (Lerner & Brand, 2006). The Middle College National Consortium (2017) claims a membership of 40 middle college public schools associated with college campuses in 16 different states, and according to Great Schools, there are now 75,000 students in 28 states attending early colleges (Tyan-Wood, 2017).
The middle college is a collaboration between a high school(s) and a college campus where students participate in a learning environment located on a college campus, are equipped with college-ready skills, challenged with college-level work, and provided support services leading to a college credential and employment (Lerner & Brand, 2006). Some middle colleges require a 13th year of high school, allowing students more time, during the high school years, for college courses to be paid for using state money appropriated for K-12. Lerner and Brand (2006) described middle college high schools with the following characteristics: a collaboration between high schools and a community college; student populations that are generally small in size; project-centered with an interdisciplinary curriculum; expanded teacher roles to include counseling and structured support; multiple student assessments; empowerment of students; an emphasis on career education; and community service (Lerner & Brand, 2006). In 1974, LaGuardia Community College founded the first middle college high school in hopes of motivating disengaged students to complete a high school diploma and earn a college credential or technical skill (Lerner & Brand, 2006). Wagonlander (1997) emphasized how middle colleges address the needs of at-risk youth.

Early colleges, similar to middle colleges, started in 2001, when the Middle College National Consortium launched The Early College High School Initiative. This initiative was funded by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, the Carnegie Corporation, the W.K. Kellogg Foundation, and the Ford Foundation (Lerner & Brand, 2006). Early colleges varied in structure, with some schools enrolling students in their first year of high school, and other schools starting students in their junior year of high school (Lerner & Brand, 2006). Early colleges were described with the following characteristics:
. . . focus on ensuring that all students receive both a high school diploma and associate degree or equivalent transferable credits at graduation. Early college high schools more clearly distinguish high school courses from college courses, and early college high school students do not begin college-level coursework until their junior or senior year. (Lerner & Brand, 2006, p. 58)

Early colleges were small educational entities operating as consortium programs. Consortium partners included colleges and school districts that often had support from local business organizations. Ideally, students would gain enough college credits during high school to earn an associate degree, or earn enough college credits to transfer into a four-year baccalaureate degree program. Initially, low-income, English-language learners, students of color, and first generation college students were targeted for early college participation. A 2017 study out of Georgetown University states that tuition and fees at public four-year colleges and universities [are] growing 19 times faster than the median family income since 1980. . . state disinvestment in post-secondary education for the past three decades has shifted the financial burden to students and their families. (Carnevale, Garcia, & Gulish, 2017)

Early colleges offered a life-changing opportunity for many students who could not afford to enter college. A personalized learning environment was established where students started college courses sooner than traditional high school students. There was an emphasis on student-adult relationships, mentoring, and providing a support system to help these students concurrently achieve a high school diploma and a college credential.

**PROBLEM STATEMENT**

This research focused on one early college program in the Midwestern United States. In order to protect the identity of the early college and the community college, the early college
was referred to as Midwest Early College (MEC), and the community college was referred to as the Learning Community College (LCC).

Each year, the majority of students enrolled in the Midwest Early College (MEC) complete the program and earn a college credential along with a high school diploma, but 21% of the students, over the last six years, have exited the program without completing the full three years in the program. When removing the number of students who left the program due to physical and mental health issues, or when the student’s family needed to relocate, the rate of students who did not complete was 9% during academic years 2015-16 and 2016-17 (The Early College, 2016). This rate of completion as compared to other early colleges is unknown, and additional exploratory research is needed, looking at the completion rates for these types of schools.

Students leaving Midwest Early College before completion of the program represent a potential risk for the student and a significant financial loss for the early college. Students are admitted entrance to the early college at the beginning of their junior year in high school, thus ensuring that all students complete the college-ready skills offered during the first semester of the program. If students exit early, those seats are not filled with new students during the three-year program. When students transition back to their former high school before the end of a semester, they may lose high school credits and increase the time it takes to earn a high school diploma. The faculty and administration of MEC desire to provide a support structure that makes it possible for 100% of the early college students to earn a high school diploma and a college credential. As each early college has developed its own unique support structure, each
school should evaluate the supports provided to students and confirm that students are receiving the maximum opportunity for success and completion.

**PURPOSE OF THE STUDY**

To identify the major contributing factors for why students leave MEC and return to their former high schools is a challenging endeavor. Some students desire to return to friends and activities available at their former high schools. Other students, with inadequate academic preparation, find the rigor of the early college too overwhelming. A lack of parental support, transportation challenges, personality conflicts, or the need of more time for emotional and social maturing may play into a student’s decision to depart. Midwest Early College can best serve students by seeking to understand the cause for student departures and by evaluating the student support structure offered in the early college. This research project sought to confirm the value of supports offered to students from the student’s perspective with the goal of increasing the probability that students would complete their high school diploma and earn a college credential through Midwest Early College.

Early college leaders wanted to understand which supports enabled students to persevere and complete the early college program and which supports needed improvement in order to increase student perseverance and completion. By making changes to the support structure within the early college, leaders may be able to reduce the number of students who leave the program without completing the requirements for a high school diploma and a college credential. Improving the model of supports could provide an example for other early colleges to follow in establishing an early college program. In this study, students were
considered the best source for evaluating the effectiveness of the support structure at Midwest Early College.

**CONTEXT FOR THE STUDY**

Midwest Early College population for the 2016-17 academic year was 204 students, and the early college is located on the main campus of the Learning Community College. Learning Community College had a reported total enrollment of 16,031 in the fall semester of 2014. That is 5,859 full-time students and 10,172 part-time students (U.S. Department of Education, 2016a). The community college campus is adjacent to the downtown area with government offices, two other colleges, and retail establishments nearby. Midwest Early College has a director, four full-time faculty members, a lead support person, and a program coordinator. Many of the students at Midwest Early College have experienced positive academic results, with the average MEC graduate earning 57 college credits by high school graduation (The Early College, 2016). Out of the three cohort groups studied, the average retention rate going into the second year of the program was 85%, and the overall retention rate for the three years was 72% (The Early College, 2016). School completion data were examined at the end of each academic year for the three cohort groups included in the study (see Table 1).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>COHORT GROUP</th>
<th>1 2011-12</th>
<th>2 2012-13</th>
<th>3 2013-14</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Average College Credits Earned Per Student</td>
<td>64.5</td>
<td>55.18</td>
<td>51.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Retention Rate Entering 2nd Year</td>
<td>93%</td>
<td>84%</td>
<td>77%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Retention Rate at End of Program</td>
<td>78%</td>
<td>74%</td>
<td>65%</td>
</tr>
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</table>

(The Early College, 2016)
Because Midwest Early College is located on the campus of Learning Community College, the early college participates in a college-wide initiative called *Operation 100%*. The goal of *Operation 100%* is for 100% of the degree-seeking college students to graduate with some form of college credential, either a stackable credential, a certificate of achievement, or an associate degree. Table 2 shows the percentage of Midwest Early College graduates earning a college certificate or degree and the percentage of students, in each cohort group, who have transferred to a four-year college or university.

Table 2: *Midwest Early College Certificates, Degrees, and Transfers*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>COHORT GROUP STARTING ACADEMIC YEAR</th>
<th>1 2011/12</th>
<th>2 2012/13</th>
<th>3 2013/14</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Percentage of students earning Certificate or Associate Degree</td>
<td>60.24%</td>
<td>55.56%</td>
<td>35.71%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of students transferred to four-year college or university</td>
<td>47/84</td>
<td>21/54</td>
<td>not yet determined</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percent of students transferred to a four-year college or university</td>
<td>56%</td>
<td>39%</td>
<td>not yet determined</td>
</tr>
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</table>

(The Early College, 2017)

Of Midwest Early College students, 65% complete some type of college credential by the time they receive their high school diploma. Approximately 12% of MEC students stay at the community college to complete a degree after the early college program is completed (The Early College, 2017).

**NATURE OF THE STUDY**

The students in this qualitative study participated in an online survey and a face-to-face interview. Moustakas’ seminal report (1994) recognized the values of qualitative designs and
methodologies as studies of human experiences that are not approachable through quantitative approaches by listing the following characteristics of qualitative research:

1. Focusing on the wholeness of experience rather than solely on its objects or parts;
2. Searching for meaning and essences of experience rather than measurements and explanations;
3. Obtaining descriptions of experience through first-person accounts in informal and formal conversations and interviews;
4. Regarding the data of experience as imperative in understanding human behavior and as evidence for scientific investigations;
5. Formulating questions and problems that reflect the interest, involvement, and personal commitment of the researcher;
6. Viewing experience and behavior as an integrated and inseparable relationship of subject and object and of parts and whole. (Moustakas, 1994, pp. 20-21)

McClenney and Arnsparger (2012) state that colleges should be listening to students if they want to increase their retention rate. “Who best can inform our understanding of what really matters in promoting student success? We believe students are the best sources of information about their own experiences” (McClenney & Arnsparger, 2012, p.5). According to Merriam (2009), at the heart of qualitative study is, “How people interpret their own experiences?” (p. 23). This study will focus on student responses in answer to key research questions.

MAJOR RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The research questions for this study were as follows:

1. What motivated Midwest Early College students to leave their local high schools to attend the Midwest Early College program, and how do they view that decision after attending Midwest Early College?
2. What value did students place on Midwest Early College classwork taken prior to college coursework?

3. Did students credit the Success Skills Curriculum, assigned mentor relationship, college and career readiness activities, and the community college environment as helpful in completing the Midwest Early College program?

4. What suggestions did students give for improving the current structure of supports offered in Midwest Early College?

5. What occupational or educational paths did Midwest Early College students pursue after leaving the Midwest Early College program, and did the supports offered during Midwest Early College contribute to the occupational and educational choices made by students?

PROGRAM SUPPORTS

According to McDonald and Farrell (2012), providing supports for students in the early college setting prepares students for college success and positively affects student scholarly development and identity. “Social support experienced as caring and trusting relationships removes perceptions of isolation and provides a sense of security for learners integrating to a collegiate environment” (McDonald & Farrell, 2012, p. 241). Healy (2009) notes the importance of helping students to develop an awareness of their abilities and be able to employ strategies for assessing classroom efforts, especially in the first year of college (p. 89). Reason, Terenzini, and Domingo (2006) state that student success in the first year has been linked to student perceptions of whether or not the environment of the college is supportive of them.

Given this challenge, it is important that educators refine support systems so that high school students in a structurally different pathway such as ECHS (Early College High Schools) can transition successfully to a community college environment, earn their high school diploma, and persist in their college studies. (Healy, 2009, p. 97)

Evaluating the support structure of Midwest Early College will inform faculty and administration about the effectiveness of student preparation for high school and college
success, determine which supports lead to student retention and completion, and discern which supports may need to be improved or changed.

Evidence of providing an effective support structure to students in the early college is helpful in proving accountability with the use of public funds. Several states have approved early colleges to provide services for students during an additional 13th year of school. In early colleges, students are using this additional year to gain college credits. Therefore, early colleges need to document the effectiveness of their programs in justification of these state funds and should monitor programs to produce the most favorable outcomes for students as possible.

The Success Skills Curriculum, taught at Midwest Early College, instructs students in academic behaviors believed to help students succeed in college courses. In addition, students are matched with an early college faculty mentor who advises the student during the three-year program. Academic expectations are set high, with classroom and homework expectations greater than students have normally experienced in their local high schools. Students participate in college and career activities that present new career opportunities, self-exploration, and the experiences of visiting industries and universities. The community college environment offers a level of autonomy and academic support that may challenge students to act in a mature manner while completing program requirements. One of the founding goals of Midwest Early College is to increase the number of students pursuing higher education, especially in STEM careers (The Early College, 2017).

SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

A study by Carnevale, Rose, and Cheah (2011) states that, over a lifetime, a person with an associate degree can expect to earn nearly one third more than a person with only a high
school diploma, and a person with a bachelor’s degree will earn 84% more than a person with only a high school diploma. Furthermore, by 2020 there will be 55 million jobs created, and the United States will fall short of filling those positions by 5 million people with a postsecondary degree if no improvement of postsecondary attainment rates is achieved (Carnevale, Smith, & Strohl, 2013). Improving the effectiveness of the early college support structure has the potential to increase college completion rates for students in these programs and to advance the earning potential and standard of living for these students and their families for many years to come. It is estimated that students who attend Midwest Early College and earn an associate degree are saving between $25,000 and $50,000 in tuition, fees, books, and housing costs if the student planned to attend a university and live on campus (The Early College, 2017). After completing MEC, graduates have the opportunity to transfer, debt free, to a university for completion of their bachelor program. A lower debt level and a reduced time to the job market compounds the economic advantage of students who are successful in the early college programs.

One purpose of this case study is to evaluate a specific early college program and determine to what extent the Midwest Early College support system is valued by the students as contributing to their goal of a high school diploma and a college credential concurrently. Understanding survey results and interview responses could lead to an improvement in supports offered to Midwest Early College students, improvement in retention rates, an increased number of students earning both their high school diploma and a college credential, and a growth in the number of new enrollments. Midwest Early College support system could
also serve as a model for other early college programs to follow. Key components of the support system examined in this early college program included the following:

1. Early College classroom instruction prior to going out for college courses
2. Early College Success Skills Curriculum
3. Assigned mentor relationship
4. College and Career Readiness activities
5. The community college setting and available campus supports

EARLY COLLEGE GROWTH

A significant number of early colleges have evolved over the past two decades offering more high school students the opportunity to earn both a high school diploma and a college credential. Jobs for the Future, an educational nonprofit group working to advance college readiness, shows a growth of early colleges involved in their network alone, climbing from two schools in 2002 to over 280 schools in 2012 (Webb & Gerwin, 2014). Early colleges are opening on both high school and community college campuses, and many are now independent of the Jobs for the Future network. Retention and program completion rates differ from one early college program to another; one factor of this variance may be the availability of student services to support program completion.

EARLY COLLEGE ACHIEVEMENT

Along with the growth in the number of early colleges, there has been a marked increase in the level of achievement for students in these programs. “Even with large populations of historically underserved students, early college schools yield outcomes well
above national averages” (“Reinventing High Schools for Post-Secondary Success,” 2012, p. 6).

In the following quotation from the 2014 American Institutes for Research Report on Early Colleges, it was found that when comparing similar students who applied for early college programs, those who were accepted into the early college programs were more likely to enroll in college than those students who were not chosen for the early college programs.

During the study period, 81% of Early College students enrolled in college, compared with 72% of comparison students. Although the gap in enrollment rates between the two groups decreased over time, comparison students’ college enrollment rates did not catch up to those of Early College students during the study period. In addition, Early College students were more likely than comparison students to enroll in two-year colleges and were just as likely as comparison students to enroll in four-year colleges. (Berger, Turk-Bicakci, Garet, Knudson, & Hoshen, 2014, p. iv)

A study conducted by The American Institute confirmed that the early college advantage extended beyond college enrollment to an increased likelihood of graduating from college as well, by saying,

Early College students were significantly more likely to earn a college degree than comparison students. During the study period, 25% of early college students earned a college degree (typically an associate’s degree), as compared with only 5% of comparison students. (Berger et al., 2014, p. iv)

Although early college and traditional high school populations may be different, Webb and Gerwin (2014) state that early college graduation rates are above the national average for high school graduation, and early college graduates are enrolling in college immediately after high school at greater rates: “Students who attend early college schools are significantly more likely than their peers to graduate, enroll in college, and earn a degree” (p. 15). The positive effect of earning a college credential for those attending early college was true for students earning a bachelor or an associate degree, and the impact of early college attendance was significantly stronger for minority students than White students. Low-income students showed
greater gains than students who were from homes earning average incomes (Berger et al., 2014). Webb and Gerwin (2014) also found that “86% of early college graduates, who enroll in post-secondary education, persist for a second year” (p. 6). The previous evidence supports the success of the early college movement and demonstrates that students are finding a clear pathway to college through enrollment in early college programs.

THE POWER OF PLACE

Some early colleges are housed in local high school buildings, but many others are housed on the campuses of community colleges. Barnett (2016) highlights the benefits of locating early colleges on community college campuses by stating, “Research suggests that students experience greater benefits from courses offered on the college campus” (p. 6). Smith (2015) concurs that there are advantages of hosting the early college on a campus, “When dual enrollment students are mixed in classes with regular college students, they are likely to display greater maturity and feel their college experience is authentic” (p. 6). Ramsey-White (2012) states that early college high schools that are physically located on college campuses have exhibited the strongest student outcomes with respect to state assessment scores, attendance rates, and progression from the 9-10 grades. In her discussion about early college history, Ramsey-White discussed the original goal of the first Middle College in 1974 with creative pedagogical inputs and “on a college campus would capitalize on the ‘power of place’ and stimulate and inspire underserved students to believe that a college education was within their reach” (p. 23). The transition from high school courses to college courses is simplified and less threatening when students are already acclimated to the college environment. Barnett goes on to say, “It is important to assess students for college readiness when they are in 11th grade and
provide opportunities to attain college readiness in 12th grade” (p. 7). This can be accomplished on the college campus.

**DESCRIPTION OF MIDWEST EARLY COLLEGE**

Midwest Early College was established as a partnership between the Learning Community College and the intermediate school district. A strong curriculum was adopted in an effort to ensure college and career readiness for all students, and the planned outcome for early college students would be either an associate degree, a technical certificate in a STEM related field, or up to 60 college credits to transfer to a four-year institution. Midwest Early College would provide universal access and stated that a student who had finished 10th grade would not be selected based on GPA but by a lottery drawing. Of the available seats, 33% would be reserved for at-risk youth, who were first in their family to attend college or students who qualified for free and reduced lunch due to economic status. With a grant from the Michigan Department of Education and a Memorandum of Understanding between the school districts and the community college, the Midwest Early College came into existence in 2010, opening its doors in the fall of 2011. The three-year program, for grades 11-13, was housed on the Learning Community College campus (Berry, 2011).

**DEFINITION OF TERMS**

*Credentialing* – Students are evaluated on college-ready skills, assessments, and grades to determine if they are ready to take college level courses.
Middle College – A program designed to provide a college campus learning environment where disengaged high school students would have an opportunity to participate in college level courses (Lerner & Brand, 2006, p. 57).

Early College – A redesign of the middle college where students graduate in four or five years with an associate degree or enough credits to transfer to a four-year college as a junior. Students generally begin college courses in their junior or senior year of high school (Learner & Brand, 2006, p. 58).

Early/Middle Colleges in Michigan – One of several forms of K-12 and higher education partnerships existing in the state, which may be a stand-alone school, an early/middle college within a high school, a Public School Academy (PSA) or a Shared Education Entity (SEE). All forms of the early college are designed for students to earn a high school diploma and college credits simultaneously (Geltner & Wagonlander, 2017, pp. 2-3).

Epistemology – “The theory of knowledge, especially with regard to its methods, validity, and scope, and the distinction between justified belief and opinion” (“Epistemology,” 2017).

Ethnography – The study and systematic recording of human cultures; also, a descriptive work produced from such research. It is characterized by “thick description” (Merriam, 2009, p. 28).

Ethnomethodology – A method of sociological analysis that examines how individuals use everyday conversation and gestures to construct a common-sense view of the world (Social Interaction, 2017, p. 1).
Interpretive research (Interpretivism) – “. . . assumes that reality is socially constructed, that is, there is no single, observable reality. Rather, there are multiple realities, or interpretations, of a single event. Researchers do not ‘find’ knowledge, they construct it” (Merriam, 2009, p. 8).

Paradigm – “The entire constellation of beliefs, values, techniques, and so on shared by the members of a given community” (Maxwell, 2013, p. 42).

Phenomenology – A school or philosophy and type of qualitative research with a focus on the experience itself, “a study of people’s conscious experience of their life-world, that is, their ‘everyday life and social action’” (Merriam, 2009, p. 24).

Positivist orientation – “. . . assumes that reality exists ‘out there,’ and it is observable, stable, and measurable” (Merriam, 2009, p. 8).

Symbolic interactionism – “Symbolic Interactionism is the way we learn to interpret and give meaning to the world through our interactions with others” (Symbolic Interaction Theory, 2017, p. 1).

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

In discussing a theoretical framework for dissertation studies, Merriam (2009) states that “A theoretical framework is the underlying structure, the scaffolding or frame of your study. . . . the system of concepts, assumptions, expectations, beliefs, and theories that supports and informs your research” (p. 66). Many early college studies refer to Conley’s (2007) work focusing on the following four dimensions of college readiness: key cognitive strategies, academic content, academic skills and behavior, and contextual skills. This research project enforces Conley’s work in that identified key cognitive skills of intellectual openness,
inquisitiveness, analysis, reasoning, interpretation, precision/accuracy, and problem solving are needed for college success and for success in the early college. Midwest Early College Success Skills Curriculum, mentor relationships, expansion of college knowledge, resources learned in college and career readiness events, and exposure to community campus resources serve to equip students for college success. The key content areas, defined by Conley as English, Math, Social Studies, Science, Foreign Language, and the Arts, provide an opportunity for students to learn about and utilize the early college supports in completing college coursework.

Academic behaviors such as self-monitoring and study skills are embedded in the Success Skills Curriculum being offered in Midwest Early College. Contextual skills are defined by Conley (2007) as “the privileged information necessary to understand how college operates as a system and culture” (p. 17). Contextual skills include all aspects of learning to maneuver college for the first time. Understanding college admissions, curriculum, testing, application, costs, financial aid, placement, challenge levels, and expectations are more familiar to those coming from homes where parents have attended college (Conley, 2007, p. 17). By way of Midwest Early College Success Skills Curriculum, college and career readiness activities, mentor instruction, and information learned through available community college campus resources, Midwest Early College program is attempting to provide students with the contextual skills they will need to be successful in college coursework. Conley’s theories undergird the structure and purpose of Midwest Early College (Ramsey-White, 2012).

Merriam (2009) stresses that one’s theoretical framework stems from a person’s world-view and disciplinary orientation, and more than one theoretical perspective may be in operation. It is stated that “the choice of a theoretical model/conceptual framework. . . will
guide the research process” (p. 67). The theoretical framework is also largely determined by the existing literature accessed and by the broader context in which the researcher conceptualizes how the study fits into recent literature (Merriam, 2009). This research adopted an epistemological perspective, believing that reality can be discovered by listening to students, reality can be measured, and reality can be used to improve student outcomes.

The interpretivist/constructivist researcher tends to rely upon the “participants' views of the situation being studied” and recognizes the impact on the research of their own background and experiences. Constructivists do not generally begin with a theory. . . . rather they generate or inductively develop a theory or pattern of meanings. (Mackenzie & Knipe, 2006, pp. 193-205)

Student opinions were key in this qualitative approach to gain information and understanding and to inform stakeholders as to why students are enrolling in the Midwest Early College, what supports enabled the students to complete, and what career paths or additional education is chosen after completion of Midwest Early College.

FOUNDATION FOR QUALITATIVE APPROACH

Husserl advanced the concept of phenomenology by focusing on the intentionality of consciousness. It was believed that the scientific method was not enough to understand how individuals experience the world in which they lived. Rather, it is through human perception that individuals can gain a true understanding of reality. Husserl’s philosophy “values human perception as reliable data that can be used to explore (via textual description) the real meaning of a particular phenomenon as it is lived and experienced by a person or several individuals” (Williams, 2014, pp. 103-104). The researcher’s role is to “put aside their repertoires of knowledge, beliefs, values and experiences in order to accurately describe participants' life experiences” (Williams, 2014, p. 104).
Martin Heidegger, a student of Husserl, added the importance of hermeneutics to Husserl’s phenomenological ideas. Heidegger formulated Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) which emphasized the importance of language for description of the phenomenon under investigation and the meaning behind the language used to describe the phenomena. As stated by Williams (2014):

IPA is concerned with examining an “individual’s lived experience. . . IPA is a double hermeneutic process in that participants in IPA are trying to gain a clearer understanding of their social world and experience, while the researcher is trying to “make sense of the participants, trying to make sense of their world.” (p. 105)

Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis welcomed the researcher to add a reflective approach to the phenomena under investigation rather than trying to block out the researcher’s ideas. Williams (2014) used an IPA approach in this case study to investigate middle college high school alumni perceptions of their college readiness and transition to college. Key resources were identified which contributed to enrollment, persistence, and degree completion after high school, and Williams sought to understand how the middle college alumni perceived college readiness. Williams also wanted to understand the role of networks and support structures in helping alumni to be successful in college (Williams, 2014).

Moustakas (1994), influenced by Husserl, described ethnography as a phenomenological research method with extensive fieldwork to be pursued in a variety of social settings. The researcher would experience direct observation of the activities of the group being studied, watching communications and interaction, in formal and informal settings, over a period of time. Moustakas stated, “We do not learn about reality from controlled experiments but rather by identifying with the observed” (p. 45). Common features of human science research as
opposed to natural science and quantitative research are identified. Moustakas says that with human science research, be it ethnography, grounded research theory, hermeneutics, empirical phenomenology, or heuristic, they all have the following features in common:

1. They recognize the value of qualitative designs and methodologies. Studies of human experiences are not approachable through quantitative approaches;
2. They focus on the wholeness of experience rather than solely on its objects or parts;
3. They search for meaning and essences of experience rather than measurements and explanations;
4. They obtain descriptions of experience through first-person accounts in informal and formal conversations and interviews;
5. They regard the data of experience as imperative in understanding human behavior and as evidence for scientific investigations;
6. They formulate questions and problems that reflect the interest, involvement, and personal commitment of the researcher;
7. They view experience and behavior as an integrated and inseparable relationship of subject and object and of parts and whole. (pp. 20-21)

In a phenomenological study, the following questions are legitimate: Can you describe the experience of leaving your high school to come into Midwest Early College program? What supports enabled you to persevere through Midwest Early College program? What response do you have toward the value of the supports that were offered to you in the Midwest Early College? What supports moved you toward perseverence and completion? This method of qualitative research allowed the researcher to interview students and formulate a description or a synthesis of the experience. In summarizing the phenomenological method, Moustakas (1994) states:

It offers processes and methods that require effective listening and hearing, seeing things as they appear and as they are, not judging them, learning to describe experience
rather than explain or analyze it, focusing on a core question and exploring in depth the everyday constituents of human experiences. (pp. 174-175)

The theoretical framework for this project centers on hearing the voice of students describe the influence and effectiveness of Midwest Early College supports and the role those supports played in their college success. Based on the work of Merriam (2009), McClenneney and Arnsperger (2012), and others, it is believed that students are in the best position to say whether supports offered to them were effective in helping them to persevere and complete Midwest Early College program and to gain a high school diploma and a college credential. Supports can make a difference in the failure or success of college coursework, and foundational in the supports being offered is the significance of relationship development. As students are paired with Midwest Early College mentors, it is believed that the chance of student success is greatly improved for moving through Midwest Early College to completion. It is also believed that environment plays a key role in helping students to succeed, so Midwest Early College being located on the community college campus significantly enlarges the resources available to help students succeed. Students need a curriculum to prepare them for the rigors of college work, and students benefit from instruction about navigating the college environment. The belief that offering key supports, through an early college model, can equip and encourage students to achieve educational and career goals and earn a college credential may be verified by this qualitative study and use of a phenomenological theoretical model.

This study sought the voice of students to describe the influence and effectiveness of Midwest Early College supports in completing their education and the role those supports played in their college success. This case study is aligned with the approach of Yin (2008, cited
in Merriam, 2009), who states, “For ‘how’ and ‘why’ questions the case study has a distinct advantage” (p. 45). Merriam (2009) clarifies: “The case study offers a means of investigating complex social units consisting of multiple variables of potential importance in understanding the phenomenon. . . . Case study has proven particularly useful for studying educational innovations, evaluating programs, and informing policy” (pp. 50-51).

SUMMARY

Chapter I provided a brief introduction and history of middle and early colleges. The purpose for the research was explained in order to better understand student motivation for attending and completing the Midwest Early College. The context for the study includes a description of the support structure and a theoretical framework for the project. Key terms and specific research questions were defined. Chapter II examines the current literature concerning early colleges with special emphasis on the student support structure within the early college.
CHAPTER TWO: REVIEW OF LITERATURE

INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this research project was to evaluate the effectiveness of the student support structure utilized at Midwest Early College. The main purpose of the support structure, within the early college, was to aid students in achieving college and career readiness and college success. Believing that student perceptions and voices were the best source for determining the value and effectiveness of the support structure, this research project utilized a qualitative research approach. Research literature was included from both middle and early colleges, with a focus on literature written within the last six years, from 2012 to 2017. Because the early college movement is less than 20 years old, research literature specifically related to early college support structures was limited. The literature included the larger context of college readiness and qualitative research methodology, and the literature was also divided into the following sections:

1. Early College Growth
2. Early College Achievement
3. The Power of Place
4. Michigan Early/Middle College Association (MEMCA)
5. Mott and Washtenaw Middle Colleges
6. College Readiness
This structure is a way to categorize and conceptualize the existing literature and apply it to the current group of students under investigation. Ideally, the study being conducted at this individual early college will add to the existing body of knowledge and contribute to the understanding and continual improvement of early colleges.

**EARLY COLLEGE GROWTH**

A significant number of early colleges have evolved over the past two decades offering more high school students the opportunity to earn both a high school diploma and a college credential. *Jobs for the Future*, an educational nonprofit group working to advance college readiness, shows a growth of early colleges involved in their network climbing from two schools in 2002 to over 280 schools in 2012 (Webb & Gerwin, 2014). Early colleges are opening on both high school and community college campuses, and many are now independent of the *Jobs for the Future* network. Retention and program completion rates differ from one early college
program to another, and one factor of this variance may be the availability of student services to support program completion.

**EARLY COLLEGE ACHIEVEMENT**

Along with the growth in the number of early colleges, there has been a marked increase in the level of achievement for students in these programs. “Even with large populations of historically underserved students, early college schools yield outcomes well above national averages” (“Reinventing High Schools,” 2012, p. 6). In the following quotation from the 2014 American Institutes for Research Report on Early Colleges, it was found that when comparing similar students who applied for early college programs, those who were accepted into the early college programs were more likely to enroll in college than those students who were not chosen for the early college programs:

> During the study period, 81% of Early College students enrolled in college, compared with 72% of comparison students. Although the gap in enrollment rates between the two groups decreased over time, comparison students’ college enrollment rates did not catch up to those of Early College students during the study period. In addition, Early College students were more likely than comparison students to enroll in two-year colleges and were just as likely as comparison students to enroll in four-year colleges. (Berger et al., 2014, p. iv)

> This study conducted by The American Institute confirmed that the early college advantage extended beyond college enrollment to an increased likelihood of graduating from college as well, by saying,

> Early College students were significantly more likely to earn a college degree than comparison students. During the study period, 25% of early college students earned a college degree (typically an associate’s degree), as compared with only 5% of comparison students. (Berger et al., 2014, p. iv)
Early college graduation rates are above the national average for high school graduation, and early college graduates are enrolling in college immediately after high school at greater rates: “Students who attend early college schools are significantly more likely than their peers to graduate, enroll in college, and earn a degree” (Webb & Gerwin, 2014, p. 15). The positive effect of earning a college credential for those attending early college was true for students earning a bachelor or an associate degree, and the impact of early college attendance was significantly stronger for minority students than White students. Low-income students also showed greater gains than students who were from average-income homes (Berger et al., 2014). Webb and Gerwin (2014) noted, “86% of early college graduates, who enroll in post-secondary education, persist for a second year” (p. 6). Evidence is readily available demonstrating the success of the early college movement, and students are finding a clear pathway to college through enrollment in early college programs.

THE POWER OF PLACE

Some early colleges are housed in local high school buildings, but many others are housed on the campuses of community colleges. Barnett (2016) highlights the benefits of locating early colleges on community college campuses by stating, “Research suggests that students experience greater benefits from courses offered on the college campus” (p. 6). Smith (2015) concurs that there are advantages of hosting the early college on a campus: “When dual enrollment students are mixed in classes with regular college students, they are likely to display greater maturity and feel their college experience is authentic” (p. 6). Ramsey-White (2012) states that early college high schools, that are physically located on college campuses, have exhibited the strongest student outcomes with respect to state assessment scores, attendance
rates, and progression from the 9-10 grades. In discussing early college history, Ramsey-White stated that the original goal of the first middle college in 1974 with creative pedagogical inputs and “on a college campus would capitalize on the ‘power of place’ and stimulate and inspire underserved students to believe that a college education was within their reach” (p. 23). The transition from high school courses to college courses is simplified and less threatening when students are already acclimated to the college environment. Barnett goes on to say, “It is important to assess students for college readiness when they are in 11th grade and provide opportunities to attain college readiness in 12th grade” (p. 7). This may be accomplished on the college campus.

MICHIGAN EARLY/MIDDLE COLLEGE ASSOCIATION (MEMCA)

The Michigan Early/Middle College Association (MEMCA) is a voluntary alliance of educators working toward increasing the number of students earning a college credential in the state of Michigan. The Michigan Early/Middle College Association cooperates with the Michigan Department of Education in seeking approval for new early college schools and programs and training leadership for the schools and programs. The three-fold purpose of MEMCA is (1) the continued practice of professional development, (2) research and contribution to the literature related to early/middle colleges, and (3) credentialing (MEMCA, 2017). Formed in 1996 as an extension of the Post-secondary Enrollment Options Act (PA 160), MEMCA has been a leader among states for encouraging the early/middle college movement. The number of early/middle colleges in the state has now grown to 24 stand-alone early/middle college high schools, 13 STEM Early College Expansion Partnerships, and 110 early/middle college programs. During the 2016-2017 academic year, 20 additional early/middle college programs were recognized by
MEMCA and approved by the Michigan Department of Education (Early/Middle College High Schools and Programs in Michigan, 2017). Four other programs are currently in the approval process. Michigan has joined Texas, New York, and North Carolina as one of the leading states in the nation for promoting the early/middle college movement. The Michigan Early/Middle College Association (MEMCA) awards a technical MEMCA Certification for students earning a minimum of 15 college credits during high school. In many early/middle colleges, students can earn up to 60 transferable college credits. Several early/middle colleges in the state of Michigan follows the design principles found on the Michigan Department of Education website:

Power of the Site – Locating schools on a college campus is integral to student motivation and success and to an enduring collaborative partnership. It is a visible symbol to the community of a dual accountability for student outcomes and academic success. Students are treated as college students and see themselves as college completers.

Teaching and Learning – Developing students’ literacy skills is critical to academic success. Schools regularly engage students in rigorous, in-depth academic work, use active intellectual inquiry and sustained writing and revision in all classes.

Student Assessment – Schools design a system of assessment that provides multiple opportunities for students to publicly exhibit what they know and can do. Assessments grow out of classroom work and provide on-going feedback to the school community, the teacher, the student, and the parent on a students’ progress toward achieving academic proficiency.

Student Support – “Smallness,” less than 100 students per grade level, helps to create a learning community for students and teachers and provides opportunities for flexible and innovative structures to support students academically and emotionally.

Democratic School Governance – Purposefully designed structures provide for everyone’s voice to be heard and respected in the decision-making process with regard to hiring personnel, managing budget, determining curriculum and pedagogy, developing students’ activities and any other policies that affect the daily life of students and faculty.

Professional Development – Staff participates in on-going professional development that focuses on student success. Time during the school day is provided for staff
development and the creation of professional learning communities. New teachers are mentored in order to help them to understand and to implement the goals of the community. (MEMCA, 2017, main page)

According to the Michigan Department of Education, an “Early/Middle College School" is defined as a stand-alone public high school, a school within a school, a Public School Academy (PSA) or a Shared Educational Entity (SEE) designed to allow a pupil to earn a high school diploma and either a certificate or associate degree. The number of college credits earned depends upon the number of credits a student has earned at the high school, the student’s ability, work ethic, and opportunities supplied by each individual middle or early college. The Michigan Department of Education permits early college students to stay in school for a 13th year, allowing districts to receive education dollars to pay for college courses during the extra 13th year. To solidify this agreement, a formal Memorandum of Understanding, where roles and responsibilities are identified, is signed by the school district(s) and the postsecondary college partner (Early/Middle College High Schools and Programs in Michigan, 2017).

MOTT AND WASHTENAW MIDDLE COLLEGES

Mott Middle College, operated by the Genesee Intermediate School District, opened in 1991 on the campus of Mott Community College in Flint, Michigan. Mott Middle College based its program on the first Middle College High School at LaGuardia Community College in New York. As a leader in the state of Michigan, Mott Middle College opened with a grant funded by the Charles Stewart Mott Foundation and partnered with 21 school districts to enroll students from different high schools. Mott Middle College is a member of the National Middle College Consortium located in New York City and formed in 1993 (“About MMC,” 2017).
Another leader in the state of Michigan was Washtenaw Technical Middle College (WTMC), formed in 1997. Washtenaw Technical Middle College emphasized a skill-based educational program where students would learn both academic and life management skills. Students were required to complete college preparatory coursework at a minimum grade standard of “B” before being eligible to earn a technical certificate or associate degree (WTMC School Profile, 2017, main page). By emphasizing college readiness, Mott and Washtenaw Middle Colleges led the way for students, in the state of Michigan and throughout the United States, to have an opportunity of earning a high school diploma and a college credential simultaneously.

**COLLEGE READINESS**

A study by Ramsey-White (2012) examined how early college students were prepared for college success. It was reported that their early college experience impacted their key cognitive strategies, academic behaviors, and contextual skills even more than key academic content. Students reported an improvement in their critical thinking skills, an increased confidence, and the ability to integrate and synthesize their learning across disciplines and content. Students also reported gains in time management, effectively communicating with professors, using study groups, using college knowledge such as financial aid, and choosing a college. Some weaknesses were expressed in the area of content, especially biology and mathematics, where students felt that the college level was much more difficult than the high school level, and in some cases, students report that they could have been better prepared: “The early college high school initiative is positioned to have a tremendous impact on the number of underrepresented students that can not only access the post-secondary
environment, but also persist and graduate from college” (Ramsey-White, 2012, p. 145). Ramsey-White’s study can help to evaluate and refine college readiness strategies.

A related study conducted by McDonald and Farrell (2012) showed the result of interviewing 31 students, in an early college program. The early college was located on a community college campus. Grounded Theory provided the theoretical foundation for this study as researchers emphasized student voices concerning school design that contributed to college readiness or a lack of readiness. The researchers examined the built-in academic and social supports available through the small early college that contributed to college readiness in underserved students (McDonald & Ferrell, 2012).

Three constructs of college readiness were defined as academic preparedness, social preparedness, and personal preparedness. Out of four recorded focus group sessions, four themes and related subthemes were identified. The four themes with subthemes are listed in Table 3.

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<th>READINESS</th>
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<td>Academic assessment</td>
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(McDonald & Farrell, 2012)
Students spoke out about the challenges they faced in transitioning from high school to college through the early college program, and students confirmed the value of the early college model in preparing them for college.

In general, students expressed how their incoming concerns about college were addressed through the ECHS experience and how this helped to develop their confidence in all aspects of college learning. They shared how being immersed within a college environment, college courses, and interacting with college students and faculty contributed significantly to their readiness for college success. (McDonald & Ferrell, 2012, pp. 227-228)

The purpose of Conley’s (2007) work, *Redefining College Readiness*, was to provide an operational definition of college readiness. Four areas of readiness were defined as (1) Cognitive Strategies, (2) Academic Knowledge and Skills, (3) Academic Behaviors, and (4) Contextual Skills. One example of each would be Cognitive Strategies—problem solving; Content Knowledge—writing on an academic subject; Academic Behaviors—time management; and Contextual Knowledge—how to manage financial aid. College readiness can be defined as “the level of preparation a student needs in order to enroll and succeed—without remediation—in a credit-bearing general education course at a post-secondary institution that offers a baccalaureate degree or transfer to a baccalaureate program” (Conley, 2007, p. 5).

Success is defined as passing a college course and thus being able to take the next level course that follows. At the time of this writing, Conley stated that there was no currently existing high school program that is designed to meet the four areas of college readiness and prepare students to start college. Conley’s college readiness definition can be used as a gauge to measure current high school programs (including early college programs) to determine if the programs are attempting to meet the college readiness needs of students.
The level of performance required for college success differs from the level of performance in the previous years of schooling. According to the National Survey of Student Engagement (Conley, 2007), students do not come to college prepared with a work ethic to meet course requirements, and students only spend one half the amount of time that they need to be spending in course preparation. Previously college readiness was defined as taking certain courses or maintaining a certain grade point average in high school, but that definition has proven insufficient, as there is no standardized or agreed-upon measure for course quality (Conley, 2007). Even in areas where an increase in course quality and GPA have been attempted, college success rates have not improved. Conley suggests that grade inflation and weighting grades in high school have not helped the problem. Admissions tests and standardized tests have not been found to be well aligned with postsecondary learning, and tests, though a measure of academic skills, are not necessarily reflective of the knowledge and capabilities needed for college success. Conley discusses the inadequacy of remedial education courses in college and the extra challenge faced by low-income students. Several organizations, such as The Standards for Success Project, College Board, and ACT, have attempted to define what knowledge, skills, and strategies that students need to succeed in gateway college courses (Conley, 2007).

An attempt to simplify Conley’s (2007) four key areas of college readiness is as follows:

1. **Key Cognitive Strategies** – “the intelligent behaviors necessary for college readiness and to emphasize that these behaviors need to be developed over a period of time, such that they become ways of thinking, habits in how intellectual activities are pursued. . . Intellectual openness; Inquisitiveness; Analysis; Reasoning, argumentation, proof; Interpretation; Precision and accuracy; and Problem solving” (Conley, 2007, p. 13).

3. Academic Behaviors – are behaviors that “reflect greater student self-awareness, self-monitoring, and self-control necessary for academic success” (Conley, 2007, p. 16). These are behaviors that are not tied to a particular subject area, but behaviors needed for success in any area, for example, study skills.

4. Contextual Skills and Awareness – Sometimes called “college knowledge,” it is the ability and level of knowledge and understanding to maneuver through college and all the associated busy work that is required for registration, financial aid, understanding the college system and culture (Conley, 2007).

Conley (2007) provides a list of skills that students should be able to demonstrate in each of the four areas and a description of how each of the four components of college readiness might be measured. There should be appropriate end-of-course exams, surveys, and questionnaires to monitor student progress. While some of this information is collected in pieces, there is not a comprehensive profile collected on students. Conley argues for a comprehensive system for measuring college readiness that “provides all of this information to students in a progressive, developmentally appropriate fashion so that they have a continuous feel for how well they are being prepared and preparing themselves for college” (p. 22). Conley ends the discussion on what schools, teachers, and students can do to promote this definition of college readiness and master the concepts for being better prepared for college success.

Barnett (2016) speaks of “momentum points,” that is, college preparatory experiences and markers in high school that prepare students for college. There are multiple momentum points that together form a “momentum chain,” or path, leading to college success with a particular emphasis on success for first-generation and low-income students. Special emphasis is placed on 12th grade, the first year of college, and momentum points that are supported by research and accomplished through collaboration between high schools and colleges in a
“shared transition zone” (Barnett, 2016, p. 1). Midwest Early College already combines these efforts as links between high school and college. Barnett explains creating a student momentum framework as

the accumulation of experiences and attainments that make post-secondary success more likely. . . . Our goal is to strengthen opportunities for students to gain multiple experiences and attainments that contribute to their momentum and propel them to and through their first year of college. (p. 3)

Following closely Conley’s (2007) “Four Keys to College and Career Readiness” model, Barnett (2016) divides the momentum points into three major categories: academic knowledge and skills, noncognitive skills, and college cultural capital. Each of the three divisions have both experiences for students to go through and attainments that students must achieve. “It is important to assess students for college readiness when they are in 11th grade and provide opportunities to attain college readiness in 12th grade” (Barnett, 2016, p. 7). This gives 11th graders feedback in time to make improvements in their senior year. Barnett provides a check-off list for monitoring momentum chain experiences and attainments. This is a useful tool for assuring individual students are ready for college, and this is similar to the credentialing done at Midwest Early College.

EARLY COLLEGE RESEARCH METHODS AND THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS

Much of the theoretical and philosophical understanding for this research project came from Sharan Merriam’s (2009) Qualitative Research: A Guide to Design and Implementation. Merriam provides a clear distinction between quantitative and qualitative research and enables the researcher to determine the best perspective for approaching research. Merriam’s work supports the methodology used in this dissertation for an observational case study by stating
that qualitative case studies focus on a particular phenomenon rather than on hypothesis testing. Merriam describes Grounded Theory as using interviews and the constant comparative method to arrive at a theory that applies to a specific aspect of practice, is grounded in the data, and emerges from the data. The researcher is central in collecting and analyzing data while taking a theoretical sample from a larger group of students (Merriam, 2009).

Ethnography is defined as extensive fieldwork pursued in a variety of social settings, allowing for direct observations of the activities of the group being studied, communications and interactions with the people, and opportunities for informal and formal interviews. Ethnography results in a cultural description and is a deep study, with a small group, over a significant period of time (Moustakas, 1994).

Moustakas (1994) explains Grounded Research as a theory with the following focus:

. . . unraveling the elements of experience. From a study of these elements and their interrelationships a theory is developed that enables the researcher to understand the nature and meaning of an experience for a particular group of people in a particular setting. . . the theory is generated during the research process and from the data being collected. The hypotheses and concepts are worked out in the course of conducting the study and from an analysis of data. (p. 4)

Characteristic of this type of qualitative research is that no sequential steps are laid out in advance. It is research in contrast to the numerical statistics of quantitative research where the researcher is trying to understand the experience of the group.

Moustakas (1994) goes on to explain hermeneutics as a focus on consciousness and experience:

To understand human experience, one must study the experience as well as history; history adds to the meaning. As stated, hermeneutic science involves the art of reading a text so that the intention and meaning behind appearances are fully understood. . . (p. 9)
The purpose of heuristic research is to find out the process, or search to discover, the nature and meaning of the experience. The following methods—Ethnography, Grounded Research Theory, Hermeneutics, Empirical Phenomenology, and Heuristics—have common qualities of human science research, and they have the following common features distinguished from natural science:

1. Recognizing that the values of qualitative designs and methodologies as studies of human experiences that are not approachable through quantitative approaches;
2. Focusing on the wholeness of experience rather than solely on its objects or parts and searching for meaning and essences of experience rather than measurements and explanations;
3. Obtaining descriptions of experience through first-person accounts in informal and formal conversations and interviews;
4. Regarding the data of experience as imperative in understanding human behavior and as evidence for scientific investigations;
5. Formulating questions and problems that reflect the interest, involvement, and personal commitment of the researcher;
6. Viewing experience and behavior as an integrated and inseparable relationship of subject and object and of parts and whole. (Moustakas, 1994, p. 21)

Moustakas said, “We do not learn about reality from controlled experiments but rather by identifying with the observed” (p. 46). Moustakas relied heavily on the former work of Kant, Husserl and Brentano, stating, “Transcendental phenomenology is a scientific study of the appearance of things, of phenomena just as we see them and as they appear to us in consciousness” (p. 49). In summarizing the phenomenological method, Moustakas states, 

It offers processes and methods that require effective listening and hearing, seeing things as they appear and as they are, not judging them, learning to describe experience rather than explain or analyze it, focusing on a core question and exploring in depth the everyday constituents of human experiences. (p. 175)
MIDWEST EARLY COLLEGE

Adelman (2006) found that the academic intensity of students’ high school coursework was the most important factor in achieving a bachelor’s degree. Barnett (2016) stated, “Academic intensity refers to participation in a substantial number of challenging high school courses” (p. 5). “Students who completed the college-preparatory core courses were 12% more likely to enroll in college, 9% more likely to achieve a first-year college grade point average (GPA) of 3.0 or higher, and 8% more likely to earn a college degree. ... Research indicates that students generally benefit from taking challenging courses, even when they have not performed well academically in the past” (Barnett, 2016, p. 6). Barnett (2016) emphasized communication to parents about students taking rigorous coursework in their senior year. At Midwest Early College there is no “senior year break” because students are stepping out into college courses when their peers, back in high school, may be slacking off from academic challenges. As stated by Knapp (2008, cited in Barnett, 2016), students need to be taking challenging courses in high school.

Knapp and colleagues (2008) found that Florida students who participated in dual enrollment were more likely to graduate from high school and enroll in college than similar students who did not participate. In addition, dual enrollment participants were more likely to persist in college, earned an average of 15 more college credits 3 years after high school graduation than nonparticipants, and had significantly higher college GPAs. (p. 6)

Similar findings were confirmed in New York and Texas. Positive college outcomes have also been associated with good performance on Advanced Placement Exams and enrollment in International Baccalaureate Programs. Non-cognitive skills are also examined in this study by Barnett. Some schools attempt to teach self-awareness and self-management through safe environment and close caring relationships (Barnett, 2016).
Williams (2014) studied 45 Northern California Middle College High School alumni and their perceptions of their college readiness and transition to college. William’s study focused on enrollment, persistence, and degree completion for students traditionally underrepresented in college (p. ii). The research questions, investigated by Williams, were both quantitative and qualitative.

1. What are the educational outcomes of Northern California MCHS alumni?
2. How do Northern California MCHS alumni perceive their college preparation for four-year universities?
3. What does it mean to be college ready for Northern California MCHS alumni?
4. Do networks and support structures play a role in the college readiness and matriculation process for Northern California MCHS alumni? If so, how? (Williams, 2014, p. 5)

The Williams’ study has many similarities to the Midwest Early College research as the research was with students who attended a middle college high school. The goal to understand how the students perceive their college preparation and the support structure experienced in the middle college. The study by Williams also questioned the role of networks and support structures through in-depth interviews and an interpretative phenomenological approach.

Students reported being academically prepared for college, but not comprehensively prepared for the college context, and Williams admits that the study did not clearly determine long-term benefits of attending the middle college:

This is due to the fact that MCHS-ECHS structural variation across states methodologically limits researchers’ capacity to examine the impact MCHS-ECHS has on student matriculation and post-secondary degree completion on a national scale. . . . Based on the review of literature, we know that students in MCHS-ECHS accumulate college credits while in high school, have a high level of self-efficacy, and enroll in post-secondary institutions. We also know that social supports impact MCHS-ECHS student academic success. . . we still do not have a clear or substantiated understanding of
MCHS-ECHS student educational outcomes after college enrollment or student perception of their college readiness experience. (Williams, 2014, p. 39)

While Williams’ study has limitations in following students long-term into four-year universities and afterward, the dissertation adds value by providing “descriptive data on MCHS alumni student outcomes and interview data that gather MCHS student perspectives of their college readiness in order to gain a better grasp of MCHS matriculation and post-secondary degree completion” (Williams, 2014, p. 41).

Williams (2014) discussed the impact of social capital and social networks in helping students to succeed. As stated by Williams, “There is limited qualitative research that privileges the voices of students that participate or have participated in MCHS-ECHS. For this reason, studies that examine MCHS-ECHS student perception of the college readiness process are limited as well” (p. 2). The current research on Midwest Early College will add to the understanding of how students are prepared for college success in a particular early college with a particular support structure. Hearing positive student voices on their college preparation experience in an early college is the best indicator of how well the students were prepared.

Seeing the value of middle and early college programs, Williams called for more research:

If MCHS-ECHS is viewed as an alternative program that boosts the enrollment, persistence, and degree completion of traditionally underrepresented students, it is imperative to produce research that informs college readiness policy and programs that are geared toward enhancing educational opportunities for traditionally underrepresented students. (p. 8)

This example of research, with student testimonials of their experiences, is verifying the effectiveness of early college programs and encouraging the growth of the early college movement.
EARLY COLLEGE STRUCTURE AND DESIGN

In seeking to understand the structure and design of early colleges, Rochford (2011) listed the following five core principles that govern the design and operation of early colleges:

Early College schools are committed to serving students underrepresented in higher education.

Early College schools are created and sustained by a local education agency, a higher education institution, and the community, all of whom are jointly accountable for student success.

Early College schools and their higher education partners and community jointly develop an integrated academic program so all student earn one to two-years of transferable college credit leading to college completion.

Early College schools engage all students in a comprehensive support system that develops academic and social skills as well as the behaviors and conditions necessary for college completion.

Early College schools and their higher education and community partners work with intermediaries to create conditions and advocate for supportive policies that advance the early college movement. (pp. 6-7)

Bush’s study in 2016 involved three early college high schools over a period of four-years, where she examined the perceptions of key informants about the process of forming early college high schools. Two of the early colleges were located on the campuses of a community college, and the third early college developed inside an existing high school building. As a result of a state foundation grant targeting low-income secondary students, two school districts, a community college, and a university started three early college schools with grades 9-12. Leaders participating in the survey and structured interviews represented a variety of positions, including high school councils, high school principals, counselors, community college administrators, and school district administrators. This study took place after the first group of high school students in the early college graduated from high school. This study serves
a model of collaboration for those interested in forming an early college or maintaining collaboration in an existing early college (Bush, 2016).

An educational goal across America is to increase the number of students earning a college credential and to supply the educated workforce needed in moving the United States forward in a competing global economy. The continued collaboration between high schools and community colleges will be required for policy, instructional, and cultural change. Bush’s (2016) research sought literature that could provide a model for change and collaboration with a focus on adequate funding, changing state policies, the nature of early college partnerships, different leadership structures in the early colleges, and the role of intermediaries who work at developing partnerships. Observation of current collaborative efforts showed a need for improvement in elementary through university programs (Bush, 2016).

Bush (2016) interviewed institutional leaders from K-12, the early college, and colleges to evaluate the level of cooperation among them in operation of early colleges. An understanding of the level of shared vision and cooperation in regard to early college partnerships was sought. Findings indicated that not all responses were positive, as some administrators expressed a lack of time for updates and discussion, and relationships that were strained. On curriculum issues, credit transferability, and arranging extracurricular activities, there had been positive cooperation (Bush, 2016). It is important to maintain a collaboration between the early college, intermediate school district, supporting high schools, and participating colleges. With limited state funding, there is competition for students. Communication and collaboration was necessary for start-up and continuation of early college programs. Programs must maintain a careful consideration for their partners and a continual
effort to bolster the success of each educational structure. Bush’s inclusion of survey questions from Raywid and Schmerler serve as a measure for evaluating early college programs and monitoring the level of communications among partners. It was suggested that advisory committees be formed to aid in communication and continued support (Bush, 2016).

In the 2015 article “Emerging Early College Models for Traditionally Underserved Students,” Barnett, Maclutsky, and Wagonlander update the status of early colleges especially in Michigan and New York. The authors examined modifications to the classic early college model. Concerning students who have been enrolled in dual enrollment, the authors state, “Participating students are likely to graduate high school, enroll and persist in college, accrue college credits, and complete college than students who do not participate in dual enrollment” (p. 39). While this is an important step forward, there are barriers to acceptance into dual enrollment programs, and this is the gap that early college programs were designed to fill. Early colleges can provide opportunity to students who previously had no access to college. Classic early colleges are defined as small high schools located on a college campus with a blended curriculum of high school and college courses. Additionally, research by Berger et al. (2014) confirmed that students in classic early college programs were “considerably more likely than students in traditional high schools to graduate high school, enroll in college, and earn college degrees” (Barnett et al., 2015, p. 40).

Barnett et al. (2015) list 280 early colleges in the United States at the time the article was written in 2015. There is also reference to the many early college designs that are now forming within high schools, and not operating on college campuses. In Michigan, three designs are described as 5th-year programs, enhanced dual enrollment systems, and Science,
Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM) programs. The programs can be grouped together with the following characteristics: research-based design considerations, strong high school-college partnerships, sequencing of courses, opportunities to gain college knowledge, measures to ensure quality of college courses, and focus on relationships between student and faculty. Michigan’s graduation rate, at 71%, and college entrance rate, at 62%, is lower than the national averages, respectively, at 80% and 69% (Barnett et al., 2015).

The early college movement in Michigan started with the opening of Mott Middle College (MMC) in Flint, Michigan in 1991. In 2002, MMC was redesigned into an early college with the Early College High School Initiative under the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation. In 2006 Governor Granholm financially supported the start-up of Early/Middle colleges, and in 2009, the Michigan Early/Middle College Association was established. Barnett et al. (2015) discuss how these early/middle college programs are funded and what some of the limitations for students might be, federal grants to start additional STEM programs in the state, and supports previously offered in early colleges being adopted into the different emerging models.

Historically, New York has been a national leader in the early college movement and continues to lead with emerging models of the early college. The Smart Scholars ECHS includes early college programs within the high schools that outnumber the classic early colleges. Unique in New York has been the development of Pathways in Technology Early College High Schools (P-TECH) where high schools, colleges, and industry partner together in offering students a six-year high school experience. Each student has the opportunity to complete the Associate in Applied Science Degree. Many of the industry partners then hire the graduates to go to work. State foundation dollars are available for all six years. Some of the P-TECHs are
partnered with more than one industry in manufacturing, architecture, and healthcare.

“Because they offer academic and social supports, the Michigan and New York models make participation in dual enrollment a possibility for a wider range of students, including those who may need bolstering along the way” (Barnett et al., 2015, p. 47).

**EARLY COLLEGE CHALLENGES**

A limited number of studies have examined how students of high academic achievement have performed in early college programs. These studies are limited due to the fact that early colleges are still relatively new, and many students, who had attended early colleges, have not yet completed their college degrees. A study by Howley, Howley, Howley, and Duncan (2013) is unique in that it examines the performance of students with demonstrably modest academic talents in early college and dual enrollment programs.

Originally, early college and dual enrollment programs were viewed as programs to enable college success for students of modest or average academic ability. Jobs for the Future states that early college efforts now target “students with poor attendance, struggling learners, and students who are overage and under-credited” (Howley et al., 2013, p. 80). The challenge for early college leaders is to prepare students in a short amount of time for college level work while at the same time, trying to address the needs of unprepared students.

Howley et al. (2013) discussed the history of early college and dual enrollment programs with an emphasis on academic fairness as opposed to academic excellence. The basic level of education, now required for sustainable employment, has changed, and students, who considered modest in their academic abilities, stand to gain from the benefits of enrollment in early college programs. In the past, a high school diploma was sufficient for modest
employment, but now the requirement for sustainable employment is set at a college certificate or bachelor’s degree in the majority of cases (Howley et al., 2013).

In the Howley et al. (2013) study, challenges were framed within the context of organizational power dynamics between K-12 and higher educational institutions and increasing student access to programs. Twenty-two educators, who were involved in a rural consortium of eight high schools and three colleges, interviewed for the study. Four relationship themes, emphasizing the importance of communication, are as follows: Organizational Conditions and Motives, Border Crossers, Organizational Power Dynamics, and Personal Attitudes Regarding Early College. School districts stood to lose funds by allowing students to enroll in college sponsored early college programs. Early college programs were established when a few champions were able to persevere through K-12 and college conflicts. Study findings suggest strategies for working through issues of funding, communication, power relationships, and distrust.

Many of these same conflicts exist in the current study at Learning Community College and Midwest Early College, as it is a delicate balance to maintain the early college option for students. Relationships between the early college and area high schools are directly related to the ability of students to learn about the early college option and if those students will be encouraged or discouraged from making that choice (Howley et al., 2013). Leaders at MEC have found some participating high schools to be more supportive than others. This may be due to a lack of program information supplied to high school counselors and high school leaders, and it is a marketing concern for MEC. There is also a concern of participating high schools with the loss of financial resources when a high school sends students to the early college.
Other studies examined challenges in establishing and operating an early college programs. Saenz and Combs (2015) explored the prior experiences, perceived challenges, and support systems of 17 Hispanic students, in grade 12, at an early college high school in Texas. The study focused on first generation students who were from populations considered to be at a high-risk for not entering college. The phenomenological design looked at student supports of school environment, support from family and friends, and student’s identity and values while in the early college. The study suggests that the early college model can provide help in solving several challenges faced in postsecondary education concerning low income, minority, and first-generation students not performing well in college and not completing college at desired rates (Saenz & Combs, 2015). Five emergent themes were identified from a series of focus groups and interviews conducted by Saenz and Combs: (1) the significance of an associate degree, (2) the importance of a positive school environment, (3) the establishment of identity and values, (4) the impact of family members, and (5) the necessity of support from peers and teachers. Students reported several benefits of attending the early college, such as a positive environment, more interaction with administrators than at the large public school, a feeling of family, and the opportunity to take free college courses. Nearly 77% of the students earned an associate degree upon receiving their high school diplomas. Students reported gaining adult skills such as goal setting, decision making, taking responsibility, and keeping commitments (Saenz & Combs, 2015).

McClenney, Dare, and Thomason (2013) believe that students are done a disservice when they have too many choices for taking college courses. The lack of clear structure has led students to waste time and resources and not complete a college credential. McClenney et al.
advocate for a limited amount of high quality, coherent, and relevant academic pathways for students and incorporating proven experiences and supports into the established academic pathways. Students highly value academic planning and advising, but too few students are actually getting the planning and advising they need. Academic pathways are a cluster of related programs from which students could choose when entering the beginning of their college experience. Pathways could be the foundation for learning communities, especially at Midwest Early College. Mentors could serve students more effectively if matched to students whose pathways more closely align to the mentor’s level of expertise (McClennen et al., 2013).

**EARLY COLLEGE CULTURE/AT RISK POPULATIONS**

Another challenge faced by early colleges is working with at-risk students. The U.S. Department of Education defines high-needs students as students at risk of educational failure or otherwise in need of special assistance and support, such as students who are living in poverty, who attend high-minority schools. . . who are far below grade level, who have left school before receiving a regular high school diploma, who are at risk of not graduating with a diploma on time, who are homeless, who are in foster care, who have been incarcerated, who have disabilities, or who are English learners. (“Definitions,” 2017, p. 1)

A study by McKillip, Godfrey, and Rawls (2012) identified components of building a college going culture with a rigorous curriculum, knowledge of academic behaviors, and availability of social supports. The study was conducted in the South Bronx Preparatory School (SBP) in New York City, which was established by the New York Education Initiative in 2004. Researchers wanted to investigate how a college going culture was established in this school of at-risk students. The study revealed:

the school works to accomplish its primary mission of preparing student to succeed in college by merging academics with the socioemotional development of students. The
relationships between and among students and staff in the school are the foundation of trust and hope upon which the school’s culture is built. (McKillip et al., 2012, p. 531)

After a thorough review of the literature on the importance of academic knowledge and significant student/teacher and student/staff relationships, the authors suggest a focus on both academic learning and social supports that can be offered at the school. The level of support offered at school will need to vary dependent upon the amount of self-efficacy and positive social and academic behaviors students bring to school (McKillip et al., 2012).

The McKillip et al. (2012) case study was built upon eight formal observations and meetings with faculty, administration, and students. Observations, field notes, interviews, and focus groups were used to study the school and confirm the importance of strong academic content knowledge along with socioemotional development. The following four themes were identified as primarily responsible for building the college going culture: (1) nonacademic relationships between students and staff, particularly supported through the counselors and principal; (2) student community and student self-advocacy; (3) sharing a common mission; and (4) a smaller school structure with a school choice option. Key to the success of the school was the development of relationships between students and teachers, students and the principal, and younger and older students. There was also the emphasis on developing a culture where it is cool to learn and where collaboration is encouraged. Students were advised to avoid friends who would not support their academic success. Academic successes, like being accepted into a college, were celebrated through displays, announcements, and rewards. Responsibility and self-advocacy were strongly encouraged, as one teacher said, “That’s not just an academic learning thing, it’s not just information you need to know, but the ethics, the culture of
responsibility” (McKillip et al., 2012, p. 544). Discussion with the students about choosing a college started early and continued throughout their school years, and former students regularly came back to discuss their college experiences. Students were taken on college trips, and students spoke of being constantly pushed to excel. These characteristics are shared by many early college programs, including Midwest Early College.

Some of the strong relationships referenced in McKillip et al. (2012) study were attributed to the small school size, even though the school was located in a large urban area. Students were given the choice, in this 6-12 school, to move to a different high school after middle school was completed. This power of choice, for the most part, results in students in the high school who choose to be there. Teacher qualifications included teachers willing to go beyond their subject matter in serving the students in an advisory position. Teachers were independent and supported by the principal in their classrooms, and the principal regularly visited in the classrooms. The emphasis in this report on school supports is relevant to the supports offered at Midwest Early College. The report confirms the importance of building a college-going culture early on, strong academics, and social support networks within the school (McKillip et al., 2012, p. 550).

The social worker and counselor were the first staff hired in the school which emphasized the commitment to social development. In summation of South Bronx Preparatory School’s success and considering what might be applied in an early college program, the authors state,

This creation of a culture of learning, motivating students to engage academically through relationship-building, appears to potentially be a key to create a college preparatory school in a neighborhood where college is not the norm. Some
administrators in schools, the principal of SBP told us, concern themselves with “controlling” their students, not engaging them. But it is not about control, she said. If it were, we are outnumbered every time. (McKillip et al., 2012, p. 551)

Cross Creek Early College High School (CCECHS) is another early college program reaching out to at-risk students. Kaniuka and Vickers (2010) conducted a case study at an early college to determine the academic performance of the students and if the early college was keeping the original mission of serving disadvantaged youth. CCECHS was opened in 2005 on the campus of Fayetteville State University. Cross Creek students outperformed traditional high school students on five state tests. Data were also disaggregated by race and gender showing that Black students at CCECHS passed at higher rates than their traditional school peers, and in a majority of cases, White, Hispanic, and multiracial subgroups from CCECHS performed better than traditional peers. The achievement gap at CCECHS was one third less the achievement gap found in traditional schools (Kaniuka & Vickers, 2010).

In the study, 51% of seniors completed a survey with a dominant theme emerging that student experiences at CCECHS were challenging, enabled student success, and provided a forward-looking focus. Students reported a sense of caring and support from the teachers and principal, and students stated that the teachers and principal were personally invested in student success. Students emphasized the importance of relationships as well as academics in making their school experience successful. As one student reported, without developing respect, teachers will not be heard, and respect is earned by caring and treating students as individuals. Students stated that teachers should not try to hold up barriers between teachers and students, and there should be a sense of family. Of the students surveyed, 94% had
positive comments about the school, and only two students had negative comments (Kaniuka & Vickers, 2010).

In addition to students, teachers were also asked to anonymously evaluate the early college experience. The dominant themes were providing high expectations, a challenging curriculum, and student support. Teachers recognized the importance of providing additional caring and support when expecting greater academic performance. Teachers considered their student support at CCECHS as beyond what traditional students receive in high school. A strong sense of collaboration and meaningful participation was also reported in regard to school leadership and decision making. Teachers viewed their principal as listening to teacher voices, setting high curricular expectations, monitoring classroom instruction, giving teachers autonomy to carry out their jobs, and setting a purposeful environment. The smallness of the school was acknowledged as key to giving students the advisory support needed and important for fostering relationships (Kaniuka & Vickers, 2010).

Kaniuka and Vickers (2010) conclude, “High schools seeking to challenge their students should take note that compressing 4 years of high school into 2 coupled with a college experience can yield significantly improved results” (Kaniuka & Vickers, 2010, p. 179).

Relationship building at all levels, providing a rigorous curriculum, and incorporating a professional teaching environment must be primary goals for school success. Teachers show a high level of student involvement as they challenge students for college readiness, and teachers have a participatory role in the leadership and decision making. Purposeful teacher leadership is tied to achieving school mission and student outcomes. Cross Creek Early College High School serves as a good role model for other schools (Kaniuka & Vickers, 2010).
In addition to the challenge of working with at-risk students, early college programs must justify receiving public funds. Crosta (2013) reports on the money spent on community college students who dropped out after the first semester of college, and he states, “In an era where the policy focus is on accountability and efficiency, improving first-year persistence is a critical goal” (p. 1). Studying five community colleges and 14,429 students, Crosta determined that 28% of the students had dropped out after the first semester, and he stated, “More students dropped out en masse after the first term than at any other time. The majority of these students never attended any college again” (p. 1). Dropouts were identified to be older students, with the average age for early dropouts being 27. Dropouts took less credit hours (7.3 average), they were less likely to complete financial aid paperwork, and they were more likely to be referred for developmental education courses in three areas of reading, writing, and math. Those students who dropped appear to have been less academically prepared due to developmental placement rates. This study confirms that additional work needs to be done examining the early college students at Midwest Early College who dropout and return back to their homeschools. With Crosta’s report in mind, it should be determined if Midwest Early College students who dropout were students who were not performing well before the enrolling in the Early College or students with low test scores, that is, students who are not academically ready for college courses.

With 1 million students a year dropping out of high school (McEvoy, 1995, cited in Wagonlander, 1997), Wagonlander focused on factors of positive re-engagement back into school. Little had been studied up to that point about what works to re-engage students, so Wagonlander focused on the following:
1. What factors had “turnaround” students identified as significant?

2. What factors did students, counselors, administrators, secretaries, and teachers at Mott Middle College (MMC) perceive to be necessary for successful student re-engagement?

3. How did student perceptions agree or disagree with the adults in the study, and how did the students agree with existing literature at that time?

4. Was there a difference between city youth and suburban youth?

5. Did male opinions differ from female opinions?

6. Were out-of-school or in-school factors viewed as more significant?

7. What were believed to be the greatest obstacles for success in school?

Surveys and interviews were conducted to search for these answers (Wagonlander, 1997).

Wagonlander (1997) surveyed 19 educators and 53 student graduates from Mott Middle College High School. A “stratified sub-sample” of 18 students were interviewed, and data were collected from the 19 middle colleges that were part of the National Consortium of Middle Colleges at that time. Wagonlander’s focus was partially a “program review,” but also went beyond program review to answer broader questions about re-engagement.

The school (MMC) was designed to deliver “intensive care” education to high school students from across the local county who possessed academic potential but were at risk of dropping out before successfully completing high school or were achieving well below their potential. (Wagonlander, 1997, p. 82)

In application of Wagonlander’s (1997) study to Midwest Early College, the student population differs somewhat. The emphasis at Mott Middle College was primarily on enrolling at-risk students, but only one-third of the seats at Midwest Early College were reserved for first-generation, college-going students and for students from families with low income. Midwest Early College sought students who had the capability of quickly preparing for college coursework, as faculty only had only one or two semesters to prepare students for successful
completion of college coursework. If students enroll in MEC and remain unmotivated after one or two semesters, those students have a high chance of being sent back to their home school.

Wagonlander’s (1997) study revealed that students who turned around, and begin to perform well academically, were students who responded primarily to school-related factors.

Factors that are viewed as major obstacles to student success in school are closely related to the factors viewed as responsible for student re-engagement with school; and of all factors identified the “affective/teacher-related” ones were viewed as the most impacting overall on both student disengagement and successful re-engagement. (Wagonlander, 1997, p. 198)

Wagonlander found major factors in which educators have control, and early colleges have power to structure supports that are both meaningful and helpful to student success and completion. Wagonlander states there is a shared process to successful student re-engagement. If students desire to change and are supported by caring adults,

- educator behaviors and attitudes, school policies, administrative practices, curriculum, instructional methods, school size and class size are all potential factors of student re-engagement. These factors can be purposefully placed and maintained within the learning environment, for they are ones over which educators and policy makers have control. (p. 216)

As students moved from disengagement to re-engagement, Wagonlander (1997) identified these 10 key factors: (1) MMC’s fresh start, (2) a college environment, (3) the demonstrated educators’ belief in the students’ academic and personal potentials, (4) higher expectations, (5) the opportunity to change, (6) encouragement to make decisions, (7) learning that was fun and group oriented, (8) MMC grading practices, (9) students’ desire to be successful, and (10) caring educators. The caring educator was the most common factor stated by students. Interviewees agreed that there were three factors with positive contribution toward school re-engagement: the location of the high schools on college campuses, grading
policies in the middle colleges, and a caring approach. In a college environment, middle college students reported no place for immature behavior, as they viewed adults who were taking college classes seriously.

Teacher actions, with expressions of caring and support, were identified as the most impacting factor for re-engagement and the most important factor in helping students to succeed academically (Wagonlander, 1997). Students who attended MMC reported changing dramatically during their years at the middle college: 40% affirmed teacher behaviors, friendships, and teacher attitudes as significant factors; 19% identified empowerment and greater freedom; 16% stated parental influence; and 25% listed other factors including field trips, similar students around, leadership roles, and yearning to go to college (Wagonlander, 1997).

**EARLY COLLEGE STUDENT VOICES**

In a video made for the Doctorate of Community College Leadership program at Ferris State University, McClenney (2016) presented the work conducted at the Center for Community College Student Engagement (CCCSE) to determine what matters most with student engagement and student success. Three data sources—The Community College Institutional Survey (CCIS), the Survey of Entering Student Engagement (SENSE), and student focus groups—were utilized for collecting large amounts of data about community college students. The extensive data gave legitimacy to McClenney’s message that personal connections matter. The conclusion is that colleges, armed with this data, need to make changes, and she reminds community college professionals that it doesn’t cost anything to establish relationships with students.
McClenney’s point is well-taken that community colleges have much work to do. Presented with these findings, community colleges have made strategic, data-driven decisions to meet student needs. College leaders now have a clearer vision of what practices can help students to be successful in completing college credentials (McClenney, 2016).

In *Students Speak: Are We Listening?* McClenney and Arnsparser (2012) continue to hear the voice of typical students speaking about their college experience. Information learned from students is passed on to faculty, administrators, and staff. McClenney and Arnsparser discuss “balancing counsel,” that is, helping students to balance their academic workload with their personal responsibilities. Students need help in choosing a major or area of concentration early in their college experience that fits their skill set and interests. Students talk about the performance of faculty, and students want to be engaged and active in the learning process as opposed to just receiving lecture-based instruction. Student activities need to be part of the classroom experience and give students more opportunity to be participants in the classroom through small group discussion and interaction. Students need connection with faculty and with other students, and this connection is especially crucial during that first semester and first year of college. Students also want encouragement from their teachers (McClenney & Arnsparser, 2012).

Ramsey-White (2012) put emphasis on listening to student voices as she studied how students perceived their high school experiences in preparing them for college, the role of social capital (social supports and networks), and how early college practices and strategies were beneficial or detrimental to their college preparation.
Michael Fielding (2004) purported that encouraging young people to express their aspirations and concerns about matters related to their education offers an important contribution to education for a civic society. Too often the student voice is dismissed because students are only seen as receivers of education and not as active participants in the process of education. (Ramsey-White, 2012, p. 146)

The research at Midwest Early College and Learning Community College focused primarily on hearing the voices of early college participants. Students were determined to be in the best position to judge the effectiveness of the support structure at the early college.

**EARLY COLLEGE SUCCESSFUL PRACTICES**

As hearing student voices can lead to successful early college practices, the following studies also contributed toward improvement of early college programs. The American Institute for Research funded an extensive study on the success of the Early College Model entitled, *Early College, Early Success: Early College High School Initiative Impact Study* (Berger et al., 2013). That report was followed up the next year with *Early College, Continued Success: Early College High School Initiative Impact Study* (Berger et al., 2014). The primary questions sought by these researchers were as follows: Do early college students have better outcomes than they would have had if they stayed at their local high schools for graduation? Does the impact of an early college vary by the student’s background characteristics such as gender, family income, first generation college attender, etc.? Control groups naturally occurred when students, admitted into early college programs, were compared to students, who had applied to the same programs, yet were not admitted. Factors explored were high school graduation, college enrollment, college degree attainment, and college experience using administration records and National Student Clearinghouse data. The 10 schools examined enrolled students in grades 9-12, during the years of 2005-2011, with a total combined population of 2,458 students. These
students were monitored until 2013 or four years after high school graduation for the oldest group of students (Berger et al., 2014).

The researchers found that early college students were significantly more likely to enroll in college when compared to the control group at a rate of 81% to 72%. By the end of the fifth year in the study, 77.9% of early college students and 67.2% of comparison students had enrolled in college. By the end of the sixth year, 80.7% of early college students and 70.7% of comparison students had enrolled in college. Researchers also found that early college students were more likely to enroll in two-year colleges. In four-year institutions, early college students, during the study period, enrolled at a rate of 54.4% compared to the control group at 50.1%. This figure was not statistically significant, but by the sixth year of the study, the gap widened, and more early college students were enrolling in four-year institutions. Early college student enrollment in college was increased no matter the student’s gender, race/ethnicity, family income, first-generation college-going status, or pre high school achievement (Berger et al., 2014).

Berger et al. (2014) state that overall enrollment in an early college program had a significantly positive impact on earning a degree. By the 2012 school year, 24.9% of early college students had earned a college degree compared to 4.7% of comparison students. College degree attainment was not impacted by first generation status or gender, but college degree attainment was impacted by minority status, income, and middle school performance. The impact of earning a college degree was greater for minorities, significantly stronger for low-income students, and stronger for students with better math and ELA scores. The authors conclude, “Early Colleges provided students with an edge over the comparison students during
high school, and the edge persisted after high school. . . . The Early Colleges were highly
effective at getting students on the path to a college degree” (pp. 20-21). Though more study
was recommended for examining the long-term effects of attending an early college, current
findings suggest that over-time, early college attenders will continue to stay ahead of
comparison students in regards to earning bachelor’s degrees. The authors expect early college
programs to continue reaching underrepresented students and helping them to earn a college
degree. This study’s strong evidence for the benefits of the early college model is confirmed by
the follow-up study the second year.

The extensive data captured in A Matter of Degrees: Promising Practices for Community
College Student Success (Center for Community College Student Engagement, 2012) show that
community colleges have not been meeting the needs of students, and opportunities have
been missed. Data from the Community College Institutional Survey (CCIS), the Survey of
Entering Student Engagement (SENSE), and Student Focus Groups were analyzed and graphed
in order to show that these practices that can make a difference in student success and
completion. This report supports the practices that work in helping students succeed in
community college (Center for Community College Student Engagement, 2012).

Zalaznick (2015) discussed some of the innovative programs available at early colleges
around the country. Through IBM Pathways in Technology Early College High School (P-Tech) in
Chicago and New York, students can access the vocational or shop courses that have been
eliminated in many K-12 districts, and the program has a “work-place learning” component
where students can partner with a volunteer industry mentor, such as IBM. Mentors keep
students motivated, informed, and give instruction on how to get a job at a major technology
company. This early college program is designed for students to apply and interview for a job with IBM at the completion of the program (Zalaznick, 2015).

**EARLY COLLEGE STUDENT SUPPORTS**

Healy (2009) focused a study on the academic behaviors of early college students to understand college readiness. Students needed to be college ready in their attitudes, academic behaviors, and contextual knowledge. In Healy’s study of academic regulatory behavior during the first term in community college, the focus was on how students changed their self-management and self-monitoring behaviors. Healy presented a few studies that focused on students who have left their high schools to complete their secondary education on a local community college campus. In reference to Bragg’s work in 2006, Healy states that there is growing interest in examining the link between student learning and alternative pathways to high school graduation, particularly the link between these programs and community colleges. The early college studied by Healy was not part of the Early College High School Initiative, but Healy’s school of interest was funded and operated by a local school district supported through an agreement with a metropolitan area local community college (Healy, 2009).

Foundational to Healy’s study (2009) was a concern with retention in postsecondary education. As stated by Tinto (1993, cited in Healy, 2009), retention and readiness of a large minority of students is a challenge faced by most colleges. Healy confirms with the follow statistics:

Data indicate that overall about one-third of traditional age college students leave college within three years of starting, without attaining a degree (Bradburn & Carroll, 2002). Most of this attrition occurs in the first year, as at most four-year colleges, where about 30% of freshmen do not return for their sophomore year. At community colleges,
the attrition rate is even higher, with just over 45% of students not returning after their first year. (p. 2)

Another major theme in Healy’s (2009) study was providing student support, especially in an early college environment. First-year success for students is connected to a student’s perception that the college environment is supportive. Healy states that high school educators should look for ways to give students feedback about their academic behaviors. Second, high school educators should not make college seem so intimidating. Educators should try to create opportunities within the high school to foster more academic independence on the part of students, and educators should work with students to build strong study skills. Study skills are key to college success as students become aware of their abilities and aware of study strategies to use. Healy’s study, of 75 early college students, showed a general increase in eight measured domains. Most gains were found in self-awareness, defined as self-management, and learning habits, defined as learning strategies/study habits (Healy, 2009).

In relation to this current study, Healy’s (2009) study suggests the effectiveness of the early college model in preparing students for college success, especially during the critical first semester of college. When students learn to monitor their learning and adapt their behavior for more effective learning, they are well on their way to college success and completion. This gain may be accomplished within the context of a supportive early college and community college environment. Healy emphasized the importance of place in changing student behavior. This is a key concept in the current Midwest Early College study when early colleges partner with community colleges. Healy stated in this situation, “I found that students expressed a stronger
connection to ECHS than to their previous high schools, and their connection to ECHS increased over the course of their first term” (p. 90).

Karp (2016), a member of the Community College Research Center, conducted an extensive literature review titled, “A Holistic Conception of Nonacademic Support: How Four Mechanisms Combine to Encourage Positive Student Outcomes in the Community College.” The work was concerned with the persistence of academically vulnerable students at two-year institutions. Different approaches provided non-academic support to students and looked carefully at the types of supports that were being offered. Creating social relationships appear to help students become connected to college, encourage integration, provide a sense of comfort and connectedness on campus, and contain a functional benefit whereby students gain from others the academic and navigational help needed (Karp, 2016). Karp goes on to say that integrated students are more likely to make progress toward a degree than those students who are not integrated. Karp advocated that all four mechanisms need to be in place at the same time: helping students gain social connections, understanding college, clarifying their aspirations, and overcoming small obstacles. Not only should nonacademic supports be sustained over time, but supports should be intrusive because students are often unaware of the help they need (Karp, 2016).

Thompson (2008) states that no literature exists on the process of how students informally communicate support for academics during the stressful transition period from high school to college. Though previous studies validate that peer support may lead to persistence and completion, little is known about this process. Thompson seeks to understand the process and define a theory explaining how academic support is communicated from student to
student. The following four categories were used to explain the academic support: change in workload, increased responsibility as well as freedom, need, and level of support. Students use social media to build a support network, and different support networks were used for different subjects. It was determined that students are more apt to go to each other for support than to formal college campus services. Students suggested that going to professors could be stressful, the students did not want to appear dumb, office hours were often not convenient with students’ schedules, and students preferred to seek counsel of other students if they considered their concern a small issue. Freshmen developed two types of action-facilitating support (informational and tangible) and two types of nurturant support (motivational and venting), which served as strategies to manage academic challenges. Different types of support were identified, such as, venting, informational, and motivational. Thompson (2008) noted, “Educational researchers have found that establishing social connections or memberships are often more important to students than academics itself; social engagement can be a better predictor of student success than academic engagement” (p. 141). The better the students know each other, the more supportive they can be for each other. Students preferred to go to other students for small questions and teachers for large issues. Emphasis is placed on repeated action-facilitating support versus nurturant support. Nurturant support can alleviate stress. As Tinto (1997, cited in Thompson, 2008) wrote, “The more students are involved, academically and socially, in shared learning experiences that link them as learners, the more likely they are to become more involved in their own learning and invest time and energy to learn” (pp. 7-8). Thompson’s research study can be applied to the support structure offered at Midwest Early College where peer-to-peer support may be as significant as any other support. Peer support
may also play a significant factor in students leaving their former high schools and in persistence and completion at the early college (Thompson, 2008).

In a dissertation Ramsey-White (2012) states that early college high schools, which are physically located on college campuses, have exhibited the strongest student outcomes with respect to state assessment scores, attendance rates, and progression from the 9th to 10th grades. In the discussion about early college history, Ramsey-White discusses the original goal of the first Middle College in 1974 with creative pedagogical inputs and “on a college campus would capitalize on the ‘power of place’ and stimulate and inspire underserved students to believe that a college education was within their reach” (p. 23).

Ramsey-White (2012) asked what social networks and elements of social support impact college readiness and the transition to the postsecondary environment for early college students, and sought to understand the role of social capital and social support in the lives of the early college students. Social capital being defined as the social support and network that students have in their lives through contact with individuals who can direct them and inform them and help them navigate from high school into college and into career decisions that ultimately can enrich the lives of the students. As stated by Coleman,

Social capital is a form of capital that exists in the relationships between people. An individual can use these relationships to access resources and information that otherwise may not have been available to them, in their pursuit of the post-secondary environment and beyond. (Ramsey-White, 2012, p. 6)

Zalaznick (2015) describes an example of social support in operation between Newport News Public Schools and Thomas Nelson Community College in Virginia. A counselor employed by the school district is stationed at the community college to add a layer of support that
regular college going freshman do not have. The counselor is available to help early college high school students with guidance and tutoring issues, and students are not left on their own in managing college problems. Susan Tilley, executive director of secondary school leadership at Newport says that four-year colleges prefer students with early-college experience because “they are already adjusted to the on-campus experience that provides independence and free time” (Zalaznick, 2015, p. 46).

Lerner and Brand (2006), with The American Youth Policy Forum (AYPF), conducted an extensive review of program data for Secondary/Post-secondary Learning Options (SPLO). Out of all the data studied, they identified four common extra supports that were proven effective with middle and low achieving students: caring adult advisors, academic assistance and tutoring, college success classes, and a safe environment and peer support network (Lerner & Brand, 2006, p. xi). Caring adult advisors are needed who may serve as mentors for students who are in two educational systems, both high school and college. These significant adults may require regularly scheduled meetings with students, or sometimes students needing information, may access other significant adults who are not assigned as formal mentors. Additional academic support is provided in a number of different ways depending upon the institution. Since students are in a new setting, with new expectations, and several different professors, it is important for mentors to monitor how students are performing in their college courses and to intervene early-on with needed tutoring or peer support. Students can utilize college campus resources for tutoring as well as tutoring supplied by the early college program. College success courses have proven effective in clearly defining college expectations before students get into the college courses. Courses may include strategies and techniques such as
critical reading, note taking, time management, and study skills. Some of these courses may include career exploration activities. A safe environment and peer support network promotes the idea that it is “cool” to participate in discussion, and it is acceptable to work hard and succeed. Programs have an emphasis on building a learning community where students are challenged and where students challenge each other. There is peer pressure, but the pressure is to increase performance up to the student’s full potential. Some institutions have designed advisory committees with students to work on anger management and conflict resolution (Lerner & Brand, 2006).

EARLY COLLEGE COMPLETION

Tinto (2012) provides advice to college leaders for helping students complete a college credential. Seven areas of focus are addressed to meet this national need where less than half of the students are completing college within six years. Emphasis is placed on having high expectations that are clearly communicated to the students. Academic, social, and financial supports must be in place, and assessment and feedback must be early in both the classroom and from the college overall with the use of early warning systems. Students must quickly become involved in the classroom and in the college if they are going to persevere through the first year and on to completion. Learning communities, service projects, and pedagogies of engagement in the classroom are showing success at various institutions. Suggested administrative action for investing will include program development, faculty development, and active alignment of students with faculty and services. Student completion will not improve without strategic action, and specific suggestions are given for meeting student needs.
Throughout the text, institutions, who are successfully implementing programs leading to increased numbers of completions, are cited as good examples (Tinto, 2012).

Richard Smith’s 2015 study, *The Effects of Dual Enrollment on Student-level Outcomes at a Rural Community College: A Quantitative Research Study*, was conducted in 2010 and 2011 with a population sample of 2,639. Smith referred to conflicting studies about the benefits of dual enrollment in relation to degree completion as motivation for his study in a small, rural community in central Michigan. Smith sought to understand the most effective means by which to transition students from high school to college, more specially focusing of policies that influence Michigan’s dual enrolled students. . . . The purpose of this study is to determine the effects of Michigan’s various dual enrollment opportunities on high school students’ progression, persistence, retention, completion rates, and college GPA using data collected from a small, rural community college. (Smith, 2015, pp. 6-7)

Smith states that most of the previous research with dual enrollment had been done with high-achieving students, leaving unanswered questions concerning middle achieving and low-achieving students. The particular college, in Smith’s (2015) study, serves underrepresented and low-socioeconomic students. Students who had been dual enrollees were compared with students who had not been dual enrolled. Smith hypothesized that “those students who participate in dual enrollment, progress, persist, retain, and complete at a significantly higher rate than those students who did not dual enroll” (p. 45).

Smith’s (2015) findings did not fully confirm the hypothesis, and Smith states that, “Students who were in any dual program were found to be more likely to finish a college course than those students who fell under a Non-Dual program category” (p. 83). Smith goes on to find that “students who were enrolled in any Dual program didn’t finish their certificate, degree, or
transfer to another institution of higher education at a rate that was statistically, significantly higher than students who were categorized under a Non-Dual program” (pp. 84-85). Smith’s findings seem to contradict other studies where early college students, a type of dual enrollment, were found to have a higher rate of degree completion than non-early college students. For example, see Barnett et al. (2015). Smith states, “Just because students participated in dual enrollment doesn’t mean that they are more likely to graduate from college within a three-year period” (p. 91). This includes a Middle College program that was included in the study. Smith (2015) concludes by saying,

Despite the results in this study that led the researcher to infer that dual enrollment participation did not lead to statistically significant rates of completion, the study did, however, provide results that demonstrated a positive impact of dual enrollment on student progression, persistence, and college GPA. (p. 91)

Smith’s study suggests caution in hoping that dual enrollment will be the answer to increasing the percentage of Americans earning a college credential.

SUMMARY

While the early college movement is quickly expanding, and various forms of early colleges are developing and opening around the country, the movement is still fairly young, and the amount of research literature specifically about early colleges, and early college support systems in particular, is limited. Focusing on the early college as an alternative bridge between high school and college is a fascinating study and naturally blends in with the related topics of college readiness, dual enrollment, and learning theory to open up related sources of research and information. A review of literature specifically focused on the support systems within an early college, narrows the literature search, but the literature included discussions about
supports offered to students in both K-12 institutions and college. Many researchers have called for more studies concerning the early college movement. Long-term studies are needed which will track students who complete middle and early college programs, transfer to universities, and enter the job market in various professions. With the success of the early college movement, the amount of research and useful literature will continue to grow.
CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY

INTRODUCTION

Midwest Early College opened in the fall of 2011 and was established as a partnership between Learning Community College and the Intermediate School District. Midwest Early College is a five-year high school program where students attend their local high school for grades 9 and 10 and then enroll in Midwest Early College for years 11-13. Students leave their high school buildings and spend the entire school day on the community college campus. Students spend their first semester with certified high school teachers at Midwest Early College, and then students are credentialed out to take college classes as faculty members determine individual college readiness for the second or third semester. As a five-year high school program, Midwest Early College allows students to stay in high school one year longer than the typical four-year high school student. The 13th year for a Midwest Early College student provides an extra year of college courses without having to pay for courses, textbooks, or fees. In order to extend funding, students reserve completing one final state requirement for a high school diploma until their 13th year.

POPULATION

The following archival data, describing the research population for this study, were available through the Midwest Early College before the research was conducted. The
population consisted of the three cohort groups who attended Midwest Early College, located at Learning Community College. Cohort One entered the early college program in the fall of 2011. These students graduated from the three-year program in May of 2014. Cohort Two started the program in the fall of 2012 and graduated in May 2015, and Cohort Three started the program in the fall of 2013 and graduated in May of 2016. The total population of students in the three cohorts totaled 230. Out of the 230 students, Table 4 shows the number of students who exited at some point before the conclusion of their third year and the total number of students who fully completed the program. Out of the 230 students who started, 77% fully completed the three years at Midwest Early College. Of the 23% who exited early, nearly 6% had completed Midwest Early College requirements before leaving, making for an average completion rate of 83%.

Table 4: Number of Students Who Completed Midwest Early College Program

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>COHORT</th>
<th>1 2011-2012</th>
<th>2 2012-2013</th>
<th>3 2013-2014</th>
<th>TOTALS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Total number of students</td>
<td>90</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>78</td>
<td>230</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number who completed 3 years</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>167</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number who exited early</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number who left early, yet completed</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percentage of completers</td>
<td>89%</td>
<td>79%</td>
<td>65%</td>
<td>79%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(The Early College, 2016)

When all three Midwest Early College cohorts started the early college program, the number of female students exceeded the number of male students, with females accounting
for 65% of the students and males for 35%. Race and ethnicity of the entire group are represented in Table 5.

Table 5: Race/Ethnicity of Midwest Early College Cohort Groups

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>RACE/ETHNICITY</th>
<th>PERCENT OF STUDENTS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black or African American</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hispanic/Latino</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Two or more races</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Race and ethnicity not reported</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asian</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(The Early College, 2017)

**TYPE OF STUDY**

This research utilized a qualitative case-study of one early college. Fraenkel and Wallen (1993) define this type of a study as *survey research* and *cross-sectional* as opposed to longitudinal, in that the data were gathered from the population at a point in time rather than over a period of time where the purpose would be to study changes. A *convenience sample* uses students who choose to reply as representing the entire group. The purpose of this case study is to evaluate a specific early college program and determine to what level the established early college support system is credited by the students for helping them to complete their goal of a high school diploma and a college credential through Midwest Early College. Specific research questions for this study are as follows:

1. What motivated Midwest Early College students to leave their high schools to attend Midwest Early College program, and how do students value that decision after attending Midwest Early College?
2. What value do students place on Midwest Early College classwork they experienced prior to being credentialed out for college coursework?

3. To what level do students credit the Success Skills Curriculum, assigned mentor relationship, college and career readiness activities, and the community college environment for helping them to persevere and achieve their goals of completing Midwest Early College program?

4. How would students improve or change the current structure of supports offered at Midwest Early College?

5. What occupational or educational paths have Midwest Early College students pursued since leaving the Midwest Early College, and did the supports offered in Midwest Early College contribute to the choices made by students after leaving the program?

The study utilized a voluntary online survey offered to all students who attended cohorts one through three at the Midwest Early College. The online survey was followed by an in-depth face-to-face interview of volunteer students.

**NEGOITIATING ACCESS**

Upon research proposal submission to the Institutional Research Board at Ferris State University, it was determined that this case study did not meet the federal definition of research on human subjects as defined by the Department of Health and Human Services or the Food and Drug Administration. The case study would not require the approval of the university Institutional Research Board (IRB). The case study was identified as “a project designed to inform a specific organization about the quality of a program offering” (see Appendix A). While the findings of the project were allowed to be published, the findings were to be identified as part of a quality improvement initiative (see Appendix A).
DATA COLLECTION METHODS

Though initial student names and email contacts were accessed from Midwest Early College department records, qualitative information for this study was gathered from student responses in an online survey and either a face-to-face or telephone interview. According to Travers (2001), methodology is related to the assumptions of the researcher (p. vi). The researcher in this study assumed that students were the best evidence for evaluating the supports which enabled them to successfully complete Midwest Early College. Students are the most reliable source as to what does or does not motivate them.

One goal of this research was to understand student reasoning for choosing to leave their local high school to attend an early college program and how the students first learned about Midwest Early College. Reflecting back on the experience at Midwest Early College would the students choose Midwest Early College again if given the opportunity to go back and make that decision. Would the students recommend Midwest Early College to a friend or family member? One of the primary methods for promoting this early college is by word of mouth. If students would choose the program again, after experiencing the program, would be an indicator of how much the students valued the program. Question 20 on the survey asked, “How likely are you to recommend Midwest Early College to a friend or family member?” This question has proven to be effective at evaluating business practices and is called the Net Promoter Score (Reichheld, 2011).

The central focus of the survey was to determine student perception of the supports offered during their early college experience and to determine if those supports were instrumental in helping the students persevere through the challenges associated with
completing the program. There were 28 questions on the survey: 14 questions addressed biographical or background information, 12 questions were evaluations of the following supports offered in Midwest Early College: success skills, pre-college class evaluations, mentor relationships, college and career readiness events, the significance of Midwest Early College being located on a community college campus, and overall program evaluations. The final two questions on the survey asked students to volunteer for a face-to-face interview in addition to the online survey. It was estimated that students would take about 20 minutes to complete the survey. The survey can be found in Appendix B.

This research project did attempt to include survey and interview responses from students who dropped from the early college program sometime before the end of the three years were completed. Two students, who were non-completers, did participate in the survey, but only one student completed the entire survey. It was believed, before the research was conducted, that students who dropped from the program could be a rich source of program support information. Their participation in the research was relevant to program supports that were designed to help students complete the early college.

Data were collected during the fall semester, August through October of 2016, and analysis of data was conducted during the end of 2016 and the spring of 2017. An email was sent to the students in all three graduated cohort groups requesting participation in the research through an online survey and a face-to-face interview. In situations where students did not leave a personal email address at Midwest Early College upon exiting, or where students did not respond to an email request, a postcard was sent to the last known address requesting student participation in the study by going online to participate in the survey.
SurveyMonkey®, an online survey tool, was used for distributing the survey. Some demographic data were requested on the survey such as gender, ethnicity or race, first generation to attend college, and socioeconomic status as determined by eligibility for free or reduced lunch. A survey question at the end of the survey asked if students would be willing to do a face-to-face interview lasting less than one hour.

Subsequent face-to-face interviews were conducted on the main campus of Learning Community College. Since many of Midwest Early College students had already transferred to four-year universities, it was not possible to interview all of the students face-to-face, so the researcher requested an online interview using the free, online program called Skype®. By this means, the researcher and student were able to visually interact online. In four interviews, the Skype® connection was weak, and the researcher concluded the interview by telephone.

**IMPLEMENTATION OF ONLINE SURVEY**

The Midwest Early College Survey was sent out in August of 2016, to the last known personal email address of all students who had been participants in Cohorts one through three. Some of the students had left a forwarding email address when they left Midwest Early College, and others did not. Many of these students were attending four-year colleges or universities at the time of the survey, and they were using different personal and college email addresses. The researcher sent out the survey through SurveyMonkey® to the available email addresses. For those students who did not leave a forwarding email address at Midwest Early College, the researcher used the existing community college email address that the student had used while the student was enrolled in Midwest Early College.
Out of the 230 emails sent, there were 48 survey responses over a period of 29 days. In an attempt to reach more students, another email was sent if an alternative email address was available. The survey link for the survey was also posted on the Facebook® page of Cohort Three, and a postcard was mailed out to students who had not yet responded to email. There was no known Facebook® page for Cohort One or Cohort Two. For the 230 students, who had been a part of the three cohort groups, there were 53 responses or 23% of the total group of students. It is believed that not all students were reached through email, mailed postcard, or the Facebook® page. There were 127 invitations opened and 113 invitations not opened. Fourteen invitations had bounced back as bad addresses, and two students opted out of the survey. Out of the 126 surveys that were opened, 48, or 38% were answered. For the students who participated in the online survey, Cohort One had 6 males and 10 female responders, Cohort Two had 8 males and 6 female responders, and Cohort Three had 4 males and 15 females who responded. One of the Cohort Three students started the survey, but did not complete the survey. In total, there were 18 males and 31 females who responded. Since five of those students completed the survey through the Facebook® web link, rather than in direct response to the SurveyMonkey® invitation, the email and gender of those five students were not detectable. See Table 6.
Table 6: *Number of Survey Respondents*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>EARLY COLLEGE SURVEY RESPONDENTS</th>
<th>COHORT 1</th>
<th>COHORT 2</th>
<th>COHORT 3</th>
<th>TOTAL</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Number of potential students</td>
<td>90</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>78</td>
<td>230</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of emails sent out</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>256</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of survey invitations opened</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>126</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of survey responses through email invitation</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of survey responses through Facebook® page</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of incomplete surveys</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of male responders</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of female responders</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of unknown gender responders</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**INTERVIEWS**

The last question on the survey asked if students were willing to participate in a face-to-face interview session. Students were contacted by the email associated with the online survey and asked to set up a face-to-face interview. The interview was offered as a face-to-face interview or through Skype® since several students were attending colleges some distance from the researcher. The same questions were asked in the face-to-face or phone interviews as in the online surveys, but face-to-face interviews provided the opportunity to explore student responses in more depth and with follow-up questions. Face-to-face and telephone interviews were recorded for qualitative analysis and evaluation of early college supports.

Face-to-face student interviews were conducted from August through September in 2016. Thirty-five students initially consented to do face-to-face interviews. After some student cancellations, or failure to respond to researcher’s request when asked to set up an
appointment, 20 students were actually interviewed (see Table 7). Of those who interviewed, six students were from Cohort One, six students were from Cohort Two, and eight students represented Cohort Three. After interviewing nine students, the researcher decided to ask the remaining interviewees additional questions about student experiences of being a young high school student taking college classes with college age students and older adults. The researcher also modified the questioning to include student responses about the value of the cohort model in helping them to persevere through Midwest Early College to completion.

Table 7: Number of Students Participating in Face-to-face or Phone Interview

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>COHORT GROUP</th>
<th>NUMBER OF STUDENTS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Eleven interviews were conducted face-to-face, on campus, in the building where Midwest Early College is located (see Table 8). Three interviews were conducted online, through Skype®; one interview was partially Skype® and partially telephone; and the remaining five interviews were conducted over the telephone. The researcher, located in a rural area, had connection problems with Skype®, so Skype® interviews were switched to a telephone interview format. Eighteen of the 20 students who did the online survey, also participated in a face-to-face interview. After the last interview was conducted, two winners were selected from a random drawing for a $25 gift card for their participation.
Table 8: *Number of Students Participating in Each Type of Interview*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of Interview</th>
<th>Number of Students</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Face-to-face</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Online</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Telephone</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Combination Online and Telephone</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**DATA MANAGEMENT ANALYSIS METHODS**

Qualitative description of family educational level, socioeconomic status, motivations for leaving local high schools to attend the early college, past academic and high school social experiences, faculty influence, community college supports, college and career activities, the significance of the early college location, and factors leading to persistence and completion, or a lack of persistence and completion, was gathered from the students. Reasons for leaving the student’s former high school were coded and analyzed to discover the most prevalent reasons for attending Midwest Early College. Were reasons predominantly to aspire to a professional goal or are other reasons more predominant? Did bullying or a lack of an orderly academic environment play a significant role in the high school departure? Reasons for leaving high schools to attend Midwest Early College were studied to better understand the student’s motivation, to better serve existing students, and to recruit new students more effectively. Though school personnel working in Midwest Early College have some experiential knowledge of why students enroll, this study extended beyond the assumptions to give researched data from the students.
Authorities at Midwest Early College assumed that current practices were effective as students completed college courses, graduated from Midwest Early College and transferred to universities. The extent of program success, however, was not fully understood. This study provided students the opportunity to evaluate their own success in relation to the supports that were offered in the program. Students were able to speak from personal experience about the level of support found in the Midwest Early College program, and the early college administration and faculty would have an opportunity to make program improvements based on student data.

Qualitative data differ from quantitative data in the way the data are analyzed. As Merriam (2009) states, “Because the basic strategy of the constant comparative method is compatible with the inductive, concept-building orientation of all qualitative research, the constant comparative method of data analysis has been adopted by many researchers” (p. 199). Merriam explained the process of data analysis as follows:

The task is to compare one unit of information with the next in looking for recurring regularities in the data. The process is one of breaking data down into bits of information and then assigning these bits to categories or classes which bring these bits together again. (p. 177)

Research data were classified by cohort group to determine if all early college cohorts were represented in the student responses. Some questions addressed biographical data that could be reported out as percentages of specific categories, but the majority of questions were open-ended, opinion questions. In analyzing the survey data, responses were tabulated for the first six questions, and questions 22, 24, 25. These descriptive questions identified student’s gender, race/ethnicity, socioeconomic status, as determined by receiving free or reduced lunch,
parent’s educational level, if the student completed the program, and number of semesters in the program. The research goal was to learn how students became aware of the Midwest Early College opportunity and what high schools were represented by the students from Midwest Early College.

Survey questions 7-16 were designed as open-ended questions so that students would be encouraged to discuss why they came to Midwest Early College and their experiences during Midwest Early College, especially in relationship to the supports that may have contributed to successful completion. Responses were coded in order to discover common themes, majority opinions, and insightful responses. Questions 17-18 asked students about their current status in continuing their education or employment. Question 19 asked students to consider if they would make the decision to attend Midwest Early College, given the opportunity to go back and make the decision again. Questions 20-21 were designed to determine the Net Promoter Score of the participants, indicating if students would recommend Midwest Early College to others, and students were asked to reflect on why they would or would not recommend the program to a friend. Question 23 sought understanding why any student may have dropped out of the program, and Question 26 asked students to recommend improvements to the Midwest Early College program.

In coding student responses, the data were organized in reference to various types of supports. As Merriam (2009) states, making sense out of the data is answering your research questions. In reference to coding student responses, Merriam also states,

The most common situation is when the investigator comes up with terms, concepts, and categories that reflect what he or she sees in the data. . . . Merely selecting data for a category that has been established by another theory tends to hinder the generation
of new categories, because the major effort is not generation, but data selection. . . emergent categories usually prove to be the most relevant and the best fitted to the data. (pp. 184-185)

Data analysis should go beyond categorizing and descriptions to an abstract level using concepts to describe phenomena (Merriam, 2009, p. 188). The researcher should allow the data to define the categories.

As you read down through the transcript, for example, you jot down notes, comments, observations, and queries in the margins. . . . This process of making notations next to bits of data that strike you as potentially relevant for answering your research questions is also called coding. . . . Assigning codes to pieces of data is the way you begin to construct categories. After working through the entire transcript in this manner, you go back over your marginal notes and comments (codes) and try to group those comments and notes that seem to go together. (Merriam, 2009, pp. 178-179)

She goes on to state, “Since the categories or themes or findings are responsive to these research questions, the name of these categories will be congruent with the orientation of the study” (Merriam, 2009, p. 184).

In coding the student interview data for this research, student responses were grouped according to the following categories:

- **B** Barriers in coming to Midwest Early College
- **CCR** College and Career Readiness Events
- **CS** Suggestions for how students would change current supports in Midwest Early College
- **CW** Student value placed on course work done at Midwest Early College before going out for college courses
- **DO** Student opinions related to dropping out of the Midwest Early College
- **E** How much the college environment impacted Midwest Early College students
- **EC** How Midwest Early College impacted student college and career decisions
G Grit or perseverance in sticking with the program
LHS Reasons for leaving the student’s high school to attend Midwest Early College
M Assigned mentor relationship
OEP Students occupational or educational plans
R If given the opportunity to go back, would students choose to attend Midwest Early College again?
SSC Student opinions concerning the Success Skills Curriculum used at Midwest Early College
VI Required internship or voluntary experience at Midwest Early College

Once student responses were grouped according to these themes related to the research questions, a majority group response and minority opinions could surface for understanding the support structure of the early college as valued by the students.

In following up the online survey with face-to-face interviews, more in-depth questioning was possible based on student responses. As Merriam (2009) states, “The researcher usually doesn’t know ahead of time. . . all the questions that might be asked, or where to look next unless data are analyzed as they are being collected” (p. 169). The idea of analyzing the data as they are being collected allows the researcher to do some preliminary analysis and shape the study according to the findings and impressions rather than a preconceived interpretation or model. This method, referred to as Grounded Theory, was developed as a constant comparative method of data analysis by Glaser and Strauss in 1967 (Merriam, 2009, p. 175). As the researcher digs deeper into the data, new categories may emerge which help in understanding more clearly the student experience.
VALIDITY AND RELIABILITY VERSUS TRUSTWORTHINESS AND CONFIRMABILITY

There have been challenges to qualitative research studies based upon validity and reliability arguments, but qualitative research has been in acceptance long enough to have developed strategies and procedures which increase the validity and reliability of qualitative studies. Though distinct from quantitative studies, Merriam (2009) suggests several strategies that can be incorporated into qualitative studies in order to increase confidence in the findings of these studies. Table 9 outlines those strategies.

A term often associated with validating qualitative research is trustworthiness. “In simple terms trustworthiness refers to as the way in which qualitative research workers make sure that transferability, credibility, dependability, and confirmability are evident in their study” (Trustworthiness in Qualitative Research, n.d., para. 1-2). Lincoln and Guba define four trustworthy characteristics as follows:

1. Credibility – a confidence in the truth of the findings
2. Transferability – showing that the findings have applicability in other contexts
3. Dependability – showing that the findings are consistent and could be repeated
4. Confirmability – a degree of neutrality or the extent to which the findings of a study are shaped by the respondents and not researcher bias, motivation, or interest.

(Trustworthiness in Qualitative Research, n.d., para. 1)

Creating a true picture of the phenomena, with explicit details that might be copied, and insuring that interpretations of the data are true to reality and not to researcher bias, are all crucial components insure the trustworthiness of a qualitative project (Shenton, 2004).
Table 9: Strategies for Promoting Validity and Reliability

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>STRATEGY</th>
<th>DESCRIPTION</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Triangulation</td>
<td>Using multiple investigators, sources of data, or data collection methods to confirm emerging findings.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Member checks</td>
<td>Taking data and tentative interpretations back to the people from whom they were derived and asking if they are plausible.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adequate engagement in data collection</td>
<td>Adequate time spent collecting data such that the data become &quot;saturated&quot;; this may involve seeking discrepant or negative cases.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Researcher's position or reflexivity</td>
<td>Critical self-reflection by the researcher regarding assumptions, worldview, biases, theoretical orientation, and relationship to the study that may affect the investigation.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peer review/examination</td>
<td>Discussions with colleagues regarding the process of study, the congruency of emerging findings with the raw data, and tentative interpretations.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Audit trail</td>
<td>A detailed account of the methods, procedures, and decision points in carrying out the study.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rich, thick descriptions</td>
<td>Providing enough description to contextualize the study such that readers will be able to determine the extent to which their situations match the research context, and hence, whether findings can be transferred.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maximum variation</td>
<td>Purposefully seeking variation or diversity in sample selection to allow for a greater range of application of the findings by consumers of the research.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(Merriam, 2009, p. 229)

In the research at MEC, triangulation is possible between the online survey and the face-to-face interviews. Eighteen out of the 20 students who were interviewed also participated in the online survey, so consistency of answers can be checked between the survey and interview responses. The online survey was separated from the face-to-face interview sessions for a few weeks. Face-to-face interviews also provided opportunity to member check, or validate, the response of the interviewees by asking clarifying questions and probing into responses, asking
for validation of understanding, and clarifying for meaning. Student responses were restated back to the students to check for clarification.

Concerning adequate engagement in data collection, Merriam (2009) asks,

How long one needs to observe or how many people need to be interviewed are always difficult questions to answer. . . . The best rule of thumb is that the data and emerging findings must feel saturated; that is, you begin to see or hear the same things over and over again, and no new information surfaces as you collect more data. (p. 219)

There should be enough student interviews to feel a repetition of responses. This was accomplished in surveying 53 students online and interviewing 20 students face-to-face, where a consensus of opinions on early college supports could clearly emerge. Merriam also advised seeking opinions in opposition to the pervasive opinion of the students served to substantiate the predominant opinion. The idea of negative or discrepant case analysis was used as the researcher sought students who had dropped from Midwest Early College to share their perceptions of Early College supports, and the researcher did have the opportunity to interview one student who did not complete Midwest Early College. The student shared a vision in opposition to the prevailing positive opinion (Merriam, 2009, p. 219). It is important to include all student voices no matter if they are supportive or critical.

Merriam (2009) adds, “Reflexivity adds credibility to a qualitative study if the investigator explains biases, dispositions, and assumptions regarding the research to be undertaken” (p. 219). Potential hindrances to objectivity were acknowledged. While being an employee at Midwest Early College, the researcher had no contact with many of the students who participated in the research, and a limited amount of contact with other students who participated in the research. The familiarity of the environment gave the researcher a unique
insight to the research and served as validation for the student responses; however, the researcher needed to reflect upon the possible bias interpretations due to being an employee of the Midwest Early College. By working at Midwest Early College over the last four years, the researcher had witnessed the performance of students and heard student responses concerning supports offered in Midwest Early College program. The researcher had also heard testimonies from students at end-of-year celebrations and convocation services. These student testimonies were strong validation of the Midwest Early College support system, and gave the researcher a subjective idea of the success of the support structure within Midwest Early College. This employee insight could be a hindrance to unbiased analysis of the research data by shading the interpretation and reporting of that data.

Credibility also involves “intellectual rigor, professional integrity, and methodological competence” (Merriam, 2009, p. 228). Merriam goes on to state, “Part of ensuring for the trustworthiness of a study—its credibility—is that the researcher himself or herself is trustworthy in carrying out the study in as ethical a manner as possible” (p. 234). Due to potential bias, it became crucial that the recording of student responses, the organization of the responses, and the reporting out of responses be as objective as possible, and students needed to speak for themselves.

Another option available for confirming trustworthiness of the data interpretation is to seek input from professional colleagues with knowledge of the targeted population and determine if the interpretations were valid. This was possible in questioning Midwest Early College faculty, a fellow dissertation member, and members of the dissertation committee.
CONSISTENCY

Reliability or consistency, the extent to which research findings can be replicated if the study is repeated, can be sought by a number of methods. As stated by Merriam (2009), “Reliability is problematic in the social sciences simply because human behavior is never static” (p. 231). The most important thing is not replication of a qualitative study.

The more important question for qualitative research is whether the results are consistent with the data collected. . . given the data that has been collected, the results need to make sense. In this way they are consistent and dependable. (Merriam, 2009, p. 221)

Wolcott (2005, cited in Merriam, 2009) states that reliability “is an inappropriate measure for assessing the rigor of a qualitative study” (p. 222). The researcher can explain how he/she arrived at results and keep a clear “audit trail” of how the how are collected, how categories were assigned, and how decisions were made. This provides reliability in a qualitative study.

EXTERNAL VALIDITY

External validity is the extent to which the findings of one study can be applied to other situations; it is referred to as generalizability or transferability. As stated by Merriam (1985, cited in Merriam 2009), “The best way to ensure the possibility of transferability is to create a ‘thick description of the sending context so that someone in a potential receiving context may assess the similarity between them and. . . the study” (p. 227). That is, others in similar situation may then have a clear enough explanation to decide if the study is applicable in their particular situation. Trustworthiness in a qualitative study depends upon the ethics of the researcher. As Merriam (2009) concludes, “The best the researcher can do is to be conscious of
the ethical issues that pervade the research process and to examine his or her own philosophical orientation vis-a-vis these issues” (p. 235). The researcher seeks honesty in personal bias, discipline in data collection, wisdom in interpretation, and integrity in reporting results. If the researcher can remove himself or herself from a forced outcome, or from any associated politics, and report as honestly as possible the results of the research, then it becomes up to the consumer of the research to determine validity of the study.

RESEARCH BIAS AND ASSUMPTIONS

The researcher must be aware of his or her own bias in order to minimize it. One method of overcoming bias is for the researcher to formulate a subjectivity statement. The SAGE Encyclopedia of Qualitative Research Methods (2008, cited in Merriam, 2009) defines the purpose for the subjectivity statement as,

(1) to help researchers identify how their personal features, experiences, beliefs, feelings, cultural standpoints, and professional predispositions may affect their research and (2) to convey this material to other scholars for their consideration of the study's credibility, authenticity, and overall quality or validity. (Given, 2008, cited in Merriam, 2009)

The researcher in the Midwest Early College study examined some core personal beliefs that may influence the study if not carefully monitored. The researcher believed that:

1. Students from single parent homes generally, have greater challenges and tend to perform poorly and/or not complete MEC program as easily as students from two parent homes.
2. Students, whose parents have a college education, will be more apt to succeed at MEC because these students have greater exposure to college knowledge.
3. Students who come to MEC for the purpose of escaping negative high school experiences, rather than for an interest in more challenging academics or to fulfill a specific career goal, may not be as successful in MEC as others who do enrolled with an purely academic/career motivation.
4. Since there had been discussions among the faculty about the number of African American males who did not persevere through the program, it was believed that African American males may have a more difficult adjustment at MEC than other students.

5. The researcher believed that MEC admission standards should be tightened by implementing mandatory face-to-face student interviews required before enrollment.

6. The researcher has an interest in promoting MEC since part of the researcher’s occupation involves serving the early college areas of academic testing, college and career readiness, and data collection.

The researcher’s self-interest in the success of Midwest Early College will require discipline in letting the students, included in the research, to speak honesty about their experiences and in recording their evaluations as honestly as possible. The researcher’s goal is to leave biases outside of the interview process and the data analysis. “Peshkin (1991) strongly recommended that all researchers systematically monitor their subjectivity” (Maxwell, 2013, p. 28). As Maxwell stated about his own research, “It (the monitoring) is a warning to myself so that I may avoid the trap of perceiving just what my own untamed sentiments have sought out and served up as data” (Maxwell, 2013, p. 28).

The goal is to determine why students come to Midwest Early College, and what are the key support components enabling students to complete the three-year program. For those students who do not complete, what reasons are given? It is hoped that a greater understanding of these students, and of this early college program, will lead to greater success in supplying a superior education for present and future cohort groups.
PREDICTIONS BEFORE THE RESEARCH

It was predicted that student reasons for coming to Midwest Early College would be mixed, and that some students would choose to attend Midwest Early College out of a desire to escape their current high school environment, where learning is perceived as limited, students are not interested in learning, the behavior of fellow students is distracting to good learning, or some form of bullying may have occurred. Other students would choose to attend Midwest Early College in order to achieve free college credits and get a career head start. These students often have confidence in their ability to learn and a desire for academic challenge. Parental influence would be a factor in choosing The Early College. Parents would value the economic savings when their child earns college credits with no out-of-pocket costs. Some students would cite an interest in adventure, trying something new and different from most of their peers. Other students would be looking for an easy way to finish high school and may not realize the rigor of the program to which they have applied. It was also believed that it would be challenging to get at the true and complete motivation for why students chose to enroll at MEC, as many students would have several internal and external motivations simultaneously for enrolling.

The researcher expected to find that the supports offered at MEC were significant factors contributing to the perseverance and completion of the students in the program. To what degree each factor would be significant was undetermined. It was also believed that students would transfer to universities in significant numbers in relation to students who did not attend an early college program. It was believed that students who had completed MEC would be on a professional career path, even if they were not currently attending a university.
The challenge for this research project was to let the data speak for itself and to formulate an accurate picture of the success or needed improvement in the support structure at Midwest Early College program.

**SUMMARY**

Chapter Three explained the setting of the study with a description of the population, data management, and data analysis. The two data collection methods of online survey and face-to-face interview provided data for the case study. The quantitative ideas of *validity* and *reliability* were considered in relation to the qualitative ideas of *trustworthiness* and *consistency*. Research bias and assumptions were explored along with limitations and delimitations. Included was additional information about the theoretical justification for the qualitative interpretation of the data. Finally, pre-research predictions were shared. The researcher will address findings and results in Chapter Four and analysis and implications of the results in Chapter Five.
CHAPTER FOUR: RESULTS

SURVEY RESPONDENTS

Chapter Four describes the results of both the online survey and the face-to-face interview. Fifty-three students completed the online survey, and 20 students participated in an interview for this project. The survey provided opportunity to be consistent in asking the same questions of each student, whereas the face-to-face interview allowed for more exploratory questioning from individual students. Students answered demographic questions, questions about how they learned of Midwest Early College, and questions about what motivated them to leave their high school to attend MEC. Students described the degree to which program supports contributed to their program completion or if supports needed to be changed. Students also answered questions about their employment and educational status after leaving MEC.

Online survey questions 1 and 3 through 6 captured demographic data from the students. Out of the group of 230 Early College students who attended Midwest Early College in Cohorts One through Cohort Three, 53 students, 18 males and 35 females, completed the online survey for this research. The majority of the students who completed the survey, 69.8%, classified themselves as White. This was followed by 11.3% indicating two or more races, 9.4% as Black or African American, 5.7% who indicated that their race and ethnicity were unknown, and 3.8% who indicated they were Hispanic or Latino. Out of the three cohort groups
represented in the survey, 48 students could be identified by cohort group as follows: Cohort One—14 students, Cohort Two—14 students, and Cohort Three—20 students. One student from Cohort Three completed only the first few questions of the survey. The survey participants represented 12 different school districts, and one participant did not indicate their sending high school. At the time these students entered Midwest Early College, 15 high schools were eligible to send students to the program, so 80% of the high schools eligible to send students to Midwest Early College were represented by the students completing the survey. Nearly 55% of the students who participated in the research indicated that one of their parents had a college degree or a college certificate of some kind, 43% indicated that their parents did not have a credential, and 4% of students reported that they were uncertain. Of the students, 51% said they were not eligible for free or reduced lunch at some time in middle school or high school. Survey questions can be found in Appendix B.

ONLINE SURVEY DATA

Survey question two investigated how students first learned about Midwest Early College. Students were given the option to choose between five standard answers: school counselor, postcard mailed to my home, a student attending MEC, a friend not attending MEC, or my parent. Students could also choose “other” as an answer and write in a response. Table 10 illustrates that 45.28% of students responded that they learned about MEC from a postcard mailed to their home, 20.75% from parents, 13.21% from a school counselor, 13.21% from another source, 5.66% from a student attending MEC, and 1.89% from a friend not attending MEC. The “other” responses included the following: from a sibling at MEC, from a teacher at
MEC, from a newspaper clipping, and three responses as a result of a MEC presentation at a student’s home school.

Table 10: How Students First Learned About Midwest Early College

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Answer Choice</th>
<th>Number of Students</th>
<th>Percent of Students</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Postcard mailed to student’s home</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>45.28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parent</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>20.75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School Counselor</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>13.21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>13.21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A student attending MEC</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>5.66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A friend not attending MEC</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1.89</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>100.00</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Starting with survey question 7, the questions on the survey were open-ended. In responding to the question, “Please discuss your motivation for leaving your high school to attend MEC,” student responses were categorized to simplify responses into a meaningful summary. Out of 53 student responses to this question, many students gave more than one motivation for leaving their high school to attend MEC. The researcher grouped similar responses in order to identify reoccurring themes, and students who gave several motivations, were counted in more than one category. The largest group of student responses were in relation to the student’s former high school with 27 responses. This group, categorized as “Not happy with high school,” included all the following negative aspects associated with the home high school: student not doing well academically, school providing a poor education, student did not like school, poor school culture, immature classmates, social struggles, and being
bullied. The second largest group, “Opportunity to start college early, better self, and get ahead” had 21 responses. The third largest group, with 18 student responses, was titled “Free college or to save money.” Fourth, 16 student responses were associated with “Wanting more challenge or something new.” Two final small categories were labeled to place the student responses, “College environment, location, and MEC reputation” and “Parents wanted it.” Student responses are summarized in Table 11.

Table 11: Student Motivation for Leaving High School to Attend Midwest Early College

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>STUDENT MOTIVATION FOR LEAVING HIGH SCHOOL TO ATTEND MEC</th>
<th>n</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Not happy with high school</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Opportunity to start college early, better self, and get ahead</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Free college or to save money</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wanting more challenge or something new</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>College environment, location, MEC reputation</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parents wanted it</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>89</td>
<td>99</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Survey question 8 asked, “Did the Success Skills Curriculum, taught during your first semester in Midwest Early College, prepare you to be successful in your college courses? If yes, please explain how.” There were 51 student responses to this question. Thirty-five responses were “YES,” and 10 responses were “NO.” Six responses were not clearly “YES” or “NO” and stated that the Success Skills Curriculum was really just common sense information that students already knew. The following reasons were given by students for stating that the Success Skills Curriculum helped them prepare for college classes: prepared students for harsh grading and stressful homework, taught notetaking skills and to take personal initiative and
responsibility, helped to exercise time management, improved communication with teachers and fellow students, improved work ethic, increased presentation skills, and helped with organization. The 10 “NO” responses included the following reasons: success skills were redundant, obvious to all, not taken seriously by all of the students, took too much time, and could better be learned by doing rather than lecture.

Survey question 9 asked, “Did the Success Skills Curriculum help you to complete Midwest Early College Program? If so, how did it help you to complete?” Out of 52 students, 32 responded positively that the Success Skills Curriculum did help them to complete Midwest Early College Program. Sixteen students said that the Success Skills Curriculum was not helpful, and two students gave an unsure answer. Similar to question 8, approximately two thirds of the students found the Success Skills Curriculum helped them to complete Midwest Early College.

Survey question 10 asked, “Did the classes, taught during your first year in Midwest Early College, prepare you to be successful in your college courses? If yes, please give an example.” On survey question 10, there were 51 responses with two people skipping over this question. The answers to this question were affirmative with 48 “YES” responses, 3 “NO” responses, and 1 response that was unsure. Of the students responding, 92% reported that MEC courses prepared them to be successful in college courses. That is 95% of the students confirming that the MEC classes were effective in contributing to student success in college courses. Multiple times, students referred to the rigor of the MEC classes, especially the English/Writing course.

Survey question 11 asked, “Did your assigned mentor relationship contribute to your completion of Midwest Early College Program? Please explain.” There were 52 responses and
one person who skipped this question. Of the 52 responses, 38 responses were affirmative, and 10 responses negative. Four responses could be placed in a middle category, as two students referenced mentor turnover causing their particular mentor relationship to not be as effective as the mentor might have been, one student was neither positive nor negative, and one student said the mentor relationship was good. That particular student chose to leave the program, so the student could not credit the mentor with helping them to complete the program.

Survey question 12 asked, “Once you were out taking all college courses, approximately how often did you meet with you mentor, and would it have helped to meet with the mentor more often?” Sixteen students reported meeting with their mentor once a month, 13 reported meeting bi-weekly or one to two times a month, seven stated every couple of months, three stated once a week, three stated almost never, two reported only as required, and one student stated once a year. Four students referenced changing the frequency of meeting as the program progressed and as the student was progressively taking more college courses. Twenty-eight students believed that additional mentor meetings would not have added value to the meetings, five stated more frequent meetings would have helped, and three reported more meetings may have helped.

Survey question 13 asked, “What career have you chosen? What led you to make that career decision?” Fifty students gave a response, and three students skipped this question. Out of the 50 responses, eight students were undecided. Student responses were grouped into one of six major career clusters used by the Nebraska Department of Education (see Figure 1). One
student listed being a mom as her career choice. Several students listed two career choices. For those students who listed two careers, both are included in the summary results.

Figure 1. Career choice for Midwest Early College students.

Student responses show Human Services and Education as the primary career choice cluster followed by Health Sciences, and then, Communication. Nebraska Career Readiness Standards, similar to career grouping used in other states, identifies Human Sciences and Education to include the following four major occupation groups: Government & Public Administration; Human Services; Law, Public Safety, Corrections, & Security; and Education & Training (Nebraska Department of Education, 2017). While the Health Sciences and Communications clusters have many occupations with a science, technology, engineering, mathematical (STEM) focus, the number of MEC students choosing the Skilled & Technical Sciences Cluster was only five students. The Skilled & Technical Sciences Cluster includes engineering and technology.
The mission of Midwest Early College includes the promotion of STEM related careers in order to meet the growing workforce demand throughout the United States. Local STEM professionals are invited to speak with MEC students during College and Career Readiness events held during the first year of the program. Visits are arranged for students to tour STEM industries, where students can learn about career opportunities. Many STEM related careers are found in the Human Sciences, Health Sciences, and Communications clusters chosen primarily by the students in this study. All of the career options selected would require some form of college credential, and many, an advanced graduate degree.

Table 12 illustrates the survey question, “What led you to make that career choice?” The predominant answers were that students already had an interest before coming to Midwest Early College, followed by taking a community college course. Students varied greatly in how they came to decide on a career, and some students indicated that they have changed career focus within the last few years.

Table 12: Factors Leading MEC Students to Make Career Choice

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>FACTORS LEADING MEC STUDENTS TO MAKE A CAREER CHOICE</th>
<th>n</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Had interest before coming to MEC</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LCC courses</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Working on a job</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chemistry courses and STEM emphasis</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Doing research and volunteering</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learning what I did not want to do</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wanting to make a difference</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Don’t know</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Doing poorly in sciences</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MEC influence</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Two student comments linking career choice to MEC are as follows: “Elementary Education. I want to be able to change the lives of my students like Midwest Early College did for me.”

I am currently majoring in Social Work and will receive my Bachelor’s degree in social work and then my master’s degree as a Clinical Mental Health Therapist. I want to make a difference in people's lives, and the faculty of Midwest Early College showed me how important it is to feel good about the career and job you are doing, and I feel amazing about the career/major choices I have made.

Survey question 14 asked, “To what extent did the College and Career Readiness Activities (college visits, professional speakers, career interest surveys, resumes, mock interviews, etc.), during your first year, help you to make a career or college decision?” The purpose of this question was to gain an understanding of the effectiveness of the College and Career Readiness events provided to the students. For approximately 17 days, during fall and spring semesters, first year MEC students participate in professional speaker seminars, college visits, career assessment, career exploration software, resume building, and mock interviews. The primary goals of this one credit high school course is to expose students to new career options, help students to compare and contrast four-year colleges and universities for transferring after Midwest Early College program ends, to prepare resumes, cover letters, and to practice interview skills. If a student commented on more than one aspect of the College and
Career activities, their response is included in each area. In reference to special speakers, although 11 students said that they found the speakers helpful in some way, two additional students commented that the career focus of the speakers was too narrow, and they would like to have speakers with a broader approach outside of STEM careers. Table 13 illustrates the influence of College and Career Readiness events on student career choices.

Table 13: Influence of College and Career Readiness Events on Career Choice

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>STUDENT RESPONSE</th>
<th>n</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Helped inform me</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Came to MEC knowing my career interest</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wanted more college visits</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not much</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vaguely</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not sure</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>99</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 14 lists the career readiness events that were specifically mentioned by students as helpful in their career or college decision.

Table 14: College and Career Activities Noted as Helpful for Career and College Decisions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>COLLEGE AND CAREER ACTIVITY</th>
<th>n</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mock interviews</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Guest speakers</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Resume preparation</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>College visits</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Survey question 15 asked, “Would you say that having Midwest Early College located on the community college campus contributed to your completion of the Midwest Early College Program? How?” There were 48 “YES” answers, one answer of “YES AND NO,” and three “NO” answers. Of these students, 92% saw value in the early college being located on the community college campus. Of the three students that stated “NO” to the survey question, two of the students added a positive dimension about the community college location to their response. For example,

No I do not think it contributed to the completion of Midwest Early College Program. It was nice to be based on a college campus though because everything was right there and if we needed to see our mentors they were right there.

Only one student out of 52 had a negative answer, “No, I could have done just as well in a different location.”

Question 16 asked, “What community college support services, such as counseling, tutoring, etc. aided your completing Midwest Early College?” To investigate more deeply the importance of an early college being located on a community college campus, question 16 asked students to be specific in which services they utilized on the community college campus where Midwest Early College is located. If students mentioned more than one resource, their response was tabulated for each response. Figure 2 shows that tutoring and academic advising...
were the most utilized services. Out of 48 responses, 18, or nearly 37% stated that they did not use any supports, while 30 (63%) did utilize community college supports.

![Bar chart showing campus support services used by Midwest Early College students.](image)

Figure 2. Campus support services used by Midwest Early College students.

As a program evaluation measure, survey question 17 asked, “If you are currently enrolled in a college or university, which college or university? What degree are you seeking?” Forty-eight students responded to this question, and five did not answer. Forty-one out of the 48 students, or 85%, report currently being enrolled in a college. Of the seven students who reported not currently being enrolled in a college or university, two students stated plans to return to college. Of the 41 enrolled in a college, nine students are still enrolled at Learning Community College where Midwest Early College is located. Fifteen different colleges were named as institutions where former MEC students are now attending. The responses reveal that students have chosen varied paths at several different colleges. Twelve of the 15 colleges
and universities listed are in the state of Michigan, and the other three college or universities are in other states within the United States. Six of the 15 colleges are private colleges, and nine colleges are public institutions.

The declared programs of study in the colleges and universities vary greatly. Thirty-nine students listed 27 different programs of study along with one undeclared major of a General Associate Degree. Fitting these declared majors into one of the career clusters revealed that students predominantly choose Human Sciences and Education followed by Health Sciences; Communications; Skilled and Technical Sciences; Business Marketing and Management; and Agriculture, Food, and Natural Sciences, in that order (see Table 15).

Table 15: Number of Student Enrolled in a Related Major

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CAREER CLUSTER</th>
<th>NUMBER OF STUDENTS ENROLLED</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Human Sciences and Education</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Health Sciences</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communication and Information Systems</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Skilled and Technical Sciences</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Business Marketing, and Management</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agriculture, Food, and Natural Resources</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>99</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Survey question 18, “If you are currently employed, who do you work for and what is your position?” sought to discover if students joined the workforce after Midwest Early College, and at what economic or professional level they were employed. Forty-nine students answered the question, and four students skipped the question. Of the 49 students who answered, 43
were employed. Student occupations were spread throughout the Career Clusters with the largest concentration of 18 students working in Business, Marketing, and Management. Other Career Cluster concentrations are in Education (11 students); Health Science (6 students); Communication and Information Systems (2 students); followed by Human Sciences; Business, Management, and Administration; Agriculture, Food, and Natural Sciences; and Skilled and Technical Sciences, with one student in each.

Question 19 asked, “If you had the opportunity to go back, would you again choose to leave your high school and attend Midwest Early College?” Forty-six students, or 88.5%, stated that they would choose to attend MEC again, three students stated no (5.75%), and three students stated not sure (5.75%).

Question 20 asked, “How likely are you to recommend Midwest Early College to a friend or colleague? (Please check a circle from 1-10).” Table 16 shows the number of student responses and the percentage of student responses from 1 to 10. The average student response was 8.45. The design of question 20 was modeled after a well-known evaluation tool for business called the Net Promoter Score (NPS), created by Fred Reichheld (2011). The NPS measures customer satisfaction by subtracting the percentage of “Detractors” from “Promoters.” Detractors are those customers who rate at 0-6 on the question and Promoters are those customers who rate the question at 9-10. Since the NPS can range from –100 to +100, any score above zero is considered a good score (Reichheld, 2011). The percentage of Distractors (12 students or 22.64%) subtracted from the percentage of Promoters (34 students or 64.15%) equals a Net Promoter Score of 41.51. On a scale of -100 to +100, 41.51 is a positive score.
Table 16: Student Responses Net Promoter Score 1–10

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>STUDENT RESPONSES</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
<th>6</th>
<th>7</th>
<th>8</th>
<th>9</th>
<th>10</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Number of student responses</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percentage of student responses</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>1.89</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>11.32</td>
<td>9.43</td>
<td>5.66</td>
<td>7.55</td>
<td>13.21</td>
<td>50.94</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Question 21 allowed students to share specifics on the reason for how they rated MEC on the Net Promoter Score. There were 52 individual student responses, and several students gave more than one reason for their answer. Where students gave more than one answer, more than one answer was recorded, so 76 responses were recorded. The responses were so varied that 20 different categories were formed to group student responses. Responses were everything from “an awesome program” to “horrible” and “I hated the MEC part.” As much as possible, similar responses are grouped and ranked in order with most responses listed first in Table 17.

Table 17: Student Responses for Giving a Net Promoter Score

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>STUDENT RESPONSES</th>
<th>n</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Not for everyone</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Great program, awesome, great, worth investment</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Free college</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Helps the transition to college</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Opened opportunities</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Exceeded high school</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gained life skills, success skills</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student Responses</td>
<td>n</td>
<td>%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-----------------------------------------------</td>
<td>----</td>
<td>----</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Made me a better person</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tough or a struggle</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hated MEC part, horrible</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Missed sports</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Saved money</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Helped me get ahead</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Needed more social aspect</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Takes all your time</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Around other students with similar goals</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Program expectations for students were too high</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gave me independence</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stressful</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Should not be used to escape high school</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Good for those who struggle in high school</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Good if student is not likely to go to college</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Great teachers</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>76</td>
<td>98</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

A graph of question 22 results seen in Figure 3 explains progress made by 52 students at MEC. Over 98% of the students surveyed completed a high school diploma while attending MEC, 96% of the students surveyed completed at least 15 college credits while at MEC, and 90% of the students surveyed completed the 40-hour internship or 100-hour voluntary service that is required to be a completer of the MEC Program. All three requirements are necessary in order for a Midwest Early College student to be a completer of the program.
Figure 3. Completion of three program requirements at Midwest Early College.

Question 23 allowed any student who did not complete MEC to state why they did not complete the program. Forty-seven out of 52 (90.4%) of students who completed the online survey were completers at MEC. Five students out of 52 (9.6%) responded with reasons for not completing:

I gained 30 credits at MEC, but I did not complete all 60. I left because I wanted to explore options other than traditional college.

Lightly put, I had a psychotic break, which resulted in me dropping out of school, quitting my job at the time, and seeking treatment.

Family circumstances.

My first year in the early college classes were so extreme that once I was on my own, and what I had prepared for, which was extreme college classes, and got something similar to the level of high school classes, and I didn't know how to function in them, I lost motivation to perform in class and that caused me to not want to succeed. I felt like I was an Olympic race horse sent to a pony show. I was supposed to look pretty and be basic when I was told I needed to be able to run a mile in under 30 seconds.

I moved across the country after my second year.
Question 24 stated, “If you did not complete Midwest Early College, how many semesters did you stay in the program?” Four students responded that they did not complete the program, with two students staying four semesters, and two students staying five semesters. All other students, 92%, who participated in the survey, stayed in the program for the full three years or six semesters.

Figure 4 illustrates what college credentials were earned by students attended Midwest Early College.

![Image](image_url)

**Figure 4. What college credential was earned while attending Midwest Early College.**

There were 49 student responses on question 25, and some students were able to earn more than one of the listed credentials. For example, it would be possible for a student to earn a Michigan Transfer Agreement along with an Associate Degree.
Question 26 gave students the opportunity to tell how Midwest Early College could better support students in completing the program. Student responses were tabulated in Table 18. Students had many suggestions for improvement. Out of 46 total responses, seven students praised the program without giving any suggestion for improvement. Another seven students gave statements relating to creating less stress with more freedom and encouragement needed. Six students commented on making students more accountable in some way, while three students said they did not know how the support structure might be improved. Six other students thought that mentor meetings should be more supportive, more frequent if needed, and some stated, meetings should be required. While one student wanted less busy work in the work-based learning requirements (College and Career Readiness), another student would have liked more college visits, and speakers from outside the STEM focus.

Table 18: How Can Midwest Early College Better Support Students

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>HOW MIDWEST EARLY COLLEGE CAN IMPROVE SUPPORT</th>
<th>n</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Stricter on mentor meeting/More frequent meetings if needed</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Good job/Keep it up</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Make it less stressful/Less hard</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>More encouragement</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>More student input</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do not know</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>More student accountability</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Broaden horizons with classes</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teachers who care and are understanding</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>More transfer help</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>More freedom</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shorten the three years and time to diploma</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>More clarity on the program upfront</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The last two questions on the survey, questions 27 and 28, asked students about their availability for a face-to-face interview. Thirty four students, or 67%, initially stated they would be willing to interview. Twenty students were actually interviewed.

**FACE-TO-FACE SURVEY DATA**

Twenty students, who had attended Midwest Early College, were interviewed face to face. The majority of the interviews were conducted in person, and the others through online Skype®. In a couple of interviews, the Skype® connection was interrupted, so the interviews were completed as a telephone interview. Once the interviews were completed, the interviews were transcribed by a professional transcription service, and then the transcripts were manually coded using a coding system developed in Table 19.

The coding system was developed by relating student comments to the purpose for the study and the research questions. The key questions were the following:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>HOW MIDWEST EARLY COLLEGE CAN IMPROVE SUPPORT</th>
<th>n</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Less busy work in work based learning</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>More help to those students from poorer districts</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>More selective enrollment</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Require more hours on campus</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Less program changes</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hold due dates firm</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>More college visits and speakers</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Create clubs and outside activities</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Less meetings in second and third years</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total Responses</td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
1. What motivated Midwest Early College students to leave their home high schools to attend MEC?

2. What value do students place on the MEC classwork for preparation in going out to college courses?

3. Do students credit the *Success Skills Curriculum*, assigned mentor relationships, college and career readiness events, and the community college environment for helping them to persevere and achieve the goal of completing the MEC program?

4. How would students improve or change the current structure of supports offered at MEC?

5. What occupational or educational paths have MEC students pursued since leaving MEC, and did the supports offered at MEC contribute to the career and occupational choices made by students?

Table 19: Coding System for Face-to-Face Student Interviews

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>HOW FACE-TO-FACE INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPTS WERE CODED</th>
<th>SYMBOL</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Barriers in coming to Midwest Early College</td>
<td>B</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reasons for leaving former high school</td>
<td>LHS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Value placed on course work done at Midwest Early College</td>
<td>CW</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Success Skills Curriculum</td>
<td>SSC</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assigned mentor relationship</td>
<td>M</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>College and Career Readiness events</td>
<td>CCR</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Volunteer or internship experience</td>
<td>VI</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Impact of the college environment on students</td>
<td>E</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Why students drop out of Midwest Early College</td>
<td>DO</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Supports that students found helpful</td>
<td>S</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Supports that students would change</td>
<td>CS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How the Midwest Early College contributed to student choices</td>
<td>EC</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Occupational or educational plans</td>
<td>OEP</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How students changed during their early college experience</td>
<td>H</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Students displaying grit</td>
<td>G</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In retrospect, would students choose Midwest Early College</td>
<td>R</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
BARRIERS TO ATTENDING MIDWEST EARLY COLLEGE

When asked if any of the students faced barriers in making the decision to leave their high school to attend Midwest Early College, 19 students responded. The most frequently mentioned barriers were transportation and leaving behind school activities such as sports, clubs, and social events. Students also discussed counselor interactions.

Transportation

Several students had transportation challenges in getting to Midwest Early College, such as this student who said,

She (student’s mother) would drop me off at the bus stop at the mall, right around the corner from our house. I would ride that for an hour, almost an hour, to get here and then I would be here half an hour early. And she normally was able to pick me up or I had to . . . .Well, the first semester she wasn't able to pick me up because I pretty much got out of class at 3:00, and she had to go back to work from her lunch at 3:00. So I had to ride the bus to the mall, and then ride a bus there by her work and walk to her work, which is like a block. So it was different, but we made it work. And I actually didn't get a car until last year. So there was a lot of figuring out when I could borrow my mom's car, figuring out when I had to take buses, where I had to take buses to.

Another student expressed the transportation challenge like this:

I was using my dad's car, and he worked a job, or my grandma's car and she didn't like that, so I tried not using her car. And then it was also kind of a relationship thing. So my parents wouldn't get on the ball together, so there was no communication with how I was getting where, and so I ended up having to take a CATABUS which was a great service, but where I was at in ____, there were only two CATABUSes that would stop by; one at 7:00 in the morning and then the other one drop off at 5:00 at night. And so, I would have to be here . . . .And when I went to West Campus, that was when I really basically had to like steal my parents' cars because the CATABUS wouldn't go past the county line. They would drop you off at a Subway that was over there, but it wasn't really close enough to be worth it. And then, I would have to go and luck out and catch it, walk back from West Campus and catch it. But I made transportation happen, but that was the biggest thing that was an issue.

Other students reported making the most out of their transportation situation:
It's because class, would get out at three and then I had to sit here until my dad got out at five. It ended up being nice because I got to do homework in that time, so that helped with homework.

One student commented about high spending on gas and the other on expensive parking.

**Counselor and Teacher Interactions**

Students had few interactions with high school counselors when they exited their high schools to attend Midwest Early College. Some counselors were uninformed about MEC, as the following counselor stated to a student,

So explain to me Midwest Early College because in my perspective, it's for kids who don't do well academically at high school, so they're kind of sent off to Midwest Early College as kind of a last resort." And I was like, "What?" That's not it at all, so it was actually questioned because they didn't understand what it was.

Another student explained their counselor’s reaction as follows:

It was a really good thing that I could do. It definitely would put me ahead in college for a few years. And she just kept telling me all the benefits, which is great to hear. And she also told me maybe the negative things about it. Because again, you'd be leaving your friends and what not. And participating in certain things, it could get harder, but she said that it would be doable. And I'm really glad that she went into also maybe the consequence. . . . But just from hearing what the positives and negatives were, I decided to do it.

Students also received mixed reactions from teachers as stated by the following students, “I did have a history teacher that was against it. She was like, "Don't do it, it's not a good idea." But, I really wanted to do it so I didn't take her advice.” Another student explained the reaction from here high school teacher when the students asked for a reference:

My favorite teacher, taught chemistry, and it was like "You know, this is probably a good move for you, but I believe so much in the public education system, I can't do this." (Give a formal recommendation) I said, "Okay." And then I talked to another teacher, Dawson, who taught math, and he thought it was the best thing ever. He was like "Oh, I'm so glad you're doing this and this is such a good opportunity. I wish there were more programs like this.
Missed Activities

Leaving behind school activities, especially sports, was frequently mentioned as a challenge in attending Midwest Early College. Though an occasional student was able to attend Midwest Early College and stay involved in local high school sports, for many others it was not feasible as these student testimonies reveal:

I actually would visit my high school every single day, after Early College, to make it to sports and everything. For two-years of early college, I didn't miss a spot of sports. I still played three varsity sports each year.

___ High School was pretty accommodating until I got really into higher level college courses, I didn't really have time anymore. But ___ High School actually was like, "Yeah, you can still come back and play sports after your classes are done," because by the time my classes were done, I could still go play tennis or soccer or whatever.

I was able to keep on doing sports. I think, honestly, my entire social life at that time was pretty much tied up in sports that I did and also band. . . .And the only barrier was that the band director wouldn't let me do Marching Band if I did the early college. Which is stupid, but whatever.

I did have to give up sports overall, since I had to drop any sort of extracurricular activities. So while I didn't have that sort of same team bonding experience as opposed to just classmate peer, and team working together, I thought overall for the education it was worth it. I could still contact those from my old high school if we really want to spend time together, if it wasn't for anything competitive.

Marching band, I had to give up. But that wasn't that big of a loss for me. I really did enjoy marching band and stuff but . . . I was just really excited about getting to go to college that it was. . . worth it.

Some students found a way to reduce their schedule in order to stay involved:

I tried soccer for a season and I loved it, but soccer just kind of got in the way after a while, so I decided to not go for it again the following year, but I stuck with track. And then instead of playing soccer I started getting more involved with the community. . . .I volunteered to be a soccer coach, which is actually how I got my volunteer hours, or at least part of it.

I tried doing swimming my first year here, and it did not work out very well. It didn't help that my situation was extremely strenuous compared to other people's situation
and the coach was a new coach. He hadn't dealt with me the past two-years. I did later acknowledge I was not able to balance the course load of MEC with swimming, so I asked if I could volunteer for the home meets for timing.

**Summary**

Based on student responses, the most common barriers in attending Midwest Early College were missed opportunities for students to participate in high school sports. For those students highly motivated, who can work out their transportation challenges, it was possible to attend MEC and play in organized sports, but for many students it was too taxing to try to do both. There is pressure of more homework than many students have experienced during the first two-years of high school. Other students have the added time pressure of working a part time job. Often, students are in a position to make significant decisions at a young age. The majority of students, who sacrificed extracurricular activities in order to attend MEC, did not express regret for their decision.

**REASONS FOR LEAVING FORMER HIGH SCHOOL**

Many students reported not being content in their former high schools as a reason for seeking attendance at Midwest Early College. Students used terms such as “waste of time,” “hated,” “bored,” “not challenged,” “needs not being met,” “didn’t fit in,” “not rooted to the high school” to describe their high school experience. One student said, “I wasn't very successful in high school. I didn't have very good grades, and I wasn't motivated to go to school. . . .I didn't try at all. I didn't take notes. I didn't pay attention in class.”

Students who had recently moved into a new district, or who did not feel connected to peers, were drawn to the concept of the early college. Another student said, “I spent most of
high school with my head in a book kind of ignoring people, just because I didn't feel very comfortable with a lot of my peers.” Other students stated,

When I was in school, I didn't like school. I was good at school. I aced all my classes, but it was boring, I didn't feel like I really had to try. And I had just changed schools... so I didn't really have any friends. And the friends I did make, were graduating that year.

To be completely honest, I left my local high school to come to the early college because... I understood that there would be a better chance of me succeeding in the early college after school, than just going to high school straightforward and then going to college. But to tell you the truth, the real reason was I knew I was not going to make it through high school. I knew for a fact I wasn't going to make it, so I knew that if I went to MEC, or whatever I thought it was at the time, I was going to have a larger chance of success, and I don't regret anything about it.

Because I knew that I wasn't as dedicated to be able to go back to homeschooling. I wanted to get something out of my education. Like, to finish strong, knowing that I learned something. And with homeschooling, I knew that I just wasn't there to be able to perseverenough in my studies to get that far. So instead of going back to that, and potentially failing, I decided to go to Midwest Early College, because then I knew that I'd have something to strive for

Others were motivated to make a change because of friends.

My biggest thing was I was too afraid to leave my friends that I made while I was at my high school, so, that was my hesitation for joining. But all in all, the biggest reason why I wanted to join the Early College was because I felt like it would put me at the level I needed to be at... I would be earning college credits that would be able to transfer to a university, and that was something that I really couldn't pass up.

The following students were looking for a more mature and challenging environment:

In high school I never fit in because I feel like I was a lot more mature than the kids in my classes. So I thought if I came to Midwest Early College, I'd find people that were as mature as I was. So I thought it would be easier.

And a lot of kids say this, but high school sort of felt like a waste of time. Just the classes, you could put in minimal effort and get by with four points and stuff pretty easily. So, to challenge myself in a way that I hadn't before.

I was not challenged in high school. I was able to 4.0 classes while sleeping through them, and didn't find them any difficulty. I was always first done with the test, first done. ... A bad test for me was a 95%. I was upset if I couldn't just get perfect on everything, and I was able to do that without putting in any effort. When I found out I
would be able to go to college at a younger age, and have the increased difficulty of classes and schooling. . . I was happy about that. I wanted that challenge.

I didn't have good homework or studying skills. I didn't do homework or stuff, because I can remember things really well, and so I didn't think I needed to do homework or study, and I just got through doing tests or projects, stuff like that.

Some parents encouraged their students to consider the early college program because of the college tuition saved. Students explained it like this, “I mean, free college, plain and simple. That's really it. I felt fine sacrificing the whole high school experience, I was fine with that.” Other students said,

I guess there were multiple factors. My sister did it, and my parents encouraged me to. Mostly for reasons of tuition, savings. . . because I knew I was going to go to college, and I guess it just makes sense. My oldest sister went to LCC, and she paid her way through. I planned to do the same thing, so, it made sense to get it for free.

My mom was saying, "Hey, you should also check out this early college thing, that LCC is doing. . . AP tests are 50, 60 bucks a piece. IB is somewhere around a hundred, to 200 a piece. . . .So early college provided an opportunity that was affordable for me and would also provide a more real college experience than AP or IB.

Honestly, I was pretty hesitant at first. My mom brought up the opportunity. . . .I want to say it was a parent teacher conference, something along those lines. And after some push, I thought, ‘Well I know that a college education is important, it could open up opportunities.’ I’d already decided on a career. . . .So I thought, ‘Alright. Well, if I’m going to go to college anyway, then why not take this next leap? Why not try to challenge myself, and save some money along the way?’

My mother, we had seen a brochure for it. I initially did not want to go, but my mother thought it would be better for me to go, so we spent a summer back and forth about it, but as the end result I ended up going and I ended up staying the whole time.

The following student testimony reveals that not of all students were unhappy in their former high school:

I left because I wanted something better, and I feel like a lot of the kids in Midwest Early College left because they didn’t like their high school, or they weren't doing well socially or academically. . . .I was very average and no one ever really told me that I would be
anything but average, and so I felt that this was an opportunity to surprise myself, let alone the other people who didn't think I'd be anything more than average.

When one student found out that he could still play sports in his local high school, it made the early college even more appealing.

I talked to my coaches and they allowed me to still be in sports back in high school. I feel like I got the best of both worlds . . . even though I was away from high school, I was still able to participate in many of the stuff that I wanted to back in the high school.

A few students reported being informed about Midwest Early College by their counselor, a Midwest Early College brochure, a postcard mailed out to local area sophomores, or by a Midwest faculty member who visited the high school where the student attended. A representative from MEC visited the high school, and this student took the information home to her mom:

I showed it to my mom and she was really the one who pushed me into applying. And I don't remember going online. . . . I think what I ended up doing was going to my counselor's office and just asking for an application because I don't remember printing one off. So, even though I didn't sit down and have a conversation with my counselor they were available at her office.

But the classes I was taking for the most part were pretty easy, so my guidance counselor suggested to me like, ‘Hey, have you heard of this program, the Midwest Early College Program?’ And I'm like, ‘No, what is this?’ She gave me a bunch of pamphlets about it, and she explained what it is. I did more research into it, and I found that that sounds exactly what I need.

One student uniquely discovered Midwest Early College from an old school newspaper.

And I had found out about The Early College through our school newspaper. . . . College had always been an option for me. My family had always talked about it. It was just a matter of getting there and getting there early seemed like a really awesome opportunity. . . . It wasn't an article that was printed that year or anything. I was in a newspaper class, we were going through old archives, and there was an article that was printed the first year that you guys had started. . . . So they ran an article about it and I read that in my newspaper class, and I was like, "Oh, I wonder if that's still around?" So I researched it and I was like, ‘Oh, okay. I'll do that.”
Another student referred to learning difficulties:

I was never someone that really excelled in high school. I had dyslexia, so I struggled a little bit, but I thought I could still do this anyways, and I was able to succeed in a little bit harder classes still.

Some students spoke about having more personal freedom at Midwest Early College, and most students gave several reasons for wanting to leave their high schools to try the early college. Each student’s path and motivation was a bit different, but all students believed they had profited in some way from their early college experience.

I don't think I would've become the person that I am today if I had remained at my high school, just because I wouldn't have had the same experiences that I had in these last three years. Because I did my internship. . . I feel as though I have become a lot better at communicating and presenting myself to other people than I would have been if I had stayed at my high school.

VALUE PLACED ON COURSEWORK COMPLETED AT MIDWEST EARLY COLLEGE

Students were asked about high school courses taught at Midwest Early College before the students were credentialed out to take college courses. The following student testimonies show how many students valued the instruction:

Being in this program really helped me to learn how to go and be successful in college, which is a skill anyone who is going to pay for college should want.

It really helped me. I’m a slow learner, and in high school I barely did anything, like I mentioned before. I was able to breeze through it. And when I came to Midwest Early College, it really helped me to just prepare myself to deal with challenging classes.

I think they did a very good job, because we weren’t treated like we were high school students. We were expected to behave like college students, and to take on full responsibility for our education, and to do our work, and show up. . . .But in these classes, you had to show up. You had to take notes and study in order to get a good grade. . . you had to participate too, which was a big thing for me.
Many MEC students believe high school courses at MEC were more challenging than courses taught at their former high school.

The Early College classes were insane. I always decide that it's college boot camp because it's just, they really throw you right into it. You're supported, so it's not like you're drowning, but they really throw you right into the curriculum and right into the amount of homework that you have. . . . they were definitely more challenging than __ (former high school) classes but they made a world of difference when it came to LCC classes.

Other students said,

That one semester was more helpful than two-years of high school. . . .They were more rigorous and they were more similar to a college set-up.

They were not nearly as difficult as an AP class, but they were definitely harder than your average high school class.

I think they were definitely more rigorous than my high school classes, they had way more homework. It required way more participation, and I guess attention during class, not even just talking about outside of class, but during class. That was very beneficial.

Several students reported that their MEC courses were even more strenuous than their college courses. This was especially noted in comparing MEC English with college English. One student said, “College work took less time than (MEC) English, definitely.” Another stated,

I feel like I learned more in MEC, some English courses, than I did in my two-years at my old high school or even part of middle school. The change was dramatic, and a lot of what was taught in the English portion was relevant, if not surpassing the expectations of LCC’s own course work.

I had already been put through the absolute worst case scenario through MEC, so, they really prepare you for the worst. And luckily, at LCC I didn't experience the worst but I was able to kind of kick back and just ease through my classes just efficiently without stressing too much because I was already put through that in the first year.

I realized very quickly within the first week that I was much more prepared than my peers in my LCC classes, and being 16, and then on top of that, be even more prepared than 20 something year olds, was pretty eye-opening.
A few students compared their MEC math coursework to college coursework. As one student said, “They were about the same, MEC to LCC math.” Other students said,

Math was the one thing that could have used a little bit more work because the math class that I was originally put in was math that I had already learned. . . by the time I got to LCC classes, it was fine for what I was taking, but I would have rather originally started with a slightly more advanced math class

Another student expressed math experience as,

Once I’d gone into a pre-calc, I felt like I wasn't entirely prepared from MEC's math courses. . . . That I was not as prepared as I potentially could have been. I still came out with a three point three five, so I still did well, I still passed, but I don’t feel confident crediting that to the math courses taken for Midwest Early College.

That early college over-prepared students for college coursework was praised by the majority of students, but two students related some negative aspects of being over prepared,

When I was part of Midwest Early College, and I had that five-day routine, and once I realized that an actual college class is not what the Early College prepared me for, I felt not lied to and not cheated, but I felt so over prepared that I couldn't actually perform the way I wanted to in a college environment. . . . my expectation of what the college environment was supposed to be was so twisted, that the idea of being in a college environment terrifies me, because I feel I can't perform the way I'm supposed to.

It was a weird adjustment because MEC demanded so much from you, and so much from your time, and it was supposed to be to ready you for college courses. And then college courses came so easily, that I had a poor attendance quality. It's noted, I did fail a couple of college classes because my attendance was abysmal, if not zero for some of them. And it was. . . I liked how MEC was treating me as an adult, and challenged me to think, and just wanted me to productively think. And then you go out to the college classes and they make you, We don't want you to think, we want you to follow this process.

SUCCESS SKILLS CURRICULUM

The purpose of the Success Skills Curriculum, used at Midwest Early College, was to prepare students for success in college courses. College Success Skills were taught intensely during the first five weeks that students were at MEC and reinforced throughout the rest of the
Ironically, for students program the student really expectations do remember get time really drilled I waste everything I think success skills head. So, At the to they're while every brainwashing, I think to the doing, they're the kinds of skills that are drilled into your head, from sixth grade up, and if we're going to learn them, we would have learned them already.

They can throw it out the window. . . . I believe it was four weeks of every class brainwashing us to think that these are the only ways to really succeed in college. And while yes, having those skills are good to have, brainwashing us into believing that they're the only way to do it, did not help. Because that's four weeks of extreme brainwashing, at the same pace of the normal college classes that we didn't really need to do. We all could have figured out our own methods, our own ways of understanding how to behave in that environment, the same way we did in high school. The same way every other college student out there does, after they graduate high school.

Ironically, the student making the last comment did not complete the early college program.

The majority of students expressed finding value in the Success Skills Curriculum, if not for the student personally, at least for other students in the program.

So, learning about the college and then time management just keeps going back in my head because that's something I really had to learn very quickly, was managing everything so that it worked together. Some people might have thought that it was a waste of time, but I thought it was beneficial, even if it was just a reminder.

I think it's a great idea because while I didn't necessarily benefit from that amount of time being focused on success skills, a lot of my friends did. It really allows students to get situated, and they are able to understand the expectations of them within this program, what they need to do to get out into college classes, and show that they're prepared for that. And I think spending five weeks on that is nice because students really get a feel of what they're in for. . . . those students who don't come in with those success skills are able to learn them in not a rushed amount of time. It's five weeks, that's a lot of time for somebody who's trying to learn how to be responsible. The class work and stuff that we were given, really reinforced that too. Because the teachers set expectations for us, so we had to try and rise and reach them.

At the time, I hated them. Now, looking back, I think that they're really beneficial. I don't really remember specifics of what they were from, it's been a really long time now. But I do remember really appreciating the fact that Early College took the time to work on soft skills because you don't get that in high school. And there's so many people who
have the ability to be successful but don’t have really the social skills or the soft skills to really make that possible in the outside world. And so I thought that, although tedious at times, I really appreciated the Success Skills in the end because it really taught me time management and that’s something that I still even use today.

I did not like them at all, but I ended up using them when I got off into the college courses, and I still use them now. . . . Time management. I think they had a study skill for time management, paying attention to where you’re putting your time as some of us did play sports and then play video games and whatever else. And to this day, I still put in slots for how I’m using my time. Also, I think they had an agenda where you write down your schedule or your homework and stuff like that. I still do that to this day. I didn’t like it then, I never even used the agenda then. I didn’t like using it, but now I make sure I always have an agenda.

I already knew that stuff. Not that I applied that stuff until that training, but yeah, definitely very helpful. There were people that simply didn’t know how to make a schedule and that taught them how to do it. There were people that didn’t know how to just get it done. STARS in a nutshell, that program was how to just do it, period. After you took that program, there was no excuse for you not knowing how to do those things. Because we took five weeks before school even started and we gave you the structure. Here’s the skeleton of success of what it takes, and then you just have to put the rest in it. . . . I’m not going to lie, at the time, I hated it. . . . But there were a lot of students that simply didn’t understand it. And that’s kind of what made me realize how important it was.

Students commented on the note taking skills that were emphasized in the *Success Skills* Curriculum:

One of the things I liked was they taught us how to do the note-taking skills which is useful because I don’t think a lot of people really know how to take notes, like honestly, in college reading for the information stuff.

But there were some useful things. . . . you need to take notes. . . . as someone who in high school never felt the need to, then coming to college and having never taken notes in his life, I found that actually useful. I don’t know if other high schools are better about that than ___ (former high school), but yeah, that’s the one thing that comes to mind as actually having a positive impact for success skills.

There was the two balances of types of students that come into the program, some of them are first-time college students and families, and some of them are just ones that are looking to excel. And all of the students who were just looking to excel and jump forward thought they were all a joke, because they believed that they already had these skills down, whether or not they did.
Students referred to learning how to speak out:

Oh, they made us do stuff where we had to talk to professional people. I used to be really shy, did not want to talk in class. So quiet all the time. They really made me come out of my shell. I mean, I remember ___ saying I was a great student in every way except I didn't talk in class enough. . . we had to meet with, do mock interviews and stuff. And I think all of that really helped me in class because then I was able to talk to my professors and classmates more, which most of my professors in college really liked me because they saw that I was a good student and willing to talk to them

I was really shy. I didn't talk to anybody. I didn't make eye contact with anybody. I just did not want to deal with other people, and that's something I personally worked on more. It was mentioned during success skills and the job interview stuff of talking to people. But it became something I personally worked on, and then I got so good at talking to people, I did a speech at the end, at the graduation.

Students also gave suggestions for improvement of the Success Skills Curriculum, which included the following:

That's a tough question. It's always easy to complain, but it's a lot harder to say how to fix it. . . .I think I would completely restructure that in some way. Just taking five weeks to do that seems. . . .Don't get me wrong, they're very important skills to have. I just don't think teaching them in the way that they're presented is maybe the best way of going about that.

I tried really hard to find the importance in it, but it just seemed repetitive. Perhaps if they found a little bit more efficient way of getting it across, and maybe in a month, not five weeks. I mean, I understood why it took that long, but it just seemed long.

I think it was a ridiculous amount of time that they took out of class to do it. I thought there was a little much personally because it just made the class itself a lot longer and a lot harder to focus because you just got put through all of this Success Skills stuff. And now, we have to get in to the curriculum and then you have homework on the curriculum but you just spent like over an hour on stuff you're not even going to be tested on. So as much as I think it was beneficial, and as much as I think it should have been there, I think that if they did it in like half hour increments or even less, and did it over a longer span of time of the semester, it would have been more beneficial because it made classes really hard to get through.

I'm not sure if this is a good idea, but spreading it out, instead of trying to do all of it in the first few weeks, maybe teaching it throughout the semester. And even when the students are taking college classes, maybe requiring them to go to success skills classes.
THE MENTOR RELATIONSHIP

The majority of student comments concerning mentors was positive. Students spoke of emotional support in addition to academic support, and students confirmed having access to mentors when they needed that connection.

In the beginning, I didn't have a great relationship with ___ He was really tough in the beginning. He was always on me about every little thing, but as it went on I started meeting with him in between the week, like every other week, and it really helped just knowing that I had someone to fall back on if I screwed up.

We only met once or twice every month. It was more of a check up than anything else. . . With me, it was just me telling him what I was going to do, what my plan was, and how I was going to do it. And then him just laying back and agreeing that that was a good way of doing it. Sometimes ___ would interrupt and tell me that that was also a good thing that I was doing or maybe try something else. . . It was just another helping hand, another resource that I could've used.

I really enjoyed my mentor relationship. I saw ___ like once or twice a month. Classes were going well, so we kind of just talked about life and stuff. There wasn't much to go over. And he of course helped me plan the college apps and stuff like that. As far as checking in on academic work, there wasn't much for us to discuss, thankfully. He was a good source of guidance, for sure.

At times, mentors needed to be supportive in personal matters:

I dealt with a lot of stuff in that year, and I relied on my mentor quite a bit, especially because I was just brand new to college classes. I was sixteen years old trying to figure out. . . My second year I did more stuff by myself, but there was still some stuff I struggled with. A lot of it has to do with my family. . . I also had a job, so I was balancing family, job and school, and trying to make it work. . . I had to go from living in two households to living in one. My parents had divorced and while I was in another country, I got a call saying that I can't live in my father's house much longer. . . It's under-appreciated. I admit, I under-appreciate it and a lot of my fellow cohort under-appreciate it as well. But the fact that you have someone there who could help you figure things out, was great.

Oh, that was, honestly out of everything that MEC offered, I think the mentor was the best thing. . . and it really shows you how much the program cared about you. And I didn't really notice that until I left. . . If anything ever went wrong or I was having a bad day or something good happened, I would just go right to ___ and let him know. It was really nice to be able to have someone on campus who looked out for you, who would
help you if you had questions, who would offer advice, would cry with you and also celebrate with you. . . .That was probably my favorite part of the entire program because it's just so helpful when you're out in college classes to be able to kind of come back to someone who doesn't have all of the answers but who can help you answer your own questions. . . .And so that emotional support knowing that someone is always cheering for you, made me as successful as I was.

Mentors served as a liaison between student and Academic Advisors who did not always understand the details of high school students attending college programs while needing to complete the requirements for a high school diploma.

when things did. . . start to go wrong towards the end of my time at the Early College program, due to a miscommunication between myself, and academic advisors, on what I would need to obtain my Associate Degree, my mentor was there and working with the director to help resolve the situation which, had I not had that relationship, I'm not sure exactly where I would have had to go.

At times, the mentor would follow an intrusive counseling model, as with the following student:

I always went in for the required meetings, but I felt like the required meetings were always right on time for when I had something going on or something wasn't going right. But he always stayed on, I guess his mentees, whatever, he always stayed on us with emails and how are we doing in our classes and stuff like that. So he didn't just wait for us to come to him, he normally would send us emails and things like that

Other faculty made themselves available for advice to the students in addition to the assigned mentor:

Even though they weren't my assigned mentors, they really helped me. They gave me ideas about what I should look for in colleges. They pushed me to excel and to go out and do things and step outside of my comfort zone, like the internship. That was crazy. I have always been a shy and soft-spoken person. So to step out there and just do that at 17 was insane, but they were there the whole way. So they really pushed me outside of my comfort zone, and I think that's really the responsibility of a mentor is to do that. But encourage you along the way and make sure you're doing okay and the two of them did that.

One student suggests how to assign mentors as follows:

Assigning mentors just randomly like that, I don't know if that's the best way to encourage a student-mentor relationship. . . basically when I went to orientation, we
were just assigned this random person. And I feel like it could be done a little bit differently, so that it's focused more on what the student needs from a mentor

Some students have suggested that older students serve as mentors,

I think that mentor relationship is ideally someone that's going through the same type of situation as you but at a more advanced level.

Maybe, I don't know, a stronger mentoring relationship. . . . so, maybe I think that talking to someone who has been through what they're going through might help though. . . . It might be good to try and pair it up because I think that would also give the older people more perspective about thinking about their first year and how they did get through it, and stuff. But, I know that some people would get really annoyed with being forced into it. So, that's hard to say. I think it would be good to just make them do it to begin with and then after a certain point maybe it's their option if they want to continue.

Not all students reported having a great mentor relationship:

I think he tried to support, but his style of mentoring didn't work for me at all, because intimidation and saying I should just drop out of early college, he told me that before, just really doesn't work for me at all, I feel like it just didn't work for me personally. . . . More motivating and not like being so dramatic about things that aren't really an issue that needs to be brought to that level. And yeah, just a little more calm. I'm pretty calm and quiet. So, if someone like being dramatic and really out there, telling me that stuff is really not the best fit for me and it kind of led me not to use mentoring that much, and use my teachers and college a little more. . . . It was basically, my college professor that I needed to talk to about graduating and stuff, because he knew all about the program I was in.

While this student says that his mentor relationship did not go so well, he also admits his responsibility in not doing so well.

was a very difficult person to communicate with. Either he would interpret things in the most literal sense, or I wouldn't be able to properly communicate what I'm struggling with. If I'm struggling with proper time management, he's thinking I'm not going to my classes, I don't know how to get on campus on time, because he's trying to understand any possible scenario. . . . Just my experience was, either I wasn't good enough, or I wasn't able to communicate well enough. . . . At a certain point I just didn't want to meet with him. I didn't want to tell him that I was not motivated to go to class. I didn't want to tell him I have no desire to do the homework. I need a break. I can't function here anymore. And so, I just wouldn't meet with him.
The same student, speaking of a fellow student, says the mentor intervention was helpful:

___ would be the first person to admit he's struggling. And in that case, the mentor would not spoon feed him, but help guide him in, ‘Well, this is what you need to do. You should probably do this element to study. You should probably go do it at the office hours. You should do something with your professor instead of coming to me.’ And then ___ would do it and (he) would pass the class.

A former Midwest Early College student now serves as a mentor herself,

I think it's interesting and I'm actually a mentor in a college, to college freshmen right now. I think it's a necessary relationship. Because of the fact that we were the first cohorts, there's not really a good way to do it other than having teachers do it, but I think if there was more of us, like a peer-to-peer relationship, it'd be a little bit more successful than a professor doing it. Because they're more like an advisor.

**COLLEGE AND CAREER READINESS EVENTS**

Midwest Early College devotes about eight days per semester exclusively to college and career readiness events for students. These events consist of personal career assessments and career exploration. The emphasis is on STEM careers as professionals, representing different fields, are invited to Midwest Early College to talk about their careers. As stated by Barnett (2016), “Colleges have an explicit interest in making sure that students identify a major/career in high school, as students who begin college with a major in mind are more likely to persist and graduate” (Baily, Jaggars, & Jenkins, 2015, p. 12). Midwest Early College students are encouraged through self-assessment tools and exposure to professionals to pick a meta-major or pathway that best fits their abilities and interests, and within that pathway to explore career possibilities.

Midwest Early College students are encouraged to explore colleges where they might transfer after the early college program is completed. College exploration includes online
research, hosting visiting college representatives, and visiting colleges. The following are some of the student comments concerning college visits:

1. “That kind of gave me an idea of what’s out there, and especially. . . . That there are local options.”
2. “It did help me to reaffirm the idea that I want to be in law enforcement.”
3. “I really liked seeing the private college. . . . I didn’t have a full understanding of what the difference between a liberal arts school was and anything else.”
4. “That’s when I really found out that I like small campuses as opposed to the large campuses.”
5. “I loved the college visits. I loved going to a different place and learning what different colleges had to offer.”
6. “We went to LTU, and that is the reason I chose LTU.”
7. “I enjoyed the college visits because it broadened my horizons on what was out there.”
8. “I think the field trips were helpful because they were enjoyable. . . . for me at least, put a more positive outlook on the program as a whole. . . . and they were also helpful from the perspective of “Where do I want to go to college? What sorts of things do I need to make sure I look at when I’m picking a college?”

There were no negative comments about college visits.

During the first year of MEC, students are required to develop a resume, write a cover letter, and practice job interview skills. Students commented the following:

1. “Having a paper copy of a resume, I think that’s great. Teaching me how to make a cover letter, that’s great.”
2. “The job interviews were very impactful to me because that was something very relatable to life. . . . The job interview is similar to how you’re going to talk to a manager. . . . how you’re going to approach someone and just be professional in your life.”
3. “And yeah, I got the job. There were four people there, and I was the only one of the four people who got the job, and it was pretty awesome.”
4. Career readiness, like... mock interviews and all of that, that was really helpful as I moved on from my internship into getting my other job at ___ because I learned how to interview correctly. And every other interview that I've done since then, I've pretty much gotten the job or the offer which was awesome. So I guess the career readiness made me more comfortable to go out into the work field, and I can definitely say that I've used those skills, like resume writing and all of that, even today. A couple of days ago, I was doing my resume over again, so it's definitely prepared me to go out into the work field, work force, and be good and be awesome. I don't think I would be this successful if I didn't have those workshops that we did.

One student stated, “It’s just amazing, the different aspects of things. It helped open up my mind to possibilities.” Though not all the students were positive about the industry visits:

And like I said, it's very hard to cater to all the students, and I know that obviously... . . . Take a look at the interest and majors of all of them, maybe break them up into groups and take the ones that want go into engineering, take them to the computer science company in ___ . . . I think more specialization is better. I know it's much harder to manage, but it kinda sucks being brought to a presentation on hospitality business when I could not care less about that entire topic.

This student agrees that it is difficult to accommodate every student’s career interest,

Well, it really wasn't helpful at all, for me, because I was going into more of art than STEM. I didn't really have any desire to go into STEM, it's not what I'm good at. And I didn't really plan on going to a four-year college right now, unless I really need to go back, so it wasn't that helpful for me personally. It might've been more helpful if they had maybe some graphic design, or some animation, or some other speakers outside of STEM, because that's really what I was interested in.

The college and career readiness events as part of the Midwest Early College received a favorable rating from 15 out of 18 students who commented during face-to-face interviews, and for several students, the impact was significant in helping the student to make major career or college decisions.
VOLUNTEER AND INTERNSHIP EXPERIENCES

Fourteen students spoke about their internship or volunteer experience requirement for completing the Midwest Early College program. Students in MEC have the option of finding a 40-hour internship experience or completing 100 hours of volunteer service. Administration and faculty encourage students to find an experience related to the student’s career goal or an experience that will allow students to explore a career interest. This requirement is usually reserved for the second or third year of the program, though a few students have started their volunteer hours in their first year at MEC.

Some students volunteered in more than one position. Out of fourteen students responding to the question, three volunteered at a homeless shelter, three coached in an elementary or secondary school athletic program, three volunteered at a hospital, four used their job experience to fulfill the requirement, one did research at a medical library, one served in the civil air patrol, one worked for a Congressman at the State House of Representatives, one remodeled houses, one taught in a Sunday School class, and another volunteered as a tutor and in an after-school choir program.

One student commented that fellow students did not take the internship/volunteer experience seriously:

It was very weird to institute and to utilize it. I don't think a lot of our kids took it to heart, and I admit, I'm on that list of kids that didn't really... I did my internship last minute. . . .I have mixed feeling about it, because having to figure out how to do that when you're balancing work, family and school is difficult. But I like the fact that's it's required, because even if you are an art student and you have to do volunteer work, volunteer work itself helps the community that you're in, which is what's an important aspect of it.
Commenting on being able to use a job to fulfill the internship/volunteer experience requirement, one student said,

They were kind of lax on us. They just let us use our jobs but I choose to use. . . I was working for the Chemistry Lab at LCC part time, and I chose to use that because it was more related to the degree I was getting, and I did really enjoy that job.

Other students spoke about the challenges they faced in meeting the internship/voluntary requirement by saying,

I started out volunteering at ___ Hospital. I did their Teen Volunteer Program, and I enjoyed it, but it took up a lot of my time that I didn't have, and it took away from work. . . work isn't everything, but when I have to pay for my own gas to get to school, work is kind of important. And since it wasn't near home, I would get off of my shift for volunteering like eight o'clock at night and then have to drive home and that got old really fast. So it just didn't really work for my schedule overall, and so I ended up not continuing. . . And then to fulfill the commitment, I ended up using my job at the time. . . which was something I really enjoyed. And so that's been kind of my internship. It definitely wasn't volunteer because I got paid for it

I think the concept in theory is good. I believe it's very hard to actually do. I don't know very many careers that want a job shadow or internship from a student that doesn't even have a two-year degree. You're asking them to add more time to their schedule for a job shadow. . . And most of the time, their job shadows will not count or will not accept them, because they have not had enough schooling in the field they want a job shadow for. They end up using their schooling, or they end up using their job anyways.

Out of the four students who used their jobs to meet the volunteer requirement, three of the jobs were on the community college campus.

For my last year there, I was the math tutor, and I think that was actually really helpful for me as well. Just because it gave me a block of time where I can study. I can help people study and all that jazz, and then just having a job on campus was really helpful. So I didn't have to worry as much about having an income. And it was really convenient so I know that it was more of a support to other students than to me. But it was still a support to me.

For other students, it was “an amazing experience.”

I had never had a job before. I was using interview skills that I had gained from career readiness and stuff, and it was really scary, but, I beat out two other juniors from MSU
for this position. Even though it was scary, I learned so much about the political system and the legislature, and really just how to be a professional in a really professional setting. Maybe I wasn't exactly the best at my intern duties, but I definitely learned a lot about myself. . . .When I came back to school in the fall, I was a significantly different person, just because I was a lot more mature. I carried myself a lot more professionally. I was a lot more respectful. I spoke more concisely and really paid attention to my surroundings and what was going on in the world.

A couple of students discovered what they did not want to do as a career. “I don't think I want to be a teacher. . . .I'm not really patient, and I tend to let the kids be in charge.” One young man stated, “I volunteered. . . . as a radiology assistant, which was an alright experience. I got to see medicine close up and kind of figure out what it really was, but I don't think it was for me.”

For others, the experience confirmed what they did want to pursue:

So before I switched, I took an Anatomy class for nursing, and I was also taking math because I would need all of those for nursing. When I was taking Anatomy and Physiology, I didn't feel like I had a passion for it. . . .I started taking classes like Sociology and social sciences and I loved it, and that's how I knew that I wanted to do something in that area. Then I found social work. . . .I volunteered at a homeless shelter and I really liked it, so I think that I want to work at a home like that, or maybe at an adoption agency.

**IMPACT OF THE COLLEGE ENVIRONMENT (THE POWER OF PLACE)**

Early college students were asked about the influence of having Midwest Early College on a community college campus. Did the students utilize any campus support services, and in what ways did the location of the early college impact student learning? Several themes emerged from the 20 students who were interviewed. Students reported a connection between being on the community college campus and maturing in their behavior:

I think by being on a college campus, I became a lot more mature as a person. I interacted with a lot of people from all sorts of different backgrounds that I wouldn't have interacted with if I was still at my high school. You're surrounded by professors and
college administrators, and they just really encourage you to maintain a level of decorum and intelligence.

There's so much diversity on a community college campus already. A couple of students who look younger, you can't actually tell someone's age by how they look. It means you are treated more like adults, and you were seen as an adult.

For me, I loved it. In high school you are not supposed to leave the campus at all throughout the school day. So there's that, which was annoying in high school... at high school it was like, "Oh my gosh." All this drama that's going on, people are passing notes around... and LCC is just a lot more adult.

What was the impact of being in an environment that students perceived as more mature? Students shared the following unique responses:

It struck me that, how vastly different things could be. One of my first courses... this 80 something year old grandmother. So, the idea that I'm someone who's not even 20 yet, is going to be in the same classroom, learning the same thing as someone four times my age... In the back of my mind, I knew that was possible, but I never thought it'd be relevant to me ever. So it was interesting to see how different the cultures could be, if it's just a matter of age... So there was some interactions, and at the same time, with interacting with older ones, it wouldn't always be about the interactions for the assignments or school work in itself, but also seeing the experiences that they had early in their life.

I think more probably maturing and a little bit of the environment, because it was just one of those things you're getting older. So wanting to, and like I said, I was not taking it very seriously beforehand and my grades had been suffering for a few years at that point. I was like, "You know what? I want to actually get something out of this and do something," so I changed.

These interactions with older students were part of an overall social development that took place in the lives of early college students:

Bonding, yeah. At first obviously, it's a little tricky, because I'm very shy. I was especially very shy back then. But back then, I tried to be more forward so I did end up getting a few friends here and there, but when people just started talking to me randomly, I was like "Oh okay. Hi. Cool." I would go with it. But since I've been here and I've gotten the relationships that I have, that definitely did when I went to college courses I wanted to be more outgoing immediately, so it's not just me being awkwardly quiet in the corner, I wanted to be able to engage and get to know people, and because of that, I've gotten to
know quite a few people in my classes, so talking to people has been a lot to learn from them, I guess.

One student did share how the age gap between early college students and other college students made for an awkward situation for her:

I was a little intimidated, but I think I fit in, for the most part. Not many people were able to guess my age. It was not very fun when people found out how old I was, because it was like the only thing that they could see about me was my age. . . .It happened in my Math class. I was talking to a girl, she was a friend, and she knew how old I was and it just came up. She was talking about how I was 16 and the guy in front of us heard, and then he kind of yelled it in front of the whole class. And the entire class kinda froze and stared at me. Yeah. It was really awkward.

Students recognized valuable contributions and different viewpoints from students varying in age.

I love meeting new people, so it gave me different perspectives because not everyone was my age, not everyone. . . my generation has a certain train of thought of how we think of things. . . it's a mixture of many different viewpoints mashed together in a very forceful way, which, I guess I understand because of our age but at the same time, sometimes the people my age they don't focus on the real problems that are out there. They just get caught up on the little things. . . And going from someone like that to someone else who had already gone to the workforce, already been there for so long and maybe they were just taking a refresher course. And they grew up differently and you get a lot of different viewpoints that I found helped me make decisions in the class and about the problems that were asked of us to solve in the class, and also about my real life, too.

Students spoke of the various resources they were able to utilize on the community college campus.

Yeah, I joined a psychology club for one semester, and that was pretty fun. And I use a lot of library resources, three or four times a week, I'd go down to the library and use one of their study rooms or computers. And they had a lot of books there to help me study for classes. And I didn't use a lot of tutoring that much, because I got the materials but I just need to study for it.

Using their tutoring services. That's what I used the most and the library, the rooms, where you can reserve rooms for private study time, I used those a lot, and we did a lot of group studying in those, too. I think MEC being on an actual college campus made it
just so much. . . It was just better, better than being in high school. It gave the students the feel, like, "Yeah, I'm high school, but I'm really in college." Type of feeling, I don't know. It was like bragging rights or something, but it also got us ready for what we would be going off into. So, when I actually got away to go to college, I was used to being on a college campus. I knew what to look for, writing services, tutoring services, things like that.

I made an effort to stay on campus as much as possible, mostly because my classes kept me on campus. . . So if I had to work that day and I didn't have a class before my shift, I would typically stay on campus and do homework, anyway. Just because it didn't make sense to go all the way home and then back for work. So even when I was full-out and I had a lot going on, I did find myself on campus quite a bit.

Being on campus gave students an opportunity to seek help when needed.

Mr. ___ suggested to me, was do more studying on campus than at home. And because I have a big family, and my family is very loud and distracting. It helped tremendously studying here and doing homework here, than at home. And I went by the pond, or one of the quiet rooms at the library, or at the cafeteria area.

Well when I was here I relied more on the teachers here. But when I went out I relied a lot more on teachers, and professors, in the degree I was in, because they knew a lot more about what I needed and stuff at that point, because they were specialized in what I was doing.

I believe I went to the writing center a couple times. . . That's the only one I can really think of that was super useful. But I'm more likely to go to a friend for help than a community given resource. . . we all worked with each other if we had problems we had a page that we posted on, we all got pretty close.

I frequently use the academic advisors. As far as tutoring services goes, I felt that they weren't necessary for me, as I largely gained my own way, or I could talk with the professor to sort of put me back on the right track, and whenever I'd be confused on certain concepts.

The freedom entrusted to high school students on a college campus had potential of producing both positive and negative consequences.

It was very nice having freedom. And part of what being an adult is, is using your free time and allocating it in a way that's beneficial for you, but still learning that you have requirements you have to fulfill, even though it is free time. Me, as a person, I abused my free time a little bit too much and it got me in trouble.
I felt that the environment was much more relaxed. It made it easier for me to enjoy, whether it was part of setting up my own schedule and deciding what courses that I want to take, and what times would be convenient for me, letting myself take the fall had I planned poorly whether it be because I faltered on transportation, when I had every ability to make it. . . it was just a matter of good planning.

Even with all the supports, some students struggled with the rigor of expectations.

My family expected out of me and the MEC expected out of me, and I wasn't capable of putting a schedule between the two. So it was place A, place B, sleep. Wake up, A, B, sleep. Rinse and repeat. . .

**WHY STUDENTS DROP OUT OF MIDWEST EARLY COLLEGE**

Students gave the following responses when ask why fellow students may have dropped out of Midwest Early College:

1. It is difficult to adjust.
2. Older people in college class may be intimidating.
3. Due to the difficulty of the program, students lose motivation.
4. When some students are credentialed out to take college courses, and others are not, those who do not get credentialed out, feel like a failure.
5. Students are forced into coming to MEC when they really do not want it for themselves.
6. It is very challenging, so you must be motivated.
7. Students do not want that level of responsibility.
8. Had a scholarship for a four-year institution.
9. First semester is very difficult and the pressure is too much for some.
10. Students are not prepared when they come, and the responsibility is fully on the students.
11. They were not fully informed of the responsibility required at MEC before they come to MEC.
12. The faculty are tough on the students that first semester.
13. Much homework.

14. Complaining about mentors and required mentor meetings.

15. Students do not put in enough effort.

16. Students miss their old school life.

17. It is humbling when students do not do as well as they think that they will.

18. Students do not realize that they can still be involved in their home school.

19. Some are kicked out.

20. You have to want to succeed.

21. Students could not keep up.

22. They are not mature enough.

The following student comments give perceptions of MEC that may relate to students dropping out:

And it requires so much from you. It's surprising, but a lot of people under that pressure flourish, including myself. Some people, of course, it's too much but a lot of people flourish.

My first semester, I was also burned out because I was trying to balance swimming, school and family. . . . So, I do acknowledge and I can sense when I'm burned out and I do compensate for that.

I've noticed from the ____ schools view it as kind of a vacation or an opportunity to get away from the things they don't like about their high school. So I think a lot of kids drop out because they don't understand or they're not told or they don't realize how much you're going to be expected to do academically and how much responsibility you're going to need to take for yourself. And so because of that, I think it causes a lot of kids to leave because they're not ready for it.

I mostly noticed people drop out in our first semester, and that was when they were really hard on us and we had to do all that Success Skills. And I remember having way more homework than I've ever had. And that's why I thought they dropped out. I thought it was just too hard. They thought, "Oh, I'm gonna get free college, it'll be cool, my mom made me." And then they were like, "No, it's not what I wanted." Or, "It's too hard." I don't really remember people dropping out after that.
What are some supports or characteristics, mentioned by students, that may prevent dropping out? Parent support: “We had people that were in the program with us that did drop. There were times we wanted to drop, but our parents wouldn't let us drop, they did not want us to drop, they made sure we didn't drop.” Grit: “So, it took me failing a whole bunch of times, and failure is how you grow. So, to tell other students that even though they'll fail, it'll help them grow, and not to drop out because they do fail.” Desire: “I think in order to succeed here you have to want to succeed. I notice that a lot of people who dropped out in the program didn't even really want to be here.”

A repeated theme in student comments was that students were not clearly informed about the rigors of the program, and that students were not prepared. One student suggested,

I think something that might be helpful is to give kind of a teasy preview. I know colleges will let prospective high school students come visit the campus, but sit in on a couple of classes things like that. I think it would be helpful for the teachers to do something like that because I'm not sure but my guess, my slightly educated guess, would be that the students who dropped did so because they didn't realize how difficult it would be. Or maybe how difficult it would be academically, or how difficult sociably, it would be. And so in terms of support, I think once the student's in, I don't want to say they're doomed to dropping, but if they're the kind of student who would do that the best support is before they're in the program, just help them to know what they're getting into.

SUPPORTS THAT WERE HELPFUL TO STUDENTS

When asked to comment in general about any supports at Midwest Early College, most students commented about fellow students, friends.

Any other supports that helped me persevere through? I mean, just as a collective, all the other MEC students as well. We went through the same stuff. . . definitely relying peer-to-peer, studying together, helping each other out, was a huge, huge resource, for sure.

Other students said,
While cliques do form in MEC, there's the common denominator of, We're all in this together, we don't have a huge core friendship. . . . None of us have past experience with each other because everyone's pulled from different schools. It was enjoyable making friends, and getting to know people. . . . There were times where dropping out or skipping classes seems like the most enjoyable thing, and having friends who are here and actually part of MEC with me who knew what I was struggling through, who were willing to say like, "Just push through. You've got one last day 'til the weekend. You've got one last day 'til you don't have to worry about it for a little while." And having those people there for me, and knowing that they're not just blowing smoke because they actually know what I was going through.

I think I made some pretty good connections with people that I will. . . . I may not see them very often and we may not talk as often as we used to being in MEC together, but you're in the same boat and no one else really understands what you're going through, so it's so important to make those connections in your cohort.

The second most highly mentioned support came from parents:

So as far as support goes, it was really just my mom and the other classmate who decided to come with me. Because so many people don't understand what The Early College actually is, so they didn't know how to support me even if they wanted to.

My parents, especially my mom she supported it, she encouraged me. I failed three classes when I went to college and my mom kept on encouraging me and she told me not to quit. And yeah, I think she was my biggest support, she was the one that helped me to finish. I think it's because I've never really challenged myself like that. In terms of like in high school I never took AP classes, never really did anything challenging, so I think she really liked that I was challenging myself and she wanted me to get through it. Because she knew that it would basically make me stronger academically, so I think that's why she kept pushing me, and I ended up finishing. . . . Well my parents weren't going to have me quit, so I didn't really have a choice, and I didn't want to give up. Like I said, it's the first challenging thing that I did, so I wanted to just complete it and feel like I can get through challenges in life instead of quitting so I just decided to stay.

One student acknowledged professors as supportive:

Instructors were also huge, especially when getting into the graphic design related courses, we got really close. Like, all of my instructors and I, because we're all pretty smaller courses. But if you have any questions, just go ahead and ask. It's very open and I loved it. It was good to have that support and if you were having issues, they'll help you immediately, if they can.

I utilized SI's (supplementary instructors), walk-in tutoring. I utilized the counseling center, before I quit my job, I went there. I skipped class and went there, because I had
to work that day and I'm like, "I need to calm down," and I'm still having a panic attack from whatever it was. So I'm like, "I can't do this. I have to quit."

I felt that I developed better connections to my peers here, actually, maybe than in my high school and I think it prepared me a lot for university in the fall.

**SUPPORTS STUDENTS WOULD CHANGE**

Students were asked how they would improve the Midwest Early College program to better support students. As a very broad question, there were many suggestions given by 14 different students. Two students mentioned that practical financial skills, such as how to file taxes, understanding the purpose of W2 statements, and personal budgeting should be taught. Though these financial subjects were addressed briefly in one early college class and by one guest speaker, the students thought there should be more “real-life experience” included at MEC. It was also suggested by students that the office staff should be more kind in meeting student needs, and that faculty should reassure students that access to mentors was available, without judgment, if needed. One student said that the mentor relationship should be voluntary, with new guidelines developed for how mentors were assigned. Mentors could be assigned based on mentor subject matter expertise blended with student interest or with the student’s major rather than being assigned randomly. Another student agreed that it would be better to “cluster people based on their interests” in assigning mentors. One idea was that students in the older cohorts could serve as mentors for newer students. Older students could also interact with younger students by leading study groups and continuing to serve as tutors.

Students suggested teaming new cohort students with early college students in their second or third year for support on a volunteer basis.
I think a way MEC could implement it is having an older student mentor. I know my senior year, they started doing math tutoring. And more often than not, students would show up not because they needed a math tutor, but because they wanted just someone to talk to who has been a part of their program, who's seen their struggles, who's worked with them, but were able to still help them with school, or help them find their footing in the program, help them discover where they needed to be. Students suggested the following ways for improving MEC:

1. Develop better communication with high schools about what Midwest Early College is and how the program functions.
2. Build closer business ties in order to develop internships for students.
3. Bring in additional professionals as speakers who will share careers that are not STEM focused.
4. Make entrance test score requirements more strenuous in order to weed out students who are not ready for the academic rigor of MEC.
5. Promote more consistency among college advisors when dealing with early college students, so that students do not make costly mistakes in planning or transferring.
6. Organize social events and allow more time to relax and hang out with friends within the early college.

HOW STUDENTS PERCEIVED CHANGE IN THEMSELVES

One student matured in their attitude between academics and athletics in a unique way,

There was no way, if I was going from ___ to college, that I was going to be ready or that I wasn't going to drop out in that first year of college, from terrible grades or something along those lines, from not being mature enough. And MEC was that bridge for maturing me and getting me ready to leave and go off to college, and stuff like that, be on my own. Because I was used to being an athlete, I don't know how many high schools this happens at but being an athlete, certain grades were just handed. . . .So certain things were just handed. And I'm very thankful that my mother made sure that I went to MEC because I had to work for my grades. My personal statement that I wrote to get accepted into my first internship in New York, my first time with that program, was about my transition from high school into MEC, and what it did for me as being a person who thought of themselves as an athlete and then a student. And transitioned into becoming a student athlete, that's what my whole personal statement is about.

Another student discovered what she did not want to do:
I got into a higher level chemistry course, which I wouldn't have been able to take pretty much until I got to my junior year and realized that I hated it and I could not do it for a living. And in order to be a coroner, I needed to go to medical school and organic chemistry is a huge class for medical school and that was the class that I was absolutely terrible at, so I was like, "I don't like this enough to pursue this at all.

For this student, the visits arranged on College and Career Readiness Days paid off:

For the college search, like West Campus, that's when I found out that I needed art back in my life, because well, we were just doing four courses and none of them are creative. I went to the West Campus and I did fashion design and it all came back and I was like, "I need to put art classes back in my life." And that led me back towards graphic design.

This student provides an overall reflection of the program:

In high school, I didn't pay attention to anything around me. I didn't really pay attention to myself. I just kind of floated from one class... to the other class... early college, is kinda like boot camp. They break you down and then they build you back up. Or they make you build yourself back up. You can either adapt or fail. And I'm not saying I adapted well. I adapted into a way better human being. I am way better at being a human being, at being anything responsible, than I was before the MEC. And I don't know if that was a MEC thing or just a college thing in general, because it's all on you. There's no babysitting. You can go get resources and they'll help you to their fullest extent, but again, it's completely your fault if you fail, with a few exceptions.

Students gave evidence of their growth during the early college period:

My growth and maturity? Well, one thing that has definitely become clear to me throughout my life is that I sometimes, depending on who you ask not necessarily sometimes, I tend to hesitate on some big decisions. For example when the Early College program was introduced to me as a 'thing' during my sophomore year of high school, I'd actually wait until the last week on that the applications were due. Not so much because I'd put it off, but because I was still trying to decide whether or not it was something I wanted to do. But in joining the Early College program, I... Given that sort of freedom, that responsibility of choosing my own way to build what I want, whether it be the associate degree or just trying to figure out what job I want, how to get to it. So much emphasis was placed on what I need to do, and I feel like that helped me be able to make some of the bigger decisions during my last year in the Early College program, that's when I joined the delayed entry program. I was originally going to put it off until at least after I graduated but I had taken it on earlier. I think being exposed to that environment, that discipline, that training. ...So I think with the Early College program it's allowed me to grow to help try to make that first step sooner.

Two students described their change during the early college like this:
I do not think I would’ve had the same growth had I stayed in high school. I don’t think I would’ve grown at all had I stayed in high school, but I feel like I’m a completely different person. I’m always mentally in class, mentally present, always taking notes and studying. And I participate in class, which used to be a huge deal for me. I would never raise my hand, or speak up, ever, and so the fact that I feel more comfortable doing that that shocks a lot of people. And I’ve gotten better at studying and doing my homework, and using a planner, and staying on top of all my work.

Yeah, so in high school I was extremely shy, like if I had to do presentations or anything I would just stay home. I wouldn't talk in class, I wouldn't participate, but The Early College, I'd say was definitely the one thing that helped me to come out of my shell, because I couldn't stay home when I had presentations in college, especially if they were group presentations. So it's one area that I grew in a lot.

I was not taking it very seriously beforehand and my grades had been suffering for a few years at that point. I was like, "You know what? I want to actually get something out of this and do something," so I changed.

DISPLAYING GRIT

A couple of students describe what it takes to stay motivated and complete the early college program at Midwest. One student describes it as a “little flame” and “motivation,” while the other calls it “perseverance”:

What do they have to have? That's an interesting question. They don't have to have much. All it takes is just that little flame that wants them to do something more. Whether it's, you want to be able to go out afterwards and go to a four-year university, or something that compels you to go into the workforce afterwards. But something to help you, or to help them. . . I guess just motivation. That's what it is. It's being motivated to do something more than just ride it out.

Honestly, the Early College and going at an age like this, you'll get back what you put into it, I think. You just need to persevere. You need to know how to take failure and not just walk away, I guess you could say. I think people just need to know what they're getting into.
**OCCUPATIONAL OR EDUCATIONAL PLANS**

Students at Midwest report many different career goals and interests. The following student has her focus on being a Medical Scientist/Researcher focusing on psychiatric drugs,

I really wanna go to MD/PhD school. So, I'm trying to get a job as a research assistant right now. And I'm gonna start studying for the MCAT and doing all that stuff. And I'm volunteering at places now so I can really boost my resume for that stuff. But yeah, I'm just worried about how competitive and hard it's gonna be to get in. . . It's called MD/PhD program. You go to med school, so you do the first two-years of med school, and then you do the PhD stuff. And then once you finish that up, then you finish the med school stuff. And because of similarities in coursework, it's only like seven years. . . When I came here, I wanted to be a doctor. I was thinking more of a pediatrician. And what actually happened is, I went out in two classes at LCC and I tried to take my first Chemistry lab and I thought the experiments were so fun. I thought, even though it was hard, it was the funnest class I ever took in my life. And then I just changed my. . . I was talking to my grandpa. And he said something about, "I thought you wanted to be a Chemical Engineer." And I was like, "Oh my gosh, that sounds like it would be some much fun now". And now that I've actually taken a real Chemistry class and I did so well in my other Chemistry classes. And then I just decided to switch my degree from Pre-Med to Chemistry.

Another student sees himself as a Philosophy Professor,

I'm currently going to Seattle Pacific University, it's a little, private, Methodist college in northern Seattle, still doing philosophy. I was originally also doing math, but all through the first year I was kind of every month taking classes, revising my EDP and thinking "You know, I'm really not looking forward to taking another math class." Eventually I just decided to drop math as another major and just stick with philosophy. . . After I get my BA I would like to go to grad school for philosophy, and then teach philosophy. And I would also like to write, preferably, fiction.

As a STEM program, several Midwest students have expressed an interest in being an Engineer/Computer Science Major:

It's an engineering school, but technically I'm a Computer Science major. And I am also getting a minor in Computer Engineering and a concentration in Computer Network Security. So, I'm more of a computer guy than anything, but I've done a lot of engineering and side stuff while I've been here too. . . .I work at a company called. . . .It's a private contracting software company. Our biggest client is the State of Michigan. I do different kinds. . . I help write different code, contracts, whatever they need for the State of Michigan.
This student credits his introduction to robotics at MEC with starting his career interest:

And it was our very first competition, we actually ended up winning which was a total surprise. . . So if I wasn't in Midwest Early College, I wouldn't have been able to be on the robotics team, and then I wouldn't have been able to come to Kettering and see what I wanted to do. So it kind of all worked out really well. . . my company's already came to me and talked to me about they would be interested in paying for my MBA, it would be like business, whatever, something higher, just for the field that I'm going into. I know all the software development, all the stuff that I need, as far as that goes. But if I want to do more of the business side, which they would be interested in having me do, that's what I would go for.

One student, moving to New Zealand, is hoping to be recognized as a writer:

In three months I will be in New Zealand. . . to write. . . I write a lot of poetry, I write some short stories. Most of it is just ideas. I like to hang out with friends and talk about ideas and events, not really people, and then I like to write them down. Poetry is just sort of my biggest one.

Another student is pursuing engineering:

I'm pursuing a degree in engineering right now. . . I got a job with an electrician over the summer, and electricity really interests me, so I was debating switching to electrical engineering. But my original goal was chemical or aerospace. . . I'd like to get a bachelor's degree, and then start working towards my masters in engineering. My long-term career goal is get a job as an electrical engineer out of college. And then there's a program called Dale Carnegie, which is a human relations course in interacting with people; and I would like to be an instructor for that, as well as an engineer.

This student found career direction toward graphic design by doing some activities in the early college:

English teacher for high school students. That was what I was going for and then when our class. . . he actually had us write the quiz for the other classes and then we graded them, and I found out I hate grading. [chuckle] Which is a huge part of it, so it was like, "I don't know if I wanna do this anymore." And then when ___ had each class make a math test and then we graded the other students, and I didn't like it. So I went away from English teacher and then from there, it actually... I was like, "What did I ever like doing?" [chuckle] And so, that led to multimedia which went to graphic design and then, went to automotive repair for a little bit and then went back to graphic design, so it was just the different interests, what I wanted to do and what I wanted to actually devote myself to. . . . I'm graduating with the Associates in Graphic Design this semester. . . . And then I'm going to Kendall next semester. Already accepted. . . . I'm hoping to be
able to get a job in graphic design, it just depends on where and where the opportunities are.

Another student plans to study Mass Communication and Criminal Justice:

My major is Mass Communication and my minor is Criminal Justice. . . . I'm hoping to go to law school in the fall of 2017, hopefully in New York. . . but the school that I attend now is an HBCU, which a Historical Black College or University. So, of course, we're very big on things taking place around in society and then we're very culture-based, too. And, I guess, that being mixed with my own previous life experiences, brought out the passion that I do have for those and which side I would like to be on like influencing things like that. And I know for a fact. . . .At first, I wanted to be the person reporting these things, but then I figured out I'd rather be the person that had the ability to change these things or to participate in certain things happening versus being the person outside waiting for the court to adjourn or be over and waiting to get the story, when I could be the story. . . .I'll apply to St. Johns Law School in New York and I'll apply to Columbia as well.

More than one student in the interview group was interested in Graphic Design:

I picked multimedia so I can do animation, graphic design, a lot of different things. So, I'm just gonna see what's out there and apply to whatever I can be qualified for, yeah. I don't really have any desire. . . .Depends, it doesn't really matter to me where I'm at. Web, I'm not really that interested in being in web full-time, because I'm not always good at that. But, probably just regular designing logos, and pamphlets, and stuff like that.

A third student from the group interviewed majored in graphic design, “I've narrowed it down from graphic design and industrial design. . . .Probably go further, but finish the bachelor's right now.”

Another student finished 12 credits at Midwest Early College, and is currently working at an auto garage. This student is pursuing additional mechanical training and working with the youth group at his church to run the sound system.

I am the service producer for the youth group there. So Sunday and Wednesdays, I teach high school students and middle school students how to run sound, how to do lights, how to do the image on the screen, and I just help move service along.
Another student is a mechanical engineering major at Michigan Technological University, but he is considering changing majors to business.

I might actually change my major into business. . . because I took the engineering classes. . . And the more I was in them the more I realized that I just couldn't see myself sit behind a desk and just behind a computer for hours and hours working on just one little thing. . . I'm a huge people person. I love talking with people. I've done sales before and I really enjoyed it. But I had been saying that I was going to be an engineer for, I don't know, since sixth grade. So that's almost eight years ago. Actually no, more than eight years ago. But I feel like I had just been saying that for so long that I just got consumed by it. . . Plus I was really good at math and science, so it just seemed like an obvious choice even though I excelled more in the whole walking up to random strangers and saying, "Hey, how are you today? Good? Bad? Well here's something that can make your day a lot better." And I'm currently talking with a few advisors to see what would happen. . . . My dream job is to be their voice, work with a team of engineers and understand everything that they do. That was why I decided to go into engineering. To fully understand what they were doing. And not just be told that this is how this works, but actually know the product itself. And go out and travel to different companies and say, "Hey, this is what. . . This is the best option that you have, and it's the greatest option that you will ever get. So support us and we can do something amazing in this world. That's what I still want to do, but sadly getting to that with engineering is a little different.

A student attending Michigan State University is a Biochemical/Biotech major and a computer science minor.

I think I'm going to the West Coast for a PhD program, maybe. I want Berkley or UC Davis. That's the number one choices. . . . My current field is biofuel production for microorganisms, so I'd like to continue on that. But anything would be good, I think. I just wanna work in science. . . . So, the idea is to use cyanobacteria, small photosynthetic micro organisms, that output sugars when put under certain stresses. And you can use those sugars, things like ethanol, with secondary organisms, like yeast, to make alcohol.

Another student wants to be an anthropology professor.

I lean towards linguistics. I think the way that we use language, such as the way that we use slang terms, I think that's fascinating. . . . I should be able to finish my associate in anthropology in the spring. Because I took the MTA, pretty much all of that, as well as the fact that I already have an associate, contributes to the prerequisites, so I'm just taking the required classes.
The 14th student interviewed was a Global and International Studies major with a minor in legal studies at a four-year university.

I honestly don't know because what I envision for myself doesn't have a title right now. Because I love to talk, obviously and I love to public speak. It's something I'm really good at and it's something I really enjoy.

Student 16 earned an Associate in Arts, Criminal Justice through Midwest Early College. He is currently seeking employment with the State Police or another law enforcement agency.

Another student is a double major in political science and economics. She is searching for an exact career.

I figured that I could either go on to law school with that or I could go on to join the foreign service or work in an embassy. Because that would be really awesome, to be able to go out there and work in a different country but still make an impact on people while representing the country. That'd be cool. I wanna help people, but I don't think being a politician is the right way to do that. But I think I can use skills from learning about political science and economics to do so in a different way. . . .I'm really torn because I've worked in the field of optometry for 20 months now, it'll be two-years in December. And I discovered that I had a real interest in the field. But, in order to go on to optometry school, you have to maintain a lot of background in chemistry and biology, and all of that. . . .I don't know if that's something I might do when I get to U of M, is just completely change my mind, I have no idea.

Several students attending college are undecided about their major as this Midwest Early College student who is attending a four-year university:

They're like introductory courses, so that I can try to pick a major. Because without picking a major, I can't actually go into the more advanced classes. . . .I'm considering something in the health profession.

One student seems to have found her path by majoring in social work:

I have always wanted to help people and I thought that nursing would be the perfect fit, but I realized that you can help people in any field and I don't know how I discovered social work, but I absolutely love it. . . .When I was taking Anatomy and Physiology, I didn't feel like I had a passion for it, it was too much for me. It made me not want be a nurse. And I think I took Sociology, I started taking classes like Sociology and social sciences and I loved it, and that's how I knew that I wanted to do something in that
area. Then I found social work. . . For the early college, we had to volunteer, and I volunteered at a homeless shelter and I really liked it. So I think that I want to work at a home like that, or maybe at an adoption agency. So either kids or people that are poor.

The nineteenth student interviewed states:

I don't really know what I want to do. I knew that I wanted it to be like STEM oriented, because that's kind of a world we're entering, more so than before, and that hasn't really changed. I still plan to declare Computer Science probably as my major.

The 20th, and final, student interviewed is focusing on a career as a sex therapist: “I was originally looking at some kind of forensics or Forensic Psychology. . . I'm only looking at programs that allow me to go right into the Ph.D.”

These 20 students represent a large span a career ambitions with many in the STEM area. As Midwest Early College begins to track their graduates, Midwest can evaluate the success of MEC graduates and better gauge the effectiveness of the early college program in helping students to meet their professional career goals.

WOULD STUDENTS CHOOSE MIDWEST EARLY COLLEGE AGAIN?

The Net Promoter Score question in the online survey asked students on a scale of 1 to 10, “How likely are you to recommend Midwest Early College to a friend or colleague?” Students were asked to explain their answer. In alignment with the Net Promoter Score question asked on the online survey, students were asked in the face-to-face interviews if given the opportunity to go back and choose to leave their high schools to attend Midwest Early College, would they make that decision again? Out of 11 students who responded to that question, all 11 students confirmed that they would make that decision again. Some of the student responses are given below.
Absolutely. It was a wonderful thing. I have more friends from the Early College now than I do from ___ that I still keep in touch with. Having transferred credits, that I didn't have to pay for is absolutely wonderful, and I think the Early College did a good job with what it meant to do.

That was probably the best decision I've made in my life, is to go to the Early College. And it was, I've often said this, that it was the first thing that I actually fought for. I was pretty much just going through life with the flow, and this was the first thing that actually made sense to me, that I thought would improve my life for the better, that I fought for.

I was raised to be very aware of things that are going on in my community and things that I can take advantage of to move further along and get done as fast as I can. So, when I found out about this, I just knew it's something I have to do. It's going to be an amazing opportunity. It's 60 college credits, it's all free. Why not? What do you have left to lose? So, when I decided to do it that was it, I was going, I was done. So, yeah I would do it a million times over because it was absolutely worth it.

Oh, definitely. I'm graduating in three and a half years from when I would've graduated high school with two Bachelor's degrees.

The following student responses answer some of the reasons that students were enthusiastic supporters of Midwest Early College. One student spoke of a lack of progress made in public school education over the years.

High school, I'm not disappointed with it, I'm just surprised that it hasn't gotten better. With all the years, with all the people that do the surveys, and the teachers that go into it, and the money that goes into it, and the politicians that waver, "I'm all for the kids". And I can't believe it hasn't changed in the past 40 years. Five days a week, five classes a day, that's insane, that's unreal. And when I came to college and it was three classes a week and I can do it two days a week?

Yeah. I don't think I would succeed at college if I stayed at high school. I didn't learn any study methods or any techniques, so I would've just failed because I wouldn't have been able to handle the course load. MEC's first semester is like a reality check. It's perhaps one of the hardest semesters I've ever experienced in my entire education. It's definitely one of them. And it requires so much from you. It's surprising, but a lot of people under that pressure flourish, including myself. Some people, of course, it's too much but a lot of people flourish.

The education itself was stimulating, and one thing I love about coming to this college environment, even if we did have to still take care of our old high school requirements.
to earn our diploma, it felt more free, like we were treated more as adults and so long as we were maintaining capacity... it didn't feel overly restrictive, adult versus children even when you're about to graduate at high school.

One student, who struggled at Midwest Early College, stated that he would still choose to come to MEC again, but he would do some things differently the second time.

Currently, if I were to redo it, I probably would have tried to work better in the college environment after being a part of the Early College classes. Honestly, I probably would've done the Early College again. I would have just tried better, if I could.

Another student would have chosen to attend Midwest Early College, but he would have chosen classes differently.

Yes, the only thing that would be different would be the classes that I would have taken. It would’ve just put me further ahead. Yeah, there was only a few that I could’ve taken and it would’ve just put me further ahead.

**SUMMARY**

Chapter Four presented data from the online survey of 54 students and the face-to-face survey of 20 students. The online survey allowed more aggregate data analysis and reporting with charts and graphs, while the face-to-face data provided qualitative testimonies of students about the support structure of Midwest Early College. Student responses addressed the research questions by examining student motivations for leaving their local high schools to attend the Midwest Early College and discussing if they would again choose MEC given the choice to go back and make that decision again. Students responded to the supports offered at MEC and how those supports contributed, or did not contribute, to their personal success and to the success of their peers. Students discussed how Midwest Early College supports influenced their perseverance and their completion of MEC, college goals, and credentials.
Future educational and vocational plans were shared. Finally, students gave suggestions for improving MEC supports.

Students were candid with their opinions about their former high schools, why they choose to attend MEC, why other students may have dropped out of the early college program, and what features of the MEC support structure were of personal benefit to them. Chapter Five will interpret data from Chapter Four and discuss limitations and conclusions.
CHAPTER FIVE: ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this case study was to examine student perceptions of the support structure utilized at the Midwest Early College and to evaluate the significance of supports in aiding students to complete the Early College program. Students responded to the following five key questions through an online survey or face-to-face interview:

1. What motivated Midwest Early College students to leave their high schools to attend the Midwest Early College program, and how did students view that decision after attending Midwest Early College?

2. What value did students place on Midwest Early College classwork prior to being credentialed out for college coursework?

3. Did students credit the Success Skills Curriculum, assigned mentor relationship, college and career readiness activities, and the community college environment for helping them to achieve the goal of completing the Midwest Early College program?

4. What suggestions would students give for improving the current structure of supports being offered at Midwest Early College?

5. What occupational or educational pathways did students pursue after leaving Midwest Early College, and did the supports offered at Midwest Early College influence the career choices made by students?

PURPOSE OF CHAPTER FIVE

Because the early college movement is a recent phenomenon, few qualitative case studies have been published which focus specifically on the support structure within the early college. Following this research project, the support structure at Midwest Early College can be
refined in order to increase student completion and reduce the number of students dropping out and returning to their home schools. Findings from this study can improve the marketing strategy for Midwest Early College based upon student reasoning for leaving their high schools and seeking out an early college program. This research can also serve as a model for other early colleges who desire to establish a student support structure increasing student completion. Chapter Five will discuss the results of the research presented in Chapter Four, evaluate the answers to the main research questions, compare conclusions of the study to the reviewed literature, consider limitations, and propose further research.

**DISCUSSION OF RESULTS**

Close to one half of the students in this study indicated that they were first-generation college students, and approximately one half indicated participation in the free and reduced lunch program. These percentages indicate that Midwest Early College is maintaining the original vision of the early middle college model to provide students, who may not otherwise attend college, a pathway to a college credential. The population by race and gender, in Tables 20 and 21, show how Midwest Early College study participants compared with the state of Michigan and the county where MEC is located. More students in the MEC study identified themselves as “two or more races” than people in the county and in the state. Only 6% of students at MEC also identified themselves as race “unknown,” which was not an option in the state and county statistics sources. Female students outnumbered males in the study, 66% to 34%.
Table 20: MEC Population by Race

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Michigan</th>
<th>County Where MEC Is Located</th>
<th>MEC Study Participants</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>78%</td>
<td>76%</td>
<td>70%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black or African American</td>
<td>14%</td>
<td>12%</td>
<td>9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hispanic or Latino</td>
<td>4%</td>
<td>7%</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Two or more races</td>
<td>2%</td>
<td>4%</td>
<td>11%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unknown</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Some other race</td>
<td>1%</td>
<td>1%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Table 21: MEC Population by Gender

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Michigan</th>
<th>County Where MEC Is Located</th>
<th>MEC Study Participants</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Males</td>
<td>49%</td>
<td>49%</td>
<td>34%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Females</td>
<td>51%</td>
<td>51%</td>
<td>66%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


**How Did Students Learn About Midwest Early College?**

The largest group of students in the study, 45%, learned about Midwest Early College from a postcard mailed to their home, and another 21% learned about MEC from a parent. The Intermediate School District, in partnership with MEC, gathers a list of all sophomore students enrolled in the district and mails out postcards during fall semester to inform these students about the early college option available to them for the following fall semester. The students who learned about MEC through the postcard mailing were the result of just one postcard mailing. In order to increase public awareness about the program, MEC could request the list of students from the ISD and mail the postcards directly from MEC. In this way, MEC could
maintain more control of its marketing and increase communication with eligible students.
Since postcards are currently the most productive means of communicating and increasing enrollment, MEC should also consider sending out more than one mailing with follow-up mailings. With the exception of the first cohort group, where all 90 seats were taken, all the available seats for new students were not filled in succeeding years. By filling all 90 seats each fall, more students could have the opportunity to earn a college credential, and MEC could secure additional resources to manage and improve the early college program.

Additional marketing insights gained through the research are as follows: nearly 21% of MEC students learned about the early college from a parent, so further research may be beneficial to find out how those parents became aware of the program. In addition, 13% of students reported learning about the program from their high school counselors; thus, MEC should continue developing relationships with high school counselors, being certain that high school counselors have correct information about the program. Students indicated in the study that high school counselors were uninformed or misinformed about the program.

Another 6% of students learned about MEC from a student already attending MEC. The current student body and the graduates of the program are a good source of increasing public awareness about the program. Leadership at MEC should consider working with marketing professionals at the college to develop ideas for helping current and former students to promote the program. One suggestion is a wallet-sized advertisement card with basic early college information that students could share with others who may be interested. Students also indicated that more MEC personnel should visit in the local high schools.
Another marketing suggestion would be for early college students, who participate in their home school award ceremonies, to be awarded with awards received in the early college. In that way, students in the supporting high schools will have an opportunity to hear about the early college and their fellow students attending the early college program. Students at Midwest Early College are recognized at the end of each of the three academic years for their academic accomplishments. These awards could be taken back to the sending high school if the high school is hosting an award ceremony.

Why Students Left Their High School to Attend Midwest Early College

Determining why students left their high schools to attend MEC was an important question for understanding the early college students and for improving instruction. Of the students, 30% stated that they were not happy with their high school, and another 18% stated that they wanted more challenge in school or something new. Close to half of the students had a negative motivation for leaving their high school. Some students commented on being bored, wanting to drop out, not being connected, lack of academic seriousness by teachers, being bullied, being in an immature environment, not making progress, not doing well academically, crowded, threats of closure, limited course offerings, and difficult peer relations.

Nearly half of the students are choosing to attend the early college as a way to escape negative aspects of their former high school. This suggests that student may also find elements of MEC that they do like or that they may like even less than their former high school. This could explain some of the reason students leave MEC before completion of the program. Further research may look at the completion rate of students who leave their high schools with
a negative motivation as compared with the early college completion rates of students who leave their high schools with a positive motivation for attending the early college. In situations where there is a waiting list for enrollment, expressed motivation for attendance may provide some indication of student future success and completion of the program.

Positive motivations for choosing MEC included wanting to focus on studies and become a college graduate, being on a college campus, having a flexible schedule, getting ahead, getting free college tuition, not being able to afford college in any other way. Of the students, 24% said they wanted to start college early, better self, and get ahead. Another 20% said they wanted free college or to save money; 4% wanted to experience a college environment and had heard about MEC’s favorable reputation. Nearly half of the students emphasized a positive motivation for choosing to attend MEC. Only 3% of students indicated their attendance at MEC was due to parental motivation.

Student motivation, as opposed to parent motivation, is an important element in student selection due to the rigors of the MEC program. Students indicated that in order for students to be successful in the program, students must desire to be at MEC. Currently, prospective students are required to write an essay indicating their personal desire to attend MEC. A face-to-face personal student interview, before acceptance into the program, may confirm the personal commitment of students to put forth the needed work to succeed at MEC.

From a marketing perspective, MEC could appeal to students with the opportunity to attend school structured in a new and unique way from most high schools. Much of MEC marketing to date has appealed to the student by promoting free college credits, but appealing
also to the student’s desire for a new environment and new way of completing high school may be a profitable marketing approach to emphasize.

**Midwest Early College Classes**

Four full-time faculty members at Midwest Early College teach courses in mathematics, social studies, science, and English. All Midwest students spend their first semester in-house taking these rigorous MEC Courses counting toward a high school diploma. During these courses, faculty attempt to equip students for successful completion of college courses during the next semester. Survey question 9 sought student perception about the effectiveness of the MEC courses by asking, “Did the classes taught during your first year in Midwest Early College prepare you to be successful in your college courses? If yes, please give an example.” Student responses overwhelming state that the MEC courses prepared them for college courses. The following are some example student responses:

Yes. Mr. ___’s class prepared me to be the top of all of my English classes in college. I was the top of my math class, too, because of the online math that Mrs. ___ had us work on at our own pace. It helped fill in many gaps that were missing in my math education.

Yes, especially College Prep English. I loved the higher standards placed on me because college courses ended up being not as bad in comparison, and I was able to handle a lot of pressure because of it. I learned a lot.

The MEC transitional classes did well to help me. They pushed us a lot harder than the actual college classes did, so the real classes felt like a breeze.

Many students spoke about the rigor of the MEC courses and the comparable ease when they went out to take community college courses.

There was one response reflecting negatively on the rigor of the MEC courses:
I think a few of the classes encouraged me. . . While it was all too often the policy of intentional grade deflation was implemented in order to push the students higher and higher. While for those more self and otherwise competitive it may have helped, but for a large majority, I’ve spoken with, have found it self-defeating. That is to say LCC classes were like walking on a rainbow. Not due to over preparation but simply all together separate expectations in several key areas.

That student did not reflect the 92% of students surveyed who affirmed the effectiveness of MEC coursework in preparing students for successful completion of college courses. Of students interviewed, 94% confirmed that MEC coursework prepared them for success in college courses. This is the purpose of the early college movement. Faculty, curriculum, and academic structure appear to be working well together in accomplishing the vision.

**Success Skills Curriculum**

One student commented about the *Success Skills Curriculum*, “In the moment it was the worst, but eventually I learned that it was a very useful curriculum. It paid off.” With two thirds of the students stating a definite benefit from the *Success Skills Curriculum*, there seems to be ample justification for continuing the practice and seeking improvements to raise the reported student benefit level even higher.

Nearly 20% of students stated that they did not value the *Success Skills Curriculum*. This percentage of resistance is not too unusual when considering reactions to any change initiative. The *Diffusion of Innovations Model* should be kept in mind when presenting students with a new approach to educational practice. The Model states that about 16% will resist the effort to change (*Diffusions of Innovation, 2016*). Several students commented that the five-week time commitment to Success Skills was too long. While it is important to consider student comments when they are not supportive of practice, future research is needed to determine if the
effectiveness of the *Success Skills Curriculum* to impact college success might be improved by reducing the amount of time spent teaching the concepts. At present, the reported value of the *Success Skills Curriculum* validates its continued use as is until additional studies can justify changing the way it is being used.

**Student/Mentor Relationship**

Survey Question 11 asked, “Did your assigned mentor relationship contribute to your completion of The Early College Program? Please explain.” There were 52 responses and one student skipped this question. Of the 52 responses, 38 were affirmative, and 10 responses were negative. The following student responses are representative of the positive comments: “Yes, my mentor helped me through many personal issues as well as educational issues that I was going through. There were times when my mentor helped keep me motivated and on track for my courses.” Another student said,

> Definitely, my mentor helped keep me on tract with my classes and any paperwork, as well as to keep me informed with what was going on within the program. He also gave advice, such as studying tips, and helped me prioritize my future goals.

Four student responses would have to be placed in a middle category as being neither positive or negative. Two students referenced mentor turnover causing their particular mentor relationship to be less effective as it might have been. One student was neither positive nor negative, and one student said the mentor relationship was good, but that particular student chose to leave the program. With 73% of the students responding that the mentor relationship was significant in program completion, there is confirmation that the mentor relationship is proving valuable. That percentage also leaves room for improvement and for more effectively
impacting the remaining 27% of students. Some students require less guidance and are more intrinsically motivated to complete the program without needing a high level of mentor support. More detailed student questioning on this topic could shed greater understanding. There is also a need for determination of the best mentor/student ratio allowing mentors to effectively assist the maximum number of students. If MEC continues to grow, there will come a saturation point where the four program mentors/full-time teachers may need assistance in serving students. No research studies were found addressing the issue of mentor/student ratio, especially in situations where mentors were balancing a full-time teaching load.

Question 12, with 52 responses, was a two-part question, “Once you were out taking all college courses, approximately how often did you meet with you mentor, and would it have helped to meet more often?” The nature of the question made analysis challenging. The question may have provided more clear information if designed as a ranking question. Sixteen students reported meeting with their mentor once a month, 13 reported meeting bi-weekly, seven stated every couple of months, three stated once a week, three stated almost never, two reported only as required, and one student stated once a year. Four students referenced changing the frequency of mentor meetings as the program progressed and as the student was fully taking college courses. Twenty-eight students, or 54%, believed that additional mentor meetings would not have added to the value of the meetings, five stated more frequent meetings would have helped, and three reported more meetings may have helped. The frequency of mentor meetings varied with each particular student and mentor at the discretion of both the mentor and student.
Ten students stated that the mentor relationship was not a factor for completion of the program. Some students responded that they did not need that much guidance from their mentor, and a few students relied more on their college professors for advice. Still, the vast majority of students spoke strongly about the influence of their mentor, and some stated the importance of the mentor in helping them complete the program. One student stated,

Most definitely. . . ____ was by far the biggest help in the Early College Program and my favorite teacher to this day. . . ____ gave me every necessary tool and showed me how to be successful in college and in my future. ____ got me through MEC and through college, and I still use his methods and the tools he showed me to continue my future and classes.

For some students, the significance of the mentor influence was difficult to measure, as with this student who said, “I’m not sure of its benefit to my academic success.”

Mentor meetings are mandatory for Midwest Early College students and require the students to meet more frequently than students would normally experience meeting a counselor in a high school setting. Early college mentors have a smaller caseload than the typical high school counselor, but early college mentors also have a full-time teaching schedule. Though not all MEC students reported the same level of support needed from their mentor, mentor support was reported to be an important source of help for many students and a key component for supporting students through the program to completion. Student responses indicate that student needs are individualized, and a standardized meeting schedule with the mentor would not meet student needs. Mentors need the flexibility to adjust frequency of mentor meetings depending upon the need to the student. Additional monitoring of student performance, based on the frequency of mentor meetings, may provide best practice guidance for mentors. This could be most helpful when employing a new mentor at MEC.
College and Career Readiness Activities

One theme emerging from student responses concerning college and career readiness events was that students preferred a greater variety of speakers and not being limited to a focus only on STEM careers. Students saw value in presentations that were not in their chosen career path, as those speakers helped to confirm what students did not want to do for a career. Other students thought that more of these activities should be voluntary since not all were applicable to their individual career interest. The events that students valued most were college visits, resume preparations, and mock interviews.

Student responses revealed how difficult it is to meet individual student needs in a large group. This research suggests the importance of individual career counseling and helping students individually with meaningful career development opportunities. Midwest Early College may find greater success in meeting student needs by finding ways to focus on assisting students with individual career exploration assignments, internships, and volunteer experiences with less emphasis on group career events. Pieces of the college and career readiness events were helpful for students, such as stated by this student, “It didn’t help me that much; though, when the person from MSU came to talk about engineering, it did help to cement my resolve in entering the engineering field.” Students expressed that the scheduled college and career events were significant, but it appears, often by chance, that the students connected to a speaker or event as influential. Further development is needed to provide individualized and targeted student experiences. The challenge remains for administration and faculty in how to help as many students as possible, explore as many careers as possible, without boring or
frustrating some students in the process. Job exploration software is being considered to allow students greater exploration.

Though individual students have found a career path and benefitted from the college and career readiness events offered at MEC, the best model appears to have not yet been discovered, and more work needs to be done to effectively meet the needs of all students in finding their individual career path. The current program coordinator may benefit from continuing to gather student feedback and working with the administration and faculty to more effectively meet student career exploration needs. The program coordinator can expand the professional contacts made available to students beyond the STEM focus. Given the necessary personnel resources for college and career activities, the program coordinator may provide simultaneous opportunities for students to hear professional speakers, thus giving students more choice for what is relevant to their individualized interests and abilities. It should be communicated that students bear some responsibility for discovering career options that meet their ever-changing interest and abilities. Allowing students to arrange individualized career exploration opportunities, in place of organized events, is one way students could more effectively explore careers. The program coordinator would need to confirm that individual students have followed through with proposed alternative career exploration events.

Community College Environment

Students emphasized the benefits of being in an environment where academic support was readily available and where they could find places to access other students for study, support, social interaction, and relaxation. Students overwhelmingly concurred with the
importance of taking college courses on the community college campus with 48 students in agreement and three remaining students giving a partially positive affirmation of the “power of place.” Students spoke affirmatively about the availability of resources and the personal independence of being able to take classes on the community college campus. One student stated, “You actually get to see firsthand what it is about.” The student explained how counseling services were utilized during a stressful time: “I skipped my class and went there because I had to work that day and I’m like, I need to calm down, and I’m still having a panic attack from whatever it was.” Another student reflected on the responsibility that entrusted freedom brings: “I personally think that teenagers don’t grow up until you start teaching them like they ‘ve grown up. . . the freedom is definitely a two-edged blade, and for me at least, it was really helpful; it was really what I needed.” While not every student may not be ready for that level of freedom and responsibility, other students report thriving in the freedom of the college environment. In researching why students leave MEC without completing, additional study should determine if the level of personal responsibility and freedom could be too much for some students at the age of 16-17. Students are counseled on how to manage their free time before they are allowed to enroll in college courses.

Though the classic model of an early college, located on a community college campus, is not financially or physically possible for all students, it is a proven model by the number of students who develop a college-going mindset and obtain a college credential. With the responsibility for success placed on the student, most students at MEC succeed in accepting the responsibility for their education and finding their way to access supports and adapt to their college environment. One student stated, “I would totally choose a college setting over a high
school setting. . . you’re untethered.” For the majority of students coming into MEC, the reality of taking responsibility for their own learning, in an adult environment, led to commendable achievement. The challenge remains in admitting those students into the early college program who will be able to manage success in the community college environment.

**How Students Would Improve Midwest Early College**

The fourth research question explored suggestions that students would make for improving the early college support structure at MEC. While many students are interested in STEM careers, others requested a greater variety of speakers and experiences outside of the STEM focus. Students want career exploration to be specific to their own interest with outside school experiences for them to explore. While professional career lectures were of value for some students, other students requested less lecture. Providing individualized career exploration, internships, and job shadow/learning experiences is challenging for Midwest Early College due to the structure of College and Career Readiness Days, when 70-80 students are together in a large group for career exploration.

Students expressed value in peer relationships, especially interacting with older students for tutoring. Currently, students have a small space within the MEC building where they can congregate for studies and relaxation. Students do have the option to seek out other spaces on the community college campus, but many students, especially new students, tend to return to the MEC building for much of their free time. A larger space could be provided by annexing a classroom to add to the lounge area.
Students also want to see students accepted into Midwest Early College who are serious in their studies, willing to cooperate, and who will do the required work. Suggestions included better informing high school counselors about the rigors of the program in an effort to attract students who will be successful into the program. Faculty readily express to students that students should be in the program at their own choice, thus eliminating the need for most high school discipline situations and giving high school students the liberty of being college students.

Other students expressed the need for emotional support from faculty and staff. In addition to all the supports offered at Midwest Early College, faculty and staff must maintain caring relationships with the students. Students in this program expressed experiencing high levels of stress in order to be successful in keeping up with program demands, especially during the first-year transition from their local high school. Along with the rigors of preparing for college course work, at the ages of 15-17, students need a high level of encouragement and emotional support from the significant adults in their environment.

Related to emotional support, students expressed a need for opportunities for social interaction and academic breaks for mental refreshment. This suggests that some of the scheduled college and career readiness time could be dedicated to providing opportunities for social interaction among students outside of academic activities. Providing more socialization opportunities could impact the number of students dropping out of MEC and returning to their high school.

When asked about needed changes in the support structure, one student summarized her experience like this:
Now that I’m done with it, there’s really not a whole lot more that could have been
done. . . in the moment, you feel like, Oh, I don’t have enough resources, or I don’t
know what I’m doing, but once you start to utilize what’s already put in front of you,
and once you start using them, you kind of figure out that you don’t always feel it, but in
the long run, you actually are being supported and that reflects on how you do in
school.

**Occupational or Educational Pathways After MEC**

The first part of Survey Question 13 asked, “What career have you chosen?” Student
responses to this question are reported in terms of a Career Cluster Model from the Nebraska
Department of Education (2017) with the following six major career clusters:

1. Business, Marketing, and Management
2. Agriculture, Food, and Natural Resources
3. Communications and Information Systems
4. Skilled and Technical Sciences
5. Health Sciences
6. Human Sciences and Education

Analyzing MEC student responses within the six major career cluster groups shows that Human
Sciences and Education was the primary career choice cluster followed by Health Sciences, and
then, Communication and Information Systems. All of the career options selected would
require some form of college credential, and many chosen careers require an advanced
graduate degree.

Midwest Early College was founded promoting a STEM (Science, Technology,
Engineering, and Mathematics) emphasis, and promotes these career options by inviting STEM
related speakers to present during the first year College and Career Readiness events and by
visiting STEM industries when possible during the first year. With the emphasis on STEM careers, both in the MEC literature, and in college and career readiness events, it is surprising that a higher number of students did not choose a major in the Skilled & Technical Sciences. Student responses concerning a chosen career confirm student comments that students want a greater variety of career speakers and exploration opportunities within the Midwest Early College extending beyond STEM related careers. Accommodation of this request could influence student completion rates in the program.

Two student comments linked career choice to MEC as follows: “Elementary Education. I want to be able to change the lives of my students like the Early College did for me.”

I am currently majoring in Social Work and will receive my Bachelor’s degree in Social Work and then my master’s degree as a Clinical Mental Health Therapist. I want to make a difference in people’s lives, and the faculty of Midwest Early College showed me how important it is to feel good about your career and the job you are doing, and I feel amazing about the career/major choices I have made.

For many students, making a career choice evolved over time. As students were influenced by meeting others, being exposed to new information, and finding themselves in new learning situations, career choice became uniquely individualized and did not happen at the same time for each student. It is difficult to pinpoint exact factors that influenced a student to go into a particular career field. This research provided insight into various interests and educational institutions where students are pursuing their careers.

The second part of research question 5 asked, “To what extent did the supports offered in Midwest Early College contribute to the choices made by students?” Though this question was only partially answered, what is clear is that Midwest Early College had a profound effect
on many students’ lives in a powerful way. Students in this study went on to four-year colleges or stayed to complete their degree at the community college in large numbers.

This research showed more students currently working in business, marketing, and management, rather than in their chose major field, such as Human Services and Education. Students in Cohort 1 are just beginning their careers, some are continuing at graduate level, and many Cohorts 2 and Cohort 3 students are still in college. Current student employment positions reflect temporary student work. Follow-up studies would be necessary to verify actual professional outcomes of these early college graduates compared to students who did not attend early college programs. Further studies may help to validate the early college model in contributing to student professional development and goal completion.

**FINDINGS IN RELATION TO LITERATURE**

Studies reviewed for this project served to validate the support structure in operation at Midwest Early College. As students reported in other studies, such as Ramsey-White (2012), McDonald and Farrell (2012), and Barnett et al. (2015), the early college support structure greatly increased college readiness and success in college. As confirmed by Adelman (2006, cited in Barnett, 2016), students need to increase the level of rigor during their 12th grade year and not slack off if they hope to succeed in college. The early college movement is providing that academic push and motivation at a strategic point in the student’s education. A repeated theme found in the literature confirmed the importance of building relationships. Wagonlander (1997) and McKillip et al. (2012) emphasized the importance of personal connections, which is possible in the small group cohort model and implementation of the mentor relationship.
Williams (2014) stated that “we still do not have a clear or substantiated understanding of MCHS-ECHS (Middle College High School-Early College High School) student educational outcomes after college enrollment or student perception of their college readiness experience” (p. 39). While the first part of her statement will require ongoing additional research on how early college students perform after leaving four-year institutions, this research project helps to answer the second part of her statement by revealing student comments, at MEC, are overwhelmingly in favor of the early college support structure for providing college readiness. This study revealed useful detail in how to structure the support system in a way meaningful and profitable for students.

LIMITATIONS AND DELIMITATIONS

This research project took place under a number of limitation and delimitations. This study is limited to one early college support system and to the student feedback from that one program. Midwest Early College is located in an urban area, and in a city that is still suffering from some of the economic downturns in the economy after 2007. The supports that are offered in this early college program most likely are different from the supports offered in other early college and community college programs, and what supports may be valued by students in this particular urban area may be different from the supports that would be needed in another urban or rural area. This study is one snapshot in time of how students responded on a particular day to a survey or to an interview. A more detailed study with periodic surveys or interviews may reveal a deeper, progressive evolution of student opinions on the topics of investigation.
The sample size in this study was limited, with 23% of the 230 potential students responding to the survey. While this study had the potential of getting quality feedback from early college participants, it was believed that students most favorable to the program were the students who predominantly, though not exclusively, participated in the survey and in the interviews. Students who dropped out of Midwest Early College were less interested in giving their opinion than those students who succeeded in Midwest Early College, and this fact most likely skewed the results to show the program favorably. In addition, those students who did not complete the program are less likely to keep their contact information updated with Midwest Early College and therefore are more difficult to reach. Not all students who had attended Midwest Early College left a forwarding email address, and the last mailing sent to the home address on file, may not have reached the student. This could be especially true of students who were away from home attending a university at the time contact with the student’s home was attempted. A postcard was sent out to the address on file with Midwest Early College for all of students who did not respond to the survey.

The research had other limitations. Many of the questions in the survey and interview referred to experiences that took place during the first year of the program. Since the program is a three-year experience, and some of the students had been out of the program since 2014, some recall of first year experiences may not be as clear as it would have been at that time. This research focused on student perceptions only and did not gather information from faculty, parents, or administration in this study. Having faculty, parents, and administration participate in surveys and interviews could provide a greater understanding about why students left their high school to attend MEC. Faculty, parents, and administrators may value the supports offered
as part of MEC much differently than students who attended the program. This research included only student voices in determining what supports were of value in helping students to persevere and complete the program. The interpretation of student data is limited to the researcher’s and the panel’s interpretation.

An additional limitation of the study was the low participation rate from students who did not complete the program. The researcher did attempt contact with students who had dropped out the program, but only one student partially responded. Another student did participate who attended all three years, but did not meet the full definition of being a completer. While the number of participating students is limited to those who self-selected, it was believed that the students who participated in the research did reveal a rich and valuable description of the program for the purpose of evaluation and improvement.

Many of the students who attended Midwest Early College are now at four-year universities or just starting in the job market within the last one to two years. Many students have not had enough time to fully establish themselves in a professional career position, so it is yet early to fully evaluate the long-term success of students who have gone through Midwest Early College. The researcher did find one student attending a four-year university who did not show up in the National Student Clearinghouse records of students enrolled at transfer universities. While that student’s unrecorded subsequent enrollment may be an anomaly, it does reveal that data can be incomplete, even when working with reliable sources such as the National Student Clearinghouse. There may be other students, who have taken some time off from higher education after a rigorous three years in MEC, but who may attend a university at a time in the future. An evaluation of progress made by graduates is only a glimpse of progress.
up to this point in time for students who have left the program within the last one to three years. Follow-up research in succeeding years could reveal additional insight into the professional outcomes of these early college students.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

The scope of questioning for this study was extensive, and the amount of data collected from open-ended, qualitative responses made analysis challenging. Looking at just one aspect of support in the early colleges, such as mentoring or first-year college and career preparation, may allow for a more thorough insight and easier to manage analysis of student responses. Another suggestion is to use just one source of data, the online survey or the face-to-face interview data by itself would have provided enough data to analyze within a reasonable timeframe. Carefulness in survey question construction would allow a more focused response from the students. Instead of open-ended questions, which produced multiple responses, more carefully constructed multiple choice questions may simplify the analysis and clarify student opinions. Though this study only focused on one particular early college, a smaller student population may allow more depth and insight.

Further program evaluations should include detailed exit surveys recorded when students prematurely leave MEC. These exit surveys could provide a more balanced insight into the usefulness of MEC supports. MEC recently started recording more detailed exit data for students who leave before completion of the program. Only one student, who had dropped the program, responded to the survey, and that student’s survey was only partially completed.

Only one early college program was included in the study, yet the support structure at MEC may serve to help other early colleges trying to improve programs or to establish new
programs. The task of studying the support structure in classic early colleges is profitable in order to improve programs and provide a model for building new programs, but the population, number of topics, and question construction need to be managed carefully to aid in the analysis of the data.

CONCLUSION

This case study examined why students left their high schools and chose to attend Midwest Early College, what particular supports were of value to students in helping them to persevere through rigorous academics and achieve both a high school diploma and a college credential, and the choices that students made upon graduating from the early college. While it is not possible for all students to attend an early college located on a college campus, this study did validate that the support structure at Midwest Early College provides many students with the opportunity for college success and a head start toward a profitable career. The William and Flora Hewlett Foundation stated that

American public schools must significantly “shift course” in their approach to teaching, learning, and assessment to ensure that students develop the skills, knowledge, and competencies they will need to meet the quickly evolving demands of life, work, and global citizenship in the 21st century. (Farrington, 2013, p. 2)

Midwest Early College exemplifies this shift toward a new way for students to complete high school and move successfully into a college program.

According to Farrington (2013), students must develop an “academic mindset” in order to persevere through rigorous academics, achieve a successful career, and gain economic independence. An academic mindset is defined as “the psycho-social attitudes or beliefs one has about oneself in relation to academic work” (Farrington, 2013, p. 3). The academic mindset
can be developed when students learn individual and specific academic behaviors and when students can say, “I belong in this community. . . . I can succeed at this. . . . My ability and competence grow with my effort. . . . This work has value for me” (Farrington, 2013, pp. 5-7). The success of students at the Midwest Early College shows a development of this academic mindset.

Of those students who did participate in the study, a high percentage of students spoke favorably of the early college and the supports structure in place, yet students had varying, and sometimes contradictory, suggestions for improvements to the program. Many students expressed they needed a change from their high school environment and that the college environment fit them better. One student who struggled with dyslexia found a way to advocate for herself and accomplish her goal of an associate degree. She was not an exceptional student, by her own admission, and she really struggled to pass math, but she had internal drive to persevere. In this case, the early college cannot take all the credit for her success, other than providing the opportunity for her to go to college. Would she have gone to college if she had stayed at her high school? That is uncertain, but she has been equipped at MEC with a head start in her career, and MEC has made that opportunity available to many students. While the students in this study are just beginning to complete four-year institutions and begin their careers, a large percentage of the students are going on to higher education.

This research revealed a sense of the students who are successful in the early college. They are students who are motivated, driven, and self-disciplined, and students who can accept large amounts of homework and pressure. They are students who can envision the benefit of working hard now for benefits that will pay off later. They are students who can discipline their
social interactions, schedule their time wisely, and maintain focus without becoming emotionally distressed. Some of the needed skills can be taught at MEC, and some of these characteristics students need to bring with them into the program. The most important characteristics appear to be drive, grit, independent thinking, a desire for personal growth, personal responsibility, and a vision for the future. Midwest Early College is challenging by design, so there is an expressed sense of pride and accomplishment by those who complete the program. Students at MEC have proven they can rise to the challenge of completing a college degree simultaneously with a high school diploma. When students are academically challenged and adequately supported, they can accomplish much at a young age.
REFERENCES


Center for Community College Student Engagement. (2012). *A matter of degrees: Promising practices for community college student success (A first look)*. Austin, TX: The University of Texas at Austin, Community College Leadership Program.


APPENDIX A: IRB APPROVAL LETTER
To: Dr. Sandra Balkema and Mr. Steven Reed
From: Dr. Gregory Wellman, IRB Chair
Re: IRB Application for Review

The Ferris State University Institutional Review Board (IRB) has reviewed your application for using human subjects in the study, “A Case Study: Student Evaluations of an Early College Support System” and determined that it does not meet the Federal Definition of research on human subjects, as defined by the Department of Health and Human Services or the Food and Drug Administration. This project does not meet the federal definition of research on human subjects because it is not a systematic investigation, rather it is a project designed to inform a specific organization about the quality of a program offering. As such, approval by the Ferris IRB is not required for the proposed project.

This determination applies only to the activities described in the submission; it does not apply should changes be made. If changes are made and there are questions about whether these activities are research involving human subjects, submit a new request to the IRB for determination. This letter only applies to Ferris IRB Review; it is your responsibility to ensure all necessary institutional permissions are obtained and policies are met prior to beginning the project, such as documentation of institutional or department support. Note that quality improvement project findings may be published, but any findings presented or published should be clearly identified as part of a quality improvement initiative.

Your project will remain on file with the Ferris IRB for purposes of tracking research efforts at Ferris. Should you have any questions regarding the determination of this letter, please contact the IRB.

Regards,

Ferris State University Institutional Review Board
Office of Research and Sponsored Programs

Version 12.2014
APPENDIX B: ONLINE SURVEY QUESTIONS
Online Survey Questions

1. What high school did you leave to come to The Early College?

2. How did you first learn about The Early College?
   - School Counselor
   - Postcard mailed to my home
   - A student attending the Early College
   - A friend not attending The Early College
   - My parent
   - Other (please specify)

3. What is your gender?
   - Male
   - Female

4. Please, choose the best answer to describe your race or ethnicity
   - Hispanic or Latino
   - American Indian or Alaskan
   - Asian
   - Black or African American
   - Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander
   - White
   - Two or more races
   - Race and Ethnicity unknown

5. When you started The Early College, did either of your parents have a college degree or a college certificate?
   - Yes
   - No
   - Uncertain

6. At any time in middle school or high school were you eligible for free or reduced lunch?
   - Yes
   - No

7. Please, discuss your motivation for leaving your high school to attend The Early College.

8. Did the Success Skills Curriculum, taught during your first semester in The Early College, prepare you to be successful in your college courses? If yes, please explain how?

9. Did the Success Skills Curriculum help you to complete The Early College Program? If so, how did it help you to complete?
10. Did the classes taught during your first year in The Early College prepare you to be successful in your college courses? If yes, please give an example.

11. Did your assigned mentor relationship contribute to your completion of The Early College program? Please explain.

12. Once you were out taking all college courses, approximately how often did you meet with your mentor? Would it have helped to meet more often?

13. What career have you chosen? What led you to make that career decision?

14. To what extent did the College and Career Readiness Activities (college visits, professional speakers, career interest surveys, resumes, mock interviews, etc.), during your first year, help you to make a career or college decision?

15. Would you say that having The Early College located on the community college campus contributed to your completion of The Early College Program? How?

16. What community college support services such as counseling, tutoring, etc. aided you in completing The Early College program?

17. If you are currently enrolled in a college or university, which college or university? What degree are you seeking?

18. If you are currently employed, who do you work for and what is your position?

19. If you had the opportunity to go back, would you again choose to leave your high school and attend The Early College? Why?

20. How likely are you to recommend The Early College to a friend or colleague? (please, check a circle from 1-10)


22. Please, check all below that apply to you:
   - I completed my high school diploma while I was at The Early College.
   - I completed at least 15 college credits while I was at The Early College.
   - I completed the required internship or voluntary service hours while I was at The Early College.

23. If you did not complete The Early College program, please explain why not.
24. If you did not complete The Early College, how many semesters did you stay in the program?

25. What college credential did you earn during The Early College?
   - Associate Degree
   - Michigan Transfer Agreement
   - A Professional Certificate in a program of study
   - A Michigan Early/Middle College Association (MEMCA) Certificate
   - Other (please specify)

26. How can The Early College better support students in completing the program?

27. Would you be available to do a face-to-face interview or an online interview to help with this research?

28. What would be the best time for you to do an interview? On campus or online?
Face-to-Face Interview Questions

Introduction:

Thank you for taking time to participate in this research study. The purpose of the research is to better understand how students perceive supports that were part of The Early College program.

As stated in the survey, your name will not be used in the dissertation, so I encourage you to be completely honest. I am recording this interview so that the interview can be transcribed to print for research. After the research is completed the recording will be destroyed. I may take a few notes as we speak. Do you have any questions? Are you at least 18 years old? Is it ok to record this conversation?

Name ___________________________ Date ___________________________

1. Your Cohort? __________
2. Where you a completer? ___________________________

Choosing The Early College – Questions 2-7

3. I would like to understand why you left your local high school to come to The Early College. Can you talk about why you made that choice?

4. Were there any barriers for you in coming to The Early College, such as transportation, high school sports, extracurricular activities, food services, facilities, faculty, friends, etc. that should be considered for future participants coming to The Early College? Counselor support?

5. What positive supports did you receive for coming to The Early College? (Rate them according to their impact of student’s success.)

6. Were there any other factors that made the decision to come to The Early College easy or difficult? (i.e., students were still able to graduate with their high school classmates, students could participate in afterschool activities at their home high school, students will be alumni of their home high school for life, student maintains or loses connection with friends from local high school).

7. Knowing what you know now, would you leave your high school to attend TEC? Why or why not?
Completing The Early College – Questions 8-17

I would like to understand the supports that helped you to preserve through The Early College to graduation. Please describe the importance that you would give to each of the following supports:

8. **Success Skills Curriculum** (Were you sufficiently prepared prior to attending TEC with success skills? If not, what specifically was the value of the Success Skills Curriculum taught at TEC? What about the timing of the course? Was the time spent in Success Skills Curriculum sufficient? Were the topics important and relevant?)

9. **The college prep TEC classes that were taught before you went out to college classes** (Do you think these courses were more rigorous than the classes taught in your high school? To what extent did these TEC courses help you to be effective in your college courses?)

10. **Your mentor Relationship** (Did you have a mentor relationship at your home school? If yes, how does the mentor relationship differ in the TEC program? Discuss the pros and cons. Do you feel that you had enough meeting time with your mentor? Could more time with your mentor have helped you to do better?)

11. **College and Career Readiness events and experiences**
   a. Did you have a career goal in mind when coming to TEC?
   b. Did the CCR events at TEC help you to develop or change your career goal?
   c. How did you come to decide on your career goal?
   d. Are you satisfied with the career goal that you chose?
   e. What are your short term and long term career plans?
   f. What did you do for your internship/volunteer experience? Do you think that was helpful? Does that requirement need to be changed?

12. **Community College Campus supports** (Did you utilize any supports offered on the college campus, like tutoring, library resources, student groups, counseling, advising? To what extent did these supports contribute to your completion of TEC? Do you think an Early College could be as effective if it were not located on a community college campus? To what extent did free access on the campus contribute to your completion of the program?)

13. **The Cohort model?** What were the pros and cons of going to TEC with students from 15 other school districts? Did being mixed into a cohort group contribute to your completion and success?)
14. What was your experience like as a high school student in college classes with older students?

15. What other supports, that we have not discussed, contributed to your completion of The Early College?

16. How might the TEC supports, that we discussed, be improved to help students stay motivated and complete TEC?

17. Did your communication with your family and friends change while you were attending TEC? How did that change contribute to your struggle or success in the program?

18. Can you discuss your growth and maturity during The Early College? How did you change?
   a. How did this contribute to your success and completion?
   b. Do you think that you would have had the same rate of growth and maturity if you had remained at your high school?

After The Early College

19. What are you doing now as far as school and/or work? What are your future goals?

20. Is there anything additional that you would like to add?