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Students' Learning Experiences in an Early College High School

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Early College High Schools (ECHS) are at the forefront of high school reform embodying the principles of rigor, relationship, and relevance. This study examines students' learning experiences in the context of relationships and rigor at an ECHS. Specifically, I investigate factors that influence students to attend an ECHS, what they attribute to their academic success, and the challenges they experience. I draw upon data from individual and focus group interviews with students at one 3-year-old ECHS in southeastern North Carolina.

Like other small high school models, the Early College High School Initiative (ECHSI) started off with limited research to support its main principle: that the core high school curriculum could be compressed and successfully completed in 2 years. To date, much of ECHSI research has focused on the establishment and implementation of early college high schools (ECHS; American Institutes for Research [AIR] & SRI International, 2003; Shear et al., 2008; SRI International & AIR, 2002, 2005b). However, there is a paucity of research on students' learning experiences in this new high school model. What is it that influences students to join an early college and what do they attribute to their academic success? This study uses the ECHSI framework of rigor and relationship to examine these questions in one early college high school in southeastern North Carolina.

MAPLE EARLY COLLEGE PROFILE

A review of documents from Maple Early College High School (MECHS) shows that it was established in 2006–2007 with funding from Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation and in partnership with the local university. MECHS started off with a total cohort of 78 students and staff consisting of a principal, 10 teachers, a program director, a counselor, and a local university liaison. Its first graduating class is scheduled for 2009–2010 academic year. Currently, it has 254 students, of which 43% and 57% are male and female, respectively. Twenty-nine percent are minority and 71% are White. The first-generation college goers form 44% of the student population.

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MECHS is a rigorous academic school offering only honors-level academic classes, which students are required to complete in their freshman and sophomore years. Classes include English I, II, III, and IV; Earth and Environmental Science; Biology; Chemistry I and II; World History, Civics, US History, & African American Studies; Algebra I, Algebra II, Geometry, Trigonometry, Discrete, Pre Calculus, and Calculus; and Latin I and II. Students can elect to take either Health and PE or Digital Communications I and II. In accordance with the ECHS concept, there are no opportunities for students to engage in extracurricular activities such as sports, arts, and music. They start taking college classes at their junior year with the potential to earn up to 60 credit hours upon graduation. College courses take the place of high school AP classes.

A review of 2008–2009 data for seniors taking classes in the university affiliated to MECHS show that students have an average high school weighted grade point average of 3.8 and a mean university grade point average of 2.8. Sixteen students are on the dean's list, 3 are named for the Chancellor Award, and there are 2 National Merit Scholars finalist. One thing that has made MECHS students visible in the community is the requirement that every year each student completes 50 documented hr of community service. Data on how each subgroup performs were beyond the scope of this study.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Several studies (e.g., AIR & SRI International, 2007; Bryk & Schneider, 2002; Coalition of Essentials Schools, 2000; Lee, et al., 1999; National High School Alliance, 2008; Sebring & Bryk, 2000; Sizer, 1992; Swanson, 2004) show that the concept of ECHSI advanced by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation rests on a knowledge base that a rigorous and accelerated learning experience with close supportive and respectful school environment is a strong precursor to student success. The foundation's vision of a new kind of high school, according to Tom Vander Ark, the foundation's education director, will allow "even those students most at risk of school failure [to] perform at very high levels, given the right conditions: much smaller schools, teacher teamwork, a personalized learning environment, and many more opportunities for applied and hands-on learning" (Wagner & Vander Ark, as cited in Shear et al., 2008, p. 1993). A synthesis of ECHSI core principles model (Jobs for the Future, 2003) states,

> Early college schools blend high school and college in a rigorous, yet supportive program, compressing the time it takes to complete a high school diploma and the first two years of college. . . . They are designed so that low-income youth, first-generation college goers, English language learners, students of color, and other young people underrepresented in higher education can simultaneously earn a high school diploma and one to two years of transferable college credit—tuition free.

This model promotes small high schools characterized by the new three R's: rigor, relationships, and relevance (Shear et al., 2008). The three R's, according to an executive summary drawn from three reports evaluating Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation's high school grants (SRI International & AIR, 2005b), are derived from fundamental attributes of effective teaching and learning. The attributes include personalization, respect and responsibility, high expectations, performance-based decision-making, use of technology, common focus, and time to collaborate.

Rigor, in this model, implies a challenging academic program and experience that prepares all students for college, work, and citizenship (Mitchell et al., 2005; Shear et al., 2008). North

Carolina's Department of Public Instruction views academic rigor as an essential non-negotiable characteristic of effective curriculum, instruction, and assessment. It argues that students learn when they are challenged to use the full range of their talents and intellectual abilities to address authentic and complex academic tasks in professional and real-life events. According to the National High School Alliance (2006), rigor encompasses a variety of tools and strategies:

- Minimum graduation requirements that prepare students for college
- High-level content and instruction
- Wide range of supports for students to help them succeed
- Alignment of requirements with postsecondary education and work

Closely related to rigor is relevance. According to Shear et al. (2008), relevance denotes studies students find engaging and meaningful to their current and future lives. Relevance is distinguished by instructional contexts where students are challenged and supported to address questions or problems with real-world applications, make choices about what they will study and how they will study it, and engage in plausible writing roles that they present to real audiences (AIR & SRI International, 2006; American Diploma Project, 2004; Bridgeland, Dilulio, & Morison, 2006; Marsh, McCombs, & Naftel, 2008).

In terms of relationships, proponents of ECHSI advocate for close, supportive, and positive relationships between and among teachers and students (Shear et al., 2008). Such relationships should be characterized by respect, responsibility, and personalization (AIR & SRI International, 2005; Allensworth & Easton, 2007; Bryk, Lee, & Holland, 1993; Chicago Annenberg Challenge, 1994; Coalition of Essential Schools, 2000; George & Aronson, 2003; Sebring et al., 1996). Relationships can serve as a vehicle for "influencing academic identity, convincing students that they are capable of performing at high levels, and getting seemingly unmotivated students to come to school, stay in school, complete assignments, participate in class, and persist on the face of academic challenges" (Saphier, Haley-Speca, & Gower, 2008, p. 319). Besides, relationships can offer students valuable academic or professional role models and be a driving force that motivates or empowers them to succeed (National Research Council and the Institute of Medicine, 2004).

Schools with this kind of relationships are places where adults both model and expect interactions based on trust and personal responsibility and allow teachers to individualize instruction to better meet students' academic needs. The key to effective rigorous instruction and learning, argues Saphier et al. (2008), resides in acknowledging, respecting, and valuing students and having them know that people care about them, that what they are learning matters, and that they possess the skills and necessary potential to meet a given challenge.

Teachers in this model are expected to be part of a professional community taking joint responsibility for the school and working together to improve their practice and students learning experiences (Darling-Hammond, Ancess, & Wichterle, 2002; Marks, Secada, & Doane, 1996; SRI International & AIR, 2005a). In addition, teachers can use relationships as leverage to help students transcend difficult and troubling times, develop personal discipline, and reconnect when they are at risk of dropping out (Ancess, 2003; Steinberg, Johnson, & Pennington, 2006; Strayhorn, 2004; Wolk, 2005).

Adaptation of these attributes is assumed to make early college high schools "inviting places where students and adults know each other well and pursue a common mission based on high academic achievement for all students, and where professional community is collaborative and

student focused" (SRI International & AIR, 2005b, p. 2). The three R's largely address factors that make small learning communities successful and not necessarily those that students attribute to their successful learning experiences. This article examined students' learning experiences in the context of relationships and rigor at MECHS in southeastern North Carolina.

METHODOLOGY

This case study is part of a larger research effort that is assessing the first 3 years of MECHS. The study examines students' learning experiences, particularly those factors that influence them to attend an early college, those they attribute to their academic success, and challenges they encounter. I first met with the MECHS school principal and university liaison to obtain a list of potential students whom they felt represented the diversity of the school's population. The principal, who repeatedly referred to her students as "the diamonds in the rough," and the liaison, who stated that "they cannot succeed if they don't come back," also expressed strong interest to understand what "made the students to wake up every school day and come to a small school that did not offer opportunities for extracurricular activities such as sports, arts and music as is the case in most traditional high schools." I used the following questions to guide the study:

1. What factors influence students to attend an early college high school?
2. What factors do students attribute to their academic success in this early college high school?
3. What challenges do students experience in this early college high school?

To answer these questions, I used a qualitative case study design (Merriam, 1998; Yin, 1994), appropriate for intensive, in-depth examination of complex phenomena, such as factors students consider to join an early college, those that support and engage them academically and those that constrain their learning (LeCompte & Preissle, 1993). Data were collected for a period of 1 month from students through individual and focus group interviews (Krueger, 1994; Spradley, 1979) and document analysis (Glesne & Peshkin, 1992).

A focus group's major advantage over other approaches is the greater depth, breadth, and degree of complexity of data collected (Goldman & McDonald, 1987; Krueger, 1994; Morgan, 1996). Focus group interviews are "fundamentally a qualitative data gathering technique . . . that relies upon the systematic questioning of several individuals simultaneously in a formal or informal setting" (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000, p. 650). As a method of data collection, focus groups are a "collectivistic rather than an individualistic research method that focuses on the multivocality of participants' attitudes, experiences, and beliefs" (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000, p. 836). They are essentially interviews conducted with groups of "individuals . . . [who] are well informed about the research topic" (Gall, Gall, & Borg, 2007, p. 244). Focus group discussions are "comfortable and often enjoyable for participants as they share their ideas and perceptions" (Krueger, 1994, p. 6). They reveal "the extent to which there is a relatively consistent, shared view or great diversity of views" (Patton, 2002, p. 386). Further, focus groups are also relatively inexpensive to conduct and "often produce rich data that are cumulative and elaborative; they can be stimulating for respondents, aiding recall; and the format is flexible" (p. 652).

To select cases that are likely to be information rich with respect to the purpose of the study (Gall et al., 2007), I sought the help of the school principal and used purposive sampling

(Patton, 2002) to select 21 participants. The selection was based on racial ethnicity, academic performance, socioeconomic status, and first-generation college goers. The sample included 7 African Americans, 11 White, and 3 non-native English speakers. Fourteen of these respondents were first-generation college goers, and 15 were on free and reduced lunch. In the sample were students who were considered "high flyers" and those who were not projected to succeed by their middle schools.

Seven of the selected students were in 9th grade (Cohort 3), eight in 10th grade (Cohort 2), and the remaining six in 11th grade (Cohort 1). At the time of the interview, cohort I students were taking courses at the university partnered with MECHS. Cohort 2 and 3 students were interviewed in three focus groups each comprising 5 participants, whereas Cohort 1 participants were interviewed individually. I encouraged all participants to speak freely and to articulate their perspectives to me and each other, understanding that many within the groups would be of the same opinion.

Interview questions were organized around a set of categories that explored student experiences and perspectives within the framework of relationships and rigor and relevance. The questions were both open-ended and semistructured, providing participants with opportunities to pose questions and shift directions to better understand their complex perspectives and experiences. Focus groups and individual interviews lasted for about 50 min. With prior participant permission, each interview was tape recorded and transcribed verbatim for analysis.

Data analysis began at the start of data collection and continued to evolve as I gathered insight into factors that influence students to choose an ECHS and what they attribute to their academic success and the challenges they experience. The process of analysis from initial transcription and descriptive coding to the deeper aspects of analysis of emergent themes, relationships across and between transcript data, and their relationship to the conceptual frame of rigor and relationships and guiding questions represented a continuous and reiterative process from beginning to the end (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000; Glesne, 1992; Miles & Huberman, 1994).

FINDINGS

Three broad themes emerged from the data: family influence, caring relationships, and challenges.

Family Influence

Family influence was a key factor in some students' decisions to join MECHS, although often-times this was a decision students did not support. According to most participants, the idea of compressing the high school curriculum into 2 years and cutting down on college costs by 2 years greatly influenced their families' decisions. Keana's description was similar to that expressed by other students.

> My mom made me. Initially, I did not want to come here 'cause a lot of my friends had gone to my home school and they were involved in sports. I did not like it at the beginning but now I really like it. I have a lot of friends here and college is almost a reality. (Keana, personal communication, June 2009)

For others like Akisha (personal communication, May 2009), it was a joint decision with their parents to join MECHS. "I liked the idea of completing high school in a record two years and my parents could not resist the two years of tuition free college credits." Dwyne (focus group communication, June, 2009), who plays basketball for a local club, narrated his dilemma to join MECHS:

> When the principal came to our school (8th grade), she was saying that it [ECHS] was an opportunity to get a college education, mostly for underprivileged kids. And she said it is a paperless school, you are given a computer that digitally carries all textbooks. At first I thought, I don't want to go there because they've no sports. I play sports . . . I want to be Mr. Basketball. But, I went home and thought hard. . . . It might be a way of getting to college.

Dwyne's dilemma was shared by other students, who decided to choose the promise of going to college over sports. The influence of their peers who were already attending an early college bolstered their confidence to join an early college.

> My friends told me it is a good small school. Plus, I wanted to avoid high school drama where I hear most students are slackers and teachers don't care. I wanted a small school where I can find myself and where teachers see and treat me as an individual. (Thomas, focus group communication, June 2009)

The desire for most students to get an opportunity to play sports waned quickly during the week-long freshman seminar, which orients them to the school curriculum and gives them a chance to start building relationships among themselves and their teachers.

Caring Relationships

One of the guiding research questions was to understand what students attribute to their academic success once they join an ECHS. Analysis of student responses revealed that caring relationships hugely contributed to their academic success. The relationships, operating at three levels occurred between teachers and students, among peers, and between students and their families.

Teacher–Student Relationships

Participants indicated that teachers supported them to take responsibility in making decisions about their priorities, including managing their time, self-awareness, success, values and relationships. They described their teachers as "caring," "confidants," "fair," and "trustworthy." Love, a rising senior and college sophomore shared, "Without teachers who took time to know me, pushed me, and cared about me, I wouldn't have had a chance to be here [university]." Some students shared that the help they got from teachers transcended the formal teacher-learner box. "During tough and rough times, sometimes away from school, I have approached them for assistance and they have not hesitated to help" (Tyke, personal communication, June 2009). Others felt valued when they realized that teachers treated them as individuals:

> We have one-on-one relationships with our teachers, they know us well since we operate like family. They are not like my middle school teacher whom you could talk to like 50 times a day and the next

morning she is like, what is your name. Here, I feel loved, accepted and challenged. (Keoto, focus group communication, June 2009)

Participants revealed another aspect that was instrumental in their academic success: teachers who cared and took time to listen to their individual and collective needs and aspirations.

They sit down with you and they listen to you and ask how they can help . . . they really respect us and always acknowledge us whenever they see us. I trust my teachers because I guess they believe in me. (Ester, focus group communication, June 2009)

These interpersonal relations were marked by mutual respect, responsibility, common focus, and high expectations.

A majority of participants said that their teachers held them to high expectations and always emphasized that the key to academic success was "having a positive attitude" and putting forth the best effort. Students indicated that their teachers communicate their expectations clearly, make personal interactions with those who need further assistance, give positive feedback on their academic work, and show a sense of "I will not give up on you." To reciprocate, students put more effort to do well in their teachers' subject areas and care more about school. Ashley, a 10th-grade student, shared, "Most teachers know our academic potential, who we are as individuals, our strengths and weakness and as for me, their help has made me like school more than I cared in middle school." DeHann (focus group communication, June 2009), who seemed overwhelmed by the amount of workload due every week, said,

Being at MECHS means that if you don't manage your time and schedule your work well, you are basically going to be up until 3 AM, the night of when something is due. It is like a college course, other teachers don't lower their homework expectations just because you have a project in another class.

Similar sentiments were voiced by other students, like Jade (personal communication, June 2009), who liked his teachers' "direct wakeup calls" when he was not meeting grade-level expectations. "If I wasn't doing well, they [teachers] wouldn't sugarcoat anything, they would say 'you gonna fail,' you need to pick up the pace and a lot of it motivates me to work harder." This kind of relationship not only communicates high expectations for students but also helps create a personalized environment and enhances students' academic attitudes, levels of engagement, and a sense of confidence.

To help reach individual students who struggle in certain subjects, teachers created "Homework Clubs" to help students who failed to turn in their work as required or performed poorly on a test. Students remained after school for 1 hr and met on Fridays with their teachers for 2 hr to catch up with their school work. By so doing, students realized that their teachers wanted them to succeed academically.

Teachers here go above and beyond to help us past school hours, like in study halls. For example, Mr. Haverdins was very encouraging in calculus, which was very challenging to many of us. As a Black girl, I can say that they make me feel important and so I don't wanna fail in any subject. (Trumae, focus group communication, May 2009)

Student efforts and positive attitude tie in well with teacher expectations, commitment and support. In this context, student–teacher relationships seem to have created an environment where students felt valued, trusted, respected, encouraged, and challenged to succeed academically.

Peer Relationships

Respondents underscored the importance of peer relationships in their academic success and general learning experiences. Peer relationship is manifested in holding each other to high expectations, encouraging each other to come to school every day, staying in school, completing assignments and assigned projects, participating in class, and persisting on the face of academic challenges. All of these starts with MECHS encouraging important positive peer relationships, which promote socially competent behavior and fosters academic engagement and achievement. The relationships and support begin during the freshman summer camp and continue as students move as a cohort from one grade level to another. Because this is a small school, students also share the teachers for core courses, have the same teacher advisors who monitor their academic progress, and provide invaluable information and strategies to navigate the high school and the affiliate university. Hence, students consider themselves as a small learning community, a family:

> I cannot stress enough how important it is that MECHS students know each other and interact in ways that you cannot find in regular high schools. At MECHS, it is not so much of a stretch to talk to or get help from someone outside of your circle. We are really interconnected like a family. (Keon, focus group communication, June 2009)

At the academic level, students described how they support each other to complete homework:

> There are people in my class whom we work with together. One person is good at this and the other is good at that and you help each other. I know even outside of the classes I am taking, I have other friends who can help me relax when I get to something that I am a little less good at or if I am feeling really stressed out. (Italee, personal communication, June 2009)

In terms of holding each other to high expectations, one student shared the following:

> My friends here [at MECHS] in their own quirky little way are a support group. Because even though they don't always say it, just because of who I am, they expect me to do well, and if I don't, I'll hear about it. (Cleaves, personal communication, June 2009)

Peer relationships, in this context, help promote a safe learning environment, positive academic and social support, and a sense of belonging where students support and push each other toward high academic achievement.

Student–Parent Relationship

Besides school-based relationships, students viewed their parents' support as a vital source that enriched their learning experiences. The majority of students revealed that upon joining MECHS, their parents were more responsive to their school-related needs, appreciated their academic efforts, and helped motivate them to make responsible choices. Students like Kenishi appreciated their parents' sacrifices and struggles:

> My mom makes sure I do my work. She is the main reason I came here and she pushes me to come home with good grades. My mom is a nurse and a single parent. I see how much she struggles to make sure I have done well. I don't want to let her down and I also want a good life in future. (Kenishi, personal communication, June 2009)

Some participants indicated that their academic effort and good grades had greatly improved their families' relationships. Chester, a rising junior, shared his experience with his parents:

> During my parent's divorce, my brother and I moved a lot from one school to another. Since my freshman year, I call my dad every two weeks to update him of my academic performance. He was so impressed that he decided to move back with my mom to support our education. Now, if I needed to go to the library over the weekend, they would drive me there. If I were to meet a teacher or remain in school for tutoring, they would pick me up and not complain at all. (Chester, personal communication, June 2009)

It is evident that parents', teachers', and peers' caring relationships intersect and compliment each other to secure high levels of student commitment and investment in their academic success. However, students' learning experiences were not without challenges.

Challenges

Being a new start-up early college, I sought to understand factors that create difficulties for students' academic success. I categorize these as challenges. Freshman year seemed to challenge a majority of students in relation to rigor, implementation of an ECHS, lack of extracurricular activities, and social identity.

Rigor

Upon their admission to MECHS, student participants indicated that everybody expected them to be successful academically. However, the fast-paced curriculum, unfamiliar teachers, and teaching techniques created a challenging social environment that required them to develop new attitudes to adapt. This was the case for some students like Rebecca (focus group communication, May 2009):

> Our 9th grade was kind of rough, very overwhelming because we got thrust into a new environment with different teachers and we had a lot of homework. We had to learn how to get along with a bunch of different people, some whom you might not want to or you may not like, but you see . . . you are stuck with them for two years. Many of us realized that you kind of have to want to be here to succeed. The personal drive makes a difference. I had to learn to adjust and check my attitude.

For others, like Dosh (focus group communication, June 2009) who was influenced by his family to choose an ECHS, the rigor had made him vulnerable to dropping out of school.

> I think it was like in the second semester of my 9th-grade year, when I wanted to drop out. I kept failing like a main class. It was a core class I was failing and, man, I didn't feel like continuing to go to school when my grade wasn't reflecting . . . even if I did good in the class later, I kept feeling like my grade still won't be that good. I wanted to drop and go to my home high school and my friends didn't want me to.

Although a majority of students talked highly of their teachers and described their classes as engaging, a few students felt that some teachers needed to use a variety of teaching methods to "spice up their lessons":

> Some teachers, they just stand in front of the class and talk and students have different learning styles so sometimes they [students] need to see things and not just hear them. There are these three teachers, they just stand and talk in front of the class and I know for me it goes to one ear and gets out through the other. I have to go home and read the book because I don't know what you said in class. They need to have a really variety of teaching styles, a lot more. (Nancy-Marquise, focus group communication, June 2009)

Students, however felt engaged in subjects where teachers made their "classes fun [and] where . . . you are not just listening but involved in the discovery or learning process" (Makhaila, personal communication, June 2009). This challenge implies that students have an abiding interest in a certain subject depending on the teacher's instructional strategies.

On the other hand, a few minority students felt that some teachers, as much as they did not give up on them, had a "little attitude." They shared that some teachers had "very weird expectations, yet we are not used to that" (Devontee, focus group communication, June 2009). The teachers pushed them to complete classroom tasks and "accepted no excuses for work not done," he added. Valinda (focus group communication, May 2009), an African American girl, thought,

> Sometimes, I see brothers [black boys] out of control in class. We probably need black teachers here to land the plane [confront bad behavior]. Our teachers sometimes go a long way to say something very simple to these boys when they are disruptive. If we had a black teacher, I am sure he will not choose his words.

Incidents and dispositional feelings such as these showed that some African American students did not have such strong sense of identity without a black teacher with whom they may identify.

In addition, one may view these students' comments from a cultural standpoint or argue that they were ill prepared at their middle schools.

Creating an Early College

During the 1st year, while a new school campus was constructed, MECHS was housed in a portion of a run-down elementary school. Most participants said that they did not want to identify themselves with the school, and a few of them used lack of "social identity" as one of the reasons to drop out and go to their home high school. A Cohort 1 student, Stigler (personal communication, June 2009), captured the challenges:

> We also did not have our own building; we were housed in a wing of Floyd Elementary. We had chairs that when you sit on them they fall over and ceiling tiles that may or may not contain asbestos falling down on you. You have all this different kinds of things when you are in a learning environment, if you are trying to listen to a lecture and all of a sudden a ceiling tile falls on you. I remember we had at least five schedule changes weekly before someone figured out one that worked. We did not know what to expect. We kind of made it up as we went along. We were flying the plane as we build it.

At junior year, Cohort 1 students were thrust into a university environment that made some of them to express their concern on their competence and ability to handle its social life, including relationships. This was pronounced more by girls than boys. Geneva, a sophomore, observed, "I feel that I am academically ready for the university, but I don't know about socially or mentally." Such feelings raise an internal struggle of self-suspicion and engender a less sense of

belonging and satisfaction with social relationships. The students' concern, however, challenges local curriculum designers to review and align ECHS curriculum programs, standards, and instruction to reflect the realities of life in college.

At the same time, school administration did not allow students to integrate across cohorts. Students could not understand the rationale behind this restriction. Integration, according to most of them, presents potential teachable moments that are unexploited. Shanthi, a rising senior, observed, "A lot of integration across grades is important because as a rising senior, I would be able to help other students coming to the university with the experience I have learned." Managing time and the flexibility of each student's schedule in a campus setting was also identified as the most challenging area for many students. "It is a lot of independence. You have a choice to go to the library and do homework or slack off and wait until 4 in the morning to do it," said Griffin, a rising junior. This was shared by a number of other students, like Jacobson (personal interview, May 2009):

> Being here [university] has way more free time, like there are ridiculous gaps in the schedule. What that does is that it allows you to have work done at school and when you get home you don't have nearly as much on you. However, you really have to stay organized in order to know what you have to do and when you have to do it.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This study's objective was to understand factors that influence students to attend an early college, what they attribute to their academic success, and challenges they experience in school. The main conclusions are as follows:

1. Because most participants indicated that their parents influenced them to join MECHS, it is plausible to argue that recruitment should start early. By starting early, educators will be helping potential student recruits build a strong academic preparation, a sense of connectedness, and resiliency before they start the rigorous ECHS curriculum. Working together, both ECHS and middle schools have the potential to share information about target students' learning experiences and be able to put in place certain intervention programs to assist students in the transition to the ECHS curriculum.
2. Caring relationships make a difference to students' interest and engagement in school. Students identified caring and supportive teachers as key to helping them establish a culture of academic engagement, achievement, and college-bound aspiration. If the early college model's focus is strongly on students who are underrepresented in higher education, including low-income students, students of color, first-generation college goers, and English language learners, then the teaching staff should reflect the same diversity to the extent possible. This has the potential to help students to experience a social and cultural affiliation of personal meaning and value.
3. Some students found the rigor at an ECHS to be overwhelming. Although it may be desirable to have high expectations for all students attending an early college and to assume all students will succeed, early colleges need to have a plan in place to help students who are unable to meet this expectation.

4. Although it might seem to be of little consequence, having an appropriate facility for carrying out integral activities of an ECHS will help students develop an "educational identity" and pride. Although MECHS is located within a university campus that has plenty of activities, learning spaces, and resources appropriate for fostering a college-going culture, having "a real high school" facility has the potential of instilling in students a sense of pride and inspiration.

5. Although the focus of the ECHS is to improve graduation rates and raise student academic achievement, especially for minority students who have traditionally fallen through the cracks, they also need to prepare and empower students with necessary social and cultural life skills to navigate college life. In any case, ECHS are intertwined with colleges and universities, which are indispensable in the context of the ECHS framework. They are intertwined in the framework on which that models.

In conclusion, the promise of ECHS is indisputable: It has raised expectations for all students, especially for minority students; embodies caring relationships; and enjoys a continuous involvement of parents and the community. Sustaining these positive results will require ongoing commitment and resources from the funders, including school districts. Like most ECHS across the United States, MECHS gears up to graduate its first cohort in the current academic year. For a program that continues to show so much promise, it would be a tragedy if the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation funding for early college programs was not renewed.

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