

5-12-2022

Early college high schools and community college partnerships: Perceptions of community college administrators in Mississippi

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Early college high schools and community college partnerships: perceptions of community
college administrators in Mississippi.

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A Dissertation
Submitted to the Faculty of
Mississippi State University
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy
in Community College Leadership
in the Department of Educational Leadership

Mississippi State, Mississippi

May 2022

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Title of Study: Early college high schools and community college partnerships: perceptions of community college administrators in Mississippi.

Pages in Study 102

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The purpose of this qualitative study was to examine the perceptions of community college administrators in Mississippi regarding the early college high schools located on their campuses. While the ECHS model has become prominent in several states, Mississippi's efforts to implement the model have yet to be fully examined. Six administrators from three community colleges with ECHS located on their campuses were individually interviewed and asked to share their perceptions of the ECHS model. The participants were asked a series of 12 questions composed by the researcher.

The results of the study indicated that each of the administrators overwhelmingly view the ECHS model as a beneficial template and resource for students in Mississippi. Six major themes were described throughout the research: access and opportunity, student achievement, evolving maturity of the students, navigating college/college readiness, benefits to the community college, and community pride.

This study provided the first comprehensive assessment of community college administrators regarding the benefits and challenges of the ECHS model in Mississippi. The

perspectives shared by these community college leaders are intended to help policymakers and other stakeholders assess the partnerships and benefits of the ECHS in the state.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to express my sincere gratitude to my advisor, Dr. Stephanie King, for her support, kindness, encouragement, and patience as she has assisted me throughout my graduate studies at Mississippi State University. From day one, she has been more generous with her time and energy on this project than I deserve.

I would like to also express my gratitude to my committee, Dr. Linda Coats, Dr. Myra Pannell, and Dr. Mark Fincher, for their time, encouragement, recommendations, and the overall scholarship that they bring to the university's College of Education.

I would like to thank my parents, Wyatt and Faye Moulds, who unknowingly instilled a passion for the community college in me from my earliest memories.

Last, I would like to thank my wife Lucy, who as I write, is approximately two months away from bringing our son Baylor into the world. All of this has without question been for them.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Early college high schools (ECHSs) represent a relatively new phenomenon throughout the United States in terms of providing students with postsecondary educational opportunities. These schools, in which high school students are often housed on community college campuses and earning college credits, are expanding at a rapid pace across the country. Cohen et al. (2014) note that the early college initiative began in 2002 after approximately \$120 million of grant money was provided by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, the Ford Foundation, the Carnegie Corporation, and the W.K. Kellogg Foundation to finance the new educational initiative. The authors maintain that the early college initiative is gaining traction nationally. From 2002 to 2006, the grant funds helped establish 130 ECHSs in 23 states. In 2016, approximately 75,000 students were enrolled in ECHSs in 28 states (Great Schools, 2016).

Throughout the 20th Century, community colleges evolved and played an important role in providing education, development, and growth for the areas that they represented. These 2-year institutions are vital for the long-term success of communities, and Boswell (2004) noted the correlation between access to postsecondary education at community colleges and the attainment of the American dream. As the current generation of students, faculty, and administrators has now transitioned into the 21st Century, the responsibility of community colleges has not changed; these 2-year institutions continue to serve as democracy's college for any student attempting to attain postsecondary education (Cohen et al., 2014). Yet while the

responsibility of 2-year institutions has not changed regarding their original mission, it has expanded. As the number of early college high schools continues to grow and as more community colleges integrate either early college models or other dual enrollment frameworks onto their campuses, the mission of the community colleges must evolve to include these high school aged students as the newest community college stakeholders.

Background of the Study

In 1931, renowned journalist and scholar H. L. Mencken described Mississippi as the “worst American state” (Tate, 1978). Mencken’s conclusions were drawn from statistical data focusing on Mississippi’s economic, political, and social culture. Decades later, the state’s economic and social culture continues to suffer. Faruque et al. (2015) stated that as of 2012, Mississippi had a higher poverty rate than any other state. The authors attributed the high rates of poverty at least partly to the state’s poor education system. Kieffer (2015) noted that *Education Week* ranked Mississippi last in a survey of educational performance. The inglorious ranking, the author maintained, is proof of transformational changes are needed throughout education in Mississippi.

Despite these facts, Mississippi’s community college system has historically ranked among the best in the United States. Tollefson et al. (1999) explained that Mississippi maintains the oldest statewide system of 2-year institutions in the United States. The authors add that community and junior colleges represent the largest sector of Mississippi’s postsecondary educational system. Also, they note the impact that community colleges in Mississippi provide regarding local economic development, workforce training, job creation, and job retention.

Mississippi ranks at the bottom of the national statistics in terms of income, indicating severe poverty. Allen and Tucker (2012) noted that more than one out of five Mississippians live

below the poverty line. Such extreme poverty places many of the state's students at a disadvantage and jeopardizes both their educational and economic future. Boswell (2004) highlighted that historically community colleges have served poor, marginalized students at the postsecondary level and represented a means in which the students could attain the American Dream. Providing educational opportunities for students in the lowest socioeconomic levels of society has long been part of the community college mission.

While Mississippi has long relied on the services of community and junior colleges as a primary educational tool, the state was not among the original 23 regarding early college high schools. In 2015, however, Mississippi joined these and other states in adopting the ECHS model. Le Coz (2015) noted that Mississippi opened its first ECHS at the Golden Triangle Campus of East Mississippi Community College. As of the spring of 2022, four early colleges which partner with a neighboring community college have been opened in Mississippi, however, one of the four was closed in the summer of 2021, leaving the state with three ECHSs partnered with a community college. Across the nation, the early college experience has been documented in many states, including Texas, North Carolina, New York, and Michigan, yet very little scholarship exists regarding Mississippi's early college experience (Thompson & Ongaga, 2011; McDonald & Farrell, 2012; Saenz & Combs, 2015; Barnett et al., 2015). Erasing the research gap on the topic will assist the state's early college and community college stakeholders in terms of understanding partnerships and defining best practice models.

The success and development of the ECHS model in Mississippi may depend on buy-in from community college leaders and their understanding of the concept, particularly as the initiative is still in its formative years. In her synthesis on organizational collaboration, Hord (1986) emphasized the importance of assessing the perceptions of parties involved in new

initiatives as early as possible. Historically, administration at the state's 2-year institutions have had limited partnerships with high school students, however the increase of dually enrolled/dual credit students in recent years has helped facilitate the relationships among community college leaders and local K-12 school districts. States such as Texas and North Carolina have seen the ECHS design grow exponentially over the past 10 years, and scholars in the field of education have documented the perspectives of many of these campus leaders. Little scholarship regarding the general perceptions of community college administrators and the ECHS initiative in Mississippi has been conducted.

Statement of the Problem

The research problem is centered on whether or not the ECHS model is an effective and beneficial method to erase educational barriers for students in Mississippi according to the perceptions of community college administrators. The research problem also examines how partnerships between community colleges and ECHS are perceived by administrators and how success is measured. Kieffer (2015) noted that the state placed 50th in terms of educational performance in 2012. These national statistics should prove alarming for the state's educators, yet year after year, Mississippi seems to land in its reserved spot at the bottom of these lists. The research problem addresses what role, if any, the ECHS model could play in helping Mississippi climb out of the bottom ranks and give students more equitable educational opportunities.

Throughout the literature, the need for innovation resonated as a key component regarding potential solutions for the economic and educational problems that plague states like Mississippi. From an innovative economic perspective, Hoffman et al. (2009) explained that methods that have historically worked in certain regions may no longer be entirely applicable in 21st Century America. They noted textile and manufacturing economies as examples of

industries that once sustained communities which are not as prominent as they once were. Many 21st Century jobs require technical skills and specialized training to compete in a digital, information-age society. Community colleges are leaders in adapting to the increasingly innovative markets and providing the skills and training to meet current demands.

Innovation may be applied to education as well. It is clear that there is a disconnect between student success and performance for many of Mississippi's students. Fleischman and Heppen (2009) maintained that new models and revolutionary ideas are needed, particularly in low-performing school districts which they claim continue to conduct business as usual in terms of the education methods currently in place. McDonald and Farrell (2012) maintained that the ECHS models that they studied provided innovation and a potential paradigm shift regarding student performance and achievement. The authors noted that the ECHS model accelerated the learning process for the students and enabled students to accomplish previously unthinkable goals within the community college setting. Based on the collective data, further research regarding the model and community college partnerships is necessary in an embattled state like Mississippi. These collaborative efforts between the two entities may serve as a valuable link in Mississippi's march to success.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to determine if ECHSs in Mississippi represent a positive educational opportunity in the areas that they represent as perceived by community college administrators. The perspectives of campus leaders might help policy-makers assess the partnerships and potential benefits between the state's ECHSs and the community colleges in which they are housed. This study is intended to showcase whether or not the early college model can be effective and innovative for Mississippi students. Variables such as perceived

benefits, challenges, student performance, the role of faculty, and best practice models for the future are addressed.

Research Questions

1. What are the perceptions of administrators at community colleges regarding the benefits, challenges, and best practices of the early college high schools?
2. From the perspective of the administrator, what are the faculty perceptions regarding the benefits, challenges, and best practices of the early college high schools?
3. What are the perceptions and challenges for administrators at community colleges regarding partnerships with the early college high schools?
4. Does the performance of the early college high school students differ from that of other community college students?
5. From the perspective of the administrator, how are early college high school students perceived by other community college students?
6. What role does the early college high school have in preparing students for additional postsecondary education?

Definition of Key Terms

1. Administration – community college vice presidents, deans, directors, and principals who align below the president on organizational charts. These campus leaders are largely responsible for academic affairs, career and technical education, student services, business services, workforce partnerships, and community outreach. The general, daily functionality of the institutions rests with these administrators (Cohen et al., 2014).

2. Community College – “any not-for-profit institution regionally accredited to award the associate in arts or the associate in science as its highest degree” (Cohen et al., 2014, p. 5). These institutions offer academic coursework which is transferable to 4-year colleges and universities or career and technical coursework intended to prepare the student for the workforce within two academic years or less.
3. Dual credit – “the practice of high school students earning college credit” (Taylor, 2015, p. 356).
4. Dual enrollment – “a program that allows high school students to attend college classes and receive college credit” (Chambers, 2009, p. 11).
5. Early College High School - schools in which high school students are often housed on community college campuses and earning both high school and college credit. The schools provide comprehensive support in an effort to develop both academic and social skills for students. The early college initiative is defined by intentionally serving students who have been traditionally underserved and underrepresented high school students (Taylor, 2015).
6. Partnerships – the collaborative efforts of the early college high schools and the community colleges which house the high schools. Local school board are also involved at the onset of each partnership (Kisker, 2006).
7. Performance – the proficiency standards measured from student participation in college classes. These are classroom results that both reduce dropout rates and increase matriculation. Performance can be measured by attendance, grades, and collegiate credits accumulated (Kisker, 2006).

Overview of Method: Research Design

Creswell and Creswell (2018) defined phenomenology as a detailed account or description of one's experiences of a setting. The authors also note the importance of purposefully selecting participants and/or sites that best aid the researcher in addressing the research questions. For this qualitative study, six administrators serving in various capacities on three community college campuses in Mississippi were asked to participate in an interview with the author. Regarding phenomenology, these individuals have direct experience with the early college high school setting on their campuses. The interviews were conducted in a virtual setting utilizing both WebEx and Zoom technologies. Face-to-face setting were intended to be utilized but due to COVID-19, all interviews were virtual. Time, date, location, names, and titles were documented, and the interviews were recorded for observation purposes. Twelve scripted and largely open-ended interview questions were composed by the author with guidance provided by the literature review and the dissertation committee. The interview questions were intended to examine community college administrators' perceptions of various components of the ECHS that they serve.

After the interview process, recordings were analyzed to detect what Creswell and Creswell (2018) define as descriptions and themes presented by each interviewee. Also, Creswell and Creswell (2018) maintain that winnowing certain aspects of the data are likely necessary in order to highlight the most relevant discoveries. Transcribing, reading, organizing, preparing, and coding the data represent integral components of validity to ensure trustworthiness regarding the findings and to provide reliability for future readers. The interview questions are as follows:

1. Describe the origin of the ECHS initiative at your college and the partnership with the local school district. What have been the benefits and challenges of partnering with stakeholders outside of the community college?
2. What are your perceptions of ECHS students regarding academic performance?
3. Is there a notable difference between the academic performance among ECHS students and other students at your college?
4. Do the ECHS students recognize or indicate any differences between themselves and their former cohort of classmates still at the local high school? If so, are these differences defined in terms academic opportunities? Extra-curricular activities? Social characteristics?
5. What do the ECHS students believe to be the greatest benefit of being on the community college campus?
6. What do the ECHS students believe to be the greatest challenge of being on the community college campus?
7. Describe the maturity level of a typical ECHS student. Does their maturity level impact their experience in the ECHS?
8. What role does the student's experience in the ECHS setting have in terms of college readiness and/or their ability to successfully matriculate in further postsecondary endeavors upon receiving their Associate degree?
9. How do the community college instructors view the ECHS in general, and how have they responded to being asked to teach this new cohort of students?
10. What are the greatest benefits that instructors describe within the ECHS environment?
11. What are the greatest challenges that instructors describe within the ECHS environment?

12. How are the ECHS students perceived by other community college students?

Delimitations on the Study

This study is limited to community college administrators in Mississippi. While findings from other states comprise an important part of the literature review, data from other states are not included. Also, it is important to note that two ECHS models with university partners are located in Mississippi. In this study, only ECHSs aligned with community colleges are included. Due to COVID-19, interviews were scheduled in a virtual setting; face-to-face interviews were not conducted.

Significance of the Study

ECHSs have seen significant success in many states since the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation's multimillion dollar grant in 2002 (Kisker, 2006; Born, 2006; Thompson & Ongaga, 2011; McDonald & Farrell, 2012; Cohen & Brawer, 2014; Saenz & Combs, 2015). While the community college system is strong in Mississippi, Smith and Mayfield (2017) noted the extensive budget woes that the state's community colleges have experienced in recent years. The early college model represents partnership opportunities for community colleges that could help lessen the fiscal burden that these institutions have been and are currently facing. This study serves to inform current and future community college administrators and instructors regarding how to create partnerships, overall benefits, and pathways to future success.

Perhaps more importantly, the early college format presents accelerated educational and social opportunities for much of the state's underrepresented student population (Taylor, 2015). Poverty and poor schools are rampant in Mississippi; innovative changes should be considered to ensure a bright future for students throughout the state. The ECHS model may represent a partial

solution to this dilemma. The early colleges allow students to receive up to 60 hours of college credit while also completing their high school diploma. Within this model, benefits over time include less tuition fees at the postsecondary level, less student loans, opportunities to leave less successful school systems, and opportunities to mature both academically and socially that may not exist in the traditional high school setting. Duncheon (2020) examined similar social and cultural aspects of the ECHS experience that could be beneficial to students as they mature on and off campus. These components could greatly enhance the holistic educational experience for many Mississippi students.

Based on previous data from other states, community college administrators will have important insight into the innerworkings of the ECHS models on their campus and how this framework has affected both students and the community colleges. Benefits and challenges as perceived by administrators may provide valuable data regarding how to create optimal conditions for student achievement and serve as an economic catalyst for the community colleges.

CHAPTER II

LITERATURE REVIEW

This study is designed to define and measure perceptions of administrators at community colleges in Mississippi regarding the introduction of early college high schools throughout the state. The purpose of this chapter is to review pertinent literature associated with the emergence and evolution of ECHSs since 2002. This chapter opens by defining the origins of the early college initiative and the significant role that community colleges have played in Mississippi's history. Next, this chapter examines literature regarding innovation in education, the history of community colleges from a national context, secondary and postsecondary partnerships, and integration data pertaining to the early college and community college collaborative model. Finally, this chapter explores sources specifically aligned to the research questions presented within this study.

ECHSs (sometimes referred to as Early College Academies) represent a relatively new phenomenon throughout the United States in terms of providing students with postsecondary educational opportunities. Cohen and Brawer (2008) noted that the early college initiative began in 2002 after approximately \$120 million of grant money was provided by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, the Ford Foundation, the Carnegie Corporation, and the W.K. Kellogg Foundation to finance the new educational initiative. These schools, in which high school students are often housed on community college campuses and earn college credits, expanded at a rapid pace across the country after their inception. From 2002 to 2006, the grant funds helped

establish 130 early college high schools in 23 states. Cohen and Brawer (2008) explained that the early college initiative appeared to be gaining traction nationally. Chambers (2009) noted that the number of ECHS collaborative partnerships had risen to 160 in 26 states.

Tollefson et al. (1999) explained that Mississippi maintains the oldest statewide system of 2-year institutions in the United States. The authors added that community and junior colleges represent the largest sector of Mississippi's postsecondary educational system. While Mississippi has long relied on the services of community and junior colleges as a primary educational tool, the state was not among the original 23 regarding ECHSs. In 2015, however, Mississippi opened its first ECHS at the Golden Triangle Campus of East Mississippi Community College (Le Coz, 2015). As of the spring of 2022, six ECHSs have opened in Mississippi with four residing at a community college campus. Of the four residing at a community college, one permanently closed in summer 2021. Across the nation, the early college experience has been documented in many states, including Texas, North Carolina, California, and Michigan, yet very little scholarship exists regarding Mississippi's early college experience. Erasing the research gap on the topic will assist the state's ECHSs and community college stakeholders in terms of understanding partnerships and defining best practice models.

In Mississippi, community colleges have been an integral part of the state's infrastructure for over 100 years. Christophersen and Robison (2002) documented the socioeconomic benefits and overall impact generated by the state's 15 community colleges. At the time of their research, the authors noted that community colleges throughout the state (also counting Jones College) employed approximately 5,000 full time and part time employees and served over 77,000 credit seeking students. The authors highlighted the important role that community colleges in the state play in increasing the skill level of Mississippi's labor force and the direct training of area

employees. Businesses throughout the state benefit by the presence of Mississippi's 2-year institutions. This highly skilled labor force populated with thousands of community college graduates is paramount in terms of creating, attracting, and retaining industries in the region.

The importance of community colleges in Mississippi transcends the principles of graduation and job placement. Christophersen and Robison (2002) listed other important social issues that often go overlooked when examining the benefits of community colleges. The authors maintained that almost 1,400 fewer Mississippians would be incarcerated in 2002 because of the credentials obtained at a community college. Also, approximately 4,000 people throughout the state would no longer need welfare or unemployment benefits. In general, the collective health of residents improves when degree attainment and employment statistics are examined. According to the authors, the reduced amount of state prisoners, citizens on governmental assistance, and health related expenditures saves Mississippi taxpayers tens of millions of dollars per year. These data regarding social characteristics serve to highlight the prominent role that community colleges play in the life of Mississippians.

A Demand for Innovation

In 2006, a commission appointed by then Department of Education Secretary Margaret Spellings released findings regarding their views on the trajectory of higher education in the United States. Along with Secretary Spellings, the commission was composed of members with ties to education and corporate America from all regions of the country. Their findings culminated after a yearlong examination and ultimately produced what the commission deemed as uneasy conclusions and matters requiring urgent reform. *A test of leadership: Charting the future of U.S. higher education* (US Department of Education, 2006) provided detailed insight

into the Spellings Commission's and the federal government's beliefs about the state of postsecondary education and a demand for changes to ensure a successful future for all students.

The central narrative of *A test of leadership* focused on the ubiquitous need of postsecondary education for all students. "We acknowledge that not everyone needs to go to college. But everyone needs a postsecondary education. Indeed, we have seen ample evidence that some form of postsecondary instruction is increasingly vital to an individual's economic security" (US Department of Education, 2006, p. vii). The commission noted that traditional 4-year degrees are not applicable or necessary for all learners, particularly students seeking skills in order to improve their employment prospects and enter the workforce as quickly as possible. While universities and graduate degrees will always be important in higher education, the significance of 2-year institutions cannot be overlooked. With local and regional economic landscapes constantly evolving, the commission recognized the increasing role of community colleges in providing both transfer opportunities and programs for teaching skills and various trades in order to best serve the areas that the schools represent.

The Spellings Commission addressed multiple factors impeding higher education and success rates in the United States. Access to postsecondary opportunities is often limited by inadequate academic preparation, insufficient dissemination of information about college options, and other barriers beginning in the high schools. The commission placed partial blame on the high schools for their inability to foster learning environments geared toward college readiness. Also, according to the commission, access to postsecondary institutions remained limited for African Americans and Latinos. Cost and affordability are cited in the report as immediate barriers for students. An inefficient and complex financial aid system deterred learners as well.

The most damning factor addressed by the commission's findings focuses on the lack of innovation by educational leaders throughout the country. The lack of innovation is noted in multiple areas including instructional methods, partnerships, and structure and has played a significant role in the stagnation of the educational system. The commission specifically noted that policymakers, both at the state and federal level, failed for too long in supporting innovation at the secondary and postsecondary levels. New ideas, creative approaches, and the incorporation of unique frameworks were often not treated as a genuine priority, and unfortunately, the education system as a whole in the United States failed to keep pace with other nations.

Community Colleges and Their Missions: Past, Present, Future

Dassance (2011) and Schudde and Goldrick-Rab (2015) explained the role that community colleges have played both from a historical context and current practices. Dassance (2011) stated that for decades community colleges have represented beacons of hope for many students thanks in part to open-door enrollment policies, lower costs, and a combination of academic or career and technical educational programs. Schudde and Goldrick-Rab (2015) added that in many rural areas the local 2-year institutions serve as not only the primary (or only) means of attaining postsecondary education but also as a social and economic community hub. Because of this, the authors maintain that community colleges create employment opportunities in the areas that they represent.

Shannon and Smith (2006) addressed the importance of the open-door policy and its fundamental role in the mission of community colleges. These authors invoke a rousing sentiment by stating that while elitist educational institutions at least partially define their standards of excellence based on exclusion, community colleges, on the other hand, define excellence by their service to many. Shannon and Smith (2006) addressed the vital role of

community college faculty as well. The authors noted that research and publishing are not immediate priorities of the faculty; rather, the ability to assist and engage students regardless of their vastly different backgrounds, ethnicities, and career objectives has been the historic function of faculty at 2-year institutions.

Shannon and Smith (2006) and Ayers (2017) noted both threats and changes to the missions of community colleges. Ayers conceded that waning resources have consistently been an impediment for 2-year institutions. Shannon and Smith (2006) agree. They list decreased state and federal funding, tuition increases, and competition among state agencies as primary combatants that undermine the historic role of community colleges. While threats also include accessibility and demographic shifts, financial challenges and funding issues reign as the chief deterrents in the battle to fulfill the community colleges' missions.

Funding trends have fluctuated from a state and national perspective, and researchers within the field of higher education have gone to great lengths to measure and explain these trends in order to ensure the schools' missions remain fulfilled. Tollefson (2009) noted that in the opening years of the 21st Century, the majority of community college funding for most states derived from four sources: state funds, federal funds, local funds, and college tuition. Since 2000, funding has proven to be an important topic and has far too often affected schools across the country in a negative manner. The national economy often dictates changes within these trends. Swings in the economy influence community college enrollment, the amount of funding, and practically every other aspect of community college governance. According to Tschechtelin (2011), the economic recession of 2008 helped increase community college enrollment across the United States by almost 17%. D'Amico et al. (2012) noted, however, that since the recession of 2008 and despite increased enrollment, more financial challenges have arisen for community

college stakeholders, such as increases in tuition and reduced federal assistance. These circumstances make continued analysis of funding trends imperative for current researchers. By examining these recent funding issues, researchers within the field of higher education may provide a template for combating future funding challenges and protecting the missions of these institutions.

Hendrick et al. (2006) also addressed economic trends affecting community colleges and their missions. Like previous authors, Hendrick et al. noted that while state funding was diminishing, tuition and other campus fees were on the rise. In the fiscal years for 2003-04, the American Association of Community Colleges calculated annual tuition increases at approximately 11% higher than in 2002 for full-time community college students per semester. The alarming rate at which tuition was increasing nationally led the authors to theorize whether or not the community college's long held mission of an open-door policy was jeopardized. The authors listed emphasizing performance-based funding, limiting program admission, instituting waiting lists, emphasizing noncredit training, prioritizing enrollment, redefining mission, and tougher academic standards as possible barriers to the open-door that schools might be forced to implement due to the lack of funding (Hendrick et al., 2006). While Hendrick et al. (2006) address the many weaknesses, they viewed regarding community college financial support, the authors also look to the future and long term, innovative solutions for the funding challenges. They maintain that community colleges must develop a collective vision focused on generating new resources in order to uphold the open-door policy and meet rising operational demands.

Ayers (2017) and Mathis (2020) maintained that community college mission statements in recent years have continued to evolve. The structure of the schools, common practices, and curriculum goals ranked at the top regarding the parts of missions evolving at the most rapid

pace. This evolution, in part, could be a result of community colleges attempting to be creative and innovative in order to increase revenues, meet various student needs, and ensure success. Ayers (2017) warned, however, that expanding missions in light of limited resources could ultimately become problematic. Regarding the community college mission, Mathis (2020) addressed themes of achievement, accessibility, and inequality and emphasized the need for transformational leadership in order to remove attainment gaps within underrepresented student populations and to eradicate injustices such as bigotry, food insecurity, and intolerance that sometimes permeate campuses in order to ensure that all students have opportunities to succeed. She implores current stakeholders in leadership positions to engage one another in (sometimes difficult) conversations and formulate a shared vision for the long-term benefits of their students and the institutions.

Dassance (2011) outlined the history of community colleges, their traditional role regarding university transfer agreements, career and technical programs, and community service. Perhaps more importantly, however, the author questioned what the future will look like for these institutions. Themes he addressed include the preparedness of students, sufficient enrollment opportunities, affordability, and innovative pedagogical methods. Lastly, he recognized and applauded the increase of partnerships over the past decade between community colleges and high schools in order to address these themes.

Byrd and MacDonald (2005) helped assess one of the previously mentioned themes: the preparedness of students at community colleges. The authors stated that in 2000, 41% of students beginning community college were underprepared regarding their English or math skills and were therefore placed into developmental coursework. Also, Byrd and MacDonald (2005) added that research indicates nonacademic skills such as time management, prioritization of goals, and

self-advocacy are vital characteristics that measure preparedness. These skills directly impact students' academic progress. The authors suggested that community colleges do more in the future regarding advisement, providing transfer information, academic support, and nonacademic support.

Cho and Karp (2013) offered a partial solution to Dassance's (2011) request for more innovative pedagogical methods and Byrd and MacDonald's (2005) desire to see community colleges do more regarding both academic and nonacademic barriers. They noted that in an effort to assist students overcome their various collegiate obstacles and foster success, more and more community colleges are incorporating student success courses. These courses, with names ranging from Student Life Skills to Orientation to College Study Skills, assist the student in multiple facets of college life including institutional awareness, effective study habits, financial literacy, and career planning. The quantitative analysis conducted by the authors within the Virginia Community College System strongly indicated positive outcomes such as credit attainment and continued academic persistence for students who completed a student success course during their first semester.

Dual Enrollment: The Original High School and College Partnership

Perhaps the most important early example of innovation in higher education can be traced back to the original secondary and postsecondary collaboration. Understanding the original high school and college partnership might serve to measure and explain the evolution that led to establishing ECHS. Klopfenstein and Lively (2012) noted that dual enrollment partnerships between high schools and postsecondary institutions date back as far as the 1970s and remain the most popular framework in terms of the high school and college collaboration. The original intent behind dual enrollment collaboration largely mirrors that of the early college high school

initiative; by encouraging students to pursue college credits and easing the transition between secondary and postsecondary institutions, avenues are established which ideally lead to degree attainment. The authors noted that from the inception of the dual enrollment process, the geographical proximity to the more highly dispersed community colleges played a pivotal role in fostering collaborations between high schools and community colleges.

Regarding partnerships and best practice models, Klopfenstein and Lively (2012) maintained that dual enrollment programs helped establish formal agreements outlining collaborative details such as the courses offered within the dual enrollment curriculum, instructor qualifications, and requirements for early college credit hours. As dual credit programs arose, communication and collaboration grew between high schools, postsecondary institutions, and other community sectors. In terms of the original partnerships and best practice frameworks, two important factors stood out in which dual enrollment programs acted as a precursor to the early college initiative. First, the mission of dual enrollment programs largely centered on the premise of high school students attending class on a college campus. Second, dual enrollment programs proposed that high school students be in classrooms with college students in an attempt to assimilate the high school students into the college environment. The authors noted that these two factors help facilitate a genuine college experience for students.

Both Hoffman et al. (2009) and Taylor (2015) noted the important role that dual enrollment plays in familiarizing students with rigorous coursework and the college experience. The authors maintain that the number of dually-enrolled students has continued to rise nationally in the past decade with community colleges taking the lead throughout the accelerated learning process. Taylor (2015) stated that 98% of public community and junior colleges offer dual enrollment opportunities for high school students, indicating the prominence and the value of

these partnerships. Hoffman et al. (2009) utilized dual enrollment data from the state of Florida to highlight both student success rates regarding college matriculation and buy-in from high schools, community colleges, and state lawmakers. To the latter point, legislation in Florida mandates that all community colleges within the state offer dual credit options. While data indicate success for dual enrollment students, Taylor (2015) presented findings from Illinois that suggest that dual enrollment success is not equitably distributed among low-income and minority students and that perhaps a different model might best be utilized to ensure the success of these students.

The Early College Model

Kisker (2006) and Born (2006) presented some of the earliest research on the ECHS model and whether or not this innovative, new model could be sustained over time. Both authors noted that the idea of high school and college partnerships dates back as far as the 1920s and 1930s, with dual enrollment agreements beginning in the 1970s being the primary accomplishment of the long-discussed collaborations. In 2002, however, the early college model began, representing a potential new paradigm in education. The ECHS model, which is defined by traditionally underserved and underrepresented high school students simultaneously engaging in secondary and postsecondary courses on or near a college campus, takes the principles behind dual enrollment to a new and more all-encompassing level. The authors noted that the transition from simply taking high school courses to receiving college credits often on a community college campus instilled pride, determination, panic, interest, fear, stress, and other emotions into the students. Born (2006) noted that this emerging model plus adequate support structures may help channel the high school student's mixed emotions and energy into positive academic achievements such as an Associate degree or multiple hours of college credit. Kisker (2006)

added that her research indicates that integrating the high school and community college provides students with a more enriching educational experience.

Thompson and Ongaga (2011), McDonald and Farrell (2012), and Saenz and Combs (2015) conducted three largely qualitative studies focusing on the rise of ECHSs in Texas and North Carolina. The studies shed positive light on the early college experiences in the two states. In a broad context, the schools view themselves as tools to counteract negative economic trends and general educational barriers from a local, national, and even global perspective. The shift toward a complex, digital and technology-based economy was cited as a primary reason why schools must foster innovative ways to secure degree attainment for the students. The value of peer relationships and accountability among the students, supportive relationships between faculty and students, and the relatively small size of learning environments are viewed as benefits to the early colleges examined. Data collected at the ECHS showcased increased access and equity for students, decreased dropout rates, increased college readiness, and higher degree completion rates. The authors maintained that these results are directly linked to the early college initiatives in their states.

While praising the ECHS, Thompson and Ongaga (2011) listed challenges and questions regarding the schools' partnerships with local school districts and other general concerns. The authors noted that bureaucratic constraints with school districts sometimes inhibited both what and how instructors presented materials in the college courses. Instructors found themselves balancing their professional expertise and innovative learning methods against authoritative mandates from central offices. Regarding the academic rigor of the ECHS curriculum, Thompson and Ongaga (2011) posed questions focusing on how to react when students do not succeed within the early college setting. Also, Hutchins et al. (2019) added that some students

within the ECHS environment lacked vital structural support to aid in the transfer process upon graduation. Other questions focused on relevant professional development methods for instructors and what types of statewide supportive structures exist in which to foster classroom innovation and long-term collaboration. Thompson and Ongaga (2011) and Hutchins et al. (2019) maintained that further research should be conducted to address these questions and concerns.

Data from the national nonprofit organization Jobs for the Future (2014a) and Jobs for the Future (2014b) help to validate what Kisker (2006), Born (2006), Thompson and Ongaga (2011), and McDonald and Farrell (2012) previously theorized. The organization described the successes of the early college model, most notably the student graduation rates which collectively rank higher than the national average. Jobs for the Future (2014a) credited administrators and faculty for embracing the new framework, buying into the innovative approach, and recognizing that the model might prove to be a paradigm shift in education. Of equal importance, Jobs for the Future (2014b) acknowledged the students' role in the initial success of the early colleges. In many cases, the students' mindsets, determination, and expectations helped make early colleges a success.

Hooker (2017) noted that ECHS models have grown exponentially since their inception approximately 15 years ago and have contributed in raising both high school and community college graduation rates for many minorities and underrepresented student populations. The partnerships between school districts and community colleges have allowed thousands of learners to achieve postsecondary credentials. Hooker (2017) maintains that recognizing the value of this relatively new educational template and having the vision and influence to convince others to buy in can be largely attributed to college leaders committed to maintaining the

missions of their institutions. These leaders, she adds, were willing to acknowledge and embrace the challenging tasks associated with historic and systematic changes needed to redefine the traditional high school experience.

The development of the model and its purposes as described by Hooker (2017) are now applicable in Mississippi. The *Mississippi Early College High School Blueprint for Implementation*, a document provided by the Mississippi Department of Education (MDE) in conjunction with Mississippi State University's Research and Curriculum Unit (RCU; 2015) serves as a guideline to assist educators regarding the model. The document describes the state's target population of ECHS students as first-generation, low-income, minority, and/or other underrepresented student populations in higher education. Learners from other backgrounds are not excluded, however. The *Blueprint* explains the written entrance policy, the enrollment application process, and the admissions rubric utilized by campus leaders to determine admittance prior to students' ninth grade year.

Other components described within the *Mississippi Early College High School Blueprint for Implementation* (MDE/RCU, 2015) address partnership agreements between local school districts and the colleges, the program design template, and multiple performance requirements. The program design outlines topics such as student selection, learning opportunities, teacher certification, and counseling services mandated by state policymakers. Performance requirements and expectations regarding specific proficiencies are defined for each year of matriculation within the model. Certain factors outside of the classroom are also considered key components of performance and are described within the *Blueprint* as well; for Mississippi's ECHS students, attendance and behavior are monitored as diligently as academic requirements.

Dual Credit, Early Colleges, and Other Options to Increase College and Career Readiness

Spence (2009), Mansell and Justice (2014), and Barnett et al. (2015) presented alternative methods for increasing college and career readiness for students which differ from what has become known as the traditional early college high school model throughout the past decade. Spence (2009) advocated that community colleges in California partner with California State University and local high schools to adopt an Early Assessment Program, created at CSU in 2001, as a means for developing college readiness. He maintained that collaboration among these entities would benefit students and the state's social and economic status. Mansell and Justice's (2014) research addressed the topic of deciding between dual enrollment or the early college setting in terms of which best serves a particular student. Incentives, friends, challenges, and school culture are cited as primary reasons students chose one option versus the other. Like other sources, Mansell and Justice (2014) recommended that community colleges and high schools strengthen their partnerships in order to best serve students, parents, and community members. Barnett et al. (2015) highlighted alternative examples in Michigan and New York in which underserved students benefit from the college and career readiness point of view. In Michigan, alternatives to early college high schools included enhanced dual enrollment models whereby underprepared students graduate having completed 12 college credits. As an alternative to the traditional early college model, New York City began Pathways in Technology Early College High Schools (P-Tech). The P-Tech model emphasizes career readiness and implements partnerships among employers, colleges, and the high schools.

Administrator Perceptions

Chambers (2009) explored the perceptions of both community college presidents and local school district superintendents regarding the growth of early college collaborations in North

Carolina between 2004 and 2008. By mailing out surveys to all community college presidents and school superintendents aligned with the state's 36 early colleges, the author was able to compile qualitative data regarding the progress of the initiative across North Carolina. The author noted overwhelmingly positive feedback from the presidents and superintendents, particularly in terms of access to education, high school completion, and college readiness. Also, school leaders reported overall satisfaction being voiced by the parents of students within this emerging early college framework.

According to Chambers (2009), many of North Carolina's community college presidents viewed the establishment of the ECHS and community college partnerships as a new means of furthering the original community college mission. By expanding educational methods and opportunities, 2-year institutions in the state increased their accessibility among underserved and underprivileged students. Likewise, superintendents recognized benefits to their districts. Chambers noted that from the perspective of the superintendents, two immediate goals of the early college/community college collaboration centered on academic improvement and students graduating on time.

Community College Instructor Perceptions

Chambers (2009) and Kisker (2006) addressed community college instructor perceptions and more specifically imminent challenges associated with the emerging early college framework. Chambers noted that community college faculty questioned resource allocation and the readiness of the students to attempt collegiate level coursework. Also, the general structure of the early college initiative created both questions and challenges for community college faculty and staff. She stressed the importance of school autonomy, particularly in terms of curriculum and structure, to ensure successful instruction and as a means of limiting bureaucratic barriers

within the district. While questions arose among many community college instructors, the goals of the innovative new framework were largely well received by faculty throughout the various campuses.

Partnerships and the Collaborative Process

Chambers (2009) described the broad range of factors that make up the actual partnerships between the early colleges and community colleges. Issues such as funding, classroom space, instruction, transportation, and many others are addressed prior to the completion of the formal partnership. Also, Kisker (2006) noted the state policy hurdles that sometimes serve as barriers to innovative changes such as the early college model. Once the logistics behind these potential challenges are resolved, administrators at the community colleges and school districts must reach a mutual understanding regarding the mission of their collaboration. Chambers (2009) noted that historically, college presidents and superintendents have seldom worked together on programs that necessitate daily interaction.

Thornton (2013) reminded all higher education stakeholders that community colleges constantly reinvent themselves in order to meet the evolving demands of area students, business interests, and other local entities. Reinvention and evolution also apply to the innovative ways in which educators work to meet the demands of state and national economic landscapes. Early college and community college partnerships, similar to the ones that she researched in Cleveland, Ohio, provide rich opportunities for students to create meaningful changes in the areas that they represent and beyond. She stated that the primary goal of early college/community college partnerships should be to create a clear pathway to the students' associate's degrees. The partnerships are intended to instill a new culture in the classroom for students and instructors in which all recognize the innovative new model in which they are navigating.

Best Practices Models

Bourdon and Carducci (2002) published a synthesis of ideas regarding best practices at community colleges. Their findings run the gamut in terms of governance and the daily operations at community colleges. Issues addressed include the relationships between Boards of Trustees and presidents, faculty development, instruction, student achievement, innovative learning outcomes, access for minorities, community service, and business partnerships. A 2014 article released by Jobs for the Future (2014a) specifically detailed what they viewed as best practices for both current and emerging early college high schools. Practices included a college-for-all approach on campuses in terms of atmosphere and instruction, strengthened relationships and increased collaboration with state agencies and local postsecondary institutions, removing achievement barriers, and the incorporation of innovative ideas regarding budgeting and long-term financial sustainability of the initiative. While Bourdon and Carducci's (2002) work was published prior to the development of what we now recognize in 2022 as the ECHS initiative, many of the priorities they listed are also proposed by Jobs for the Future (2014a). These priorities have and will continue to be valuable within the early college/community college dynamic. Themes such as partnerships, increased student achievement, innovation, access, and instruction aligned with both the early college initiative and the mission and longstanding history of community colleges.

Summary of Literature

Overall, the literature discussed within this chapter outlined many things. First, the federal charge for innovation in higher education is warranted. In 2006, the Spellings Commission issued a demand, not for overt political reasons, but because their research showcased how the United States was not keeping pace with other world powers in terms of

educational growth and attainment. The commission's mandate was simple: the U.S. must become proactive and creative or be surpassed on the global scale. Second, the importance of community colleges, particularly for first-generation, minority, and non-traditional students cannot be overstated. Much of the literature indicated that many current employers do not require students with bachelor's degrees or traditional academic backgrounds. Rather, many current jobs demand specific skill sets and specialized training that community colleges provide. While fiscal challenges often serve as an impediment to the community college's mission, 2-year institutions continue to evolve and serve the areas that they represent. Third, the literature highlighted the importance of partnerships for higher education stakeholders. The design of the partnerships may not always mirror that of other collaborations, yet they remain vital for increasing attainment, accessibility, and long-term success.

Lastly, the early college model works. Jobs for the Future (2016) noted that 90% of early college students complete high school versus 78% of other students nationally. The overwhelming majority of early college students (94%) earn free college credits. In 2016, Jobs for the Future reported that the average ECHS student graduated with 38 college credits. Future cohorts of students are expected to obtain even more college credits or possibly their associate degree. As noted, early colleges serve a broad range of students, the majority of whom come from low-income backgrounds. Perhaps most importantly, Jobs for the Future (2016) stated that a higher percentage of early college graduates immediately matriculate to college after graduating versus the national rate. The literature is clear that the early college framework helps alleviate barriers that have historically been a challenge to students.

This does not imply that there are no serious challenges or flaws with the ECHS design. Nor does it imply that early colleges represent a one-size-fits-all remedy for all school districts.

What is implied is that for many areas, the early college model might represent a fresh set of ideas and new opportunities throughout their school districts. When faculty and administration take the time to make the model fit, in many cases, students reap the benefits. The literature is clear that when there is buy-in among the faculty, administrators, and students, great things have been accomplished in many states.

In the 21st Century, the ECHS initiative has arguably proven to be the best example of creativity throughout higher education. For example, housing students on college campuses, particularly community college campuses, has shown to be effective in a variety of ways previously mentioned. This model overall represents an innovative and proactive approach as called for by policymakers and other education stakeholders. Ironically, the early college model fits the parameters of what is demanded by the Spellings Commission, however, the commission failed to list the burgeoning initiative in its findings. Regardless, the early college initiative represents one possible, partial solution to negative trends found within both secondary and postsecondary education and will serve to increase access and student success for many that might otherwise have gone without.

To best understand early colleges in context of Mississippi, studying the origins of the initiative and models from other states is vital in order to ensure a successful future for Mississippi's students. For school districts to fully buy in, all available data need to be examined to guarantee the greatest possible success. It is beneficial to know what has and has not worked in other places. Comparing the early college mission against the backdrop of other accelerated learning models such as dual enrollment policies can only serve to strengthen the scholarship of all frameworks. Also, it benefits the stakeholders and policymakers that may play a prominent role in the implementation process.

Sources examined in this study often seemed to mirror the needs of Mississippi. Hoffman et al. (2009) described ECHS in North Carolina as tools for economic innovation and reinvention in the wake of declining manufacturing, tobacco, and textile jobs. It is logical to think that Mississippi could do the same. Using the same logic, it may be reasonable to assume methods that work in highly urban regions might not be the best fit for a largely rural state. Other sources, such as Taylor (2015), noted the importance of the early college model because it is intentionally designed to provide opportunities, access, and support to historically underserved students. This too rings true for Mississippi, a state known for its high poverty rates and underperforming school districts. Dassance (2011) specifically asked what might be the next movement for community colleges in terms of preparing students, affordability, degree attainment, and benefits. Based on the research of Kisker (2006), Born (2006), Thompson and Ongaga (2011), McDonald and Farrell (2012), and Saenz and Combs (2005), one could argue that the answer to Dassance's question centers, at least partly, on the ECHS model. The innovation behind the initiative might help reshape education throughout the state and serve as a boon for industries looking to relocate. Based on all of the literature, Mississippi should consider investing more human, cultural, financial, and economic capital into building upon the previous successes documented in North Carolina, Texas, and other states deeply invested in the ECHS model.

CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY

The ECHS movement in Mississippi is still a relatively new design and just budding out of its implementation phase. Since 2015, the ECHS model has emerged across the state, and the majority of these schools have partnered with local community colleges. The ECHS initiative represents a new educational template for the state which has and could continue to provide postsecondary opportunities and accessibility for students. To better understand the model and evaluate the progress among participants, it is important to study the development of the ECHS framework in recent years.

The purpose of this methodology chapter is to describe the research design, the research questions, and the procedures which were utilized to conduct this study. Included were methods regarding data collection, data analysis, and measures to ensure validity. This body of work employs a qualitative methodology using a researcher-composed set of interview questions presented to administrators at multiple Mississippi community colleges.

As the ECHS design continues to evolve in the state, understanding the perceptions of community college administrators working within the model becomes increasingly important. Their observations and perspectives may both help shape the future of the ECHS design and help ensure success for the students served by these colleges. Important stakeholders such as community college instructors, parents, local superintendents, state legislators, and other policymakers can benefit by understanding the perceptions of community college administrators

who facilitate the daily operations of the ECHS on their respective campuses. Thus, the purpose of this dissertation is to define and examine the ECHS model as perceived by community college administrators in Mississippi.

Several important characteristics of qualitative research techniques were utilized in this study. Creswell and Creswell (2018) list natural setting, researcher as a key instrument, and participants' meaning as three components of the qualitative process. Although virtual, the interview participants were interviewed in their office at the community college (natural setting). The researcher in this study gathered and interpreted all aspects of the data (researcher as a key instrument). Also, the meanings held and shared by the participants remained the primary focus throughout the research process (participants' meaning).

A phenomenology research design was utilized for this project. Creswell and Creswell (2018) defined this method of research as a design "in which the researcher describes the lived experiences of individuals about a phenomenon as described by participants" (p. 13). In this study, the "lived experiences" related specifically to the "phenomenon" of being an administrator in an ECHS. Collectively, these experiences comprise an important element to the total body of research. Creswell and Creswell (2018) state that this type of research "culminates in the essence of the experiences for several individuals who have all experienced the phenomenon" (p. 13). Detailed descriptions, as described in the interviews, of community college administrators' perceptions and experiences represent key components of a phenomenological design. Creswell and Creswell (2018) state that phenomenological research "typically involves conducting interviews," and 3 to 10 participants are often used (p. 13). Six participants were interviewed for this study.

Research Questions

1. What are the perceptions of community college administrators regarding the benefits, challenges, and best practices of the ECHSs?
2. From the perspective of the administrator, what are the faculty perceptions regarding the benefits, challenges, and best practices of the ECHSs?
3. What are the perceptions and challenges for administrators at community colleges regarding partnerships with the ECHSs?
4. Does the performance of the ECHS students differ from that of other community college students?
5. From the perspective of the administrator, how are ECHS students perceived by other community college students?
6. What role does the ECHS have in preparing students for additional postsecondary education?

Participants

Creswell and Creswell (2018) noted the importance of purposefully selecting participants and/or sites that best aid the researcher in addressing the research questions. Through the spring of 2021, four ECHS and community college partnerships operated in Mississippi. In the summer of 2021, one of the ECHS closed after external conflicts arose. Six administrators serving in various capacities on these campuses were asked to participate in an interview with the author. These participants were recruited through and recommended by each community college's institutional research department, and formal research permissions were granted by each college's president. Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval was granted by Mississippi State University. Upon IRB and institutional approval, the researcher emailed each administrator

individually requesting a date and time to conduct an interview. Based on their familiarity with the ECHS model, all six administrators agreed to be interviewed. The interviews were conducted in a virtual setting utilizing WebEx and Zoom technologies.

Data Collection

Because the author did not directly observe the ECHS administrators, the interview format represented an advantageous approach in which to document data. Time, date, location, names, and titles were documented, and the interviews were recorded for observation purposes. Notes were taken during each interview. Interview protocol consisted of introductions and followed by comments from the researcher regarding voluntary participation, confidentiality, and the purpose of the study. In all six instances, the interview structure consisted of small talk/chatting, followed by the interview questions, and a brief thank you to each participant. The length of each interview was between 45 and 90 minutes. Twelve scripted and largely open-ended interview questions were composed by the author with guidance provided by the literature review and the dissertation committee. The interview questions were intended to examine community college administrators' perceptions of various components of the ECHS that they serve. The interview questions are as follows:

1. Describe the origin of the ECHS initiative at your college and the partnership with the local school district. What have been the benefits and challenges of partnering with stakeholders outside of the community college?
2. What are your perceptions of ECHS students regarding academic performance?
3. Is there a notable difference between the academic performance among ECHS students and other students at your college?

4. Do the ECHS students recognize or indicate any differences between themselves and their former cohort of classmates still at the local high school? If so, are these differences defined in terms academic opportunities? Extra-curricular activities? Social characteristics?
5. What do the ECHS students believe to be the greatest benefit of being on the community college campus?
6. What do the ECHS students believe to be the greatest challenge of being on the community college campus?
7. Describe the maturity level of a typical ECHS student. Does their maturity level impact their experience in the ECHS?
8. What role does the student's experience in the ECHS setting have in terms of college readiness and/or their ability to successfully matriculate in further postsecondary endeavors upon receiving their Associate degree?
9. How do the community college instructors view the ECHS in general, and how have they responded to being asked to teach this new cohort of students?
10. What are the greatest benefits that instructors describe within the ECHS environment?
11. What are the greatest challenges that instructors describe within the ECHS environment?
12. How are the ECHS students perceived by other community college students?

Data Analysis

After the interview process, recordings were studied, analyzed, and then transcribed to detect what Creswell and Creswell (2018) define as descriptions and themes presented by each participant. This review of the data allowed the researcher to get a general understanding of what the participants shared. All of the interviews were conducted in the fall of 2021, recorded, and

transcribed at approximately the same time, therefore, the researcher waited until all interviews were completed to begin the analysis. The website Scribie.com was utilized for transcription purposes. The researcher watched the recorded interviews and read along with the transcriptions to ensure that the transcriptions accurately represented the participants' words in the proper context. Watching the interviews and reading along simultaneously helped the researcher recognize familiar codes found within the participants responses; these codes ultimately helped determine themes.

Creswell and Creswell (2018) maintain that winnowing certain aspects of the data are likely necessary in order to highlight the most relevant discoveries. The authors define winnowing data as “a process of focusing in on some of the data and disregarding other parts of it” (Creswell & Creswell, 2018, p. 192). Regarding this process, data were organized by hand and findings were initially separated for each participant. Reading, organizing, winnowing, and coding of the transcribed interviews represented integral components of both the validity of the findings and the final report. These research components helped the researcher identify themes and related trends from the interviews. Handing coding, in particular, allowed the researcher to recognize and develop the primary themes during data analysis. This process helped highlight similar themes shared by all of the participants. Codes created were: access, benefits, challenges, classmates/peers, community/community struggles, community college student(s), faculty, first generation, maturity, opportunity, partnership(s), performance, poverty, pride, school district/superintendent, transfer, and university. Coding of the transcribed interviews revealed six themes: access and opportunity, student achievement, evolving maturity, navigating college/college readiness, benefits to the community college, and community pride.

Reflexivity and Validity

Creswell and Creswell (2018) define qualitative validity as the means and methods employed by the researcher to ensure the accuracy of the data. Accuracy and credibility will be assessed by the utilization of multiple validity procedures. These procedures are meant to enhance the trustworthiness of the researcher's findings and to provide authenticity and reliability for all readers. Procedures and validity strategies will include detailed descriptions of the process, bias clarifications, the presentation of discrepant information, and prolonged time spent in the field.

As a former employee at a Mississippi community college that housed an ECHS (Copiah-Lincoln Community College, Natchez Campus), my first-hand experiences and personal interactions with certain components of the research may create biases that shape the interpretation of data and other findings. For approximately 4 years, I worked closely with early college students, staff, administrators, and instructors. In 2019, I accepted a position at a sister institution in the state, however, I have maintained professional relationships and friendships with employees of my former institution. Since the inception of the ECHS at Copiah-Lincoln Community College, my former colleagues and I have discussed our personal feelings and perceptions regarding the early college framework many times.

The public K-12 school district located within the same city as my former community college was determined by the state to be a failing district at approximately the same time as the ECHS framework was introduced at the college. That fact, coupled with the opportunity to receive college credits while in high school, created positive perceptions among local stakeholders. While participating in civic functions and educational/professional meetings, I personally witnessed and/or heard both colleagues and community members express excitement

over the introduction of the ECHS and the potential new opportunities that local students would have because of the ECHS implementation on Copiah-Lincoln Community College's Natchez Campus.

Chapter Summary

The ECHS initiative in Mississippi is still a relatively new educational template and represents a potential paradigm shift in terms of opportunity and accessibility for students across the state. Using the ECHS model and the perceptions of community college administrators as a backdrop, this chapter outlines the research design, participants, data collection procedures, open-ended interview questions, data analysis, and validity strategies. The research design defined in this chapter is appropriate for a qualitative study which employs an interview format. This study examines the perceptions of community college administrators and the ECHS on their campuses, specifically as it relates to performance, benefits, challenges, and opportunities for students.

CHAPTER IV

RESULTS

The purpose of this study is to assess the perceptions of community college administrators regarding ECHSs on their campuses. As the ECHS model has become more prominent throughout the United States in the past 15 years, this study helps to explain if community college administrators in Mississippi view this template as a positive educational resource and opportunity for students. Defining administrative perceptions may help policy makers understand whether the ECHS model can be an effective tool for educators in the state.

The research questions below served as a thematic foundation for the open-ended interview questions:

1. What are the perceptions of administrators at community colleges regarding the benefits, challenges, and best practices of the ECHSs?
2. From the perspective of the administrator, what are the faculty perceptions regarding the benefits, challenges, and best practices of the ECHSs?
3. What are the perceptions and challenges for administrators at community colleges regarding partnerships with the ECHSs?
4. Does the performance of the ECHS students differ from that of other community college students?

5. From the perspective of the administrator, how are ECHS students perceived by other community college students?
6. What role does the ECHS have in preparing students for additional postsecondary education?

This chapter will showcase administrative perceptions regarding the ECHS model. First, perceptions regarding general benefits and challenges will be discussed. Next, the interview participants will provide insight into the faculty perspective of the model. Details regarding the partnerships with local stakeholders will also be explored. Administrative perceptions of early college student performance will be discussed and followed by an examination of the ECHS students as perceived by the traditional college students. Lastly, the role of the model in preparing students for further postsecondary opportunities will be examined.

Creswell and Creswell (2018) noted the importance of utilizing participants who best assist in addressing the research questions. For this study, six administrators from three community colleges in Mississippi participated in an individual virtual interview with the author. Each interview was recorded, transcribed, examined, and coded. Codes created were: access, benefits, challenges, classmates/peers, community/community struggles, community college student(s), faculty, first generation, maturity, opportunity, partnership(s), performance, poverty, pride, school district/superintendent, transfer, and university. Coding of the transcribed interviews revealed six themes (access and opportunity, student achievement, evolving maturity, navigating college/college readiness, benefits to the community college, community pride) that repeated throughout the data.

Participants

Participants in this study were administrators at three of the four community colleges in Mississippi that housed or once housed ECHS on their campuses. The fourth community college (not included in this research) informed the researcher that institutional studies were temporarily suspended due to an unfulfilled position in the Office of Institutional Research and Effectiveness. All of the community colleges had fall enrollments between 2,000 and 4,000 students. Of the administrators asked to participate in this study, all six agreed.

The participants' job descriptions included Vice-Presidents, Directors, a Dean, and a Principal. The participants were comprised of three African-American females, two white females, and one white male. One interviewee had worked approximately 10 years in higher education, while each of the other five participants had worked in higher education 20 years or more. Pseudonyms were used in this chapter as a means of protecting each participant's identity. Because of the small number of ECHS in Mississippi and administrators working within the model, identifying characteristics regarding each participant have been purposefully limited. Each of the individual interviews took place virtually using WebEx or Zoom technologies and lasted between 45 to 90 minutes.

Table 1

Interview Participants

Participant	Gender	Experience
Dr. Smith	Male	Executive Level Administrator
Dr. Shedd	Female	Executive Level Administrator
Dr. Green	Female	Campus Dean
Ms. McLemore	Female	Director, Counselor, Part-Time Instructor
Mrs. Woods	Female	Director
Mrs. Sabine	Female	Principal at Community College

Findings for Research Question 1

Research Question 1: What are the Perceptions of Administrators at Community Colleges Regarding the Benefits, Challenges, and Best Practices of the ECHSs?

Three of the twelve interview questions related specifically to the first research question. The following interview questions relating to administrative perceptions regarding benefits, challenges, and best practices were asked during the interviews:

- What do ECHS students believe to be the greatest benefit of being on the community college campus?
- What do ECHS students believe to be the greatest challenge of being on the community college campus?

- Do the ECHS students recognize or indicate any differences between themselves and their former cohort of classmates still at the local high school? If so, are these differences defined in terms of academic opportunities? Extra-curricular activities? Social characteristics?

Interview Question 5: What do ECHS Students Believe to be the Greatest Benefit of Being on the Community College Campus?

All six of the participants noted multiple and largely similar benefits for the ECHS students on their campuses. Dr. Smith stated,

Students in the early college acknowledged that they were treated in such a way that they felt like they were participating in their learning experience. They weren't just going to (high) school and being told something, being told some information, and being told something to do, but that they felt like they were participating. They were active, they were making decisions about the stuff that they were learning...being on the college campus represented something that would light them up, being in that kind of environment.

Mrs. Wood shared,

One benefit would be to intermingle and mingle with regular college students. And the second thing that I would say, in addition to that, would be being able to receive your college degree while still in high school, to put you ahead of everyone else...in regular high school.

Dr. Green answered,

Being able to get that Associate's degree, that's the greatest benefit for them, they wanted to be able to leave, have that degree under their belt. It gave them a special sense of accomplished learning...a distinctive sense of accomplishment, it set them apart from

their peers who were back at the other high school. We made such a big deal about them in the community.

Mrs. Sabine answered,

I think that the benefit of being here on a college campus is the variety of classes that are available to them. There's really nothing that is not available to them unless it has an age limit like truck driving or nursing programs. I think for them, I think the variety of...especially when they get to the junior and senior year, I think that's what they see as the benefit of being here on the college campus.

Mrs. McLemore noted,

The benefits, students repeatedly tell me, this helped me get ready for university, it helped me with expectations, it helped me with balance, it makes me feel like I'm getting ahead. It builds a lot of self-confidence for them; I saw that as a trained counselor. It builds their self-confidence. That might not be the terminology that they use, but they do use verbiage and behavior that shows they're more confident in that they can contribute, what they can do, and their goals and expectations. You see them from the time they get started to the time they are seniors. It's always beautiful to watch how their expectations of themselves evolve...at that point, they have a broader idea of what they want to do back in the community, their environments, and their futures.

The administrators mentioned particular auxiliary functions of the colleges that were perceived to be benefits as well. All agreed that campus police, bookstores, and cafeterias were viewed as beneficial amenities for the students. Mrs. Sabine stated that, "the lunch at the cafeteria is their favorite thing of the day! It is the truth. Our kids, they talk about the cafeteria as much as they talk about anything else!" Mrs. Wood added, "well, the students here on campus,

they love the cafeteria of course.” Dr. Smith stated that the students often say, “the best part of the day is lunch!”

Interview Question 6: What do ECHS Students Believe to be the Greatest Challenge of Being on the Community College Campus?

Regarding the challenges, the interviewees shared thoughts regarding components of the ECHS model such as breaking away from the traditional high school setting and/or the familiarity that they have with their high school, the responsibilities associated with college life, and the academic rigor found within collegiate level coursework. The general theme noted among the interview participants focused on the challenges of navigating college life in contrast to the typical high school experience. Dr. Green described an initial challenge.

So what I perceived many times, the whole mystique of college, or the unfamiliarity of having to go to a professor’s office, as opposed to seeing him/her in the classroom, for help...just all those little nuances. So, I would say just the unfamiliarity of college or the mystique they had. We really tried to involve them because we saw that the students still saw themselves as high school kids, and they did not fully embrace the fact that they were a community college student. I think that was a little intimidating for them. That was the challenge...making it their own. Owning it. That was the challenge, owning it as a college student, and that was something that we tried to help them with.

Dr. Smith answered,

I think that early on, when each new cohort comes in...I think it’s the initial change of not being...in their regular school. Even though they don’t really feel like they fit in sometimes (at their high school), there’s still this kind of feeling of at least I know what’s there, at least I know what to expect. They go through a period of time where they’re not

sure what to expect. Most of the time, by mid-term of that first semester that begins to wear off. Some of their apprehension and some of their feelings about that go away as they stay here (at the ECHS) longer, as they move through the program.

Regarding academic pressures and course rigor, Mrs. Sabine noted,

I think the challenge for some is...that they want to move too fast because all of these things are available. And when I say too fast, I mean if you've got a 16-year-old taking English Comp 1, College Algebra, and General Chemistry, that's pretty stout...they want to move so fast when really and truly slow and steady wins the race when it comes to college classes. It's hard for some of them to be patient enough to wait until they're ready for classes like Comp 1 or College Algebra...I think that sometimes the freedom of being on a college campus is challenging, just because there's not a lot of freedom in traditional high schools.

Mrs. Wood and Mrs. McLemore shared similar thoughts. Mrs. Wood stated, "Greatest challenges? I would say being responsible. Independence and responsibility are two of the greatest challenges". Mrs. McLemore maintained that the greatest challenge is generally the class workload and balancing all of the components of the college experience with other aspects of the students' lives. "We have to remember what all these kids are doing...they're still taking full-time college classes and most of them have jobs. They help out with their families, and they're very involved in their communities as well."

Interview Question 4: Do the ECHS Students Recognize or Indicate any Differences Between Themselves and Their Former Cohort of Classmates Still at the Local High School? If so, are These Differences Defined in Terms of Academic Opportunities? Extra-curricular Activities? Social Characteristics?

In terms of the ECHS students recognizing or indicating differences between themselves and their former classmates at the high school, the administrators generally shared similar perceptions. Dr. Shedd, Dr. Smith, and Mrs. Sabine stated that early college students were normally allowed to participate in sports, cheer, band, and other extracurricular activities with their former classmates. Therefore, while they noted that the students did recognize the academic opportunities that they received by being a part of the ECHS, students generally were able to participate in the extracurricular activities and social events that they chose to. The administrators added, however, that often students who leave their high schools to enroll in the ECHS were not always highly involved in their high schools' activities.

Regarding the ECHS students and extracurricular activities or other social activities at the high school, Dr. Shedd stated that, "a few students here do do athletics, and they have to do a little extra to get over to the high school and perform. It's not a whole lot of them." Mrs. Sabine answered,

Most of the kids that come to school here are looking for a way to connect to school. For kids that connect through sports or music or theatre or any of those things, they really don't want to come out here and do this (early college) because they are going to miss things...it was a trade-off that they were willing to make for the education and the opportunities that they were going to get through Early College.

Dr. Smith answered,

From the very beginning, they understood that the way the schedule was going to have to work, because of the bussing to the campus, the fact that we're regional, we're serving five schools, it was kind of a logistical issue that we had to work out to make sure schedules fit right and their day started at a certain time and ended at a certain time...sometimes, they really couldn't participate in extracurricular activities back at their home school. If they chose to come (to the early college), they knew that part of that was walking away from that. And that was fine for most of them because most of them weren't plugging into that kind of stuff anyway. Most of them did find that they were...ahead of their friends...they were ahead of them academically, and they were sort of separating from them a little bit socially...they began to mature a little bit faster.

The results suggest that the ECHS model offers many benefits to the student. The administrators perceived engaging learning experiences and broader academic opportunities for the students as contrasted against the traditional high schools in their region. The administrators noted the development of self-confidence and maturity in the students as they learned to navigate the collegiate experience. Auxiliary functions such as campus bookstores and cafeterias seemed to resonate positively for the students. The notion of accelerated achievement was listed in some manner by each participant; the accumulation of college credits and in many cases the earning of an Associate degree was perceived to build a sense of pride within the students. Often, this pride extended to the local communities. Lastly, the participants noted the importance that the ECHS model played in preparing the students, both academically and socially, for university transfer.

Regarding the challenges associated with being on the college campus and the differences found among themselves and their former classmates, the administrators described similar

perceptions. Leaving the familiarity of the local high school and questions concerning the new expectations of the ECHS seemed to be initial challenges for students. Increased responsibilities, rigorous coursework, navigating the collegiate experience, and balancing new academic pressures with their personal lives also represented challenges. Differences perceived among the students and their former cohort of students at the local high school proved to be minimal according to the administrators; in most cases, they noted that either the early college students could participate in various high school extracurricular activities that did not interfere with the college coursework, or students within the ECHS were largely committed to being at the early college and largely uninvolved with local high school activities. The administrators did note that the ECHS students recognized that participating in the new model represented an academic opportunity that their former classmates did not have.

Findings for Research Question 2

Research Question 2: From the Perspective of the Administrator, What are the Faculty Perceptions Regarding the Benefits, Challenges, and Best Practices of the ECHSs?

Three of the twelve interview questions related specifically to the second research question. The following interview questions relating to the administrators' perspective of faculty perceptions were utilized during the interview:

- How do the community college instructors view the ECHS in general, and how have they responded to being asked to teach this new cohort of students?
- What are the greatest benefits that instructors describe within the ECHS environment?
- What are the greatest challenges that instructors describe within the ECHS environment?

Interview Question 9: How do the Community College Instructors View the ECHS in General, and How Have They Responded to Being Asked to Teach This New Cohort of students?

The administrators described trepidation from faculty during the implementation stages of the ECHS model. Also, the maturity and behavior of the students posed a question for the instructors. Once some of the general questions were answered for faculty, and maybe more importantly, once faculty saw the model in action, their trepidation diminished, and they were largely pleased with the final product. Regarding the instructors' views of the ECHS and their response to being asked to teach a new cohort of students within this model, Dr. Smith answered,

Prior to us ever admitting any students, I had several conversations with, like division heads, and of course all the academic leadership talking about strategies...And I think one of the first things that they were concerned about was having young students just wandering campus and young students placed into their classrooms and the instructor either never having any experience working with anyone other than college-age kids...And so it was some of that, those kind of things that we dealt with, and then folks worried about maturity level. They were worried about capabilities and stuff like that, and I said hey, do you have a pre-requisite for getting into your class? Well, you know that these students are going to have to meet that pre-requisite to get in your class, and it's not going to be any different...You know what, ever since we've been doing dual enrollment, you've had 11th graders in some of your classes, haven't you? Yeah, I guess you're right.

Mrs. Sabine shared a similar thought regarding faculty and implementation of the model on her campus. She stated,

I think that in the beginning, they were terrified that there were going to be high school students, large numbers of high school students on the campus. I think that once they realized that whatever rules there were for the community college and whatever rules there were for their particular classes, those were the rules that our kids were going to have to follow. We didn't want them treated any differently. We wanted them treated just like every other college student. So, I think that made them more comfortable with what was going on. Sometimes the instructors don't even know who the early college students are. In a lot of cases, they have told me that it's not uncommon for the early college students to outperform their traditional community college students, to be more active in class and be a better participant.

Dr. Shedd answered,

I think that the majority of instructors on campus welcome the opportunity to teach Early College students. I think that they have high expectations of them, and they don't give them slack...I think most of them realize that they are not exactly like the traditional college students, so they do work with them a little bit more, but they still hold them to that same level of expectation. I think most of them have been pleased with the outcome of the Early College students, how hard they are willing to work to get where they need to be. This is just my conversations with the instructors...I think the majority of instructors feel like the early college students are very good students.

Dr. Green stated,

For the most part, they loved it. In fact, they were willing to sacrifice the running in the hallways or the running into class or being loud...they were willing to sacrifice that for the academic maturity...they want those types of students. They were the students that

listened well and participated and they always wanted to know exactly what the instructor meant. I only had one instructor who did not enjoy working with the early college students, and then, in turn, I just replaced her with someone. Yes, so they loved the opportunity to teach the early college students.

Interview Question 10: What are the Greatest Benefits That Instructors Describe Within the ECHS Environment?

The benefits noted by instructors and described by the interview participants are vast. They include academic opportunity, enhancement of the classroom setting, and pride shared among faculty members in terms of seeing young students achieve and succeed at the collegiate level. Other fiscal related benefits recognized by administration and faculty include overload courses for faculty, increased enrollment, and increased FTE (full-time equivalent); the latter two of which are directly linked to state funding metrics. As enrollment at Mississippi's community colleges has decreased in recent years, early college students have helped to offset the losses. Instructors have stated that the early college students make them feel hopeful about the future of their local communities. In multiple cases, instructors have mentioned the community pride that has arisen from having the ECHS model at their local community college. Dr. Shedd shared, "I think that the instructors that I have talked with are really encouraged to see high school students at the level that they are at. It's something that they're proud to see."

Regarding the benefits, Dr. Smith answered,

Yeah, well, I would say that the instructors now feel like that one of the biggest benefits of the program is having the students on campus. I think that they see that as a big benefit of the program. Especially in the past couple of years, most of the dual enrollment opportunities that we have, they're either happening on the high school campus or they're

happening online. And for our instructors who love face-to-face, they are enjoying the fact that this is giving them more contact...they see that as a benefit having the program on campus full-time.

Mrs. McLemore stated,

Benefits...the instructors will tell you that their early college students make their other students rise, because you have to think, 19 and 20-year-olds don't want to get shown up by a 16-year-old who knows more during a class or is out performing them...it sort of unintentionally will raise the bar, not because they're any smarter or better equipped than our traditional students, they're just not as timid about speaking up because we've worked with them for the last two years and encourage them...I love how our early college students breathe life to a campus, they really do, their energy and their enthusiasm is contagious.

Mrs. Sabine added,

I think as far as the benefits go, I think just from what some of the instructors have told us just about experiences in their classroom, I think sometimes they feel like that just adds maybe a new layer to their classroom. You've got your traditional age students, you've got kind of your older non-traditional students, and then you've got these young students in the mix...I know that it does help with enrollment, it helps with FTEs.

Regarding the benefits of additional students and faculty overloads/more course offerings, Dr. Green shared,

I think that's definitely one of them (the benefits). Absolutely, they saw that as a benefit, and once we got started, those other instructors who were not active in teaching early college, they wanted to come, they wanted to know how do I get in on this? Other

benefits included – most of my faculty, they live in the community. And, so, they're vested in seeing the community prosper, they know many of the students' parents or they know someone in their family, so they felt like they were a part of a very honorable momentous opportunity in the lives of the students. They were excited to be asked about how the early college was going. So, it was a big deal, there was an honor associated with teaching those students. They felt like they were getting in on advancing the lives of these students.

Interview Question 11: What are the Greatest Challenges That Instructors Describe Within the ECHS Environment?

In a similar manner as the benefits, almost all of the interview participants described several challenges as noted by their faculty. The exception, Mrs. Wood, stated, "I don't see or hear of many of the challenges or complaints or anything like that." The challenges as defined by the instructors included increased parental involvement due to the age of the students, faculty's desire to be lenient on the students due to their age, and the navigation of college responsibilities and expectations on the part of the students (such as checking email and submission of assignments on time). Maturity is a challenge, particularly with the younger ECHS students. On the question of faculty perspective challenges, Dr. Green answered,

I'm not completely convinced that this is their greatest challenge, but this is something that comes to mind when I think of things that they had to deal with. And that was getting used to parents being more involved than they were used to, because college, you know, college instructors generally, it's the students they're talking with most, but parents would show up...wanting to see the college instructor. And so, we talk to them about FERPA (Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act) and things like that, making sure

that was covered...they had to get used to that. That was a challenge for them. Just dealing with someone who was so young and whose parents still had so much authority in their day-to-day life, that was a difference. One of their greatest challenges was just adapting to or trying to make sense of what was in the high school and what students and parents were used to, and getting them to understand this is college now.

Mrs. Sabine answered,

As far as challenges go, I do think sometimes it's hard for, or it feels like it's hard sometimes for the community college instructors, if they know a student is an early college student, not to coddle them just a little bit. And, you know, we try to make them understand we don't expect that, we don't want that. Don't ever give them anything that you wouldn't offer to anybody else.

Mrs. McLemore stated,

One of the biggest challenges, I will say this, and it's sort of across the board, is getting them to check their email...we have limited ways where we can get messages to students and make sure they're receiving all the information they need, that is consistently the biggest, I guess, complaint is checking email when they're first getting started...making sure they meet their deadlines on things, but I don't now really anybody in a classroom who doesn't have students that have to work with that.

Both Dr. Smith and Mrs. Sabine described maturity challenges that have arisen with the early college students, particularly the younger students who are enrolled within the same course.

Dr. Smith stated,

The challenge, I think the faculty may still see some challenges in some case-by-case bases. I think maturity...the early college kids show a good level of maturity in general,

but I think the challenge is still when you've got some of those cases where...and it's not...Maybe it's not maturity in terms of their attitudes and the way they work, but still may be a maturity in their academic preparedness and being ready...because they start with us in ninth grade, and they begin taking college classes all the way through...but I don't think it happens as much as the faculty was afraid it was going to happen.

Mrs. Sabine added,

A challenge that I do remember from one of our college instructors...the first year that we had juniors, we decided that we were going to have all of them take World Civ I in the fall and take World Civ II in the spring so that they could get their World History requirement for graduation...probably the best History teacher here on campus taught them. But, because they were all in that class together...there was almost kind of like this herd mentality among our kids where they...it was not a great experience for the instructor, I don't think. Just having all of them in that homogenous group there was not great. It's much better when they're spread out.

The responses suggest that, overwhelmingly, the faculty viewed the early colleges as a beneficial educational framework for their campuses. While multiple administrators stated that faculty shared apprehension during the implementation process, all participants answered that, once in place, the model was perceived as a benefit to each local community college campus. Benefits included new learning and achievement opportunities for students, campus reinvigoration, and faculty/community pride. Also, from a fiscal standpoint, the ECHS model was perceived by faculty to help increase enrollment, increase FTEs for the college, and enable instructors to make overload pay/receive additional classes. Challenges perceived by faculty included student maturity and minor behavioral issues, increased parental involvement, and

issues involving the students efficiently managing their new expectations and responsibilities within the ECHS.

Findings for Research Question 3

Research Question 3: What are the Perceptions and Challenges for Administrators at Community Colleges Regarding Partnerships with the ECHSs?

One of the twelve interview questions related specifically to the third research question. The following interview question relating to the administrators' perceptions regarding partnerships was utilized during the interview:

Interview Question 1: Describe the Origin of the ECHS Initiative at Your College and the Partnership with the Local School District. What have been the Benefits and Challenges of Partnering with Stakeholders Outside of the Community College?

The administrators' perceptions of the origins of the ECHSs on their campuses varied per institution. One administrator described how MDE proposed closing an old agricultural high school and then delaying/repurposing that plan by transitioning the agricultural high school into an ECHS similar to the ones in North Carolina and Texas. At another institution, the origin was described, in part, as a partnership between a local school district and community college to expand dual enrollment/dual credit and other academic opportunities in light of the school district's struggles. The third institution explained the origin of their early college as an idea/innovation coordinated in alignment with a university partnership (recommendation) based on the successful Texas and North Carolina models.

Dr. Green answered,

So as best I can remember...MDE approached us with turning it (existing space) into an early college using that model. The state decided to give it a try and we visited, I think it was North Carolina...We went to visit some there, but the model that impressed us the most or interested us the most was the one in McAllen, Texas. So, we went there, and they had an all-in early college model where the entire high school was an early college. And once we saw that model, we knew we could possibly make it work. And that's how we got started.

Mrs. McLemore answered,

It started (with) that conversation where we could offer something and expand our dual enrollment programs with the high school and make it into an academy, essentially, so it could serve the needs of our public school students better. Part of it is the fact it's (the early college) not pulling out the best students from our public schools; it's pulling out students and incorporating students who have a drive to achieve their Associate's while they're in school...It's incorporating and giving students who want to go ahead and take those extra courses and contribute that extra work a different opportunity to excel...So when you look at the origins and the partnership between us and the school district, it was a lot of work, a lot of discussions, so it's not just looked at like you would a traditional magnet school, for example, where you're just pulling the cream of the crop and you're leaving everybody else alone...When I think back to the interviews that I've done over the years with early college applicants, that's the consistent thing, is they want to give themselves a challenge...that was one of the key components kept in mind in the design and establishing the memorandum of understanding...between the school district and the

community college, was these are students who want to give themselves a challenge academically.

Dr. Smith shared,

The college was approached by some folks from the College of Education and folks from the Research and Curriculum Unit at Mississippi State...they approached the president at that time here at the college and some of the leadership that they were interested in seeing if an early college strategy would work in Mississippi. They had been making friends with folks in North Carolina and Texas that were doing that, had been doing that for a little while, and they were learning some things about the success of the early college in those states, and they were wanting to pilot something in Mississippi. And so, they came to us...they introduced the concept to us and said that they were taking a group of folks to Texas to visit a school there. We got some feedback and that sort of thing and began to talk about it a little more seriously. And so, we decided that the next step was to bring in some representatives from the local school districts to see what they thought. So, we got in touch with a couple of superintendents here.

The administrators noted many benefits and challenges related to local partnerships. The benefits included new academic and achievement-related opportunities for area students, access to education at no cost or little cost to the students, improved graduation rates, and community service. Challenges listed included hesitancy on the part of the local school districts/stakeholders, the evolving nature of both the ECHS model and the relationships with the stakeholders, cultivating buy-in from the school districts, and communication. Overall, once the hesitancy and questions regarding the early college model were discussed among the stakeholders, the community colleges were able to implement their plans.

Dr. Smith answered,

So, they (various superintendents) all came, and we usually hosted every meeting we had about it on our campus. They came in and we began talking about it, and they were inquisitive, and they were somewhat interested but hesitant about what it really meant for their school district, what kind of students would participate, and how would it affect accountability and things like that. And so another trip was planned to North Carolina. I was able to attend that trip, as well as the superintendent from _____ County and folks from the RCU and the university. They have like 75 early colleges in North Carolina, and we visited two...both of these were one college, one school district, that was the agreement that we saw. So anyway, we got a lot of great information, and a lot of great feedback from the kids. I'll never forget what really turned me on to early college was when they always talked about these are first generation students. There were issues that were more than likely going to keep them from graduating high school, much less ever go to college, and that's why they were encouraged to come in, graduation rates were very high, they were high-performing students.

Speaking about his and the superintendent's return from North Carolina, Dr. Smith added,

At that time in our region of the state, as well as in other places in the state, just as it is now, there were a lot of schools that were in trouble because of their grading level. And I said, you know what, I don't know that there's very much that we can do as a college to really help a school district from being a failing school district. But I truly think that if we can use this program to help students in our community to graduate high school and get a leg up in college...we can definitely help students. And if that's what we're about, then

we need to seriously talk about being involved in this. So, the president latched onto it...and wanted to take a regional approach with the school, so that's why from the very beginning, we said we're going to do this as a regional model. And so, one of the board of supervisors came to the campus and came to my office and said, I've heard about this program that y'all are working on...our students need this. Pretty much from that point forward through the first two, three years, there was a lot of trial and error things that we did, in terms of getting things going.

Regarding the local school districts, Dr. Smith concluded,

I just say that one of the things that has negatively impacted our regional model is that from the beginning until now, there's only one superintendent of schools still in place.

There was change and change more than once in that 6 years. And so that did have some effect in that new administration would come in, and so there was not as much buy-in.

And so, we've had to deal with some issues.

Dr. Green noted,

The superintendents in the local school districts, they were interested, and they were concerned...they did agree to send us some students. We knew we could get it done. So, the local stakeholders, meaning the superintendents, in the beginning...there wasn't a strong, I don't want to say desire...We were trying to do the all-in model.

Dr. Shedd answered,

Basically, it is an opportunity for high school students to have elevated class curriculum, college curriculum, that would allow them to excel and receive Associate's degrees. So, it's a special arrangement between the high school district and the college. It's a really special arrangement. The students don't have to pay anything for the classes unless they

do not pass the class, or if they take an intermediate class. They have to meet the requirements for being a student... I think it's a very special arrangement. One that I think works for the students, as well as for the college because it helps with our numbers. The benefits to the college is that this helps our enrollment numbers, and a lot of the early college students, they're good students. So, they help the campus with the marketing. They help us go out into the community and basically sell the school. So, they're good representatives of our campus, of the college as a whole. A lot of times, they're stepping up even when the traditional students are not.

Mrs. Sabine answered,

So, over the years, those partnerships have changed and morphed. Some of them are, I would say, very strong...For some districts, I think it still feels like competition rather than a partnership. I think that the benefit is that we can serve. We're not just serving one group of students, we can serve lots of students in this region because there is right now in this area a ton of industry...and also academic opportunities with the university being right here. There're so many ways to help students connect with not just college but a career field. So, I think that's a huge benefit is kind of spreading that myth as wide as we can spread it...we've learned so many lessons along the way...we try to keep what works and throw out what doesn't. I think another issue is that some districts are more bought-in than others, so they're much easier to communicate with and work with as far as just everything from student records to disseminating information...I guess just that communication has been easier with some districts than it has been with others.

Mrs. Wood stated,

One of the benefits of working with early college stakeholders is, I'm just going to say, the enrollment numbers. It increased our enrollment tremendously, because I can tell you we have roughly 50 students from each grade level now. Another benefit I would say is just giving the students an opportunity to be able to receive their degree before actually receiving their high school diploma. One of the challenges, let me try to think. Initially when we first implemented the early college program, they were supposed to hire a liaison paid by the school district, but at the end it ended up not being anyone there that they actually hired, so therefore I had to take up the new stuff. Definitely I think that they should have hired a liaison to kind of take hold of that part.

The results suggest that each community college was largely proactive regarding the ECHS implementation process on their campuses. Also, ideas, assistance, and coordination from other state agencies seemed prevalent during the implementation phase. Benefits of the partnership shared by all administrators included increased educational access for students, the removal of attainment barriers for students, increased college enrollment, and community service. Local stakeholders, in most cases, were described as inquisitive and hesitant, particularly during the implementation phase. Buy-in and communication issues with local school districts represented ubiquitous challenges faced by the community colleges.

Findings for Research Question 4

Research Question 4: Does the Performance of the ECHS Students Differ From That of Other Community College Students?

Two of the twelve interview questions related specifically to the fourth research question. The following interview questions relating to the administrators' perceptions of academic performance were utilized during the interview:

- What are your perceptions of ECHS students regarding academic performance?
- Is there a notable difference between the academic performance among ECHS students and other students at your college?

Interview Question 2: What are Your Perceptions of ECHS Students Regarding Academic Performance?

All six of the administrators shared positive descriptions of the academic performance of the ECHS students on their campuses. A primary theme of their responses could be summarized as the power of place; this phrase, specifically stated by one administrator, denoted the benefits for the students upon leaving their high school and enrolling into the ECHS at the local community college. Perceptions of the academic performance indicated by the administrators included heightened achievement, a sense of determination among the students, and improvement as compared to their high school experience.

Mrs. Sabine stated,

Overall, they perform better while they are here than they did in their home school districts, and not just from an academic standpoint. Attendance is better, discipline is better. The crazy thing is, and one of the happy surprises along the way, is that it's not

uncommon for our students' college GPAs to be higher than their high school GPAs. I think there is something about being in a college class on a college campus that makes the students feel like they're doing something special, and so that's how they treat it. Our kids are, most of them were middle of the road to strugglers, we're not looking for the highfliers, and so we're testing the same kids that everybody else is testing. So, I would say overall performance is better when they're here than it was when they were at their home schools.

Mrs. Wood answered,

I think some of them performed exceptionally well. Most of the students perform academically well, and then you have the other side where most instructors have to kind of keep up with the students by ensuring that they're submitting their assignments and staying academically well to the end while they're here. I think because of the fact that early college has this system in place where students make below a C, they would have to be responsible for paying for those courses if they do not do well, so I think as far as academically for the most part, most of the students are doing well...we haven't had many students who actually just left or withdrew from the early college. It's very bare minimum. Very bare minimum.

Dr. Smith answered,

They've been surprisingly good. I have to admit that although I was for this, I was a promotor from the very beginning, saw the benefits that it had for other students in North Carolina, and saw the potential, I was apprehensive about exactly how well overall the students that would participate would be. We were specifically telling the school districts, the parents, and the students, hey we're not trying to be a Mississippi School for Math

and Science, we're not trying to be a Mississippi School for the Arts. We feel like we can be the most help to students who have some kind of barrier that might keep them from completing high school and subsequently not be able to go to college, a first-generation college student. We had the application for admission for these students to the program ask them questions that would help us to understand whether or not they were plugging into school. But we didn't necessarily eliminate folks that made good grades or anything like that. It's just that we weren't trying to target the high performers. It was trying to find folks that just weren't plugging in the regular...because another thing that I heard in North Carolina was it was described by some folks there was the power of place. Students would no longer go to that old school district, they would come, and they would be embedded at the college from ninth grade all the way through. And so, it was the power of place that we thought would be able to help them. So, to get to my point, I still sort of felt like, well, how do we deal with some failing grades? How do we deal with some bad grades? But let me tell you, those were few and far between. There was a lot of active learning, there was a lot of moving around. Every day they had to write something, every day they had to produce something, and it was very interactive learning. And so these kids blossomed through that. It was a combination of a new environment, a new way of seeing their learning environment, and then knowing from day one that they are expected to step up and being acting like a college student, even though they were only a ninth grader. So, my perception of them is that they really outperform their own self, that's how they become an early college student, they really outperform their own self.

Dr. Green stated,

My perception of the students, they're hard workers. They were determined to get that Associate's. They were excited about the prospect of getting a degree at such an early age. It excited them. They wanted to make their families proud. They thought it would be phenomenal to walk across the stage with the other college students. They were tremendously excited about being able to earn an Associate's.

Dr. Shedd stated,

I think that their academic performance has been really good. We've had some students with challenges that have not made the required ACT score, I think that most of them have made the required score...it's a 16 to actually stay in the program, then most of them have done that. Overall, the comments that I hear from instructors is that their early college students are good students. And, I have not had a lot of discipline problems or like them not coming to class or not doing their work. I have not had a whole lot of that, so I believe that they're doing a good job.

Mrs. McLemore added,

They continually impressed me...I love seeing them in a classroom when concepts click. Through their interactions, their completed assignments, you can see where they can take those concepts that we teach and see how it applies to their communities, to the real world. These are students, these are young people who are entering our communities who are going to make that change, to make our communities safer, better places and be true advocates of welfare of others; I don't know any community college where that's not a mission, to give back to the community, and that's what these students do.

Interview Question 3: Is There a Notable Difference Between the Academic Performance Among ECHS Students and Other Students at Your College?

Regarding noticeable differences between the academic performance of early college students and traditional college students, the participants were generally hesitant to differentiate among the two groups; their stance being that students of all backgrounds do above average, average, and below average. While all administrators noted high performance of most early college students, they recognized that the performance mirrored that of other successful traditional students. Dr. Shedd stated, “there’s not anything that particularly stands out. Of course, I have not necessarily look at the data per se, but there is not anything that’s glaring. They perform well.”

Dr. Green answered,

I believe that they took college classes far more serious in 11th and 12th grade, I think, than some of my traditional college students, because they were so excited about the opportunity to take part in this monumental resource that was being offered to them. And I can recall the look on their faces and the look in their eyes when they walk across the stage...their hard work had paid off. There was no difference between how well the early college students performed with students who had equal or greater ACT scores as they did, or who were skilled coming out of high school. Understand, we have open enrollment at community colleges in Mississippi, and so those students who were coming to us not prepared for college, and having to take developmental courses, many were first-gen students. Now, those students weren’t performing as well as some of the early college students. There was a difference if the students were coming to us not prepared for college, unprepared for college.

Mrs. Wood answered,

I wouldn't say so, because they're both in the same academic level of instruction, so I feel for the most part, they're receiving the same. They do as good as our regular students. If you're an early college student, you make Ds and Fs, you're going to be responsible for paying for your courses. I think that's one thing that kind of ensures that the students at the early college level are, that pushes them to do what they're supposed to be doing.

These responses suggest that the early college students generally perform at an average or above average pace in their community college classes. The power of place, defined as a new learning environment, new pedagogical methods, and heightened expectations, seemed to largely resonate with students as they transitioned from their traditional high schools to the community college, particularly in terms of academic achievement and pride. The results also suggest that there is little categorical difference between the performance of the early college students compared to traditional community college students.

Findings for Research Question 5

Research Question 5: From the Perspective of the Administrator, How are ECHS Students Perceived by Other Community College Students?

One of the twelve interview questions related specifically to the fifth research question. The following interview question regarding the administrators' perceptions on how students were perceived was utilized during the interview:

Interview Question 12: How are the ECHS Students Perceived by Other Community College Students?

Throughout the course of the interviews, the participants noted that in many cases the early college 9th and 10th graders often take classes solely reserved for their cohort, while the 11th and 12th graders are fully integrated into traditional community college classes. Therefore, traditional college students have limited contact with the youngest of the ECHS students in an academic setting. The ECHS upper classmen, however, are in close proximity to the traditional college learners on a daily basis. During the implementation stage of the ECHS model, it was noted that some traditional college students were opposed to or off-put by being in classes with the early college students. Over time, however, the perceptions of the administrators indicated that traditional students generally do not know which of their classmates are early college students, or if they do, it is a non-issue. In this design, the ECHS students are perceived primarily as peers by the traditional students.

Mrs. Wood stated,

I'm going to be honest with you. When early college students first started attending classes, when they became integrated with our regular college students, our regular college students did not like that. There were students who wanted to get out of the class, because they felt like those students were not on their level. I could tell you that there were students who were very unhappy with being in a class with an early college student at one point. And don't you know that we don't even have those complaints anymore, Zach.

Mrs. Sabine answered,

I think our kids sometimes make a conscious effort not to identify themselves. So, a lot of times, it's like the instructors, those traditional students don't know that they're younger. We have had students that had to participate in groups with traditional college students. They've had to interact in class, that sort of thing. I don't have any experience with them being treated any differently or in a negative way. If anything else, I think sometimes traditional students are kind of amazed that these kids are younger than they are and they're doing the same work and that sort of thing.

Dr. Shedd shared,

I don't get to hear a whole lot of either positive or negative. So, I tend to think that they're okay with it. There are not any major issues. I think they're just living together in harmony. It's like, yeah, you're here, and it's good that you're here, and you're not bothering me. I don't see a problem with you being here.

Mrs. McLemore stated,

At this point in time, a lot of times student don't even know the difference. Because, you think about it, we've had early college students on this campus for such a long period of time, with us being a commuter community college. You have students who come in, and they've seen this kid since the moment they walked in the door. Because the early college students are actually on campus for four years, and where our traditional students are only on campus for two, so a lot of times, they're part of the fixtures to an extent. Often times in classes, you don't really know that they're not a regular student now...it's becoming less and less of them being distinguished from other students as a whole now. I don't think any of our students think twice about it at this point.

Dr. Green shared,

I remember when it came time to have them join Phi Theta Kappa, the traditional college students were open to having them join. That wasn't an issue. They're used to dual enrollment also because sometimes dual enrollment students would be on campus, so they were used to that. I think what they probably didn't like, they didn't like if a high school student was doing better on tests than they did. But, their perception was I think overall good. They saw them as another person in class. They saw them just as another student.

Dr. Smith answered,

Well, from what I've gathered, it's a lot like the perceptions of the instructors. Unless they are told, they really don't know that the person sitting next to them is not just another typical college student just like they are. And then, I think I've heard some feedback. Students say that, hey, we were put on a team doing some team stuff in a particular class, and we got through most of our work before I happened to mention that I was an early college student. And the rest of the students had no idea. And they were thanking me for how much I helped them with the project...In general, I don't think they see them any different way than the other students.

The results suggest that ECHS students are largely perceived as regular students by their traditional classmates. At the onset of the ECHS model, the evidence suggests that the traditional college students might have been less inclined to accept their new cohort of classmates, but based on the perceptions of the administrators, that distain seems to have lessened overtime or gone away completely. In most cases, the results indicate that traditional community college student are not aware who among their classmates are early college students. If the traditional students are aware, the distinction appears to be a non-issue.

Findings for Research Question 6

Research Question 6: What Role does the ECHS Have in Preparing Students for Additional Postsecondary Education?

Two of the twelve interview questions related specifically to the sixth research question. The following interview questions regarding the ECHS's role in preparing students were utilized during the interview:

- Describe the maturity level of a typical ECHS student. Does their maturity level impact their experience in the ECHS?
- What role does the students' experience in the ECHS setting have in terms of college readiness and/or their ability to successfully matriculate in further postsecondary endeavors upon receiving their Associate degree?

Interview Question 7: Describe the Maturity Level of a Typical ECHS Student. Does Their Maturity Level Impact Their Experience in the ECHS?

All administrators described the early college upperclassmen as generally mature for their age. Most indicated that some of the younger ECHS students struggled at times maintaining the level of maturity appropriate for the college environment. A theme throughout the course of the interviews centered on the evolving maturity that took place for most of the ECHS students. While maturity occurred naturally as the students aged and progressed within the ECHS, the administrators noted that being on the college campus served as a catalyst in helping students mature academically, emotionally, and socially.

Dr. Shedd answered,

Well, the early college students that I have run across are very mature. Like I said, they are generally the leaders. I remember the first year I came, I was really amazed by the leadership that I saw on the campus from the early college students. One of them had a regional position with PTK. They were just out there, out front. When we went to _____ County, they were the ones out talking to the students. When we went to games, they were the ones out front. So, like I said, in many ways, in many perspectives, they are leading the charge, somewhat more so than the traditional college students. So, they're out there, and I'm very proud of them.

Mrs. Wood stated,

Of course, the early college starts off in the ninth grade, and I teach the College Study Skills for the 9th grade students. I'm glad that they take that class starting off because I have to baby them and kind of hold them by the hand because they are not used to submitting course work in a timely manner. I have to keep them on track to ensure that they are able to complete their course work in a timely manner to basically prepare them for the additional courses that they would take. I can honestly say that once they go through those two grade levels, 9th and 10th grade, they're practically ready for 11th and 12th grade because they know what to expect from the instructors in the courses that they are taking.

Dr. Green answered,

When it came to academics, when it came to studying for finals, knowing what the instructor wanted it, getting it, acing (tests) or beating out that paper, they were very mature. They were mature academically, they were serious, they were focused. Socially

and behaviorally, there were some issues. They're a little shy, and they're not speaking up...I think that speaks to maturity.

Mrs. Sabine answered,

You've got kids who are really, really mature. We don't have to keep our thumbs on them too much. Then you've got kids who are not as mature, they're not used to having to advocate for themselves and to take care of things on their own, and they need more support. I guess probably the challenge is just finding the level of support that every kid needs without being either overbearing or too hands-off.

Dr. Smith stated,

I've been pleasantly surprised, in general, by the general population of early college students in that, in my opinion, they have stepped up socially, emotionally, and academically in terms of maturity. They've gone to conferences; they've been able to present papers. It's like they get to really step up and think about things in a way that requires them to think a little bit more maturely than they would have otherwise. And, I think in general, the group steps up. Individually, you still from time to time have a cut up. In the beginning, it was really like pulling teeth and trying to prod them, and get them to step up. And then, all of a sudden, a light would click with them, and they would hit it, then blow it out the top, really do well. Any of the issues that we have ever had with discipline, there have been very few of them. We've probably had two instances in six years where we would discipline someone in such a way that the school district removed them from the program and took them back. To me, they began to mature a little bit faster. When I say that they mature, I don't mean that they become an immediate adult. I just mean they got much closer to what our traditional aged college students were, what

we had typically seen before of our normal freshmen and sophomores, how they would be by the time they were with us for a couple of years and getting ready to transfer. We could see maturity happening. In a matter of time, we began to see some maturity in them already.

Interview Question 8: What Role Does the Students' Experience in the ECHS Setting Have in Terms of College Readiness and/or Their Ability to Successfully Matriculate in Further Postsecondary Endeavors Upon Receiving Their Associate Degree?

All of the interview participants noted the tremendous impact that the ECHS experience played in preparing the students for both university transfer and future academic achievement. Academically, the early college graduates were largely prepared for their next chapter. All of the administrators noted that the rigor the students experienced at the community college laid a solid foundation for graduation and then transfer. Of equal or greater importance was the students' ability to navigate collegiate life outside of the classroom. The administrators explained that the self-advocacy attained within the early college model proved as valuable as the classroom experience.

Mrs. Sabine stated,

One of the things that I would say about our students that I guess maybe I was surprised about, by the time they get through here, they're very comfortable on a college campus. They know where to go for things, they know when to go to the business office, when to go to admissions, when they need to see the registrar, kind of how scheduling works. I guess more than anything, is just their level of comfort with being away from home and on a college campus would probably be much higher than your traditional student. I think the most important things is that they've learned to advocate for themselves. They are

less dependent on a parent to do it for them, or even sometimes us, as staff members. They know how to contact an instructor if they're having problems. They know to go to the writing center if they want to improve work on their papers or get feedback. They are just better at navigating the whole experience.

Dr. Shedd answered,

I think it plays a huge impact because they're on our campus. They are getting that experience of being with college professors who are going to give them the rigor that they need and that they desire so that when they go on to another institution, when they do transfer, they know what it's like. So, they've gotten the head start, they're not going to be shocked. They know how to be independent. But also, the resources that are available for them should they need any assistance, so they're going to know who to go to. They're taught how to reach out to the counselors, to reach out to different offices to get the help that they need. So, they learn how to be independent while doing their learning, and I think that's something that many traditional high school students probably miss out on. You have that little bit of freedom, but you're not all the way free to do what you want. So, when you do step into that college, to the higher next level, you're totally free, but you have that experience.

Dr. Green shared,

So, I think it did for our students. And, what is does is there's increased rigor, so they're used to digging in early. What they've done is they cultivated grit, that's it. That's what I'm looking for. They've cultivated some grit because of their experience. They've cultivated far more discipline, and they've taking that with them to the universities or

four-year colleges that they're attending. So, I think the experience gives, I think, that confidence that I wanted to see more of.

Mrs. McLemore answered,

The benefits, students repeatedly, will tell me, this helped me get ready for the university. It helped me with expectations, it helped me balance, it makes me feel like I'm getting ahead. It builds a lot of self-confidence for them, what they can do, and their goals and expectations. It's always beautiful to watch how their expectations of themselves evolve.

Mrs. Wood answered,

First off, we all know that community colleges actually prepare students to get to point B in life at the university level. So, students who are in the early college, they actually can experience all four years of an actual college, community college life. I feel like that helps the students prepare for the next step into the university life on the community college level. So, they basically are able to experience more years on a college campus versus the average regular high school student. So, I feel that it actually prepares the students better in the early college level versus a regular student at the regular high school.

Dr. Smith answered,

Well, from what anecdotal information I've learned so far is that I think it really helps. Even our regular college students struggle from time to time in their transfer process. I don't think that I'm prepared to say that they've done better than our traditional college students that transfer, but I would say that they do as well or better than a student that would have gone to that same university right off the bat. They're much more ready for the rigor of the class because they've taken more dual enrollment classes than the typical

high school student has. Between 80 and 85% of our students leave here with an Associate's degree from their experience in early college, so they're prepared to do better. I think for the most part, I would say they are a lot more academically ready than they traditional aged high school student that would start as a freshman in college. For the most part, I think the early college kids leave us probably with a little bit, possibly even a little bit more preparedness than our traditional transfer do. They've been with us for four years. They've been on the campus, and they've had a lot of exposure to different stuff. I think the model of them being embedded on the college campus the whole time for four years makes a big difference when they get ready to do the next thing.

The results suggest that the ECHS students are well prepared for the rigor of university courses, navigating both in and out of the classroom, and the transfer process. While the youngest of the ECHS students were described as immature in some cases, throughout the course of enrollment within the early college model, the students were celebrated by the administrators for their academic, social, and emotional maturity. According to the participants, this maturity translated successfully post-graduation. The students were described as being capable of navigating the many challenges of the college experience and transfer process as well or better than some of their more traditional peers.

Summary

Overall, the results suggest that the ECHS model positively benefits the students, the community college, and the community at large. Themes indicated throughout the research were: access and opportunity, student achievement, evolving maturity, navigating college/college readiness, benefits to the community college, and community pride. Partnerships with local school districts and other stakeholders posed a challenge during the implementation phase, but

with communication and time, questions were answered and most hesitancy subsided. This, in turn, enabled the collaboration with the community colleges and local school districts to begin. Faculty, like other stakeholders, had concerns prior to implementation, however, the administrators noted that they quickly began to see benefits with the new initiative in terms of enrollment, instructor pay, and classroom engagement. Perceptions of the academic performance indicated by the administrators included heightened achievement, a sense of determination among the students, and improvement as compared to their high school experience. The power of place, defined as a new learning environment, new pedagogical methods, and heightened expectations, seemed to resonate with students during this transitional period and helped facilitate maturity and success within the model. In most cases, traditional college students either did not know that some of their classmates were part of the ECHS, or it was a non-issue. The results indicate that upon graduation, the early college students are well prepared for transfer, the rigor of university courses, and navigating college life both in and out of the classroom. Lastly, the interviews showcase how meaningful the opportunities provided by the ECHS model were to, not only students, but the community at large. A sense of pride and achievement was shared by local stakeholders outside of the ECHS.

CHAPTER V

DISCUSSION

This chapter will summarize the results of the study including the purpose of the study, significant findings, and an explanation of the findings. Discussion of the findings and conclusions regarding the administrators' perceptions of the early college high school model will follow. Next, limitations will be addressed. The chapter will conclude with recommendations for practitioners, policymakers, and future research.

The purpose of this study was to determine if the ECHS model is viable template and tool to serve students in Mississippi. Located on community college campuses, the ECHS allows high school students to earn both a high school diploma and an Associate degree consecutively at little or no cost to the student. While the model has become prominent in several states, Mississippi's efforts to implement the ECHS model have yet to be fully examined. For this study, community college administrators who work in close proximity to the early colleges on their campuses shared their perceptions of the model. The perspectives of these campus leaders are intended to help policymakers assess the partnerships and potential benefits of the ECHS in the state.

Summary of Results

Several significant findings were derived from the interviews. The six primary themes present throughout the entirety of the research were: access and opportunity, student achievement, evolving maturity, navigating college/college readiness, benefits to the community

college, and community pride. All participants unequivocally viewed the ECHS model as a means of providing educational access and opportunities to students in areas of the state in which local school districts have struggled. All administrators viewed the ECHS as a combative force against the problems within the local districts. Elevated student performance and achievement, in spite of leaving the familiarity of the high schools and enrolling into rigorous college courses, represented shared themes among the administrators. The power of place, as specifically described by one administrator, resonated with students and helped facilitate maturity and success within the ECHS model. Partly because of that, serious discipline concerns and student attrition within the model at all three campuses were almost non-existent. In the majority of cases, faculty bought into the initiative once they realized the benefits to students and the community college. The research indicated that the early college students were perceived in a positive manner by the traditional students attending the community college. Also, the interviews presented a critical narrative linking the early college model to successful matriculation at the community college, graduation, and university transfer.

Two other significant findings were prominent within the research. The first centered on the effects of student achievement and the community. Mrs. McLemore and Dr. Green explained on multiple occasions how meaningful the students' success within the ECHS was and what it meant to the areas that they represented. The other interviewees shared similar thoughts. The access created by the early colleges and the Associate degrees that they produced genuinely seemed to resonate throughout the communities as a source of pride toward its next generation of leaders.

The next significant finding related to overcoming challenges. In most instances, challenges regarding the early college model arose as soon as the implementation process began.

Throughout the interviews, the administrators discussed challenges almost as frequently as they described the many benefits that they perceived. Challenges addressed included implementation of the model, buy-in from the school districts and other local stakeholders, communication, selecting the particular framework or structure of the ECHS, modifying the structure when needed, the maturity of the students, and faculty perceptions. In practically every scenario, however, the multitude of challenges were recognized, addressed, and eventually transitioned into a solution or resolution. No single challenge related specifically to the ECHS as described by the administrators proved to be a permanent barrier. In fact, several of the challenges, such as modifying the framework of the ECHS and faculty perceptions were ultimately perceived to enhance the model.

Discussion of Findings

The first research question examined perceptions of the administrators at community colleges regarding the benefits and challenges of the ECHSs on their campuses. The findings suggest that administrators in Mississippi overwhelmingly believe in the early college template as an innovative resource for removing educational barriers and fostering success. Benefits described during the interviews include new educational opportunities, heightened achievement, academic and social maturity, burgeoning self-confidence among the students, increased enrollment and FTE, community pride, and university preparation; all of which were precursors along the path to students earning an Associate degree.

Results of this study are consistent with existing research regarding early college high schools that has been produced in the last 15 years. In his analysis of community college presidents' perceptions of the model, Chambers (2009) noted that campus leaders in North Carolina also described overwhelmingly positive feedback when questioned about the benefits of

the ECHS. In particular, the presidents noted that the early colleges increased access to education and college readiness. Administrators in Mississippi replicated those sentiments. The results are also consistent with patterns found in both Ayers (2017) and Mathis (2020) whose research addressed topics such as creativity and innovation as it relates to meeting students' needs, increasing revenues for the colleges, and ensuring student success. Mathis (2020) explained how accessibility and increased achievement provided a solution for removing attainment gaps in underrepresented areas. Her analysis aligns with the results described at Mississippi's early colleges.

Various challenges associated with the model were described by all six administrators. Challenges included implementation, partnerships, students leaving the familiarity of their local high schools, increased responsibility, course rigor, and navigating college life. These findings replicate challenges described by Thompson and Ongaga (2011) throughout their research on the ECHS model. They described how implementation, partnerships with school districts, and course rigor were challenges from the onset of the initiative. Specifically, their themes regarding local support and classroom innovation mirror the results of this study.

The second research question examined perceptions of the administrators at the community colleges regarding their faculty. The administrators stated that in almost every case, once instructors saw the ECHS model in place, they were pleased with the final product. The benefits noted by the faculty members were vast. They included new and innovative academic opportunities for students, a reenergized classroom environment, increased enrollment, overload pay, and a joy shared by many of the instructors upon seeing the students be successful. Dr. Shedd stated, "I think that the instructors that I have talked with are really encouraged to see high school students at the level that they are at. It's something that they're proud to see."

Participants noted challenges as well. Challenges as perceived by the faculty members were described primarily during the implementation phase of the ECHS. The administrators noted general apprehension from faculty as word began to spread about the new initiative. Also, prior to implementation, the maturity level of students and other classroom expectations were a source of anxiety for the instructors. Additional challenges perceived by faculty within the framework included minor behavioral issues, increased parental involvement, and coursework/time management. These findings are consistent with existing research regarding faculty within the ECHS model. Chambers (2009) and Kisker (2006) addressed community college instructors' perceptions of challenges. Chambers (2009) described how faculty questioned maturity and student readiness in terms of college level courses prior to the early college's implementation. Kisker (2006) noted that some of the faculty she studied in California expressed dissatisfaction with students' academic performance. While none of the administrators in Mississippi described widespread dissatisfaction, in the early stages academic performance was perceived to be an imminent challenge among faculty. In the majority of cases, however, academic performance was not deemed a problem at Mississippi's ECHS.

The third research question explored the partnerships involved in the ECHS model. For Mississippi schools, this included the community colleges and local school districts. Based on the interviews, it is apparent that each community college was proactive regarding implementation on their campuses and working with local districts. Ideas and additional coordination about implementation came from other state agencies that were familiar with the ECHS framework.

Scholarship in recent years has examined partnerships between community colleges and local school districts. Klopfenstein and Lively (2012) maintained that dual enrollment programs

helped establish formal agreements outlining collaboration among the local colleges and school districts. As dual credit offerings became commonplace across the country, communication and collaboration grew between postsecondary institutions, school districts, and other community stakeholders. Dassance (2011) noted increased partnerships among colleges and high schools as a means of addressing themes such as student preparedness, enrollment opportunities, and innovative pedagogical methods. Likewise, Mansell and Justice (2014) recommended that community colleges and school districts increase and strengthen their collaborative efforts in order to best serve students, parents, and community members. Thompson and Ongaga (2011) indicated that often constraints with school districts sometimes limit partnerships or additional agreements with the community colleges. Despite challenges, however, Mathis (2020) implored community college and school district leaders to continue to engage one another in order to create a shared vision for the future.

The results in Mississippi largely mirror the previous research conducted across the nation on community college and high school partnerships. The benefits of the collaboration in the state proved to be immense; academic opportunities, increased access, and student success were three of the positive outcomes perceived by the administrators. The challenges included hesitancy from the school districts, cultivation of buy-in regarding the ECHS model, and general communication concerns. Overall, once the hesitancy and questions pertaining to the model were discussed among the stakeholders, the community colleges in Mississippi were able to implement the plans.

The fourth research question examined the administrators' perceptions regarding the performance of the ECHS students. The interview participants made it clear that the early college students on their campuses perform at an average or above average standard in their college

courses. The nonprofit organization Jobs for the Future (2016) stated that 90% of students within the ECHS model complete high school as compared to 78% of high school students nationally. The report added that higher percentages of early college completers matriculate beyond graduation versus their peers in traditional high schools. Likewise, Mississippi's administrators noted that the ECHS students often perform at a much higher pace than their former cohort of classmates at the high schools. Also, the ECHS students were described as being generally on par with their traditional community college classmates.

Byrd and MacDonald (2005) noted that approximately 41% of students enrolling at community colleges were not academically prepared for transferable English and math credits. They added that other skills such as time management, goal prioritization, and self-advocacy often directly impact students' academic progress. Similar challenges were noted in Mississippi as well. In most instances shared by administrators, however, academic preparedness, nonacademic skills affecting progress, and general performance represented issues that were successfully addressed within the model. Time management and self-advocacy, in particular, were highlighted as two important components that evolved throughout the students' ECHS experience.

The fifth research question examined how the ECHS students were perceived by other community college students. While the ECHS model is a relatively new initiative, high school students have been taking college level classes for decades. Born (2006) explained that dual enrollment agreements with high schoolers learning on college campuses date back to the 1970s. Taylor (2015) stated that 98% of community colleges offer dual enrollment/dual credit opportunities for high school students, indicating the prominence and the value of these local partnerships. During implementation of the model in Mississippi, one administrator noted that

some traditional community college students were uneasy about sharing classes with younger students. In time, however, all administrators shared that similar sentiments had been largely erased, thanks in part to the familiarity of dually enrolled students. Grades 9 and 10 of the early college were described as mostly self-contained; therefore, these students had limited contact with traditional students. The results indicated that in many cases traditional students were not aware of which classmates participated in the early college, or it was perceived to be a non-issue if and when traditional students became aware.

The final research question explored the early college's role in preparing students for additional postsecondary coursework. Hoffman et al. (2009) noted the correlation between higher schoolers having access to rigorous collegiate level classes and familiarization with the college experience. The authors described the success rates for these students in Florida measured by college matriculation. In a similar manner, administrators in Mississippi were adamant that the ECHS model more than adequately prepared students for the rigor of college courses and university transfer. Also, the model assisted students in navigating collegiate responsibilities outside of the classroom such time management, securing financial aid, and the utilization of writing labs and tutoring centers. The results of this study suggest that the self-advocacy instilled within the early college served students well both in and out of the classroom upon graduation. Additional qualitative and quantitative studies might assist in measuring the progress of early college graduates enrolling into universities.

Limitations

The amount of time that each administrator had worked within the model posed a potential threat to internal reliability. One participant had only spent approximately two years working with the ECHS framework, therefore knowledge regarding the origins of the partnership

and implementation could be limited. Other participants had worked at the community college prior to and during the implementation of the early college and were supporters of implementation, therefore their biases may have influenced their perceptions. Also, the utilization of WebEx and Zoom technologies limited observation and other qualitative components of the research.

- One administrator inherited an ECHS model in which her knowledge regarding the origin of implementation and partnerships may be limited. Other interview participants played proactive roles in the implementation of the ECHS on their campuses; their biases may influence their perceptions.
- WebEx and Zoom technology limited observation and other qualitative components of research.

General Recommendations for Practitioners and Policymakers

The results of this study are indicative of several factors. First, mutual understanding and a shared vision between the community colleges and school districts during the planning stage are imperative in order to mitigate challenges during and after implementation. Mutual understanding and a shared vision also apply to the relationship between the community college leaders and their faculty; the research suggests that faculty are largely in favor of the model, however, additional conversations in the planning stages might help to foster buy-in, define expectations, and limit challenges. Next, it is recommended that practitioners and policymakers understand the social, economic, and political climate of their communities. While the literature review helped to define certain characteristics of Mississippi regarding poverty and education, the ECHS model may not represent a one-size-fits-all template for success throughout the state. The data suggest that familiarity with college level courses does assist high schoolers in

preparing for postsecondary education. High performing high schools, for instance, might utilize other versions of college/school district partnerships to best serve their students; those conversations need to take place between college leaders and superintendents. Last, the research indicates that high school students who have access to college-level courses have reaped many academic, social, and emotional benefits in recent years. School districts and community colleges that are not actively engaging in or pursuing some form of partnership might be doing a disservice to themselves, their students, and their communities.

In summary, the following aspects should be considered:

- A mutual vision should exist for school districts and community colleges.
- A similar vision regarding expectations should exist between community colleges and faculty.
- Practitioners should understand their local social, economic, and political climate when crafting models and partnerships.
- The benefits of the partnerships are abundant and have been for years; schools districts and community colleges should determine what model best suits their community.

Recommendations for Future Research

Due to the expansion of high school/community college partnerships in recent years, future research should be conducted to assess the ECHS model both in Mississippi and other states. The model in Mississippi is now over 6 years old, and as students continue to matriculate through the ECHS, additional qualitative and quantitative data will become available to help measure outcomes produced by the model. Examining these results will help quantify the value of ECHS in the state. Future quantitative and qualitative research would be helpful to determine

any noticeable distinctions exist between ECHS students and their former high school classmates and ECHS students and their traditional classmates at the community college. Also, additional qualitative and quantitative studies might assist in measuring the progress of ECHS graduates enrolling into universities.

While this study examined qualitative components of implementation, future researchers may find it beneficial to limit their scope to just one area of the collaboration. A fully quantitative or mixed methods analysis mirroring the breadth of this study would be helpful in determining the value of ECHS in Mississippi. If community colleges continue to represent a backdrop for future studies on ECHS, perhaps data examining career and technical education (CTE) programs, student success, and postgraduation outcomes should be considered.

Partnerships and models similar to ECHS exist in Mississippi (e.g., middle colleges, Mississippi Gulf Coast Community College's Collegiate Academy, etc.); future qualitative or quantitative studies should assess the outcomes of these models as well. The following recommendations are suggested for future studies:

- Qualitative and quantitative analysis of distinctions between ECHS students and their former classmates at the high school;
- Qualitative and quantitative analysis of distinctions between ECHS students and their traditional classmates at the community college;
- Qualitative analysis of the implementation process;
- Qualitative analysis of student matriculation within the model ;
- Qualitative and quantitative analysis of student outcomes upon graduation of the ECHS and university transfer;
- Quantitative analysis or a mixed methods approach to examine the ECHS model as a whole;

- Qualitative or quantitative study focused on CTE programs and the model; and
- Qualitative or quantitative study focused on similar models in Mississippi.

Summary

This chapter examined the results of the study, a discussion of the findings, and recommendations for practitioners and future researchers. Significant findings included the universally positive responses from the administrators regarding their perceptions of the ECHS model and its impact on students, the colleges, benefits and challenges of the model, and the communities that the schools serve. Increased access, opportunity, maturity, and student achievement represent a partial list of attributes described by the administrators in their discussions of the model and the ways in which this particular template benefits students. Additional research focused on community college/high school partnerships in Mississippi and other states would strengthen the overall scholarship regarding these relationships and assist practitioners, policymakers, researchers, and other stakeholders as decisions regarding this or similar models are implemented going forward.

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APPENDIX A
IRB APPROVAL

Protocol ID: IRB-21-392

Principal Investigator: Stephanie King

Protocol Title: Early College High Schools and Community College Partnerships: Perceptions of Community College Administrators in Mississippi

Review Type: EXEMPT

Approval Date: September 09, 2021

Expiration Date: September 08, 2026

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