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**USING INFORMATION SHARING BETWEEN HIGH SCHOOL COUNSELORS  
AND COMMUNITY COLLEGE PERSONNEL TO IMPROVE COLLEGE  
READINESS FOR INCOMING STUDENTS: AN EXPLORATORY CASE STUDY**

by  
Dyron J. Corley

A Dissertation

Submitted to the  
Department of Educational Services and Leadership  
College of Education  
In partial fulfillment of the requirement  
For the degree of  
Doctor of Education  
at  
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March 21, 2017

Dissertation Chair: MaryBeth Walpole, Ph.D.

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## **Dedications**

To God. Without You, I can do nothing. Thank you for giving me the strength to stand and endure this process.

To my wife, LaShelle, who has supported and walked with me throughout this entire journey. I am grateful to have you as a life partner. Your sacrifice did not go unnoticed. I love you more than you will ever know.

To my sons, Calvin and Caleb. Everything I do, I do for you. My prayer is that you will love and value education as much as I do. For with it, you will have the key to open any door and do anything you put your mind to. Your opportunities will be limitless.

To my parents, Laverne Corley and Donald “Duke” Moore. Although you are no longer here with me, the both of you will always be in my heart.

To my late great-grandmother, Cathleen Handy, and late grandmother, Nina Lee Corley. I am the man that I am today because of the seed you had sown, the sacrifices you made, and the legacy you left. What was freely given to me, I vow now to give to others.

To my family and friends. Words cannot express how much I love and cherish each of you. Thank you so much for your support. I could not have done this without you.

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## Abstract

Dyron J. Corley

USING INFORMATION SHARING BETWEEN HIGH SCHOOL COUNSELORS  
AND COMMUNITY COLLEGE PERSONNEL TO IMPROVE COLLEGE  
READINESS FOR INCOMING STUDENTS: AN EXPLORATORY SINGLE-CASE  
2016-2017

MaryBeth Walpole, Ph.D.  
Doctor of Education

A significant number of incoming students who graduate from high school and attend the community college lack the information and guidance needed to understand what is expected as they make their transition to higher education (Karp & Bork, 2012; McDonough, 1997; Venezia, Bracco, & Nodine, 2010). This exploratory case study examines how an enrollment office at a community college shared information and resources about college readiness with local high school counselors to ensure that incoming students received the knowledge and tools necessary to make a successful transition. By investigating the insights and experiences of both the college enrollment staff and the high school counselors, themes evolved as to the inconsistencies in the exchange of information between public K-12 schools and postsecondary institutions surrounding college readiness. The two themes that emerged from the data, unintentional barriers to student college readiness and the benefits and challenges of maintaining a collaborative relationship, provide insight into the communication patterns and interactions between these stakeholders. Community college and high school personnel must embrace collaborative relationships being careful not to create inadvertent barriers that prohibit students from being prepared for college entry.

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## Chapter 1

### Introduction

Since its inception, the community college has been a gateway to higher education for millions of Americans (Mellow, 2009). In a short amount of time, community colleges were able to level the educational playing field by increasing access to higher education for populations of underrepresented students, including, but not limited to, minorities, first-generation college students, the academically underprepared, nontraditional students, and the economically underprivileged, who were previously denied or not given equal access to higher education (AACC, 2012; Jenkins, 2014; Kirst & Usdan, 2009; Roman, 2007; Rosenbaum, 2001). Many of these students see the community college as a beacon of hope because they have an opportunity to achieve their academic and career goals. Additionally, these institutions provide students with another chance to reinvent their personal or professional images and rewrite their destinies. Since the early to mid-1900s, the community college has truly become one of our nation's greatest hidden gems.

While community colleges have experienced their share of great triumphs and increased exposure, they are now challenged with the unenviable task of expanding their focus and plans to include student success as a priority in response to the national College Completion Agenda. While open access to higher education has always been a top priority for many two-year institutions, colleges can no longer focus on providing access alone (Maliszewski, Crabill, & Nespoli, 2012; Venezia, Kirst, & Antonio, 2003). Instead, colleges must now reexamine their approach and create initiatives that will increase

completion rates as well as reinvigorate and sustain a culture of student success on their campuses.

The new federal mandates have also compelled colleges to become more cognizant of the knowledge and skills which students, especially those graduating from high school, should possess when they enter college. Community colleges will still have to contend with the reality that a majority of incoming high school graduates are underprepared for the college experience (Green & Forester, 2003; Moore, Slate, Edmonson, Combs, Bustamante, & Onwuegbuzie, 2010). Since most two-year colleges utilize an open-door or open-enrollment policy, they tend to enroll more underprepared students than their university counterparts (Fike & Fike, 2008).

### **Problem Statement**

The problem for these incoming college students is not the restriction or denial of college access. The issue, however, lies within the fact that the pathway to college “is marked by vast disparities in college preparation, college knowledge, and college culture within schools” (McDonough, 2005, p. 5). Many of these incoming college students lack the academic skillset and understanding of the college-going process, and, consequently, barriers to their overall success at the community college are created before they come to campus. Faculty and staff at community colleges understand this dilemma and therefore have to assist students who have little to no knowledge of what will be expected of them once they become college students (Karp & Bork, 2012; Venezia, et al., 2003). This lack of clarity can result in students making costly mistakes that may eventually lead to an extension of their time in college or worse – becoming a college dropout.

As a community college academic advisor, I experience this dynamic firsthand. Year after year, I meet with high school seniors who want to pursue higher education at the community college, but their perceptions about college are often inaccurate and misguided. In speaking with new students, I have discovered that many of them are unaware of the knowledge and skills that are needed to have a successful transition to the community college. From understanding the importance of preparing for the college's placement exam to knowing what soft skills are needed to succeed in the classroom, many of the students who come to the college are lost and become quickly overwhelmed. When meeting with me, some students and parents come to the harsh realization that time has been wasted because they did not know about or were unable to utilize all of the resources that their high school and the college provided. Most students come to the college regretting the fact that they did not know how to ask the *right* questions at the *right* time. As a result of seeing students frustrated with the college-going process, I have quickly learned that graduating from high school does not necessarily guarantee that students will be academically ready or knowledgeable about the transition into college. Students must be informed of what to expect before they come (Venezia et al., 2003).

A significant portion of incoming students lack the information and guidance needed to understand college expectations so they are better equipped to navigate through the college-going process (Karp & Bork, 2012; McDonough, 1997; Venezia, Bracco, & Nodine, 2010). Some may find this to be surprising because we live in a technological age where information is readily accessible. We live in a time where students should be able to easily access and obtain the resources and knowledge they need to learn about college. As my research will show, however, this is not always the case. Although



various sources of information about college are available to students, they may not necessarily know how to access and utilize them (RP Group, 2010). How is it possible for students in 2017 to be uninformed about college expectations when it appears resources are continuously available for access and utilization?

Some scholars believe that a lack of a college going culture in high schools and in homes can contribute to a lack of understanding about college for many students (Bryan, Moore-Thomas, Day-Vines, & Holcomb-McCoy, 2011; McDonough, 1997; Oakes, Mendoza, & Silver, 2006; Walpole, McDonough, Bauer, Gibson, Kanyi, & Toliver, 2005). Inequities are produced when students are not given similar opportunities to obtain information about college. This is particularly true for those who attend low-socioeconomic high schools and for students of color.

Other scholars believe that a major cause of students' insufficient preparation and understanding lies within the disjuncture between public K-12 schools and postsecondary education (Kirst & Usdan, 2007; Venezia, et al., 2003). The disconnectedness between the high school and the community college has resulted in numerous consequences for graduating high school students. One of the major consequences that colleges have been dealing with for years has been the lack of communication and collaboration between themselves and the high schools. The communication lines between the two educational systems has been broken for years and, as a result, a significant number of incoming college students have been given insufficient and unclear information about the transition to the community college and its expectations (Kirst & Usdan, 2007; Rosenbaum, 2001; Venezia et al., 2003).

While many studies have been devoted to understanding the need for four-year institutions to better inform prospective students and help them transition (Contreras, 2011; Reid & Moore, 2008; Tierney & Garcia, 2010), little has been written concerning the need for two-year colleges to collaborate with high schools to inform prospective students of college expectations. Some scholars have observed the disjuncture between the secondary and postsecondary education through the lens of creating state and federal policies to better align the two (Kirst & Usdan, 2007), but an information and resource discrepancy still exists and little has been written on it from the perspective of examining collaborative practices and networks. Although scholars and practitioners would agree that an information gap exists and has produced numerous challenges for incoming college students (Person, Rosenbaum, & Deil-Amen, 2006; Plank & Jordan, 2001; Venezia, et al., 2010), the gap has not been researched exhaustively enough to pinpoint its root cause or to determine how and to what extent high schools or community colleges should take responsibility or ownership of it. If not given proper attention, this lack of transparency will continue to perpetuate the information deficiencies that exist between secondary and higher education. Although transitioning to a community college may be less complicated or not as prestigious as transitioning to a four-year school, it is nonetheless a major transition and students still need to be given clear expectations in tangible and meaningful ways (Karp & Bork, 2012). When students do not receive sufficient or transparent information about the skills, knowledge, and expectations necessary to ensure a successful transition to college, they are more at risk of making critical mistakes that could hinder student success or ultimately derail their college careers (Deil-Amen & Rosenbaum, 2003; Karp & Bork, 2012).

To close the information gap, it is recommended that two-year institutions become more proactive and purposeful in sharing with high schools the expectations and behaviors that are necessary for incoming students to have when transitioning to the college (Karp & Bork, 2012, Venezia et al., 2010). Community colleges can no longer assume that students are getting the necessary information they need from their high school experiences. Since many high school students see their school counselors as gatekeepers to college information (Rosenbaum, 2001), community colleges should concentrate more of their efforts in building partnerships and networks with the counselors to help students understand the college environment. When it comes to assisting graduating high school students with their transition to higher education, school counselors have proven to be an indispensable social resource (Bryan et al., 2011; McDonough, 2005; Rosenbaum, 2001).

Scholars and practitioners would agree that counseling is one of the top necessities that is needed to improve college access (McDonough, 2005). The issue is that most public schools, however, do not have a strong relationship with postsecondary institutions. Most of these schools have to rely on a mixture of programs and services to provide college counseling because they may not have the time or resources to perform the task themselves (Lautz, Hawkins, & Perez, 2005). By collaborating more closely with the community college, school counselors would have the opportunity to maximize their college counseling capacity by utilizing college staff such as admission and enrollment officers and academic advisors to be extensions or “institutional agents” (Stanton-Salazar & Dornbusch, 1995, p. 117) that could help provide information about resources (Lautz et al., 2005). In return, these institutional agents can achieve their institution’s goal of

recruiting students and getting to know their neighboring high schools. By working collaboratively, both high school and community college professionals can provide graduating high school students with the support they need to be college ready.

### **Significance of the Study**

The purpose of this inquiry was to explore how the enrollment office at Erlington County College (a pseudonym) collaborated with neighboring high school counselors to ensure that incoming students received the information and support they need to understand college expectations and be able to make a successful transition to the two-year college. Through an exploratory case-study analysis, I investigated the information exchange between the two-year college and its neighboring high schools and how information was perceived to be disseminated to prospective college students by the high school counselors. I also examined the perceptions of counselors concerning how information was provided by the enrollment staff. Through using a social network lens, I analyzed the information exchange between the two-year college and the high school to determine if any gaps or inconsistencies existed that could potentially impact a student's transition into the community college.

### **Context of the Study**

I conducted my research at Erlington County College (ECC). ECC is a suburban two-year college located in the northern part of the United States. According to its 2016 Annual Institutional Profile, the College serves approximately 7,100 students each year (Durkin, 2016). At least 36% of the total population of students is between the ages of 18 and 19. I chose Erlington County College because of the strong relationship that the college has with neighboring high school counselors. For the last five years, the college

has worked diligently to strengthen its relationship with its feeder high schools. When the current president first came to the college, one of his goals was to find a way to streamline an educational pipeline that began in K-12 and that would go through the community college on to the four-year university.

To strengthen the pipeline between K-12 and the community college, Erlington County College invited the Erlington County Professional Counselors' Association (ECPCA) to hold their meetings on campus. Holding their meetings on campus created an excellent opportunity for the Office of Enrollment and various departments and divisions at the college (e.g., Student Life, advisement, disability services, financial aid, faculty members, and academic deans) to share updates and new developments with the counselors. Likewise, the counselors could ask questions about any new changes and share some of their students' concerns. Although the two have made a lot progress through the years in rebuilding their partnership, both entities understand that more work can be done to improve their collaborative efforts with each other. Because of the established relationship that the counselors' association has had with Erlington County College, the institution served as my research site.

### **Research Questions**

To examine this collaborative relationship more closely, my study sought to answer the following research questions:

1. In what ways do enrollment representatives from Erlington County College collaborate with high school counselors to assist prospective students with understanding the entry level expectations of college readiness?

2. What is the Erlington County College enrollment representative's role in sharing information about expectations of college readiness with high school counselors?
  - 2a. How do enrollment representatives at ECC perceive their role in sharing information with high school counselors?
  - 2b. How do high school counselors perceive the community college's role in sharing information with them?
3. What are the perceived gaps or inconsistencies, if any, in the information that is exchanged?
4. Are the advisement practices of high school counselors toward graduating students reflective of the interactions between themselves and community college enrollment representatives?
5. To what extent does social network theory explain the communication patterns and interaction between admissions representatives at ECC and high school counselors?

To answer my research questions, it was important to use a methodology that allowed me to gain an in-depth understanding of the phenomenon at hand and examine it in a real-world context (Yin, 2014). For my research design, I utilized an exploratory single case-study approach. An advantage of using the exploratory approach is its ability to investigate a particular phenomenon that lacks preliminary research (Streb, 2010). When I combined the exploratory approach with the case study methodology, I was able to study the phenomenon in more detail to determine how and why it occurred (Merriam, 1998; Yin, 2014). When exploring the information exchange between the high school

counselors and the community college, I utilized four data collection techniques: interviews, field notes and my reflective journal, direct observations, and electronic and paper documentation. All of these techniques were necessary for triangulation to take place and to strengthen the overall validity of the study (Yin, 2014).

### **Conceptual Framework**

For my conceptual framework, I have selected to use social network theory (Lin, 2001) to undergird my study. Since incoming high school students are expected to understand and navigate through the rigors of the college-going process, it is essential to use a theory that focuses on the relationship between internal and external connections and institutional resources. Much of Lin's work is consistent with Burt (1992), Coleman (1988, 1990), Flap (1991, 1994), and Putnam's (1993, 1995) discussions on social capital and how it is embedded in social relations and social structures.

When transitioning to the community college, it is important for incoming students to have connections with individuals who have the social and institutional know-how and resources to assist them in navigating through the college-going process. An incoming college student's success in the college-going process is dependent on supportive relationships they have with what Stanton-Salazar and Dornbusch (1995, p. 117) term as "institutional agents." In the context of this study, institutional agents are knowledgeable about the institutional structure and are committed to sharing that knowledge and those resources with students. They assist incoming high school students in understanding the college-going process and create support mechanisms to assist students in handling their academic responsibilities, career aspirations, and educational and job opportunities, among other things. When students have access to these social ties

and networks, they are able to acquire new knowledge and institutional support that they previously may not have had at their disposal.

## **Conclusion**

My study sought to provide a convincing rationale for the collaboration between two-year colleges and high schools. The two entities must work collaboratively to ensure that the information they share with each other is also communicated to prospective college students. In Chapter 2, I review the literature related to the history of the community college and its relationship with secondary education, the disjuncture between the community college and secondary education and its consequences, the role of the school counselor and their participation in the college-going process, and how the theory of social networks can be beneficial in strengthening the structure and resourcefulness of the relationship between the two. In Chapter 3, the methodology section, I discuss my rationale for choosing Erlington County College as my research site and using the exploratory case study approach. I will also share my data collection techniques. A discussion of the themes and analysis of the data are presented in Chapter 4. The study will close my conclusions, implications for practice, and suggestions for future research in Chapter 5.



## Chapter 2

### Literature Review

The inconsistent information exchange between public K-12 and postsecondary institutions has had detrimental consequences for incoming high school students attempting to make the transition into the community college. While numerous studies have been devoted to understanding the need for four-year institutions to better inform prospective students of college expectations (Contreras, 2011; Reid & Moore, 2008; Tierney & Garcia, 2010), little has been written concerning the need for community colleges to collaborate with high schools to inform prospective students about the skills and behaviors necessary to have a successful college transition. If students are not informed properly, it not only presents difficulties for them in their transition, but it also presents challenges for the two-year institution. Moreover, this lack of transparency continues to perpetuate the information deficiencies that exist between secondary and higher education. While scholars and practitioners acknowledge that the information gap exists and has produced numerous problems for incoming high school students and two-year institutions (Person, et al., 2006; Plank & Jordan, 2001; Venezia et al., 2010), the gap has not been examined thoroughly enough to pinpoint its root cause or direct consequences.

The literature reviewed for this exploratory single-case study will attempt to address these concerns. In order to understand this phenomenon in its entirety, we must first examine the history between postsecondary and secondary education. The review begins with a brief history of the creation of the community college and the idea that it was created to be an extension of secondary education. A discussion of the attitudes and

contentions of several prominent educational pioneers that supported its connection with secondary education is followed by a presentation of the factors and events that ultimately led to their separation. Then, it is important to explore how the consequences of this disjuncture between the two entities produced numerous assumptions and misconceptions, and how they, in turn, influenced how students receive information about the community college. The review will then examine the role of the high school counselor in the college process, how it has evolved, and the challenges the profession is faced with when it comes to preparing students for college. The review will close with Lin's (2001) discussion on the role of social networks, which is the theoretical framework for this study.

### **The Need for the Junior College**

In order to understand how the inconsistent information exchange between public K-12 and postsecondary institutions began, one must understand how the relationship between the two entities was established and how it fits into the consciousness of a growing nation. During the late 1880s, the United States found itself going through yet another transformation. The Civil War had ended and the nation was beginning to reassemble the pieces of a broken government. A nation that was formerly divided over issues like slavery and states' rights had to now find the courage and perseverance to embrace change and move forward.

While the nation was grappling with its challenges, colleges and universities at the time were experiencing their share as well. During the University Transformation Era (1870-1944) as Cohen and Kisker (2010) refer to it, the number of students seeking postsecondary education grew from 63,000 to 1.5 million and the number of colleges

quintupled. Between the late 1880s and early 1890s, colleges and universities saw an influx of students as the secondary school completion rate increased substantially. As a result of the expansion in secondary education, many of the colleges and universities became overcrowded (Cain, 1999).

Industrialization played a major factor in the overcrowding of colleges and universities. As demands for workforce training grew, the democratization of public school education was a necessity that no longer could be ignored (Tillery & Deegan, 1985). Unlike any time before in the history of the United States, there was a strong demand from a more diverse group of graduating high school students for college access (Cohen & Brawer, 1996; Cohen & Kisker, 2010). Many of these colleges and universities had to accept the reality that higher education was not only for the benefit of the typical White, male, wealthy student. Their missions and services had to be more inclusive – they had to expand to include those students with more diverse educational and occupational interests and those from different ethnic backgrounds (Cohen & Kisker, 2010). Their missions had to include those students who desired postsecondary education but may not have been the best or most academically prepared student.

As demands for access grew, leaders from various universities in the United States began to question whether they should expand their capacity to accept freshmen and sophomore students into their institutions. While they had the capability to do so, a majority of these educators did not want to jeopardize their desire of “becoming true research and professional development centers” like their educational exemplars, the Germans (Cohen & Kisker, 2010, p. 120). Prominent nineteenth- and early twentieth-century educators such as William Mitchell, a University of Georgia trustee, William

Watts Folwell, president of the University of Minnesota, and Henry Tappan, president of the University of Michigan, were huge supporters of the German educational model and believed that students should enter the university from the *Gymnasium* or *Gymnasia*, or after the fourteenth grade (Cohen & Brawer, 1996; Gleazer, 1971). Tappan believed that the *Gymnasia* “guard[ed] the entrance of the Universities” and that “the University course would not be available to him who had not prepared himself for it” (as cited in Diener, 1986, p. 24). Like the others, Tappan wanted to “free the university of freshmen and sophomores whose immaturity made specialization difficult” (Gleazer, 1971, p. 80).

Other educational leaders such as Edmund J. James of the University of Illinois, William Rainey Harper of the University of Chicago, John W. Burgess of Columbia, and David S. Jordan of Stanford suggested that the United States should follow the same system that European universities and their secondary schools used. Burgess, for example, thought that the American universities were trying to take on too much by handling both general and specialized education. He believed that the general role should belong to the colleges, while specialization should be placed in the hands of universities (Cain, 1999; Cohen & Brawer, 1996). This concept would eventually lead to universities being responsible for “higher-order scholarship” while the “lower schools” provided general and vocational education to students (Cohen & Brawer, 1996, p. 7). Harper was one of the first to implement this new strategy at the University of Chicago. He organized the freshman and sophomore years into a separate division called the “Academic College” and organized the junior and senior years into the “University College.” Four years later, he renamed these divisions “Junior College” and “Senior College,” respectively (Gleazer, 1971, p. 80). By 1900, at least eight private junior colleges were

established in the United States, each serving approximately 100 students (Gleazer, 1971). In 1901, the first public junior college was established in Joliet, Illinois.

While these early educators saw the junior college as a way to make postsecondary education more accessible to young people, one cannot ignore their elitist mindsets. Those who advocated for the creation of two-year colleges were not totally infatuated by the junior college concept or of general education (Cain, 1999). The junior college was created to restrict the number of students who could attend universities. They hoped that the junior college would deter the growing number of students who demanded access to higher education (Brint & Karabel, 1989). This hierarchical system was created to protect the university's specialization functions and preserve the university as a "citadel of learning" (Cain, 1999; Dougherty, 1994). While these arguments are valid, one cannot deny the future benefits that these institutions would offer students who attended them. Haggard (1971) provides several arguments in support of the establishment of junior colleges:

(1) [T]hey permit the students to be under the influence of the home during later adolescence; (2) they provide attention for individual students; (3) they provide occupational training of college grade; (4) they offer two years of work acceptable to colleges and universities; (5) they complete the education of those students who will not advance farther; (6) they offer better instruction than that found in the Freshman and Sophomore years of colleges and universities; and (7) they provide an upward extension of secondary education for those financially unable to go away to college or university (p. 88).

Although the sincerity of the early pioneers' intentions and actions can be questioned, their ideas gave birth to one of the nation's greatest treasures: the junior college. The creation of junior colleges not only freed the universities for advanced study, but it perpetuated the idea that postsecondary education was available for all young people (Tillery & Deegan, 1985).

### **The Junior College as an Extension of Secondary Education**

As junior colleges became more prevalent in American society, educational leaders began to contemplate where they would fit in the educational structure. Since the concept of the junior college was unique and unparalleled to any past American educational model, it was difficult for educational and political leaders to reach a consensus on its exact function. For example, questions arose among educators as to whether the junior college would be a part of the university structure, could it stand alone as an entity in and of itself, or be part of the K-12 school structure. While many of them were not in favor of the former idea because they wanted to establish their own identities (Tillery & Deegan, 1985), Tappan and Folwell did not believe that the institution should be unique unto itself (Cain, 1999; Diener, 1986). They along with Harper and Lange believed that the junior college should be an extension of secondary education and as such, would be more functional if connected to the high school than the university (Cain, 1999; Cohen & Brawer, 1996).

The idea seemed to sit well with politicians and other educators because social demands at the time called for a more useful education that extended beyond the high school experience (Tillery & Deegan, 1985). But educational leaders like Harper

recognized that making education more useful alone would not meet the social demands of his time. He believed that higher education itself needed to be reorganized. He stated:

Evidence that this change is already taking place may be found on every hand.

The establishment of hundreds of high schools thru [sic] all the states is in itself a new element in our educational machinery which has disarranged the former system, but has, at the same time, greatly advanced the interests of education itself. . . . With this modification of the high school on the one hand, and with the suggested modification of many of our colleges upon the other, there would come to be a system of colleges, state or non-state, which would meet the demands of the situation today as they are not met (as cited in Diener, 1986, p. 57-58).

Although the educational system of that time was not equipped to handle the massive influx of high school students or meet social demands, Harper understood that social conditions were calling for the reorganization and massive expansion of higher education. Palinchak (1973) believed that reorganization would help people recognize the importance of higher education, which would, in turn, help them realize the significance of junior colleges. This would be helpful in solidifying the transition between secondary and postsecondary education (Palinchak, 1973). The junior college would serve as the “transitional” educational institution (Gleazer, 1971, p. 83).

By creating the concept of the junior college, the goal was to link the first two years of college with the high school experience. Harper (as cited in Haggard, 1971) believed that “the work of the Freshman and Sophomore years [in college] is ordinarily of the same scope and character as that of the preceding years in the academy or high school” (p. 86). The objective was to create ways to increase efficiency in instruction,

align the curricula between the two entities, and decrease the duplication of services and processes (Palinchak, 1973). Junior colleges would eventually serve as upward extensions to higher education (Cain, 1999; Cohen & Brawer, 1996; Palinchak, 1973). Since both entities were using similar models for finance, administration, organization, infrastructure, and teacher preparation, educators found it logical to connect the high school with the junior college (Cain, 1999; Tillery & Deegan, 1985).

A few communities adopted Lange and Harper's theory and linked the junior college with the high school experience. One of the first high schools to promote this linkage was Joliet Township High School. Joliet High School was one of the first schools to promote the "six-year high school junior college" educational model (Palinchak, 1973, p. 25). Graduates of Joliet received college credit from institutions such as the University of Chicago, the University of Illinois, the University of Michigan, the University of Wisconsin, the University of Minnesota, and the University of Pennsylvania for certain courses in science and mathematics (Haggard, 1971).

About a decade later, McLane (1971) wrote his account of how residents and policymakers of Fresno decided to embark on their journey linking the high school with a junior college. In June of 1910, the school sent a circular letter to the parents and other stakeholders and to the surrounding principals of neighboring high schools to see if they would approve the establishment of a junior college in connection with the local high school. Over two hundred people responded in agreement and a report was then presented to the board of education. The following report supported the need for a junior college and why it should be connected to the high school:



There is no institution of higher education within two hundred miles of Fresno where students may continue their studies beyond the regular high-school courses. Many of our high-school graduates are but seventeen or eighteen years of age and parents are frequently loath to send these young people so far from home. Many who desire to continue their studies cannot afford the expense necessary to college attendance where the items of room and board mean so much. Authorities in the University of California and Stanford University have been consulted in this matter and seem much interested in the project. Both have promised such assistance as they may be able to render in planning courses and securing instructors. There seems to be no question as to the possibility of doing work of such merit as will command recognition from these institutions (p. 91).

Some high schools wanted to provide the first two years of college to graduates because many of them simply lacked the knowledge and guidance of knowing what they wanted to do as a career. Through intensive counseling programs, two-year colleges would assist these freshmen and sophomore students by helping them determine the best course of study that would fit for them (Gleazer, 1971). Communities also wanted to provide this option because of the economic and distance obstacles that existed for many families (Gleazer, 1971, Koos, 1970; Quigley & Bailey, 2003). To take away these burdens and uncertainties, it seemed rational for the junior college to be connected to the high school.

### **The Divide between K-12 and Higher Education**

Between the 1900s and the 1930s, it was quite evident that the junior college was an extension of the high school. Tillery and Deegan (1985) found that much of their organizational, administrative, and financial structures were similar. Both entities were

known to share similar facilities, boards of education, and administrators and teachers. Between the 1930s and 1950s, however, a divide developed between the junior college and secondary education. Scholars like Palinchak (1973) and Tillery and Deegan (1985) believe that the increased separation between the entities resulted from two main factors. First, social and economic demands called for the junior (now community) college to expand its focus and mission and include other student populations including those who were not recent high school graduates. According to Tillery and Deegan (1985), this shift in focus and even in ideology caused many junior and community colleges to become “increasingly equalitarian and utopian” (p. 5). The other factor included the desire for many community colleges to develop their own independent identities. Although the separation between the community college and secondary education occurred gradually, the consequences of separation were felt immediately and would be lasting.

After the Great Depression, social and economic demands increased the junior college’s priorities and altered its overall mission. Although colleges saw a decrease in funding, student enrollments continued to grow (Tillery & Deegan, 1985) and included both traditional students and nontraditional populations such as veterans, displaced workers, immigrants, and homemakers (Tillery & Deegan, 1985; Kirst & Usdan, 2009). Junior and community colleges had to expand programs such as vocational education and community service to include older adults who wanted to prepare for new careers, acquire more occupational training, and take advantage of open-enrollment (Tillery & Deegan, 1985). The authors had also found that by the 1950s, missions from many public two-year colleges included the following: “(1) terminal education, (2) general education, (3) transfer and career orientation and guidance, (4) lower-division preparation for

university transfer, (5) adult education, and (6) removal of matriculation deficiencies” (p. 9). Many two-year colleges then shifted their concentration away from high school recruitment and toward nontraditional student recruitment to maintain their growth. Unaware of the consequences, two-year institutions gradually communicated less often with high school students about academic preparation and the skills that were needed to make a successful transition into the college as they targeted recruitment efforts at more diverse populations (Kirst & Usdan, 2009).

Another factor that led to the divide between K-12 and the community college revolved around the question of whether the entities should be a unified or independent system. Advocates for the unified system held the belief that community colleges should be “an upward extension of the public-school system” (Harvin, 1953, p. 406). They also held the belief that the curriculum of the freshman and sophomore years should be closely articulated with the rest of the high school experience. On the other hand, some educators supported the idea of having an independent system because they believed that the community colleges should have their own identity and be recognized as a separate entity in higher education (Tillery & Deegan, 1985; Harvin, 1953). Between the 1930s and 1950s, two-year colleges began to separate themselves from high schools. Tillery and Deegan (1985) and Cain (1999) believed that the separation of the entities resulted in two-year colleges’ belief that they were viewed by four-year colleges as inferior institutions. Many of the community colleges believed that their connection with high schools was the cause of this negative perception. To shake themselves of this perception, many community colleges found ways to identify with and create partnerships and articulation agreements with four-year colleges. Additionally, many states passed

legislation mandating that two-year colleges have their own campuses and governance structures. By the 1970s, most two-year colleges had severed their official and unofficial ties with secondary education. As a result, their relationships with the high school students and its administration weakened as well.

It is important to briefly discuss the history of the disjuncture between two-year colleges and secondary education because current educational leaders and practitioners may have a limited understanding of the ideologies and events that contributed to the separation. They know that a disjuncture between the two systems exists, but many cannot find or pinpoint its root. The disjuncture between the two sectors is not a new phenomenon; the same discussions that we have today are the same ones that educational practitioners and scholars had over 100 years ago. In fact, Venezia et al., (2003) believe that there is a greater disjuncture between secondary and postsecondary education in the U.S. than in most other nations. The authors argue that this separation has the potential to hinder successful transitions between the two systems and reduce educational opportunities for many students, particularly for those who are traditionally underrepresented in higher education.

### **Consequences of the Disjuncture between Higher and Secondary Education**

The disconnectedness between the high school and the two-year college has resulted in numerous consequences for graduating high school students who wish to attend community colleges. First, the need for remedial or developmental courses has continued to increase. Due to open-door or open-enrollment policies, community colleges tend to enroll more underprepared students than a university (Fike & Fike, 2008). According to Bailey and Cho (2011), at least 60% of incoming students who attend

community colleges are in need of developmental coursework. Remedial education has always been a necessary component of higher education, however the main concern for community colleges was that they could not depend on public secondary schools to provide them with academically prepared students. Two-year institutions were also concerned about the grade inflation in high schools, weak articulation of high school and college curricula, and varying standards between the two institutions (Cohen & Kisker, 2010). Not surprisingly, developmental courses have remained among “the most intractable areas of the curriculum” due to increased numbers of students graduating from high school and enrolling in college (Cohen & Kisker, 2010, p. 499). The high level in remediation is not simply a result of having to refresh certain skills that have not be reviewed or taught for a particular length of time. Instead, faculty and instructors at the community college must teach skills that were probably not previously taught in high school at all (Kirst & Usdan, 2007).

The second consequence is closely tied to the first. The disjuncture between the community college and high schools also led to disjointed curricula for grades 10 to 14. In the early 1900s, colleges and universities played a huge role in influencing high school curricula. For example, in 1900, the College Entrance Examination Board created uniform standards for each academic subject and issued a syllabus to prepare students for college entrance subject-matter examinations (Kirst & Usdan, 2007). Shortly after, the University of California began to accredit high schools to ensure that their curricula were acceptable for college preparation. As the number of high schools grew, it was more difficult for the University of California to meet the need for high school accreditation and the institution had to stop performing this function. Eventually, the regional high

school accrediting associations separated from the higher education accreditation associations in order to lessen the workload. Ultimately, the division also “deemphasized” K-16 alignment (Kirst & Usdan, 2007).

To rectify the alignment problem, leaders from each sector are currently working collaboratively to understand each other’s difficulties and expectations. Some national policymakers have turned their attention toward increasing access to college instead of concentrating solely on developing aligned curricula between the two institutions (Kirst & Usdan, 2007). By doing this, the expectation is that students will gain the necessary skills and knowledge to be successful in college. Some educational leaders and scholars felt that access alone was no longer a satisfactory goal to attain (Maliszewski et al., 2012). Two-year colleges had to now expand their focus to include success (Venezia et al., 2003).

Lastly, the disjuncture has produced a disconnect in the communication lines between the high school and the community college. Since the lines have been broken for years, incoming high school students have been receiving insufficient and unclear information about what to expect in their transition to the community college (Kirst & Usdan, 2007; Kirst & Venezia, 2004; Rosenbaum, 2001; Venezia et al., 2003). As a result, the inconsistent information exchange between public K-12 schools and postsecondary institutions has had detrimental consequences for high school students transitioning to college. When students do not have sufficient information about the skills and knowledge necessary to ensure a successful transition to college, they are more at risk of making critical mistakes that could ultimately derail their college careers (Deil-Amen & Rosenbaum, 2003). Simply graduating from high school does not ensure that

students will be ready for college-level coursework (Venezia et al., 2003); students must be informed of what to expect. Two-year institutions should be more proactive in sharing with high schools the expectations and behaviors that are necessary for incoming students to have a successful transition. If students are not informed properly, it not only presents difficulties for them in their transition, but it also presents challenges for the two-year institution. Moreover, the lack of transparency perpetuates the information gap between secondary and higher education.

### **The Information Gap between Secondary and Higher Education**

One of the challenges for many community colleges today is addressing the gap that exists between the colleges and neighboring high schools with regard to helping students navigate the behavioral and performance expectations of the educational environment, recognize the importance of academic achievement, and complete the necessary coursework to facilitate a successful transition to the two-year college. Although scholars and practitioners agree that an information gap exists and has produced numerous problems for incoming high school students, the gap has not been researched enough to pinpoint its root cause or to determine which entity should take responsibility or ownership of it. To close the gap, community colleges and the high schools must be more purposeful in their collaboration and communication with each other to bridge the gap.

Community colleges can no longer assume that students are getting the necessary information they need from their high school experiences. Two-year colleges have been guilty of doing this on multiple levels. For example, when it came to college academic advisement, O'Banion (1994) found that all too often community colleges assumed that

students had already made choices about their life and educational or vocational goals before they entered college. Although colleges offer a variety of academic programs, students may not have the skills or the foresight to create a plan or choose the best major that would allow them to fulfill their academic or career goals (Person et al., 2006). The authors have found that many students make their educational decisions based upon insufficient, unclear, and even incorrect information. The other incorrect assumption that many two-year colleges have is that incoming students are college ready when they come to their doors. For many community colleges, placement exams and other standards of assessment are used to “predict students’ readiness for college” (Byrd & McDonald, 2005, p. 23). Studies have shown, however, that these instruments may not be the best indicators of whether an incoming student will be successful (Armstrong, 1999; King, Rasool, & Judge, 1994). For a student to be college ready, Conley (2007) believes he or she should:

[B]e able to understand what is expected in a college course, can cope with the content knowledge that is presented, and can take away from the course the key intellectual lessons and dispositions the course was designed to convey and develop. In addition, the student is prepared to get the most out of the college experience by understanding the culture and structure of postsecondary education and the ways of knowing and intellectual norms of this academic and social environment. The student has both the mindset and disposition necessary to enable this to happen (p. 5-6).

Conley (2007) presents a succinct description of the skills, knowledge, and understanding that a student needs to be successful in college coursework. The unfortunate reality is that



many students lack this knowledge and enter community college without clear goals or plans.

Another misconception is that many college faculty, administrators, and staff believe that incoming students possess the knowledge and skills to navigate the college system. A significant portion of incoming high school students, however, have little understanding of what will be expected of them once they enter college (Karp & Bork, 2012). According to Venezia et al., (2010), many students' perceptions about college are inaccurate and misguided. A possible reason for this could be that most of the information students received about college may be from four-year colleges and universities, not two-year institutions. Additionally, a lack of a college-going cultures in schools and in homes can contribute to a lack of understanding for many students (Bryan et al., 2011; McDonough, 1997; McDonough, 2005; Oakes et al., 2006; Walpole et al., 2005). This is particularly true for African American and Latino students from low-socioeconomic schools who lack basic information about college requirements and test preparation. When a school has a college-going culture, "teachers, administrators, parents, and students expect students to have all the experiences they need for high achievement and college preparation" (Oakes et al., 2006, p. 29). When there is an absence of a college-going culture, there is a strong possibility that school counselors have lower expectations of their students and will encourage them to enroll in community colleges rather than four-year institutions (Venezia et al., 2010). Unfortunately, this does not solve the problem: if students lack the knowledge and skills to be successful at a four-year institution, they will more than likely lack the same knowledge and skills to be successful at a two-year institution.

Yet, there is also a misconception in community colleges that students learn about college expectations from their high school counselors and teachers. In the instances in which a student is attending a high-socioeconomic secondary school or preparatory school, this could very well be the case. Students have access to a vast amount of resources and school counselors are committed to college counseling (McDonough, 2005). They are more able to follow and reap the benefits of the college decision-making process that Hossler, Schmit, and Vesper (1999) outlined in their study. During their sophomore and junior years in high school, students are able to utilize information sources such as their parents, family members, peers, teachers, and counselors. There is even a strong possibility that students themselves become active participants in the information gathering process. For students attending low-socioeconomic or urban schools, however, this is not always the case. They rely heavily on their teachers and counselors to provide them with information about college (Venezia et al., 2010).

### **Who should be Held Responsible for the Information Gap?**

Who should be held responsible for the information gap that many high school students encounter: the high school or the community college? Scholars and practitioners have debated the subject for at least thirty years. On the one hand, some scholars believe that two-year colleges are responsible for perpetuating the cycle of unprepared students (Payne, 1989). Person et al., (2006) found that institutional practices and structures, or the lack thereof, can create information problems for students. On the other hand, some scholars like Rosenbaum (2001) believe that two-year institutions should not be responsible for students entering college unprepared. Instead, he argues that “students are promised college for very little effort” (p. 56) and that there is a lack of emphasis on the

importance of good grades and preparedness. Venezia et al., (2010) found this also to be the case in their research when the students they studied were not encouraged to take difficult courses while they were in high school. Since they were planning to attend a community college, students did not feel the need to prepare much beyond passing the courses they were taking. When high school staff do not understand the role that the community colleges expect incoming students to embrace, they are unable to communicate it effectively to their students (Karp & Bork, 2012). From this perspective, high schools do not share enough of the blame for why incoming students are unsuccessful in college.

Whether community colleges share in the blame more than high schools or vice versa is without consequence: the information gap still exists. If students are not receiving accurate information about what is expected of them at the community college level, they then remain uninformed about college requirements and processes. To bridge this gap, community colleges should be more proactive in inviting high school counselors to be part of the conversation when discussing college readiness with students. The high school environment has a powerful influence on students' college aspirations and preparation. According to McDonough (2005), there are four key components of the high school experience that have a tremendous impact on college attendance: 1) a college preparatory curriculum; 2) a college culture which establishes high academic standards and includes formal and informal communication networks that promote and support college expectations; 3) a school staff that collectively is committed to students' college goals; and 4) resources devoted to counseling and advising college-bound students. For the purposes of the next section, I will focus on the need for community colleges to

inform and even help improve the counseling and advising of community college-bound students.

### **Incorporating the High School Counselor into the College Process**

According to McDonough (2005), no profession is more important in improving college enrollment than the school counselor. When it comes to assisting graduating high school students with their transition to higher education, school counselors are an indispensable social resource, not only to students, but to their families as well (Bryan et al., 2011; Rosenbaum, 2001). McDonough (2005) asserts that when counselors are available and consistent in their roles, they can be effective in delivering services that have a positive impact on students' ambitions and accomplishments. Students who saw their counselors were more likely to apply to college compared with students who did not see their counselors. In the next section, I will discuss how the role of the school counselor evolved into what we know it to be now and the challenges they currently face when preparing students to attend college.

### **The Role of the School Counselor**

First, it is important to discuss the role of the school counselor and how the profession has evolved over the last 100 years. In the early 1900s, counselors fulfilled the vocational guidance role (Lambie, 2004). They were mainly responsible for career counseling. Since the 1970s, the school counselor has become recognized as the gatekeeper to college information and has been an indispensable resource for many students and their families (Bryan et al., 2011; Rosenbaum, 2001). Literature shows that this has not always been the case, however. To arrive at this point where the school counselor is recognized as being a valued asset in the college preparation process, the

profession itself had to endure years of transition and fine-tuning. The strategies they used to determine whether students were academically fit for college had to be examined and perfected.

In the early 1970s, school counselors were vocal about their opinions regarding whether a student should go to college or not. During this time, school counselors had the informal authority to decide which pathway would be more suitable for graduating high school students. Counselors would either persuade students to pursue the vocational or the college track. If counselors did not believe that a particular student was capable of being college material, he or she would dissuade the student from applying. According to Rosenbaum (2001), some counselors went as far as “guarding access” to college recruiters to ensure that students who were believed to be academically unprepared did not apply (p. 90). If a student had unrealistic college goals, some counselors would employ the “cooling out” strategy (Rosenbaum, 2001). This term was originated by Clark (1960) to describe how two-year colleges would give students alternatives in their educational goals instead of allowing them to pursue their original goals and fail. Rosenbaum (2001) believed counselors at the time utilized the same technique to discourage students from pursuing certain majors or wanting to attend college.

Today, school counselors no longer take on the responsibility of discouraging students’ plans to attend college. School counselors are responsible for creating and implementing the school’s normative expectations for students’ college destinations and planning process (McDonough, 2005). Now, they have an impact on the following components of the college preparation process: 1) structuring information and organizing activities that foster and support students’ college aspirations and an understanding of

college and its importance; 2) assisting parents in understanding their role in fostering and supporting college aspirations, setting college expectations, and motivating students; 3) assisting students in academic preparation for college; 4) supporting and influencing students' decision-making about college; and 5) organizationally focusing the school on its college mission (McDonough, 2005).

### **Counseling at a Crossroads?**

Over the last twenty years, the school counseling profession has come under scrutiny and criticism. While school counselors have been considered pillars in the educational system, questions began to arise about whether they were utilized strategically, whether their roles and missions should be more clearly defined, and whether measures should be created to track their effectiveness (Bridgeland & Bruce, 2011). Scholars and practitioners began to question whether high school students were receiving the information and assistance they needed to make a successful transition to college. The first question was whether counselors' time was used adequately when it came to college counseling. In her research, McDonough (2005) found that counselors were "structurally constrained" (p. 24) from providing guidance to students about college. According to the American School Counselor Association, at least 70% of a counselor's time should be spent in providing services to their students. According to McDonough (2005), 43% of all public high schools reported that more than 20% of their counselors' time is dedicated to college advising. She also found that school counselors were overwhelmed with performing other tasks that took their attention away from college advising. These tasks included: scheduling courses; testing; assisting with discipline; providing counseling for students who were suicidal, on drugs, and pregnant;

serving on lunch duty; and substitute teaching, and, as counselors spend more time on non-college-counseling-related responsibilities, they spend less time in college counseling (Bryan et al., 2011; McDonough, 2005). Consequently, this reduces college access for the students who depend on them for college information.

Another criticism is that there is a shortage of school counselors. Usually, students who attend low-socioeconomic school districts are less informed about the college process because their schools do not have enough counselors to adequately assist each of their needs. In many public schools across the nation, there is a shortage of school counselors who are available for college advising (McDonough, 2005). A vast amount of research suggests that high school counselors have tremendous influence on the college plans of students of color and those from low-income households (Bryan et al., 2011; McDonough, 2005). School counselors are vital to these student populations because many of them lack the social know-how to navigate the college process (Deil-Amen & Rosenbaum, 2003). Deil-Amen and Rosenbaum (2003) define “social know-how” as the “skills and knowledge that are more available to middle class students than to the lower-income students” (p. 121). Students from low-socioeconomic backgrounds often lack social know-how and have difficulty with understanding the college-going process. Typically, these students and their families need the counselor’s assistance in understanding, interpreting, and applying the information they have received (Bryan et al., 2011). Since many of the students who attend the community college are first-generation college students, they need assistance in understanding the influence of the high school track, college admissions requirements, the importance of the placement exam, and financial aid (McDonough, 2005; Orfield & Paul, 1993).

The other criticism is closely related to the previous one. Many students may lack social know-how because their counselors may not have been trained properly in college preparation or they, themselves, lack the social capital. Through their studies, Hossler et al., (1999) and McDonough (2005) found that coursework in graduate education rarely includes training in college preparation. In fact, college counseling is not a requirement; it is not written in any accountability system. Usually, school counselors would spend time in professional development to learn more about the process. To assist students with the process, Savitz-Romer (2012) suggests that school counselors use the college readiness counseling approach. College readiness counseling is a developmental process that engages students in developing their college plans and expectations, gaining awareness of one's abilities, and receiving support and information for college access and success. If counselors prepare students by using this approach, they prepare them to not only get into college, but to succeed once they are there.

The final criticism is that counseling is often tied to the track placement of students. If students are not in the college track, they usually do not receive college information. Typically, students of color as well as first-generation college bound students are more likely than Whites and non-first-generational students to have their college plans influenced by their high school counselors (McDonough, 2005; Plank & Jordan, 2001). If students are at the lower level tracks, they, more than likely, will not know the prerequisite courses needed in college for their major. They will not have the information or knowledge to make correct course selections that would prepare them for their major in college. If this occurs, students would need to take either remedial and/or introductory courses to gain the knowledge and foundation they need.



Improving counseling would have a significant impact on college access for students of color and low-income students (McDonough, 2005). Counseling is generally agreed upon as one of the top necessities that is needed to improve college access (McDonough, 2005). When students are able to meet in person with their counselors by their sophomore year, they benefited positively in the college application process (Bryan et al., 2011). While there are benefits with meeting with the counselor, not all students get the opportunity to share in this experience. All students do not receive equal access to information. Depending on the school they attend, they can receive vague or inaccurate information about college.

### **What Advice should be Given to Students about the Community College?**

When counselors are advising high school students about the community college, Hugo (2007) suggests that they bring clarity and focus to what a community college student should be and how their students can make the successful transition from high school. She outlines the ten things that counselors should know: (1) community colleges are open to all students; (2) English and math matter; (3) prepare for the community college placement tests; (4) understand all options; (5) communicate student achievement to your high school community; (6) apply early; (7) consider honors programs; (8) explore the resources; (9) financial aid is available; and (10) celebrate the process.

### **The Role of Admissions**

When high school students decide to enroll at their local community college, the first person that they usually see is a representative from the Admissions Office. If institutions are serious about making a good, lasting impression of new incoming students, then one of the areas that they can assess is their admissions office. According

to Bridgeland and Bruce (2011), at least 75% of all high school graduates enroll in postsecondary education within two-years. In her research, Roman (2007) found that the admissions office can play a huge role in setting students' expectations for college. She believes that admissions should try to identify students who may have difficulty in transitioning to college and educate them on how to navigate the process. This approach is particularly helpful for students who attend schools in low socio-economic areas where access to college resources are limited (Lautz et al., 2005). In their recruitment of incoming students, Roman (2007) suggests that admissions should introduce them to some of the resources offered through the college such as tutoring, library services, academic advising, and career planning and may want to emphasize that college students are responsible for their own learning. Many incoming students are unaware this and as a result, they do not succeed.

### **Conceptual Framework**

For my conceptual framework, I have selected social network theory (Lin, 2001) to undergird my study. Since a majority of incoming college students are unaware of the behavioral and performance expectations of the community college environment and may be unable to access this information from their parents or friends, it is important for these students to have connections and relationships with individuals from their respective high schools and community colleges because they have the knowledge and resources to assist them in navigating through the college-going process. A student's network with high school and college personnel often compensates for family networks when their parents have limited resources (Bryan et al., 2011). The way students engage with the college-

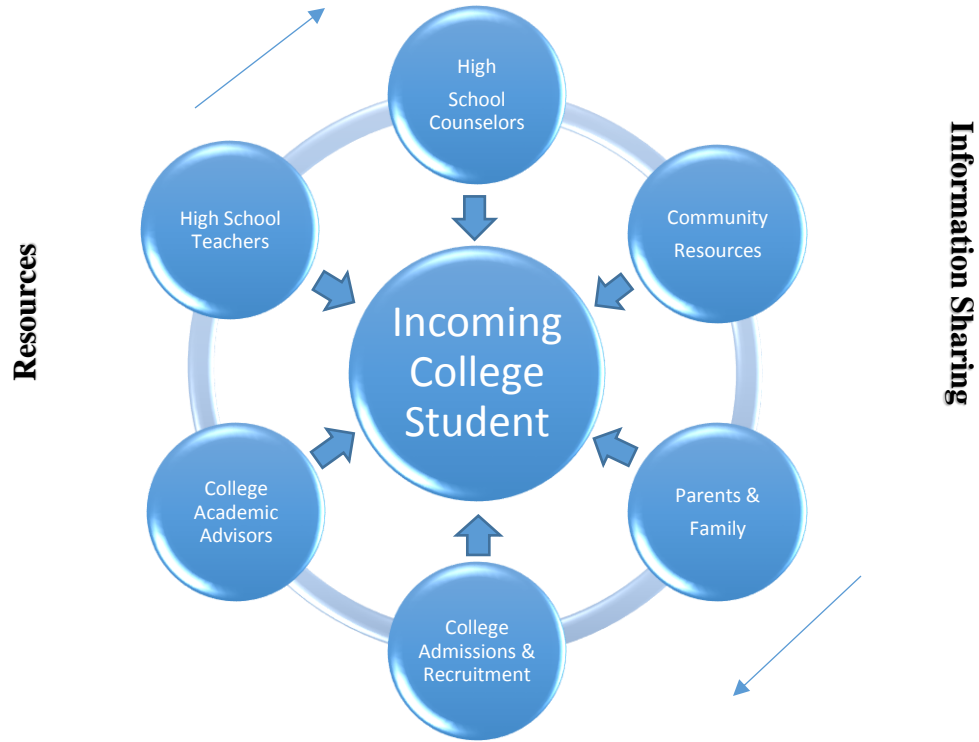
going process and their overall success at the community college is contingent on who they are connected to and how resources and information are flowed to them.

Lin (2001) asserts that resources are at the core of all capital theories, especially social capital. He defines social capital as “resources embedded in a social structure that are accessed and/or mobilized in purposive actions” (p. 29). It is Lin’s (2001) position that actors access resources through direct and indirect social ties or connections. In his definition, Lin contends that possessing social capital should have three distinct outcomes: (1) it should explain how resources take on values and how these values are distributed in society; (2) it should show how actors, through their interactions and social networks, access those resources; and (3) it should explain how access to such social resources can be mobilized for gains. A person’s social capital can only extend as far as their social networks.

An incoming high school student’s success in the college-going process is dependent on the genuine, supportive relationships they have with what Stanton-Salazar and Dornbusch (1995, p. 117) term as “institutional agents.” Institutional agents are knowledgeable of the institutional structure or hierarchy and committed to transmitting that knowledge and those resources with students (Stanton-Salazar, 2001; 2011). They are “accustomed to occupying positions of status and of authority, and managing and accessing highly valued resources, exercising key forms of power, and mobilizing his or her reputation in purposive actions” (Stanton-Salazar, 2011, p. 1075). They assist incoming college students in understanding the college-going process and create support mechanisms to assist them in handling their academic responsibilities, career aspirations, educational and job opportunities, and crisis intervention, among other things. An

institutional agent is usually a non-parent, non-kin person. They can include teachers, counselors, social workers, college admissions counselors, college academic advisors, clergy, community leaders, and college-going peers. When students are connected to institutional agents, there is a greater chance that students are more engaged in the college-going process and they are more likely to advance in higher education.

Figure 1 below shows that incoming community college students have a variety of potential institutional agents. They can include, but are not limited to high school counselors, community resources, parents and family, college admissions and recruitment personnel, college academic advisors, and high school teachers. Before a student graduates from high school to enter the two-year college, he or she will more than likely encounter and utilize the services of one of these groups of people.



*Figure 1. Conceptual Framework of Social Support Networks*

For the purposes of this study, I will only concentrate on high school counselors and college admissions and recruitment personnel and their need to be connected and rely on each other to provide the necessary resources and information to assist incoming students with their transition to the community college. Each individual group has a variety of information and resources to offer to incoming college students, but in order for them to have the impact that they desire, they must first strengthen and ensure the “structure and resourcefulness of their own social networks, as well as their orientation toward effective networking” (Stanton-Salazar, 2011, p. 1068). To best serve incoming college students, institutional agents, both at the high school and at the community college, need to collaborate with each other to strengthen their network so that their services and the information they provide will be beneficial and meaningful to the students they serve.

As numerous studies have shown, new students often do not know how to access the information they need to be successful in their transition to the two-year college. When students have access to these social ties and networks, they are able to acquire information and institutional support that they previously may not have had at their disposal. Even if their ties or networks with these institutional agents are not as strong, their weak ties or relationships still have the probability of increasing access to institutional resources and opportunities (Lin, 1999; 2001). According to Coleman (1988), weaker ties tend to form bridges that link students to other social circles for access to information not likely to be available in their own circles. As a result, that information becomes useful and the student is now able to utilize the information and resources not only in their own respective circles, but they are now able to connect to the social capital that their institutional agents possess as well and be successful.

### **Conclusion**

The lack of literature pertaining to the need for community colleges to collaborate with high schools to inform prospective students about the skills and behaviors necessary to have a successful college transition warrants the need for additional research. In the next chapter, I present the methodology for this case study.

While numerous studies have been devoted to understanding the need for four-year institutions to better inform prospective students of college expectations (Contreras, 2011; Reid & Moore, 2008; Tierney & Garcia, 2010), little has been written. If students are not informed properly, it not only presents difficulties for them in their transition, but it also presents challenges for the two-year institution. Moreover, this lack of transparency continues to perpetuate the information deficiencies that exist between

secondary and higher education. While scholars and practitioners acknowledge that the information gap exists and has produced numerous problems for incoming high school students and two-year institutions (Person, Rosenbaum, & Deil-Amen, 2006; Plank & Jordan, 2001; Venezia et al., 2010), the gap has not been examined thoroughly enough to pinpoint its root cause or direct consequences.

## Chapter 3

### Methodology

The inconsistent information exchange between public K-12 schools and postsecondary institutions has led to a variety of detrimental consequences and challenges for many students attempting to make the transition from high school into the community college. As a result of not receiving sufficient information about college expectations, many transitioning students lack the behavioral and performance skills needed to navigate the higher educational environment and ensure a successful transition. While some studies have given a significant amount of attention to four-year institutions and their need to improve the way they inform prospective students about college expectations (Contreras, 2011; Reid & Moore, 2008; Tierney & Garcia, 2010), little has been written concerning the need for two-year colleges to collaborate with high school personnel to share their expectations so incoming students are informed and prepared for the college experience.

The purpose of this inquiry is to explore how the Office of Enrollment at Erlington County College collaborates with neighboring high school counselors to ensure that incoming college students receive the information and support they need to understand college expectations and be able to make a successful transition into the two-year college. Through an exploratory single-case study approach, I will examine the information exchange between the two-year college and its neighboring high schools and how that information directly impacts prospective college students. One of goals of the study is to explore how the theory of social networks may be beneficial in explaining the communication gaps that may exist between community college personnel and high



school counselors. Building upon the theory, the other goal of the study is to assess the strength and level of collaboration among the institutional agents of both entities.

### **Research Questions**

The following research questions and sub-questions guides this study:

1. In what ways do enrollment representatives from Erlington County College collaborate with high school counselors to assist prospective students with understanding the entry level expectations of college readiness?
2. What is the Erlington County College enrollment representative's role in sharing information about expectations of college readiness with high school counselors?
  - 2a. How do enrollment representatives at ECC perceive their role in sharing information with high school counselors?
  - 2b. How do high school counselors perceive the community college's role in sharing information with them?
3. What are the perceived gaps or inconsistencies, if any, in the information that is exchanged?
4. Are the advisement practices of high school counselors toward graduating students reflective of the interactions between themselves and community college enrollment representatives?
5. To what extent does social network theory explain the communication patterns and interaction between admissions representatives at ECC and high school counselors?

These questions helped me examine how college expectations and other pertinent information is exchanged between Erlington County College (ECC) enrollment representatives and neighboring high school counselors.

### **Rationale for Qualitative Research**

In this section, the rationale for using qualitative research for this study will be presented. To understand how enrollment representatives from Erlington County College share information about college expectations with neighboring high school counselors, it was necessary for me to approach this research study from a qualitative standpoint. Creswell (2014) defines qualitative research as the “approach for exploring and understanding the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem” (p. 4). Merriam (1998) views qualitative research as an umbrella that covers several forms of inquiry that assist researchers in “understanding the meaning people have constructed” and “how they make sense of their world and the experiences they have in the world” (p. 6). Qualitative researchers are intrigued more by the meanings that are embedded in others’ experiences and perspectives than their own. The process of qualitative research involves taking investigators on a journey that begins with selecting a research topic, constructing research questions, collecting and analyzing data into general themes, making interpretations of that data, and writing up their findings (Creswell, 2014; Miles & Huberman, 1994).

What makes qualitative research so fascinating is that the researcher is an integral part of the study. The researcher is considered as the primary or key instrument in data collection and analysis (Creswell, 2014; Merriam, 1998; Patton, 2002). According to Piantanida and Garman (1999), “the researcher is as much a part of the inquiry as the

intent of the study and the inquiry process . . . the researcher's thinking lies at the heart of the inquiry . . ." (p. 24). I had to use my insight, intuition, and experience to explore how college expectations and other important information was shared between Erlington County College enrollment representatives and county high school counselors. Each entity had its own reality to share about the exchange and in order for me to produce findings that are meaningful and relevant, I had to extract each of their separate experiences to tell a collective story. I also had to be cognizant of my own personal biases and worldviews so the interpretation of the data would not be influenced or contaminated in any way. When conducting research, the goal is to produce findings that are credible, trustworthy, and transferable (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Eventually, I would like to use this study as a foundation for future inquiries.

### **Rationale for Case Study**

While I was confident in knowing that my study would be qualitative, I was still unsure of which design would work best for my study. In the planning stage, I could see my study being either phenomenological or action research based. Phenomenology could have been an option because it would provide me with the opportunity to learn about the lived experiences of those I was studying. I could have made a case for action research because I could have worked with the high school counselors and enrollment staff to use a team or collaborative approach to inform and improve our practice. It was important for me, however, to select a design that was thoroughly descriptive and that would allow me to gain an in-depth understanding of the phenomenon I was studying (Hancock & Algozzine, 2006; Yin, 2014).

Of all of the qualitative approaches, using the case study design was the best method for answering my research questions. According to Yin (2014), “a case study is an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon in depth and within its real-world context, especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context may not be clearly evident” (p. 16). Merriam (1998) posits that case study research “offers a means of investigating complex social units consisting of multiple variables of potential importance in understanding the phenomenon” (p. 41). The case study approach was appropriate for this inquiry because it provides practitioners with the opportunity to understand complex issues and solve them in practical and meaningful ways that would benefit not only their organization or social context, but it would play a significant role in expanding the field’s knowledge base (Merriam, 1998). Since I was exploring the collaborative relationship between the enrollment staff at Erlington County College and its neighboring high school counselors, I wanted the case study to be exploratory (Streb, 2010). The advantage of the exploratory approach is its ability to examine “distinct phenomena characterized by a lack of detailed preliminary research” (p. 373). To my knowledge, no prior field research was conducted exploring the communication and information exchange between a community college and high school counselors to explore how they rely on each other to provide incoming students with the necessary resources and information to assist them in transitioning to the college.

I utilized this type of strategy because it provided my study with the following advantages. First, the case study inquiry explains the process of how and why something occurs (Merriam, 1998; Yin, 2014). When using this approach, the researcher is more intrigued by the *process* than the *outcome*. As educators and practitioners, we are

inundated with producing and understanding outcomes all of the time. We are cognizant of the need for outcomes, but do we understand the developments, behavior patterns, and structures, that influence and ultimately lead to the final results? For case study research, the focus is not on the destination but in how the investigator navigates and presents the journey to the readers.

Case study research also relies on multiple sources of evidence (Yin, 2014). It was necessary for me to use a research design that allowed me to collect data from various sources. The interpretation of the findings for this case study is based on my analysis of observations, electronic and paper documents, my reflective journal, and interviews with high school counselors and college enrollment representatives. For triangulation to take place, there has to be a convergence of all the data. No single source of evidence can achieve triangulation in isolation. By developing convergent evidence, data triangulation helps in strengthening the overall validity of a study (Yin, 2014).

Case studies are great in drawing upon theories and models of disciplines outside of education such as psychology, anthropology, history, and sociology to identify and illuminate issues in the field or in practice (Merriam, 1998). According to Merriam (1998), researchers can utilize the case study approach to confirm, challenge, or extend a particular theory. For my conceptual framework, I used two sociological theories to undergird my study. The theory on social networks focuses on the relationship between internal and external connections and institutional resources (Lin, 2001). In his study of low-status youth, Stanton-Salazar (2011) used concepts such as social capital and empowerment theory in critical social work to create and ground his theory on institutional agents. Similar to what Stanton-Salazar did in his study where he extended a

particular theory to address the needs of a particular population, I wanted to investigate whether the theory of social networks and institutional agents can be extended to address how high school counselors and college personnel can collaborate with each other to strengthen their network so they are able to provide students with the tools they need to be successful once they graduate and go to college.

### **The Role of the Researcher**

My role as a community college academic advisor allows for me to bring a unique perspective to this study. My research topic originated from a state of frustration with how unprepared and uninformed graduating high school students were when entering the community college. I would often meet with students who want to pursue higher education and be successful, but their perceptions and understandings about college and its expectations are often unrealistic and erroneous. In speaking with these new students, I have discovered that many of them are unaware of the knowledge and skills that are necessary to navigate the college environment. From understanding the importance of simply preparing for the college's placement exam to knowing why certain course prerequisites are required for rigorous academic programs like nursing and STEM (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics), many of our students come to the college completely lost and consequently, they are overwhelmed.

As a result of seeing students frustrated and discouraged with the college-going process year after year, I began to question how or through which sources they received information regarding college expectations and whether the expectations were made clear to students before they came to campus. I also wondered about whose role it was to convey those expectations to students: school counselors or college representatives?

Finally, I wondered about the relationship between the counselors and college representatives and how information is shared between them. Asking these types of questions began to frame the overall design of the study and ultimately led to my research questions.

Creswell (2013) emphasizes the importance of connecting the researcher's past experiences to the research problem. For this particular study, I used my past experiences and expertise to examine the information exchange between Erlington County College and its neighboring high schools to identify the gaps and inconsistencies that impacted students' transitions to community college. As the investigator, I am considered as the "primary instrument for gathering and analyzing data" (Merriam, 1998, p. 20). As such, when conducting research, it was essential for me to be aware and disclose any preconceived notions, personal biases, worldviews, values, and backgrounds I had because these could have been the very elements that my observations and analyses would be filtered through (Creswell, 2014; Merriam, 1998). To account for my biases, substantial consideration had to be given to my research design and how the data would be analyzed and reported. To do this successfully, it was necessary for me to be rigorous in maintaining my thoughts and observations in my reflective journal.

I also had to be cognizant of some of the challenges that could potentially prohibit me from obtaining good data. For instance, I was not an insider. Since I work in a different department on campus and we are not a part of many of the recruitment efforts, I had to rely on the Office of Enrollment and the counselors' association for access. To prepare for the challenge, I had spent at least the last four years forming relationships with the counselors and building trust with the Office of Enrollment. While negotiating

these relationships were necessary in helping me gain the information I need to answer the research questions for my study, I kept in mind of what Maxwell (2013) cautioned researchers about when building rapport with participants. I had to be careful that the research relationships that I had established did not hinder certain aspects of my research design.

I was also mindful of the challenges that I may have as a participant-observer (Creswell, 2013; Yin, 2014). Early on in the research process, I was unsure of whether I would be a participant-observer or an observer when it was time for me to do observations. I did not know if my role as an academic advisor could be called upon. If this was to happen, it would have been difficult to perform my role as an observer. Throughout the data collection process, however, I did not have to perform the role as a participant-observer. I concentrated most of my efforts on just observing.

As a staff member who is knowledgeable about multiple aspects of Erlington County College, finally, I had to challenge myself to remain neutral throughout the entire research process. Although this was difficult at times, it was important to allow for the data to speak without interfering or manipulating them in any way. Since I was conducting research where I am employed, I held myself responsible for presenting the data in a manner that would not be compromised or put the participants or myself at risk in any way (Creswell, 2014).

### **Research Site**

The research setting takes place at Erlington County College. Erlington County College is a public, comprehensive two-year college located in the Northeastern part of the United States. The mission of the college is three-fold: strive for academic excellence;



support the economic development of the community; and provide affordable, accessible programs and services. Recently, ECC has been ranked as one of the Community College Week's top 40 fastest growing community colleges in the United States. ECC serves roughly 6,800 students a year with at least 3,800 of them being full-time (Durkin, 2016). For the last three years, ECC has sustained consistent growth in its student population. The student demographic profile shows that at least 78% of the total student population is under the age of 25. A majority of the students are county residents; almost all of them are state residents.

I decided to focus on Erlington County College because the institution is known to have a great relationship with its neighboring high schools. For almost a decade, the College has taken major steps to invest time and resources in developing and maintaining strong relationships with the high school counselors. In that short span of time, the College has also extended their recruitment efforts to include high schools outside of Erlington County and some private high schools. The enrollment team at ECC recognizes the counselors as the medium between themselves and the students they are trying to attract to the institution. Furthermore, they understand that counselors play a key role in not only helping their students choose an institution of higher learning but also in assisting them with the college-going process. Choosing ECC as the research site for my case study was ideal because the data revealed that some gaps and inconsistencies existed in the exchange of information about college expectations and college readiness.

### **The Sample Selection**

To answer my research questions, it was essential that I selected participants who were knowledgeable of the phenomenon I was studying. For this exploratory case study, I

used two types of sampling strategies: purposeful and typical case. Since my study was qualitative, these two types of sampling strategies were most appropriate in selecting participants. I conducted interviews with three representatives from the Office of Enrollment at Erlington County College and ten school counselors from various high schools in the county. These individuals were the most knowledgeable about their respective professions and they possessed valuable insight on the collaborative relationship between the community college and the high schools. They were able to assess the inconsistencies and gaps that existed in the exchange of information between the two institutions and provide suggestions on how they can be addressed and rectified.

When selecting high school counselors, I used typical case sampling because “it reflects the average person, situation, or instance of the phenomenon of interest” (Merriam, 1998, p. 62). I decided to group the counselors and the schools they represent by their District Factor Group (DFG). According to the state’s Department of Education, DFGs represent an estimated measure of a community’s relative socioeconomic status (SES) along with student achievement. DFGs are calculated by using the following six variables that are closely tied to SES: 1) percent of adults with no high school diploma; 2) percent of adults with some college education; 3) occupational status; 4) unemployment rate; 5) percent of individuals in poverty; and 6) median family income (New Jersey Department of Education, 2013). School districts can have the following SES classifications: A, B, CD, DE, FG, GH, I, or J. Municipalities that hold an “A” or “B” classification have a lower SES than those municipalities that hold an “I” or “J” classification.

Since there are thirteen public high schools in Erlington County that have articulation agreements with the college, the schools were separated into three groups by their respective DFG: A and B (Jefferson, Wilson, and Kennedy), CD (Van Buren, Grant, Reagan, Eisenhower, and Pierce), and DE and FG (Roosevelt, Taft, Truman, Harrison, and Lincoln). All high schools received a presidential pseudonym to protect their identity.

I chose three high schools within each group and interviewed one counselor from each school. I was able to gain access through the relationship that ECC had with the counselors' association. I spoke with the president of the association to see if he was willing to grant me permission to discuss my study with the counselors at one of the first meetings. The school counselors were instrumental in answering research questions one, two, and three.

I have selected the three representatives from the Office of Enrollment at Erlington County College through the means of purposeful sampling. According to Merriam (1998), purposeful sampling can be used when an "investigator wants to discover, understand, and gain insight" on a phenomenon (p. 61). My original goal was to select four representatives, but one left the college to pursue employment at another college. I have chosen these individuals because they have a close affiliation with the counselors' association. The director and administrator are responsible for sharing information and updates with the association. The academic advisor is stationed in the high schools to help students learn about and enroll in the college's High School Choice Program (HSCP). As part of the college president's new initiative with college readiness, their roles have expanded and they are going out to the high schools to assist students in learning more about the college, taking college courses, and understanding the college

enrollment process. Like the school counselors, the representatives from the Office of Enrollment helped answer research questions one, two, and three.

### **Data Collection Procedures**

Within qualitative research, I have access to a variety of data collection methods. To answer the research questions for this exploratory case study, I utilized four data collection techniques: interviews, maintaining a reflective journal, field notes from direct observations, and electronic and paper documentation. Using all of these methodologies gave me a thorough understanding of the phenomenon at hand. In discussing data collection techniques, Merriam (1998) posits that “understanding the case in its totality, as well as the intensive, *holistic* description and analysis characteristic of a case study, mandates both breadth and depth of data collection” (p. 134). To ensure that I obtain rich data, both breadth and depth was needed.

The high school counselors who were interviewed for this study were selected through typical case sampling. To best capture the viewpoints of the school counselors, I conducted one-on-one in-depth interviews. According to Seidman (2006), in-depth interviewing can be used as a vehicle to assist the researcher “in understanding the lived experience of other people and the meaning they make of that experience” (p. 9). In-depth interviewing has the following key features: (1) it combines structure with flexibility; (2) it is interactive; (3) the researcher can use a variety of probes and other techniques to achieve more depth; and (4) the interview itself has the ability to create new knowledge (Legard, Keegan, & Ward, 2003). Before meeting with the counselors, I created an interview protocol that was approved by Rowan University’s Institutional Review Board (IRB). Each counselor was asked to sign a consent form explaining the

purpose of the study, the amount of time needed to complete the interview, and the use of results (Creswell, 2013; Seidman, 2006). I reassured the participants that their names and the information they provide would be kept confidential. Participants were also given the option of deciding where they wanted to meet to hold the interview. Most of the counselors elected to hold the interviews in their respective places of work. Each counselor was asked twelve open-ended questions about their views on collaboration and information sharing between themselves and the community college. As Patton (2002) points out, it is important to ask the participants the same basic questions in the same order to increase the comparability among the responses. Counselors were interviewed between the months of May and December of 2016. Each interview was digitally recorded and then transcribed by a professional transcribing company.

I also interviewed three enrollment staff members at Erlington County College. Since the Office of Enrollment has a close-knit working environment, the best strategy was to interview them as a group. The original goal was to conduct a focus group, but with the number of participants being low, conducting a group interview seemed better suited. Two of the participants decided to meet with me as a group and I interviewed them in one of their offices on campus. I interviewed the third enrollment staff member a month or so later due to the rigidity of her work schedule.

The goal was to create an environment that encouraged synergy and spontaneity among the participants (Finch & Lewis, 2003). Since they love to discuss their initiatives and contributions that their office has made to Erlington County College, I was able to obtain the high-quality, rich data that I needed for my study. When interviewing the staff members, I was able to explore the relationship that the college had with the high school

counselors and what their philosophy was about sharing information and college expectations with them. Their transparency made it possible for me to see the phenomenon in its most authentic form.

Unlike the high school counselors, the participants from the Office Enrollment were selected through purposeful sampling. Before meeting with the Office of Enrollment, I created an interview protocol that was approved by Rowan University's IRB. Each participant was asked to sign a consent form explaining the purpose of the study, the amount of time needed to complete the interview, and use of results (Creswell, 2013; Seidman, 2006). I reassured the participants that their names and the information they provided would be kept confidential.

The third strategy used for this case study was my entries from my reflective journal. Making notes throughout the study and having a reflective journal was vital to my study because they gave me the opportunity record my "insights, interpretations, beginning analyses, and working hypotheses" about what was occurring when I observed and conducted interviews (Patton, 2002, p. 304). They also made the data I received more tangible, and through reflection I was able to transform that information to build additional knowledge (Rossman & Rallis, 1998).

Another methodology I utilized was direct observations. According to Rossman and Rallis (1998), observations are a vital component to all qualitative inquiry. For observation data to be beneficial to a study, it must have depth and be descriptive (Patton, 2002). In other words, my observer's field notes should be able to paint a succinct picture that helps the reader to understand what occurred and how it occurred. Patton (2002) further asserts that the notes should "become the eyes, ears, and perceptual senses for the

reader” (p. 23). For this study, I conducted four observations at the counselors’ association meetings between the months of February and April of 2016. The association held their meetings once a month. During each observation, I recorded the following: the items that were discussed, what each participant said, participants’ body language, my personal observation notes, and my reflective notes. I used the meeting agenda as a guide to separate the meeting in five-minute intervals. I found this technique to be extremely helpful because I was able to stay focus and engaged.

After each meeting, I typed my handwritten notes in a document and reflected on what I saw. I documented my reactions in my journal. While I wrote, I kept in mind the importance of expanding my notes to gain more insight and fill in the gaps (Glesne, 2006). Throughout the entire data collection process, my goal was to make the interview and observation process interactive where one technique informed the other (Tjora, 2006). I used what I saw in the observations to create questions and probes for the counselors and college personnel during interviews. By using multiple methods, I was able to triangulate my data.

Lastly, I collected as many electronic and paper documents as possible. Yin (2014) lists a variety of documentation that an investigator could use for his or her research. I was able to collect the following: meeting agendas, ECC literature given to high schools, formal evaluations, and administrative documents and reports. The purpose for using electronic and paper documents was “to corroborate and augment evidence from other sources” (Yin, 2014, p.107). As Yin suggests, the documents should only be treated as inferences and not as definitive findings.

## **Data Analysis**

Throughout the entire process, my goal was to collect data and analyze it frequently. Since I was gathering data a long period of time, I did not want to leave the analysis of it until the end. After I collected my data, I began analyzing it immediately. First, I had them transcribed. I used single-space formatting to group each interview question together so when it came time to code, each response was clustered together and given its own code (Saldana, 2009). When reading the transcripts, I looked for similarities that were useful in helping me develop a deeper understanding of my findings. After reading each transcript twice, I created a list of preliminary codes (Saldana, 2009). After creating the initial codes, I reread each transcript to determine whether some codes could be combined or if they were no longer needed for the study. After combining and collapsing the codes, themes emerged.

I also used explanation building to further analyze my data (Belk, 2010; Yin, 2014). I preferred this approach over pattern matching because it challenged me to explain how and why a certain phenomenon occurred. Although my case study was exploratory, the same procedures for an explanatory case study still applied (Yin, 2014). Using this technique helped me in refining my ideas and entertaining other “plausible or rival explanations” (Yin, 2014, p. 150).

## **Reliability and Validity**

Reliability and validity are avenues through which quality research is evaluated. For my work to be respected and beneficial to the fields of secondary and higher education, my study must be rigorously conducted and plausible to other educators, professionals, and researchers (Merriam, 1998). Creswell (2013) views validity as “an



attempt to assess the ‘accuracy’ of the findings, as best described by the researcher and the participants” (p. 249-250). He goes on to discuss how the term *validation* is used more to emphasize a process rather than *verification*. For case study research, Yin (2014) uses four assessments to establish its quality: construct validity, internal validity, external validity, and reliability. For the purposes of this case study, I will focus on construct validity, external validity, and reliability.

Yin (2014) defines construct validity as the process of “identifying correct operational measures for the concepts being studied” (p. 46). To increase construct validity for my case study, it was essential that I used multiple sources of evidence and established a chain of evidence in the collection of my data. These two tactics helped strengthen the reliability of the study. When analyzing the data and writing the findings, I used member checking to see if my findings are plausible to the participants (Merriam, 1998).

For external validity, the focus is on whether the findings can be generalized to other populations (Merriam, 1998). Maxwell (2013) makes a clear distinction between external generalization in qualitative and quantitative research. When thinking of generalizability, many researchers see the findings as representing a larger population. According to Maxwell (2013), that is not the goal in qualitative research. External validity should be based “on the development of a theory of the *processes* operating in the case studied, one that may well operate in other cases, but that may produce different outcomes in different circumstances” (p. 138). Yin (2014) discusses the importance of investigators carefully wording their research questions. For my research questions, I worded each question in a way that the answers can be generalized to fit other

community colleges who have similar questions about communicating with high school counselors to inform them of college expectations. The focus was on the process, not the result.

In qualitative research, researchers usually think of reliability as a way of just replicating their findings. In case study research, however, Merriam (1998) and Yin (2014) view reliability as a means of ensuring the results of a study are consistent with the data that was collected. To ensure the reliability or trustworthiness of a study, Merriam (1998) suggests using the following techniques: the investigator's position, triangulation, and an audit trail. The goal is to minimize as any errors and biases as possible (Yin, 2014).

## **Conclusion**

To investigate the communication patterns and interactions between Erlington County College and neighboring high school counselors, I have to use an approach that allows me to ask the *why* and *how* questions to gain an in-depth understanding of the phenomenon. Since I am assessing the communication patterns and interactions to determine if they are beneficial to the students who will eventually come to the community college, using an exploratory single-case study approach was designed and implemented. Using the case study inquiry also provided me with some flexibility to reach outside of the field of education and utilize a sociological framework to undergird my study: social network theory (Lin, 2001). By using this approach, I am able to examine the relationship between the two entities in a real-world context (Merriam, 1998; Yin, 2014).

## Chapter 4

### Findings of the Study

The purpose of this exploratory case study was to examine how the Office of Enrollment at Erlington County College shared information about college readiness and college expectations with county high school counselors to ensure that incoming students received the knowledge and tools necessary to make a successful transition from high school to the two-year college. The study sought to investigate whether and where the two groups perceived there were breakdowns and disparities in the information that was exchanged. By utilizing a qualitative case study approach, I was able to gain an in-depth understanding of the perceptions and experiences of the participants. Their contributions to this project allowed me to investigate this complex phenomenon in its totality and present the findings in a meaningful and compelling way.

This chapter is organized to represent the findings of an exploratory case study conducted at Erlington County College involving its enrollment staff and neighboring high school counselors. The chapter begins with a brief description of the participants. I then discuss the process by which the interview, observation, and electronic and paper documentation data were analyzed and the themes that emerged as a result. Finally, the chapter will close with a summation of the findings.

#### Description of Participants

As discussed in Chapter Three, the participants of this study were Erlington County College enrollment staff members and high school counselors who possessed valuable insight into the collaborative relationship between the community college and its neighboring high schools. Below are the names and short description of the individuals

who shared their experiences with me for this study. From Erlington County College, I interviewed Claire Garnett, Darlene McCann, and Lori Quinn. The following high school counselors in Erlington County were interviewed: Sylvia Nardelli from Van Buren High School, Amanda Cross from Grant High School, Brad Templeton from Roosevelt High School, Katelynn Bonner from Eisenhower Vocational High School, Sarah Read from Pierce High School, Chris Bruno from Reagan High School, Patricia Olsen from Taft High School, Sam Harris from Jefferson High School, Larry Fisher from Wilson High School, and Barbara Anderson from Kennedy High School. In the pages that follow, I give a brief description of each of the participants.

**Claire Garnett.** Mrs. Garnett is the director of the Center for College and Career Readiness (CCCR) at Erlington County College. She has worked as the director for about two years, and she oversees all of the programs and partnerships related to high school students.

**Darlene McCann.** Mrs. McCann is the administrator of High School Outreach at Erlington County College. She has worked in the position for little over a year. Her primary responsibility is to oversee the College's Priority Admissions Program. The program is designed to assist high school seniors making the transition from high school to ECC.

**Lori Quinn.** Ms. Quinn is the academic advisor for the High School Choice Program (HSCP) at the College. The High School Choice Program falls under the Center for College and Career Readiness. She has served in the position for just over a year. Most of her time is dedicated to visiting twelve of the thirteen high schools in Erlington County at least once a month. Lori is responsible for assisting high school students from

grades nine to twelve in understanding the enrollment process and registering for college courses.

**Sylvia Nardelli.** Mrs. Nardelli is one of the school counselors at Van Buren High School. She has been at Van Buren for 29 years. She was previously a school counselor at a public and vocational high school. Some of her responsibilities at Van Buren include homebound instruction, college and career planning, and working with students who are in the Academic Support Program. She holds a student caseload of approximately 272.

**Amanda Cross.** Mrs. Cross is the director of guidance at Grant High School. She has served in that role for six years. Before becoming the director of guidance, she was an elementary, middle, and high school counselor. She also worked as an elementary school teacher. Mrs. Cross is responsible for managing the school's master schedule, overseeing the department, and serving as the school's liaison to Erlington County College. As director of guidance, Amanda does not have a student caseload, but she has six counselors who each have a caseload of around 300 students.

**Brad Templeton.** Mr. Templeton is the head of guidance at Roosevelt High School. He has served in that role since 2010. Before becoming the head of guidance at Roosevelt, he was a school counselor and prior to that, he worked as a school counselor at a Catholic high school in another city in the state. Mr. Templeton supervises all of the school counselors and administrative support professionals in his district. His primary responsibilities are to coordinate the school's counseling and academic services, review policies regarding social and emotional counseling, and work with his fellow counselors to create and maintain a comprehensive program that consists of individual, academic,

social and emotional, and college and vocational counseling. Brad's student caseload is limited to ten to twelve students. The students he counsels consist of special cases.

**Katelynn Bonner.** Mrs. Bonner has worked at Eisenhower Vocational High School as a school counselor for three years. She counsels students who are interested in pursuing careers in finance and engineering. Mrs. Bonner was previously a recruiter and the administrator for the first-year experience program at Erlington County College. Her responsibilities at Eisenhower include assisting students transitioning to the high school and creating their schedules, conducting career interest inventories, and guiding them through the college application process. Katelynn serves approximately 300 students.

**Sarah Read.** Mrs. Read has been the director of guidance at Pierce High School for two years. Before coming to Pierce High School, she worked as a school counselor at Roosevelt High School. Some of her responsibilities include attending the meetings between the county counselors' association and Erlington County College; overseeing the department; and coordinating testing, the school's master schedule, and scholarships. Currently, Sarah does not have a student caseload; however, one of the counselors at Pierce works with the senior class.

**Chris Bruno.** Mr. Bruno is one of the school counselors for Reagan High School. He has served as the senior class counselor for at least six years and has been in education for the last 13 years. Before becoming a counselor at the high school, he worked as a one-on-one classroom aide. As a school counselor, he is primarily responsible for academic and college/career counseling. Due to the various resources that Reagan High School has, he does not have to dedicate much of his time to emotional support counseling. Chris serves approximately 310 students.

**Patricia Olsen.** Mrs. Olsen is the chairperson of the guidance department at Taft High School. She has worked at Taft High School for the last thirteen years. Before coming to Taft High School, she worked as a program director for students who had dropped out of school in another district. At Taft High School, Mrs. Olsen coordinates and oversees all of the activities of the guidance department. Unlike the other guidance department heads, she is one of the few who has a student caseload. Patricia currently serves a caseload of around 150 students

**Sam Harris.** Mr. Harris currently serves as one of the school counselors for Jefferson High School in Erlington County. He has been with the Jefferson School District for 27 years. Before becoming a school counselor, he was previously a special education and third grade teacher. Some of his responsibilities include academic, social, and emotional counseling, coordinating parent conferences for students who are struggling, and coordinating state, SAT/ACT, and AP testing. Sam has a caseload of approximately 170 students.

**Larry Fisher.** Mr. Fisher is one of the school counselors at Wilson High School. He has served as a counselor for almost fifteen years: seven at the elementary level and eight at the high school level. Before becoming a school counselor, he was a middle school science teacher and prior to that, he served as a police officer for thirteen years. Similar to the other counselors who participated in this study, he is responsible for social and emotional counseling, academic advising, and mentoring. Larry has around 265 students on his caseload.

**Barbara Anderson.** Mrs. Anderson is one of the school counselors at Kennedy High School. Before becoming a school counselor, she was previously a French, Spanish,

and Italian teacher. At Kennedy High School, some of her responsibilities include maintaining student records, coordinating PSAT and state testing, and conducting senior interviews. Barbara has approximately 200 students on her caseload.

Table 1 displays each of the counselors' names, the number of years they served in their current position, the high schools they represent, and the school district's respective District Factor Group (DFG) classification. As discussed in Chapter Three, the school's DFG classification represents an estimated measure of a community's relative socioeconomic status (SES). School districts can have the following SES classifications: A, B, CD, DE, FG, GH, I, or J. Municipalities that hold an "A" or "B" classification have a lower socioeconomic status than those municipalities that hold an "I" or "J" classification. Vocational schools like Eisenhower do not have a DFG classification. When designing the framework for this study, I included the District Factor Group classification to determine whether and how it played a factor in how Erlington County College communicated with the high school counselors.



Table 1

*Description of High School Counselors*

Name	Years of Current Experience	Name of High School	DFG
Sylvia Nardelli	29 years	Van Buren High School	FG
Amanda Cross	6 years	Grant High School	CD
Brad Templeton	6 years	Roosevelt High School	FG
Katelynn Bonner	3 years	Eisenhower Vocational High School	N/A
Sarah Read	2 years	Pierce High School	CD
Chris Bruno	6 years	Reagan High School	CD
Patricia Olsen	13 years	Taft High School	DE
Sam Harris	27 years	Jefferson High School	A
Larry Fisher	15 years	Wilson High School	B
Barbara Anderson	Did not want to share	Kennedy High School	B

**Data Analysis Process**

The research findings of this exploratory case study are based on the thorough analysis of the following data sources: direct observations, my reflective journal, semi-structured interviews, and electronic and paper documentation. Data collection began in

early February of 2016 and ended in mid-December of 2016. Before conducting any interviews with the enrollment staff or the high school counselors, I wanted to first observe the Erlington County Professional Counselors Association (ECPCA) meetings at the College to get an overview of how the two groups interacted with one another. I conducted four observations between the months of February and April of 2016. During the course of the observation phase of this study, I documented my observations and reactions in my field journal and reflected on what I saw. These notes and journal entries were instrumental in helping me create questions and probes for the counselors and college personnel when it came time to hold interviews. My goal was to make the observation and interview processes as interactive as possible so that one data source could inform the other (Tjora, 2006).

Interview transcripts served as the primary source of data for this study. Three Erlington County College enrollment staff members and ten high school counselors were interviewed. All thirteen individuals were given the option of choosing the location at which their interviews were to be held to ensure the greatest amount of comfortability and transparency. Each participant was interviewed using a semi-structured interview protocol consisting of several open-ended questions with predetermined probes and follow-up questions that were used when necessary to better understand the perceptions and experiences of the individual (Seidman, 2006). The Office of Enrollment personnel were asked ten open-ended questions (Appendix A), and the high school counselors were asked twelve open-ended questions (Appendix B). Each interview lasted between twenty and ninety minutes.

All of the interviews were audio recorded with the knowledge and consent of those who were participating in the study. The audio files were stored on a flash drive and then transcribed by an online professional transcription service. Once I received the transcripts from the online professional transcription service, I went through the process of reviewing them for errors and inconsistencies while listening to each of audio recordings. I then edited the transcribed document and emailed each of the participants a copy of their respective manuscript to review and verify that their original responses were quoted correctly. Each participant was given the option of adding to or clarifying any of their responses (Creswell, 2014).

Next, I reviewed my observation field notes and each of transcripts for a second time while listening again to the audio recordings. For the first cycle of coding, I looked specifically for similarities that could be useful in developing a deeper understanding of my findings. I placed analytic memos throughout my observation field notes and each of the transcribed documents, and I utilized my reflective notes to evaluate some of the ideas and patterns that were emerging from the data I collected. After reviewing each of the transcripts and observation notes for a second time, I created a list of preliminary descriptive codes (Saldana, 2009). According to Saldana, descriptive coding can be used to quickly summarize a single statement or a concept of an entire passage in a word or a short phrase. My first cycle of coding resulted in the creation of approximately 200 preliminary codes.

After creating these initial codes, I reread the transcripts and my observation field notes to determine whether some of the codes could be combined with others or if they were no longer needed for the study. The codes that were similar were combined and

those that were no longer useful to the study were discarded. After combining and collapsing the preliminary codes, I ended up with fourteen sets or groups of codes. From this second cycle of coding, I saw three major patterns emerging from the data and I managed to combine the codes into two main categories or themes: unintentional barriers to student college readiness and the benefits and challenges of maintaining a collaborative relationship. Each of the themes is discussed in detail below.

**Theme 1: Unintentional Barriers to Student College Readiness.** The first theme, Unintentional Barriers to Student College Readiness, originated from my observations and interviews with the enrollment staff at Erlington County College and was then confirmed through the interviews with the high school counselors. What made this particular theme fascinating was understanding how multifaceted college readiness was in the community college context and how, if not careful, college and high school professionals can collectively and unconsciously create barriers that prevent incoming students from receiving the information and resources they need to be ready for college. In analyzing the data, five barriers or subthemes emerged: being process-oriented is the main priority, no sense of ownership, not viewing college readiness as a holistic concept, students reflect the culture of the high school, and kinks in the communication pipeline. Each subtheme is examined in greater detail below.

***Being process-oriented is the main priority.*** The first subtheme, being process-oriented in the main priority, describes the approach the Office of Enrollment uses to assist students from high school with the application and course registration process. Using this approach, the enrollment staff is able to walk students through the entire enrollment process which includes the following steps: completing the college

application, applying for financial aid, preparing for the placement exam, gathering important documents such as official high school transcripts and immunization records, and introducing them to their academic advisor for course registration. Since the enrollment staff members are responsible for making first contact with prospective students, one of their priorities is to support and empower students in the college enrollment process so they can enroll at Erlington County College seamlessly and take full advantage of the opportunities the college has to offer. Utilizing this approach streamlines the entire enrollment process and makes their interaction with students less complicated and more productive.

For the last few years, the Office of Enrollment has had to focus on being more process-oriented due to the growing enrollment at the college. In their interviews, the enrollment staff said that the administration at ECC tasked them with the responsibility of attracting and enrolling as many students as possible. In trying to satisfy this charge, many of their initiatives have had to focus on increasing enrollment. According to Claire, director of the Center for College and Career Readiness, “Anything to drive enrollment is always being put on the forefront.” While the Office of Enrollment has worked diligently on finding ways to increase enrollment, the staff has been faced with the challenge of trying to balance the quality of the information they provide about the enrollment process with the high volume of students they have to serve. In their interviews, both Claire and Darlene spoke about their struggle in trying to accomplish this huge task. Claire began by saying:

Because we’re enrollment and we’re charged with increasing enrollment, increasing our high school capture rate, it is certainly about numbers. We want to

get as many numbers as possible. However, it is very much, and I would put this at the forefront, about customer service. We want to make certain that every single one of those numbers count. They're [students] in front of us, we treat them as if they were our own son or daughter or a grandparent or a sibling. Whatever the case, we want to make certain they get the best service and the most accurate up-to-date information. So it is that fine line between getting as many students here as possible but not jeopardizing the quality that they're receiving when they're here in front of us or we're in front of them.

Darlene, administrator of High School Outreach, added to Claire's point:

So, to that note as well, that yes, we are essentially selling a product, but it's a product that we believe in and we're providing these students with a quality product that we, at the end of the day, can be happy and they can be happy with. So it's not just us being salespeople and be like, "Welp, you're in the door. We don't care about you now." We do. We're invested from start to finish.

The enrollment staff strives to provide each of their students with great customer service and personalized care. Although it is difficult sometimes for the Office of Enrollment to find the perfect balance, they understand how important their role is in assisting students with the enrollment process. The enrollment staff wants their students to be confident in knowing that they are committed to walking them through every step of the enrollment process.

To be effective, the enrollment staff realized that they could not help incoming students from high school navigate the enrollment process alone; they needed additional support. They decided to reach out to the school counselors from each of the high schools

in Erlington County and the academic advisors at the college for assistance. The enrollment staff recognized that their relationship with the counselors would not only benefit the students who would eventually attend Erlington County College, but it would also help to funnel more students to their institution. Claire discussed the importance of having the counselors' support with the recruitment and application process:

As you know with the recruitment, it's called the recruitment funnel for a reason. So we have to start somewhere and we turn prospects or recruits to applicants. And that's a huge piece because if they're not in our system with their information, we can't continue to communicate with them. So it's been great to have that buy-in [from the counselors] because now we're getting more and more [students]. We reached an ever-high application count through the priority admissions program and that's due to their support with that.

As a result of getting the high school counselors' buy-in, the counselors became more active in assisting their respective students with ECC's application process. One of the counselors, Barbara Anderson of Kennedy High School, shared how she helped her students with the enrollment process:

As you know, because you work there, they [the enrollment staff] have worked very hard to get kids now to that next step. So when they get their acceptance package, we try to walk them through the steps: this is what you have to do, here you have-- you go on, you do this, you do that . . . but that seems to be one of the harder areas to really get kids beyond. I think if they or we struggle in an area, it's probably that, getting kids to actually make that step to enroll.

Barbara noticed how difficult it was to encourage prospective students to commit and enroll for courses as Claire described. Nonetheless, she was engaged in the enrollment process and helped her students to progress through the steps.

In a separate interview, Lori, the advisor for the High School Choice Program (HSCP), made the following observation about how difficult it would have been to recruit students without having the assistance of the counselors:

They have that direct connection, that direct communication with the student that we're trying to capture. We as a group, as a college, as a team, really wouldn't be able to continuously put together different ways to recruit these students if we didn't have the *in*. We didn't know exactly how to recruit or how to attract these students.

The Office of Enrollment recognized the need to collaborate with the counselors because they had a direct connection with the students who the college was trying to reach. The counselors were instrumental in the success of the Office of Enrollment because they helped students enroll at ECC and assisted them with the enrollment process.

The Office of Enrollment also relied on the academic advisors in Student Services and college faculty to help culminate the enrollment process. Darlene, the administrator for high school outreach, believed that her office was responsible for guiding incoming students through the admission process and handing them off to the academic advisors for course selection. She discussed that when students meet with their academic advisor, the hope was that the advisor would assist them in creating a degree pathway, discuss short- and long-term goals, and inform them of what will be necessary to eventually graduate. Since their priority was to find ways to increase enrollment, the enrollment staff



concentrated on informing students about the process, what they needed to do, and what would happen at the next step. Claire reiterated Darlene's point about the importance of the handoff process: "That's why the passing of the baton and getting them [students] here through priority registration is important because then they get to meet their advisor one-on-one and that relationship can begin from there." In order for the enrollment process to work effectively, the enrollment staff understood that each step was important and could not work in isolation. They need the assistance of others to maintain the process.

In my observation of the enrollment process at Erlington County College, I saw it as a vital component to the Enrollment Office. With the high volume of students they have to serve, the enrollment staff had to be process-driven to accommodate everyone. Much of what I have heard and observed from the meetings I have attended centered on the need to recruit students, help them get through the enrollment pipeline, and encourage them to enroll for courses. However, as a result, the promotion or discussion of college readiness was a missing component of the enrollment process. The enrollment staff would share information about college readiness during their presentations with students at their respective schools, but not much attention was given to working with the counselors to see how they can work more collaboratively to assist students in becoming college ready. This is not to say that college readiness was not a priority for the enrollment staff or the institution, but it was obvious that increasing enrollment and creating a system for students to progress through the enrollment process was the main priority.

**No sense of ownership.** The second subtheme, no sense of ownership, came as a result of discovering that increasing enrollment and getting students through the enrollment process were the main priorities for the enrollment staff at Erlington County College. Much of the information that was given to high school counselors to share with their students focused on promoting new initiatives and events at the college. Sharing information about college readiness with potential students was important, but it was not the main focus for the enrollment staff. So I then had to ask, if college readiness was not a priority for the enrollment staff at Erlington County College, whose responsibility was it to focus on it and promote it? What quickly became obvious after speaking with the Office of Enrollment was that no one specific office or department at ECC was responsible for promoting college readiness to incoming students. Although the College had created the Center for College and Career Readiness, which was geared toward helping high school students utilize programs like Priority Admissions, High School Choice, and Summer Bridge, the College did not have a specific office or department that was tasked with the responsibility of focusing on or promoting college readiness.

When asked if the enrollment staff saw sharing information about college readiness as a part of their role, there was a slight difference of opinion among the three staff members. Lori, the academic advisor of the High School Choice Program at ECC, saw herself responsible for informing students of what was expected of them when they enrolled in college. She explained:

It kind of all goes hand-in-hand because in order for a student to really know whether or not they want to come to our college, they need to know what is expected of them. They have to know that first and foremost. You know, so for

us, if we don't give them that information early on that, "Hey. You need to take our college placement exam prior to registering for any of our courses." And they end up coming in August saying, "Hey. I'm here to register for courses." "Yes, but you missed a step." So whose fault was that? It's our responsibility to give them that information and prepare them for the steps in which they need to take to start off on the right foot.

Lori believed that helping students understand the enrollment process, in particular the placement test, and making sure that they were prepared for it were two important components of being ready for college. She felt responsible for initiating that conversation with students early on in the enrollment process.

Darlene believed that from an academic standpoint, there were several ways for a student to be ready for college. The Summer Bridge Program, for example, provided students who are college-bound with the opportunity to take remedial courses prior to high school graduation. If students take advantage of this opportunity, they will be able to take or even finish their remediation coursework before they start their first semester at ECC. With the High School Choice Program, students can take an unlimited number of courses, remedial or general electives, at a 65% tuition discount while still in high school. With both programs, students are able to get a jumpstart on their college education. While Darlene was in agreement with Lori that it is important to prepare students for the enrollment process and help them take advantage of the programs the college provided, she did not believe that enrollment had as strong of a role in promoting or focusing on college readiness as other departments and offices did on campus. Darlene further explained her position:

I think that the college, in general, should have a piece in retention, but from an enrollment services standpoint, I don't think we have as strong of a component as those that are more proactively involved in setting up their coursework.

Although Darlene viewed her office as having a role in retention efforts, it was miniscule compared to other offices and departments on campus.

Claire took a different approach in answering the question. Each spring semester, the Office of Enrollment hosts several outreach events called "Hop on the Mainline" in which students from each of the high schools are invited to take the placement exam at the college and are given information about some of the resources the college offers. She further described the initiative:

We do bring those individuals [campus personnel] that we feel are necessary for students' success in the room. Yes, for [Hop on the Mainline], this is not all eighteen hundred applicants, but those that come, to give them the skills that they need, give them at least that face-to-face, try to build a connection there. So that's part of it, too. Success is building that connection. So key members of our community that are there to support these students along their journey are in the room to speak with them.

The enrollment staff tries to connect as many incoming students from high school as possible with members of the campus community to learn about some of the services that are provided. They recognize, however, that only a small portion of them will receive the information. The enrollment staff tries their best to provide a venue where incoming students can be connected to campus resources, but they are limited in what they can do.

When asked if they believed that the college was invested in promoting college readiness, Claire made the following observation:

I think because it's not assigned to one specific group, it's hard to say. I think if one department was given that job, there'd be a buy-in to do that, but I think when you have certain responsibility and you're so zoned into that, that when you hear, I'm just going to use recruitment for example, there are members of this college campus that turn their head away because they're not assigned to recruitment. So it's the same for [the] student success type concept. I think if that's not built within your job description, you can kind of look away a little bit to say, "that's not my job." I think we all say that we're invested. It's just there's no program in place to do that other than what we're offering.

The enrollment staff understands that there is a void in the college readiness process at Erlington County College. Since no one else at the college is tasked with promoting college readiness, they try to fill the void and do the best they can. They are only one office, however, and their overall scope of responsibility is not solely centered on promoting college readiness.

*Not viewing college readiness as a holistic concept.* The third subtheme, not viewing college readiness as a holistic concept, portrays how certain aspects of college readiness receives more attention and preference than other aspects from college and high school personnel. Much of the literature I have read about college readiness suggests that it should be viewed from four perspectives: key cognitive strategies, academic knowledge and skills, academic behaviors, and contextual skills and awareness (Conley, 2008). Key cognitive strategies encompass skills like problem solving and

engaging in research; academic knowledge and skills involves understanding core academic subject matter; academic behaviors include students having self-awareness, self-monitoring, and self-control; and contextual skills and awareness comprise of how to access and use college knowledge. Knowing that Conley's definition was geared more for students entering four-year colleges, I wondered if the same would hold true for those students who were entering two-year institutions. When I developed my interview protocols for the school counselors and enrollment staff, they were created with this comprehensive definition of college readiness in mind. My goal was to examine whether Erlington County College shared all four elements of college readiness with the high school counselors or if they only concentrated on sharing certain ones.

First, it was important to understand what information about college readiness was shared with the high school counselors. During my interview with Lori, she gave me a good idea of what was conveyed to the counselors:

The first thing that comes to my mind with the college readiness that we share is our Accuplacer, which is our placement exam and the different changes that occur with our scoring requirements. So we share that information with them. We provide them with study links that will assist their students with taking the exam. Sometimes we put packets together that provide sample questions that assist their students with the exam. Our Continuing Education Department started to do courses that assist students with some of these standardized tests that they're going to have to take in order to get into college. We really make sure that we provide the counselors with the tools to hand down to their students to prepare them better for college. Now we really, really focus on the Accuplacer because

we don't need SAT or PSAT for students to be enrolled in the college. The Accuplacer kind of takes the place of that. But we're seeing a lot more students not doing well on the Accuplacer. So that's really been something that we have been trying to focus a little more on letting all the counselors know the different websites that they can provide to their students.

Since Erlington County College is an open-access institution, a lot of attention is given to the college's placement exam. Before students can register for courses, the college requires that they first take the Accuplacer exam to assess their ability in reading, writing, and mathematics. Placement scores are used to determine a student's readiness for college and will determine their course placement. Information and resources about the placement exam was shared with counselors in hopes that they would share it with students so they can better prepare.

Erlington County College also relies on the promotion of programs like the High School Choice Program and Summer Bridge Program to help prepare students. Darlene referenced both programs when describing how her office defines college readiness. In an email, Darlene stated:

There are two ways to view college readiness: (1) By helping students remediate while still in high school so they can focus on college-level courses once they graduate. An example of this practice would be [HSCP] and the Summer Bridge Program; (2) by focusing on both academic and soft skills needed to do well in college. Summer Bridge tries to integrate soft skills with student success workshops.

If a student needs to take remediation courses, the enrollment staff's goal is to encourage them to try to take them while they are in high school so when they graduate and transition to the college, they will only be required to take college-level courses. The enrollment team also tried to encourage students to take advantage of their Summer Bridge Program to learn the soft skills needed to be successful in college. The Office of Enrollment sees college readiness from both an academic knowledge and academic skills perspective.

The high school counselors seemed to view college readiness from a similar standpoint. Many of the counselors spoke of the need for students to be academically prepared and demonstrate the necessary cognitive skills and behaviors to be ready for college. In each of their interviews, the counselors were asked what makes a student prepared for college. Barbara Anderson from Kennedy High School gave the following response:

Well, I think there's a lot of factors. Obviously, taking courses that are challenging enough to allow kids to begin to test themselves in that kind of environment where they're going to have to perform at a level that's higher than perhaps middle school or whatever courses they were involved here in high school. I think that's one of the factors. But I think there's also a certain amount of - I don't know what the right word is - self-motivation, grit, the ability to kind of see a problem through, like to break through that frustration barrier when you're up against an obstacle, whether it's academic, whether it's filling out paperwork, whatever - how to get beyond, how to problem solve beyond the things that are stopping you, they're creating a roadblock for you.



For Barbara, college readiness involves self-motivation, tenacity, and skills in problem solving. Katelyn Bonner, one of the school counselors from Eisenhower Vocational High School, spoke about the importance of allowing students be active participants in pursuing their education. Katelyn shared:

I think they [the students] have to be responsible and accountable. You hear a lot about helicopter parents and all that stuff, and that's what our staff at my school tries to really get away from, teaching the parents also that your kid needs to be able to do this [the college-going process] on their own. We try and prepare the kid to really take ownership of their education. They're the ones that are submitting the application, that are calling the school, that are going on the visit; their parents aren't doing all that for them. I think a lot of that is trying to teach them to feel comfortable doing that on their own.

Patricia Olsen, head of the guidance office at Taft High School, shared a similar point about college readiness:

Well, I think there's two pieces to that. I think it's the academic skill readiness, right? Having the content knowledge, being able to analyze research, right. So, I think it's the academic knowledge, but I also think it's some of the softer skills. The resiliency, the being able to manage obstacles, the being able to do things independently, fill out forms themselves, respond to deadlines themselves, manage their time appropriately. Those kinds of softer skills.

The enrollment staff and the counselors viewed college readiness in the same vein. Many of their responses revolved around the need for students to possess the academic knowledge and skills to be prepared for college. Much of what I have heard and

witnessed centered on the importance of preparing students academically for college and teaching them the cognitive and academic behaviors they will need to be successful (Conley, 2008).

***Students reflect the culture of the high school.*** The fourth theme, students reflect the culture of the high school, describes each high school's different culture and how students mirror or reproduce that culture in the college-going process. It shows how when a high school does not have a college-going culture, it can affect how prepared a student is for college. This theme originated after meeting with Lori. Lori was asked to describe her interaction with some of the high schools she went to and what types of cultures she encountered. She stated the following:

So for example, we have one specific school that we have a really good relationship with, but from administration down, it's chaotic. They are scattered. They are unorganized. They appear to be overworked. They appear not to be able to internalize the information that we consistently give them on a daily basis. And therefore, I see that in the students that come to meet with me. They have a lack of understanding, a lack of wisdom. They're scattered. They have no idea of what they're doing. And I think that is partially due to the leadership that they have. Their "mentors," the ones who are to be guiding them. And you go to a different school where the administration and staff are completely different. They're organized. They're on top of things. They have a manageable caseload and you see such a big difference in their students. Their students are more organized. They're more well-prepared. They're more well-informed. It seems as though

they have a better direction of what they want to do and who they want to become. So it's very interesting to see the differences in the high schools.

Lori believed that the differences she encountered were based on the district factor of the high school. She told me that schools that were given a lower classification of an A or B seemed to be more disorganized. Usually, these were the schools that tend to serve more first-generation college students. The schools that had a higher DFG classification were considered more organized.

In a separate interview, Darlene shared an incident that occurred in 2016 that characterizes Lori's point about schools with a lower DFG classification seem to be more disorganized than schools with a higher DFG classification. About a year ago, the enrollment staff began to notice that some incoming students from high school were not performing well on the Accuplacer, due to the fact that they were not preparing as they should. To rectify the issue, the enrollment staff attempted to enhance their communication efforts about the placement with the students, their parents, and high school counselors in hopes that they would be more successful. Despite the new initiatives that were created to assist students in the preparation process, they continued to struggle on the placement exam.

During the spring semester of 2016, several incidents occurred to give the enrollment staff further doubt about whether the information about the Accuplacer was being shared from the counselors to the students. Darlene discussed an incident that occurred in February of 2016 where students from Jefferson High School, a school that has a DFG classification of B, came to ECC unprepared to take the Accuplacer. She shared her account by saying:

We noticed an unfortunate trend when students were coming in today. After they [took] the Accuplacer, we just asked them how the test went, did they prepare for it, did they know about it, and it seems like the response that I got, my colleagues also got, was a lot of students were saying that they did not know that they were coming to take the Accuplacer until yesterday. That the counselor informed them of this information the other day, and for that reason, whether if it's true to not, they did not have time to prepare last night to take the Accuplacer. Scores for the most part, I would say, students did relatively well, all things considering if that's true, but a lot of students, I would say a majority of students, did need some type of remediation.

According to the students she and her colleagues spoke to, many of them did not know that they were going to ECC to take the Accuplacer until a day before. As a result, there was not much time for them to prepare. When asked if she had discussed the incident with the high school counselor from Jefferson, she stated that she did not, but intended to do soon. I then asked if she saw a disconnect between what the college had presented to the high school students and counselors from Jefferson prior and what had happened today. Here was her response:

That's what students told us. So now, it's a matter of going back to the counselors to say this is what we experienced on our end today, not necessarily to investigate to say, "Is there any truth to that," but in a diplomatic way, yes to say, "Is there any truth to that?"

Jefferson wanted to have another Accuplacer event at the high school. The enrollment staff member were cautious because they did not want for something like this to reoccur.

Darlene then recalled a discussion her office had with a group of students from Jefferson who took the Accuplacer last year:

Last year, we've had students before, it's not all that uncommon, where they'll say, "They did not know they were taking the Accuplacer. How could they prepare?" and they literally had counselors shouting to their students, in kind of a funny way like, "Don't lie to them. We told you" and "You have this information. We gave you this study guide. This look familiar?" And they pull it out of their folders. So, we don't know. Is it something that's true? Is it something that students, you know, made up because either they were embarrassed about their scores, something of that nature? It's just interesting that I had the comments given to me, as my colleagues, from these students. There was a consistent message where it wasn't all, "Well, one student heard it, so I'm going to say the same thing to this person," because we were meeting with them on an individual basis.

Darlene noticed that a trend was occurring at Jefferson High School. It was apparent that students were not receiving information about the Accuplacer in a timely manner and as a result, their scores were impacted.

According to Lori, there was not a difference in how the college communicated with each of those schools. There was a difference, however, in her opinion, in how each of the high school counselors received and internalized the information they were given. This became one of the biggest hurdles the enrollment staff had to overcome. Lori elaborated more about dealing with this challenge:

I'd say the biggest roadblock again is that each high school is different. They're ran (sic) by different individuals and some individuals are sharper than others. So they're some that completely understand the information we're giving them and they implement it and they internalize it and they give that knowledge to their students and the other counselors. And then they're some that we can give them the same information over and over and over again and they still do not get it. They still do not internalize it and on the 20<sup>th</sup> time that we expressed something. It's like it's the first time for them.

If not handled correctly, a situation like this can quickly become a barrier for students because they rely on their school counselors to process and disseminate the information and knowledge properly and in a timely manner. If the college shares the information with the counselors, but they are unable to internalize and make it useful for their students, a barrier to a student's readiness has unintentionally been created.

***Kinks in the communication pipeline.*** The fifth and final subtheme, kinks in the communication pipeline, explains the instances when information about Erlington County College and college readiness was not given to students. There were blockages in the communication flow within the high school structure that hindered and prohibited information from flowing down to students.

Many of the counselors that I have spoken to did not have any issues in sharing information they received from the college with other counselors at the high schools. For example, Barbara Anderson from Kennedy High School discussed what she would share with her colleagues after attending one of the Erlington County Professional Counselors' Association (ECPCA) meetings. "I come back from the meetings. I share with my fellow

counselors, ‘This is what we learned; here's what we have.’” She further explained, “Whatever we'd discussed, we all three [of us] know about it, and then if a student comes in that seems to be appropriate or if it's something that I can disperse online, we communicate that to the general population.” Brad Templeton, director of guidance at Roosevelt High School, gave a similar account of how he shares information about the college with his counselors:

Well, everything that we receive at the [ECPCA] meetings, we do our best to turn key. I can't say I do it all the time. I do my best to turn that over, you know, as far as like the program, the admissions program, applications. Like [Darlene] gave us regular updates throughout the year. The information I receive, we send. Give hard copies in the counselors. A lot [of] times, we take homes posters and things from those meetings. I just drop them off at counselors' mailboxes. We talk about it at the next staff meeting.

Patricia Olsen, chairperson of the guidance department at Taft High School, shared how she felt personally responsible for what she shared with the counselors in her department:

Like when [ECC] comes out to share information, I make sure that my whole team is available so that they're all getting the information. We all participate in the professional development programs that [ECC] offers so that the counselors are keeping up on the information. I participate on the [Erlington] County Professional Counselor's Association Executive Committee, so I go once a month to meetings. As you may know, they're held at [ECC]. There's [ECC] reps there. We always get updated information at those meetings. I bring it back. I share it with my counselors. Because things change all the time, right? And there's new

initiatives that they're pushing out. There's new majors. There's new partnerships with [Flemington] University. Things like that. So it's my responsibility - and I feel like it's an important role - for me to bring that back and make sure that they're updated too. It's not just my personal students who are benefiting from that information.

These counselors were active in sharing the information they received from ECC with their colleagues. They found the information to be beneficial to the students they serve.

While some high school counselors could attest to not facing any problems in receiving information from the college or distributing it to their fellow colleagues, there were some counselors who did face some challenges. For instance, Sam Harris, the counselor from Jefferson High School, spoke about how he and his administration were not on the same page with the promotion of a particular program in his district. There was some confusion about how the program would be delivered. When asked about the importance of collaboration, he shared the following experience with me:

I think it's-- might be the most important, because for instance, if everybody's on a different page-- like [Ashley Keller]. Yeah, she's coming monthly to talk to kids interested. Well, that was set up, not through [Ashley], but [Claire] spoke to our superintendent and our principal. They set this up. Like, "[Ash], come in monthly," bop, bop, bop. Now I get any email and I guess last week, our principal secretary said, "Hey, [ECC], they have the schedule for kids that are interested in High School [Choice]. They're coming." I'm like, "Well, we only have three kids in High School [Choice]. They don't need to come. It's fine." So [Claire] emails me. She goes, "[Sam], I don't understand. Why don't you like this--" "I don't



know." I said, "This is what I know. I got a question about anybody interested in High School [Choice]. No, no one's interested. Save [ECC] some time. Tell them not to bother." Then [Claire] goes, "No. I had a meeting with [Mr. Ushler] and [Dr. Stevenson] about this program." Like, "Okay, that makes perfect sense." But see, when the left hand doesn't know what the right hand's doing, and that's not your fault. That's our administration not coming to us because we don't have department chairs. I'm not the director of guidance; I just happen to be here the longest.

Sam spoke about the organizational breakdown in communication that occurred between him and the high school administration. The administration knew of the change but did not share it with their counselors.

Other counselors discussed how sometimes information is not dispersed from the guidance directors who attend the Erlington County Professional Counselor's Association (ECPCA) meetings each month to the rest of the counselors. In my interview with Lori, she spoke about this in detail, using the Accuplacer as an example. When asked whether information about preparation for the exam was communicated from the counselors to the students, Lori had some reservations:

This is the thing with the counselors. All of this relationship that we build and the counselors that come to these [ECPCA] meetings, they are the heads of guidance. So although we are providing the heads of guidance with all of this information, it doesn't mean that it is being trickled down to all the other staff members in the guidance department. And I can think of some schools right off the top of my head that I know for a fact that's not happening. So although some of the heads of

guidance know this information, they're not sharing it with their staff. So the staff does not know. And the staff are the ones that are seeing the majority of the students. So it's all the other counselors in the guidance suite that need to know this information and they don't know it.

Sarah Read, head of guidance at Pierce High School, and Chris Bruno, school counselor from Reagan High School, made the same observation and could attest to Lori's statement. Sarah spoke about how the directors would go to the meetings, but they were "not the ones doing" the work. They would "push the work" off on the other counselors to do. Chris described how it felt to be on the receiving end:

And again, like I said, the [ECPCA] may get more than we get, but I'm the one who's on the ground. I'm dealing with the students every day. Is there something that he's [the director] hearing? Obviously, he's dealing with a lot that I'm just missing what I'm supposed to be delivering to the students. I mean, I know he comes back with new pamphlets and stuff and I update the thing and all that kind of thing, but if it's something that's more, that should be getting to them, and I haven't gotten it to them.

Sarah and Chris represent two opposite sides of the same spectrum. On the one end, we have a director who recognizes the disconnect that exists between the directors of guidance and their colleagues. Although the directors are mainly the ones who are attending the ECPCA meetings, Sarah admits that they are not primarily the ones who will communicate what they hear or learn with students because they do not have a caseload. Their counselors perform that role. On the other end, Chris, who sees himself being a grassroots counselor, admits that he cannot do his job as well as he would like,

because he feels as though he is not getting all the resources and support he should be getting. He believes that he can do more to help his students.

The enrollment staff noticed this trend of how some directors were not sharing information with their counselors about the college and wanted to help resolve the issue. They decided to change the way they communicated with the counselors in the county. Darlene described the change they made:

And one adjustment that we did make this year is copying both the directors and the counselors because we noticed in years past that when we would send the information out to just the directors, sometimes that information didn't trickle down to where it needed to be. So now we try to make everybody across the board informed.

Instead of communicating with just the directors of guidance, enrollment decided to communicate with all the counselors through a Yahoo!Group. By communicating with all of the counselors, there was more of a chance that the information the enrollment staff shared would filter down to the students.

## **Theme 2: Benefits and Challenges of Maintaining a Collaborative Relationship**

The second theme, benefits and challenges of maintaining a collaborative relationship, speaks to the amount of time and dedication that was needed to sustain and expand the collaboration between Erlington County College and the county high school counselors. Although the Office of Enrollment and the high school counselors see great value in working with each other, preserving this collaborative relationship comes with its advantages and obstacles. For this theme, I first discuss how the relationship between the enrollment staff and the high school counselors originated, what steps the enrollment

staff took to gain the counselors' trust and respect, and what they both consider as some of the rewards and challenges of sustaining their relationship.

For the last few years, the College has made strong efforts in trying to foster a collaborative relationship with the high school counselors. When Claire and Darlene were asked to discuss the rationale and some of the history behind wanting to collaborate more with the counselors, Claire recounted:

So I am approaching six years here on the enrollment services side. I originally started as an admissions coordinator, but it really was under [Mary's] leadership and it was always with a recruitment purpose. At that time, we did have a relationship with the counselors and that they were here once a month. But I think the relationship was a little rocky - maybe some information that was shared and things of that nature.

Claire was referring to one of the past representatives that used to work in the Office of Enrollment. When the person was employed with the college, a lot of the information that was shared with the counselors was inconsistent and inaccurate and as a result, it strained the relationship between the two and trust was lost. Darlene went on to describe that "prior to that person, I don't think there was that level of engagement with the counselors. It was more just viewed as 'Well, this is my job, this is what I do.' And that person really didn't go to that next level to create and enhance those relationships." Lori gave a similar account in her interview:

Well, I came in on the latter end. So before I was actually introduced to admissions and recruitment, it was [Mary Friedman] and [Claire Garnett] who really kind of started the initiative of building those relationships with the various

high schools. So previous to them stepping in those roles, from what I've heard, it was a really bad relationship that our college had with the high schools. So when [Mary] and [Claire] stepped in those roles, they really picked the program up and groomed these different high schools by just providing hospitality and really being overtly accommodating to these high schools to kind of build their trust and to gain their respect.

Due to the amount of damage that was previously done, the Office of Enrollment had to work diligently to restore the relationship with the high school counselors.

Claire discussed the importance of strengthening their relationship with the counselors to ultimately win them over and promote Erlington County College as a legitimate option for students:

So our team that's here currently work really hard to establish a better relationship. As we know, the counselors play a prime role in the high school student's journey in not only picking an institution but then following through on the enrollment process. It's very important to us that we strengthen that relationship to kind of get them on our side to educate them as to the value that we can play as a two-year school.

Darlene added:

We firmly believe in the education that [ECC] offers our students. As an alumna, I can certainly attest to it and we know that one of the ways to communicate that message with the students and their parents is sometimes through the counselors. So they become a medium. So we wanted to make sure that we maintained a good relationship. As [Claire] noted, prior to [Mary's] leadership, it wasn't the best

relationship and there were trust issues. And this department had to work *really* hard to build it back up and enhance it to what it is today, and more importantly, maintain it so students are aware of the opportunities that are available to them. Part of the restoration process included being hospitable and accommodating to their needs. Lori discussed what that entailed for enrollment:

So when I came on board, the relationships were kind of already built at that point. So it was just my responsibility to continue to maintain that relationship and maintain that trust. So some of the things that we would do is of course make ourselves always readily available to them and accessible to them. So whenever they had any type of question or any type of issue, they would reach out via email; they would reach out via phone. We also hold their monthly [ECPCA] meetings at the college. So that's a way for us to continuously kind of be in their circle, hear their concerns, and provide them with whatever assistance that they personally need. So it's really just extending ourselves and making ourselves accessible to them through anything and everything.

The enrollment staff knew that if they wanted to regain the counselors' trust, it was crucial for them to be consistent in the information they provided and accessible to the counselors' needs.

Each of the enrollment representatives who were interviewed acknowledged the value and benefits of collaborating with the high school counselors. They saw the collaboration between themselves and the counselors as an important component in reaching their goals. For example, Darlene saw the counselors as “the gateway to students and the families.” From her viewpoint, if the counselors were informed of the

College's enrollment process, the hope was that the students and their families were informed as well. She continued:

So to have somebody come along side us and help us with that handholding process, it's all the better because we've noticed with this population of students, they really need that handholding. Like right in front of them - this is what you need to do. So the more people that are hearing that same information and hitting them [students] with the same information, the better in the hopes that it sticks.

The counselors were instrumental in the handholding process for the college. They served as an additional avenue to assist students with the enrollment process. The counselors were also valued because of the relationship they had with students. In my interview with Lori, she discussed in detail the necessity of building a good rapport with the counselors:

If you walk into any high school, into any guidance counselor suite, you'll see a wall full of college flags or you'll see a wall full of college posters. We're not the ones putting that up; they're [counselors] the ones putting that up. They're the ones that when they have a personal conversation with the student, they're the ones suggesting certain schools to that student. So we have to continuously maintain that good relationship with them, that good rapport so we know that one of the schools that are coming out of their mouth is [Erlington County College]. That's why we do what we do because if it weren't for them, I don't think we would get the amount of students that we do because they are our direct contact to them. It's not enough just putting posters around the community. It's not enough. We have to have that direct in and the only way we can do that is to continue to having a good relationship with them and allowing them to trust us. What they

allow us to do in their schools is unbelievable. It's unheard of to have a college representative stationed in your high school once a month answering questions, giving students instruction. And they allow me to do that. And I feel honored that they trust me enough with their students to allow me to come in and do that. We have acrylic boards in all these high schools where we get to put our poster in their main display. Other schools don't do that. It's us; we are the main school for them, you know? Same thing with the different pamphlets. Same thing with junior and senior presentations. We always have a presence that other schools are trying to fight to get. We don't have to fight; we already have it.

Although Lori's response to the question about the importance of collaboration with the high school counselors was quite extensive, it was nonetheless insightful. She provided a robust explanation for the primary reason that the enrollment staff wanted to collaborate with the counselors and what it took to maintain that relationship. The College benefited from the relationship because they became the "school-of-choice" for the counselors.

The counselors were also instrumental in keeping the College abreast of the various student populations that would enroll at ECC. According to Lori, the counselors would share certain trends or nuances with the enrollment staff. Lori further explained:

They [Counselors] have that direct connection, that direct communication with the student that we're trying to capture. We as a group, as a college, as a team really wouldn't be able to continuously put together different ways to recruit these students if we didn't have the *in*. We didn't know exactly how to recruit or how to attract these students so the counselors are the ones that really give us that insight on new trends on what's happening with their specific group of students because



each year when people graduate and another senior class comes, it's a different dynamic and there's different issues and different situations that are affecting that specific graduation group. And we, as a college, would not know what those trends are, what those issues are, unless we had the direct communication with the counselors. So they really assist us with that.

The Office of Enrollment leveraged the relationship the counselor had with students to learn how to recruit and attract certain populations to the college. Moreover, enrollment was given valuable intelligence of the different trends and circumstances that each of the student population faced. With this information, the enrollment team would know how to engage and interact with each of them.

When I spoke with the high school counselors, some expressed the same sentiments about the importance of collaborating with the college. For example, Patricia Olsen from Taft High School reflected on the collaboration and the mutual respect that she and the enrollment staff had for each other:

Oh, it's huge. It's absolutely huge. I mean, I really feel like I have, personally, that I have friends there. When I see the admission reps, I feel like they're close colleagues and friends. I know I can pick up the phone and directly reach someone if one of my students is having a problem. And I think we've worked hard from both ends, from [Taft's] end and [ECC's] end, to develop those personal relationships. And because we have them, I think our kids benefit. I know I can reach someone. I can reach out to [Claire Garnett] and, in a second, have an answer for her. And I appreciate that. And they know when they contact me and they need me to do something, they know it's going to get done. So I think

there's that mutual professional respect, and I think that's huge. I think all parties benefit from that.

Patricia felt that she had a close connection with the enrollment staff. Based upon the mutual respect the two entities had for each other, students were able to benefit and get the assistance they needed. Brad Templeton, director of guidance at Roosevelt High School, made a similar point about how students are able to benefit when goals were mutual. He shared how when the enrollment team and the counselor worked together collaboratively, the two were able to assist students in creating a realistic game plan, be prepared academically, and have a seamless transition to the college.

Some counselors spoke about being a vital stakeholder in the collaborative relationship with the college. For example, Sam Harris, counselor from Jefferson High School, felt as though the enrollment staff at the college made him feel a “part of the process.” Some of the counselors spoke about how the Office of Enrollment was able to create an environment that included them in the planning and decision-making process. Amanda Cross, director of guidance at Grant High School, shared that the Office of Enrollment was always receptive to criticism and advice:

They tell you how important you are. They don't make any qualms about it. They let you know. You are important. What do you think? What different ideas [do you have]? Even after they leave a group or they do something, “How do you think we could [improve]?” They're always willing to accept feedback: positive or negative. And then they make changes on the negative.

The counselors felt as though they had a voice. Their suggestions and feedback were always welcomed and acted upon. The enrollment team used their criticism to inform their practice.

In their interviews, Claire and Darlene also alluded to the importance of soliciting advice from the counselors before making decisions. Claire shared an example of how her administration sought to create a new program for students but wanted to get input from the counselors before doing so:

Upward administration came up with an idea to have a program run in the summer and asked our department to deliver that message or that concept to this counselor group to obtain their feedback because again, they would have a better understanding of that group than we would and what they would need. And the counselors were completely against it. They really did not feel that the program would be viewed at . . . all with any interest. That caliber of student we were looking for would be sticking with what they needed to do for their AP classes and such and would not participate in the program that we offered. So that program got put to rest. We're not exploring it because of that feedback.

Collaboration, in that respect, is important because we could've marketed that program to find that there was no interest. We would've spent a lot of money and resources where we really wouldn't have to have.

As a result of consulting with the counselors, the college avoided making a huge mistake. The enrollment staff recognized that the counselors knew the needs of their students and relied on their expertise to inform their decision-making process. Darlene discussed the importance of allowing the counselors to be honest:

And the same thing too - sometimes it doesn't feel like it, but it's a good thing if they're very transparent and they let you know what they're thinking good and bad. If they're happy with something, they'll let you know. If they're upset with something, they'll let you know twice as many times about it. So when you're going through that, it feels a little strange but objectively if you look at it, you can be appreciative of it. At a prior [ECPCA] meeting, I think another department got to see firsthand that you can't take their relationships for granted. They thought that they could just go in and promote a program and the counselors would love it and they would be done, and it was quite the opposite. They had a really rough crowd.

Claire continued:

Just an example. I was really excited to share what our thoughts were on the upcoming in-service that we're now calling Professional Development. We have a brand new facility that opened in a certain area, a new program coming on board, and we were excited to show that area off. Come to find out that that is not an interest of the high schools because their students are not getting into that type of program. It was more or less us taking a look and saying, "Well, there is a way that we can better inform these students." And I did make certain that we promoted that option.

The high school counselors served as a "good window" to know what programs and initiatives would and would not work. Enrollment knew that the counselors were not going to promote a program if they were not convinced that their students would be able

to benefit from it. When promoting programs and initiatives, they had to keep this in mind.

I asked if the enrollment staff sometimes felt as though their office were at the mercy of the counselors. Darlene made an interesting comparison:

They're like your board of trustees. You have to keep them happy and, same thing, if there's something going on in another department that's creating a headache for them, they'll let you know. Not necessarily that you're the person responsible, but apologizing on the college's behalf. And sometimes understanding their frustration and trying to figure out, "Okay. How can we work with this? How can we move forward?"

In a sense, the enrollment staff felt obligated to "serve at the pleasure" of the counselors because they served as the primary point of contact for the college. When problems and situations arose, they were ones who had to respond to the issue even though they were not necessarily directly responsible. Even in moments like these, the enrollment staff welcomed their feedback and found ways to rectify the issue.

While the enrollment staff and the high school counselors experienced a wide range of benefits in maintaining a collaborative relationship with each other, the two have also experienced their share of challenges. Some challenges have been openly discussed within each of their respective circles and sometimes with each other, but some of them have not been examined or discussed collectively at all. Each of the participants were asked to discuss some of the difficulties they had in collaborating with each other in more detail.

One of the challenges the enrollment staff had was the perception of not having complete buy-in and support from all of the counselors when it came to programming and hosting events at certain high schools. For example, Darlene shared:

Well, let's start with the positive. They're some schools that are wonderful to work with. From start to finish, we know walking into a situation that we're going to be well taken care of, there aren't going to be a lot of surprises. I'll give you presentations as an example. So there are some schools when I send out the welcome back messages at the beginning of the school year to say, "As we transition into the fall semester, let's start scheduling presentations." Some will get back to me right away. They'll let us in. They'll give us a great amount of time to work with their students. They'll have the equipment set up and everything is as it's supposed to be. They're engaged from start to finish. There are other schools where it's like pulling teeth to get them to figure out a date when we would go out there. It's like nobody's talking among one another at the school. [They] didn't know we were coming, announcing [for] the students to come down at the wrong time or [with] the wrong group. The equipment's not there. So that can sometimes be a little bit frustrating in that sense. So there are schools where we have a bigger buy-in. I think they're others where their counselors or directors just feel like this is just one other thing that they have to do and it's not their priority. It is what it is when we go out there.

Claire added to Darlene's point:

On that same note, we have a high school advisor who is stationed in each high school, for the most part, and I'm speaking to the fourteen in-county [schools].

And it's similar to what [Lori] just described. There are oftentimes with those who have that buy-in that really see the value that she can bring to discuss the enrollment process or picking classes through the [High School Choice Program]. They fill her schedule to the max and we certainly appreciate that. And there are other times when that individual [high school counselor] will send her correspondence making certain that the department [is] aware that she is coming and she does that well in advance, and then she shows to find out that no students have been scheduled and they're in a scamper to get some students down to see her. Again, maybe those schools don't see the value or this is yet one more thing [ECC] is asking for. I think it's a combination of both. It's not that they don't see the value in it. It's just with the many things they're dealing with, that is not oftentimes at the forefront of their minds as they're planning their day.

After Claire shared her observation, Darlene shared the following:

And sometimes the counselors will be apologetic and we get there and they'll say, "I'm really sorry, but I was just given this. I didn't know whether they knew or not." So two extremes: Went to one high school. They had everything set up for a presentation. They had refreshments for us. Another high school, we go there. Same thing like, "Oh, this was just thrown on me, really sorry." Had no idea that we needed equipment. There was a room change. There was a class going on in the same room that we were giving the presentation, and a senior picture, a group picture, was scheduled the same time the presentation was supposed to start. So it was just like a domino effect, one thing after another. On our end, we just try to be prepared for the unexpected as best as possible.

From what Darlene and Claire shared, two dynamics seemed to be in play here. On the one hand, the enrollment staff understood that they may not be the top priority for some of the counselors. They recognized and accepted the fact that the counselors have other obligations to attend to and they may not be at the top of the list. On the other hand, the enrollment staff associated the amount of chaos they experienced in certain high school environments with whether that particular counselor or school bought into their program. The challenge for the enrollment team was trying to differentiate between which one was the case.

When interviewing the high school counselors, I was anxious to see if they would confirm or reject this notion made by Claire and Darlene. One of the questions I asked each of the counselors was how much time did they dedicate to counseling students who were planning to enroll at Erlington County College. Many of them responded that they spent a considerable amount of time working with future ECC students. They saw the significance of promoting Erlington County College as an option, and as a result, they did not mind allocating their time or resources to assisting that population. For example, Patricia Olsen from Taft School shared the following:

So we try to devote half of our time and energy in college planning to pushing out [ECC] as an option and half of our time to the four-year schools because we know statistically that half of our students are going to go to [ECC] and that it's a really, really good financial option for them.

Since half of their graduates were planning to attend Erlington County College, she and her counselors made sure that half of their time in planning for college was dedicated to serving those students. The same could be said of Chris Bruno from Reagan High School.



For the 33% of students who would eventually attend ECC, he considered working with this student population a “worthwhile” cause.

While some of the counselors saw the value of promoting the college as an option for their students, some of them acknowledged that preparing these students for the transition to ECC was almost overwhelming. In my interview with Sylvia Nardelli, one of the counselors of Van Buren High School, she gave me an idea of how much time she had to invest to ensure that her students received the services and assistance they needed. She used the priority admissions program as an example:

We have, as every school has, the priority registration. So, advertising that for students. There's always a lot of kids. Over 100 attend[ed] but, having them get out of class with a pass and [making sure] that [they] really belong there and not [have] kids that just show up. So kind of coordinating and monitoring that kind of thing and then having that follow-up with, "Did you apply and how did you apply?" or "This is how you apply," because sometimes they get confused [on] where to go and how to do and so on. What I did last year, I think it was very successful, was I emailed every senior in the class as well as their parents to indicate that when [ECC] would be coming. We have the kids sign up on Naviance for about everything and that worked out really pretty well and that was where we got our original list. From that, I could cross-reference who was coming, who was interested and so forth. Of course, after the initial visit, then you have additional kids who say, "Oh, I missed it. What can I do?" The next step was coordinating kids for [Hop on the Mainline] and I believe we had over 100 kids that did apply but, of those kids that applied, some had SAT scores that qualified.

So, they were exempt from taking the Accuplacer. And then, there were a whole lot of kids that were not exempted, you know? So getting that all coordinated and have the kids sign permission forms, field trip permission forms so that they could go and have the nurse check to make sure there's no health issue. It's very time consuming.

Sylvia discussed the amount of coordination and monitoring she had to do to make the program successful. Although she saw the work as time consuming, she believed that the service she was providing was beneficial to her students and their families.

Sarah Read, the director of guidance at Pierce High School, presented a different viewpoint. She discussed how difficult it was for her office and her counselors to accommodate all of the requests that the enrollment team had. She expressed the following:

Our school is trying to come up with different ways to partner with [ECC], so we are probably on the bad list. We're probably lacking in things that we could be doing that we're not. I would take the blame for a lot of it only because [I have been in this position for] the last two years. It's hard to kind of fit in everything they want you to do.

She discussed how there was an expectation for the counselors to share the information they received from the Office of Enrollment with their students. When asked if she and her counselors were comfortable with having that expectation placed upon them, Sarah answered:

Yeah. Sometimes. Some points of the year, it's a lot. It's like, "Oh my goodness. We have another thing that we have to do for [ECC]." But it's all stuff that's

necessary. I don't think it's anything that could be eliminated, but sometimes it does feel like every new initiative that happens at [ECC] is usually great, but it means that it comes back for the high school staff to do more work.

I then inquired to discover exactly how she felt about this dilemma. Sarah gave the following response. “Well, I just ask sometimes like can part of the process be put back on the admission staff there to make it easier on the high school.” Afterward, she began describing how the counselors were responsible for following up with their students to satisfy certain requirements for the enrollment process:

We did all these online applications. They're in the system. They're in your systems as applicants, but they didn't take a placement test. Now, you want me to hunt them all down and tell them they didn't take a placement test. Okay. They took the placement test; now, they didn't enroll. Now, I've got to hunt them all down to enroll. I'm not doing that for any other school [college]. I don't even allow any other schools to come in here and present to any of the kids in a group. Like how much of promoting the school is my responsibility? Right? How much of the follow-up is my responsibility? If a kid is going to [Rivertown University], I [as an admission counselor] wasn't going to call the high school and say, “This kid didn't show up for the placement test. Can you send him over?” Call the kid. The school called the kid.

Sarah expressed some of her frustrations with some of the things that were requested from the Office of Enrollment. Although she did not view these requests as being totally overwhelming, she did feel as though the enrollment staff was relying on her office to help them do their job. At the end of the interview, I asked if she considered herself as an

important contributor to the collaborative relationship with the college and she confirmed that she was. When asked how so, she gave the following response, “Because I feel like the recruitment staff relies on the high school counselors so much for their own success that without [having] the high school counselor could kind of make or break things.”

During my interview with Lori, I was surprised to learn that she had almost the same sentiments and frustrations as Sarah. The difference was that Lori believed that the high school counselors depended on the enrollment staff to do what enrollment considered to be the counselors’ responsibility. She made the following observation:

I’d guess that I think one of the strengths is the close relationship that we have with the counselors and the trust that they have for us, but on the other hand, I think that also plays as a weakness because we have such a good relationship. They don’t seek the information out for themselves sometimes. They don’t take the initiative on their own sometimes to assist their students. They rely really on *me* anytime they have a question, “Oh, well [Lori] is going to be here next month to see students on an individual basis, you can just ask [Lori]” when I may not necessarily be the person that should be providing them with that information.

She continued on to say:

I think the relationships that we have with the counselors are wonderful, but I would like to see them be a little more proactive and not use us as a crutch. We do have a website that provides a lot of important information. They don’t even go on our website to even inquire about anything. So if they’re not doing it, I know that they’re not advising their students to do it.

Lori acknowledged that having a close relationship with the high school counselors could work as both a positive and a negative. In her opinion, one of the disadvantages to having the relationship was that there was an overreliance on the enrollment staff to help connect the missing links for students. The counselors were perceived as not trying to make the connection on their own although they were given the resources to do so. Lori suspected that if the counselor was not taking steps to do this, more than likely, their students were not doing so either. When asked of what the counselors could do differently to rectify the issue, she stated the following:

They could do a lot of things differently. They can actually read the information that we give them. So we spend so much time putting together their step-by-step information of how to enroll, giving them handouts of the different people in positions here and who to contact for different things. I am completely convinced that the counselors want us to do their work for them. They do not take the time to read any of our information. They do not take the time to learn any of our ways. And it does not matter how much we accommodate them. It does not matter how much we hold stuff here. It does not matter how much we give them, presentations [of] our college and what we're about and what we do and how we do things. It doesn't sink in because they know that they don't have to learn it because we are a phone call away and we're accommodating so we're going to do whatever we need to do to keep them.

In a sense, Lori felt that the enrollment staff was accommodating the counselors to a fault. She did not believe that the counselors were proactive or knowledgeable enough in assisting their students with the enrollment process. There was a reluctance to rely on the

enrollment staff because they would be available and accommodating to their needs. The enrollment team did not want to do anything that would jeopardize their relationship.

Later in the interview, Lori gave the potential reason for why the counselors may not be as engaged in the process as the enrollment staff would want them to be. She said, “They’re overworked. They have a lot of students. They have additional testing now that they have to organize. So I think that’s why they also rely on us very heavily to do the work.” She tried to empathize with what the counselors were experiencing on their end. What Lori said correlates to the point that Claire and Darlene made in their interview: the counselors have other responsibilities to attend to and this may not be their main priority.

The final challenge that emerged from the data was this idea that collaboration itself was the missing component of the relationship between the enrollment staff and the high school counselors. In my interview with Larry Fisher, counselor at Wilson High School, he elaborated more on this issue:

Typically, the collaboration exists only when they [the enrollment staff] come here. And when they come here, their mission is to enroll as many students as they possibly can, or at least that's my perception. Once they get that application, then it's the document dump they want after that. That's the gist of it, really. That's the biggest part of it.

For Larry, collaboration only existed when it came time for the enrollment team to “capture” their numbers. When I asked of what his thoughts were concerning this, he responded with the following:

I think [ECC] enrollment, like I said, does a good job getting our kids to fill out the applications. And trust me, I want my numbers to look right here, too. I want

to be able to say every one of our kids applied and was accepted to a college. So I do a pretty good job making sure our kids at least fill out an [ECC] application.

Collaboration? I think that as an organization, we roll out things that are good for us as an organization. [ECC] rolls out things, I think, are good for them. But I'm not sure that the two ever talk.

I then asked how important collaboration was in accomplishing goals with the college.

He answered:

Well, I think if it's a mutual goal, you know, collaboration can be synergistic. But if the goal for us is just to get them [students] out, [it] doesn't help you. If the goal for you, or [ECC], is just to enroll students, [that] doesn't help us. If there was a common goal, which I don't believe there is right now, I think it could be explosive.

Larry understood the advantages of when a common goal benefits all stakeholders.

Presently, however, Larry does not believe that a mutual goal between the high school counselors and Erlington County College exists. He did not see collaboration as being beneficial for both entities simultaneously.

### **Summary**

The purpose of this study was to examine how the Office of Enrollment at Erlington County College collaborated with their neighboring high school counselors to share information and resources about college readiness. A case study research approach was utilized to gather data and to provide a clear description of the unintentional barriers to student college readiness and the benefits and challenges of maintaining a collaborative relationship between high school counselors and the Office of Enrollment at

Erlington County College. The research findings of this exploratory case study are based on the thorough analysis of four data sources: direct observations, my reflective journal, semi-structured interviews, and electronic and paper documentation.

In Chapter 5, I will summarize the major conclusions of this study and present an interpretation of the findings. I will also offer some recommendations and implications for future research.



## Chapter 5

### Conclusion and Implications

The purpose of this exploratory case study was to explore how the Office of Enrollment at Erlington County College shared information and resources about college readiness with neighboring high school counselors. This inquiry was written to provide a rationale for why there is inconsistency with much of the information that is exchanged between public K-12 schools and postsecondary education about college expectations and readiness at two-year colleges. This study sought to examine where community college enrollment staff members and school counselors perceived there were communication breakdowns and barriers in the information that was exchanged and how, through using social networks, these breakdowns and barriers can be identified.

The research questions and sub-questions that guided this inquiry were:

1. In what ways do enrollment representatives from Erlington County College collaborate with high school counselors to assist prospective students with understanding the entry level expectations of college readiness?
2. What is the Erlington County College enrollment representative's role in sharing information about expectations of college readiness with high school counselors?
  - 2a. How do enrollment representatives at ECC perceive their role in sharing information with high school counselors?
  - 2b. How do high school counselors perceive the community college's role in sharing information with them?

3. What are the perceived gaps or inconsistencies, if any, in the information that is exchanged?
4. Are the advisement practices of high school counselors toward graduating students reflective of the interactions between themselves and community college enrollment representatives?
5. To what extent does social network theory explain the communication patterns and interaction between admissions representatives at ECC and high school counselors?

For this study, a total of thirteen interviews were conducted with three Erlington County College enrollment staff members and ten high school counselors from various high schools in Erlington County. The participants were selected due to their firsthand experiences of working with high school graduates in preparing them for entry into college and their knowledge of the collaborative relationship between the high school counselors and Erlington County College. Based on the information that was gleaned from interviews and observations, several key findings were discovered that will answer each of the research questions.

This chapter is organized to provide a summary and interpretation of those findings as well as offer some recommendations and implications for leadership and practice. I will also give a few suggestions on how this study can be used as a foundation for future research.

## **Research Question One**

*In what ways do enrollment representatives from Erlington County College collaborate with high school counselors to assist prospective students with understanding the entry level expectations of college readiness?*

First, it is important to note that the Office of Enrollment at Erlington County College does not believe that they have as strong of a role in promoting college readiness as other offices and departments do on campus. College readiness is not a significant part of their focus. Although they understand the importance of making sure that prospective students understand college expectations and have the tools necessary to make the transition from high school to the college experience, they do not see college readiness as being a significant part of their responsibility as an office. They view themselves as being limited in the amount of time and resources they can dedicate to this cause.

To assist incoming students from high school in understanding college expectations, the Office of Enrollment works closely with the high school counselors in promoting three important campus programs: Priority Admissions, High School Choice, and Summer Bridge. All three programs are geared to helping incoming students prepare for college. The Priority Admissions Program, which is hosted by the Office of Enrollment, is designed to help students in their senior year of high school to transition to the college. The program provides a handholding type of experience in which students can navigate the enrollment process seamlessly. Two initiatives fall under the Priority Admissions Program: Hop on the Mainline and Priority Course Sign-up. Students who need to take the college's placement exam are invited to participate in the Hop on the Mainline initiative. The enrollment staff works with the high school counselors to

organize a field trip for students to come to the college and take the placement exam. While students are on campus, they take a tour of the college and meet with various offices and departments to learn more about the services and resources they provide. Students then return to the college on a different date to participate in Priority Course Sign-up where they meet with their academic advisor to set up coursework for the summer or fall semester.

The Office of Enrollment also collaborates with the high school counselors in promoting the High School Choice Program (HSCP) and Summer Bridge Program. Both programs are designed to help students prepare for college. By participating in either of the two programs, students can get a jumpstart on their college education while they are still in high school. HSCP allows students to take an unlimited number of courses, either remedial or general electives, at a 65% tuition discount. The Summer Bridge Program is a grant-funded program designed to help high school students improve their skills in reading and math. By participating in the Summer Bridge Program, students can reduce the need for remediation and begin college taking college-level courses sooner.

The collaborative relationship that Erlington County College has with the high school counselors reflects much of the literature that has been written about two-year institutions and high schools partnering with each other to assist incoming students in preparing for college (Barnett & Hughes, 2010). In their brief, the authors focus on promoting partnerships that make it more likely for students to complete three key milestones toward college completion: enrollment in college, college readiness at enrollment, and persistence in college. To help students be college ready, the Office of Enrollment focuses on two important initiatives: early assessment and summer bridge.

According to Barnett and Hughes (2010), early assessment “aims to provide information on skills deficiencies well before students begin college” (p. 60). To help students prepare for the Priority Admissions Program, for example, the enrollment staff shared information and resources about the placement exam with the counselors in hopes that the information would be given to students so they can prepare for it and do well. The enrollment team also provided the counselors with study websites and packets with sample questions that would assist students in preparing for the exam.

Summer bridge programs are designed to help students “master the knowledge and skills needed for college success” (p. 61) and to “introduce students to college norms and expectations” (Barnett & Hughes, 2010, p. 62). These programs have often been helpful in promoting success for underprepared students (Strayhorn, 2011; Walpole, Simmerman, Mack, Mills, Scales, & Albano, 2008). To promote the Summer Bridge Programs, the enrollment staff works closely with the counselors to identify students who are eligible to participate. They gave the counselors literature to take back and share with their students. The counselors, in turn, assisted their students by sending ECC their high school transcripts and SAT or ACT test scores. By working collaboratively with the counselors, the enrollment staff used these programs as vehicles to assist students in understanding entry level expectations of college readiness.

### **Research Question Two**

*What is the Erlington County College enrollment representative’s role in sharing information about expectations of college readiness with high school counselors?*

According to the Office of Enrollment, they have two important priorities. First, they are tasked by the college’s administration to find ways to increase enrollment.

Increasing enrollment is their top priority and greatest endeavor. One of the ways they try to accomplish this goal is by increasing the percentage of high school students they enroll. Enrollment staff members need the assistance of the counselors to help enroll this population and provide additional support. Enrollment staff are also responsible for assisting incoming students with the application and course registration process. They try to empower students in the college enrollment process so they can get the information and support they need to navigate through it seamlessly and successfully. Enrollment staff members work with the counselors to streamline the process to make it easier for students to take advantage of various programs and opportunities.

When it comes to sharing information about college readiness with the high school counselors, the enrollment staff view themselves as being limited in what they can do. They do not believe that they have as strong of a role in promoting college readiness as other offices or departments on campus. Nonetheless, they recognize the importance of preparing students for entry into college and find ways to help. For example, the enrollment team makes sure that the counselors are given information and resources about the college's placement exams and some of the programs they offer to share with their students. They also serve as a conduit to connect students and counselors to campus resources such as testing, advisement, disability services, and the like. Their role in college readiness is to provide a venue for students to learn more about college resources.

In my observation of the enrollment staff at ECC, I saw their enrollment process as a vital component to their success. With the high volume of students they have to serve, the staff was process-minded and process-driven to accommodate all of them. Enrollment staff members believed that focusing on the enrollment process left little

room or opportunity to concentrate on college readiness. Not much attention was given to working with the counselors to see how they can work more collaboratively to assist students in becoming more college ready. This is not to imply that college readiness was not a priority for the enrollment staff or the institution, but it was apparent that increasing enrollment and creating a system for students to progress through the enrollment process were the main priorities.

### **Research Question Two(a)**

*How do enrollment representatives at ECC perceive their role in sharing information with high school counselors?*

The Office of Enrollment perceives themselves in two ways: as gatekeepers to college information and as the lifeline of the collaborative relationship between Erlington County College and the high school counselors. The enrollment staff takes a proactive and aggressive approach in providing information about the college to the high school counselors. They are constantly making sure that the information they provide is accurate and consistent. The term “gatekeeper” was used because whenever the counselors have questions or concerns about the College, they would look to enrollment staff to answer them and provide additional insight or direction. The enrollment staff recognized that a great need existed and assumed the role. By serving in this capacity, the enrollment staff was able to earn the trust of the counselors, which allowed them to continue to solidify and maintain the relationship with them.

The enrollment staff also view themselves as the lifeline to the collaborative relationship between the College and the high school counselors. For the last few years, the enrollment staff has worked diligently to maintain and strengthen its relationship with

the counselors. Part of the process in strengthening that relationship included being hospitable and accommodating to the counselors' needs. Whenever the counselors encountered an issue or had a question about a particular program, even if it fell outside of the parameters of their office, enrollment made themselves accessible and responsible to address the need. As a result of showing consistency again and again, enrollment was able to win the counselors over and thus, they began to promote ECC as a reliable option to students. This opened the door for the College to become the "school-of-choice" for the counselors.

If any information was going to be given to students, the enrollment staff understood that school counselors had to be involved. This finding is consistent with what Bryan et al., (2010), McDonough (2005), and Rosenbaum (2001) found in their research: school counselors have proven to be an indispensable social resource. The counselors were an excellent source of added support and they provided an avenue for the enrollment staff to reach students and their families. As Claire stated in her interview, the counselors played a pivotal role in the students' experience for "not only picking an institution but then following through on the enrollment process." Enrollment members were assiduous in making sure that information was given to the counselors because if they were not informed about the college, then students would not be informed either.

### **Research Question Two(b)**

*How do high school counselors perceive the community college's role in sharing information with them?*

Many of the high school counselors perceive Erlington County College's role in sharing information with them as being vitally important. Without having the strong



involvement and support of the enrollment team, the counselors could not have advised their students about the College as effectively or coherently as they like. Everything the counselors needed to have to promote programs or walk students through the enrollment process, the enrollment staff provided. Many of the counselors felt well-informed and confident in providing college counseling for students planning to attend ECC. When high schools and colleges work collaboratively, they create and share opportunities for their students to utilize (McDonough, 1997).

### **Research Question Three**

*What are the perceived gaps or inconsistencies, if any, in the information that is exchanged?*

During my interviews with the enrollment staff at Erlington County College and the high school counselors, several gaps and inconsistencies with the information that was exchanged between the two entities emanated out of the data. The greatest disparity was that the promotion of college readiness was not the main priority for the enrollment staff, and, as a result, it did not receive much focus in the enrollment process. Again, according to Clair, anything to increase enrollment was always put in the forefront. Much of the information that the counselors received from the staff reflected the necessity of increasing student enrollment.

For students to be ready for college, they had to be successful on the college's placement exam. The enrollment team would share information about college readiness during their presentations with students at the high schools, but not much consideration was given to working with school counselors to see what more could be done to assist students in preparing for college. As recently demonstrated, placement exams can be a

hindrance for college success and completion (Bailey, 2009; Scott-Clayton, 2012). The enrollment staff would work with the counselors on ways to help their students become enrollment ready, but that did not necessarily mean that they were ready for college.

Another gap was that there were times that information was not flowing from the college to the students. The enrollment staff shared information with the directors of guidance or a guidance representative in their Erlington County Professional Counselors' Association meetings, but there were concerns that the information did not travel back to the high schools nor was it given to the other counselors. There were blockages in the communication flow within the high school structure that hindered and prohibited information from flowing to students. The enrollment staff noticed this trend early on and worked on ways to try to communicate with all of the counselors to ensure that information flowed properly.

The other gap was that not all incoming students from high school were able to take advantage of the Hop of the Mainline Initiative. Yet, out of the eighteen hundred high school applicants that would eventually attend Erlington County College, only a small portion of them received the information about the placement exam and college resources. If incoming students did not attend this event, they, more than likely, did not obtain this information. The enrollment staff tries their best to provide a venue for connecting incoming students to campus resources, but they are limited in what they can do.

The final gap was that the enrollment staff believed that students reflected the culture of their high schools. According to the enrollment staff, each school had a different culture and students mirrored or reproduced that particular culture. The study

found that the differences in various cultures were indicative of the school's District Factor Group classification (DFG). Schools that had a lower classification of an A or B seemed to be more disorganized to the Office of Enrollment than schools that had a higher DFG classification. According to enrollment staff members, schools with a higher DFG classification exhibited more of having a college-going culture than their counterparts. Students from those schools seemed to be more engaged and prepared than those students who attended schools with a lower classification. This research reflects the work of several scholars who believe that the lack of a college-going culture in high schools contributes to students having an understanding about college and its expectations (Bryan, et al., 2011; McDonough, 1997; Oakes, et al., 2006; Walpole, et al., 2005).

#### **Research Question Four**

*Are the advisement practices of high school counselors toward graduating students reflective of the interactions between themselves and community college enrollment representatives?*

Many of the advisement practices of high school counselors toward graduating students were reflective of the interactions between themselves and college enrollment representatives. The counselors said that much of the information that they received from the college was shared with the graduating students. Some of the counselors took great pride in ensuring that their students were given the information. That experience was different for each school, however. According to the Office of Enrollment, some schools seemed to have more of an investment in preparing their students for the transition to ECC more than others. This was evident in how prepared students were when it came

time to take the placement exam and participate in other activities. As stated previously, students' high schools and colleges work in tandem to shape outcomes (McDonough, 1997).

This research question can only be answered through the perceptions of the high school counselors and the enrollment staff. Due to the fact that I did not witness the interactions between the counselors and their students firsthand, it is difficult to answer this question in totality.

### **Research Question Five**

*To what extent does social network theory explain the communication patterns and interaction between enrollment representatives at ECC and high school counselors?*

This case study was built on the premise that the way students engage with the college-going process was contingent on who they were connected to and how resources and information were provided to them (McDonough, 1997). A student's success at the community college depended on how strong and supportive those relationships and interactions were and whether they were provided with opportunities to take full advantage of them.

Throughout the study, certain aspects of social network theory were clearly evident in the communication patterns and interaction between the high school counselors and the enrollment staff at Erlington County College. The collaboration between the two groups was, for the most part, strong and resourceful. The enrollment team was diligent in making sure that the counselors had everything they need to assist their students with the enrollment process. The enrollment staff were clear in sharing information about the initiatives and some of the programs the college provided. Students

were perceived to have access to the information they needed, whether it was through the high school counselors or through the enrollment staff. The two worked well together as “institutional agents” (Stanton-Salazar & Dornbusch, 1995, p. 117). Both groups served as extensions of each other in assisting students in their transition to college.

Enrollment staff members also did not mind having transparent conversations with the counselors about the services and programs that were provided. The high school counselors served as a way for enrollment staff to know what worked and what did not work. Having the school counselors’ candidness strengthened their relationship with each other and the college was able to improve their services and programs and provide them in a more meaningful way for students (McDonough, 1997).

Even when the relationship between the two was not on the best of terms, the theory was still in operation. According to Lin (1999; 2001) weak ties still have the possibility of increasing a student’s access to institutional resources and knowledge. Coleman (1998) suggests that weaker ties tend to form bridges that link students to other social circles for access to information not likely to be available in their own circles. This was the reason why the Office of Enrollment made it a point to serve as a conduit to try to connect students and counselors to other offices and services on campus. They wanted to become that bridge so when they are unable to provide assistance, that department or office would be able to do so.

### **Implications for Leadership**

Preparing high school students for college is no easy task. Students come from a variety of backgrounds and need different types of support to be successful in their transition to higher education. It is my belief that college preparation should not be done

in isolation. Community colleges cannot and should not expect high school personnel to be solely responsible for preparing students for college. Leaders at two-year colleges, however, should commit themselves to finding and creating opportunities where genuine communication and collaboration with K-12 educators on how the two can better prepare students takes place (AACC, 2012).

To initiate this conversation, community college leaders may want to consider adopting the servant leadership approach. In his essay, “*The Servant as Leader*,” Robert Greenleaf (1977) provides a brief but powerful description of what it means to be a servant-leader:

The difference manifests itself in the care taken by the servant-first to make sure that other people’s highest priority needs are being served. The best test, and difficult to administer, is: Do those served grow as persons? Do they, *while being served*, become healthier, wiser, freer, more autonomous, more likely themselves to become servants? *And*, what is the effect on the least privileged in society; will they benefit, or, at least, not be further deprived? (p. 6).

Greenleaf (1977) presents some intriguing questions that can be examined in the context of college readiness. First, he describes the difference between what it means to be leader-first versus servant-first. The difference between the two lies within the type of attention that is provided. For example, servant-first leaders want to “make sure that other people’s highest priority needs are being served” (p. 6). According to Greenleaf (1977), these types of leaders are “more likely to persevere and refine a particular hypothesis on what serves another’s highest priority needs than is the person who is *leader first* and who later serves out of promptings of conscience or in conformity with normative

expectations” (p. 6). But then Greenleaf asks two fundamental questions that community college leaders may want to consider in working with high school personnel: (1) do those who are served grow as persons; and (2) how are those who are least privileged in our society affected? “Will they benefit, or, at least, not be further deprived” (Greenleaf, 1977, p. 6)?

If students are to be prepared for college entry, community college leaders must reexamine their role in the college-going process and ask themselves this key question: do the services and initiatives they provide to high school personnel and their students benefit their own agenda and interests or do they serve a good greater than their own? Oftentimes, it is easy for leaders to be so immersed with their own challenges and priorities that it becomes difficult for them to concentrate on matters outside of their domain. The lack of focus on preparing students for college is a great example of this. For many two-year colleges, a greater emphasis is placed on increasing enrollment than working with high school personnel to make sure that incoming students are equipped with the knowledge and tools they need to transition to college successfully. The former receives more attention because it solidifies the financial state of the college, thereby satisfying their highest need. This is not to say that increasing enrollment is wrong, but if leaders are not careful, this approach can be misguided, and as a result, it may create inadvertent barriers to student college readiness and success.

If community college leaders desire to become servant-first in how they collaborate with K-12 educators in preparing students for college, they may want to develop some of the following servant leadership attributes: listening, empathy, healing, and awareness (Greenleaf, 1977). First, campus leaders should make a commitment to

listen to the needs of those who work in K-12 schools, especially high school counselors. According to Bryan et al. (2011), McDonough (2005), and Rosenbaum (2001), school counselors are an indispensable social resource for the students they serve. School counselors can become an essential resource for colleges as well. They provide valuable insight on how colleges can serve certain student populations both academically and holistically. While leaders may want to use this knowledge to inform their practice, the *servant leader* would seek to learn about their experiences and ask how the college can better support the counselors and other educators in preparing students for college (Greenleaf, 1977).

College leaders should also develop empathy for incoming students, especially those who come from marginalized backgrounds and from schools that do not have a college-going culture. Community colleges are known for providing access to higher education for the following populations of underrepresented students: students of color, first-generation college students, the academically underprepared, and the economically disenfranchised (AACC, 2012; Kirst & Usdan, 2009; Rosenbaum, 2001). For these special student populations to transition to college successfully, they will need special care and additional guidance. For those students who come from schools that lack a college going culture, campus leaders should try to work with K-12 educators to identify what inequities exist in the information that is exchanged and how best to provide equal access and opportunities for all students to obtain information and resources about college.

When community college leaders listen to their fellow K-12 educators and show empathy toward special student populations, they can provide healing and restoration for



themselves and others (Crippen, 2004). In chapter 2, I discuss extensively the disconnect between community colleges and high schools and how that disconnectedness resulted in numerous consequences for graduating high school students desiring to attend college (Kirst & Usdan, 2007; Venezia, et al., 2003). One of those consequences is the lack of communication and collaboration between community colleges and high schools. This has resulted in a significant number of incoming students having insufficient and unclear information about college and its expectations (Kirst & Usdan, 2007; Rosenbaum, 2001; Venezia, et al., 2003). If community college leaders incorporate a servant-first mentality, they may be able to provide healing and restoration to this relationship and close the information gap (Greenleaf, 1977).

The final servant leadership attribute is awareness (Greenleaf, 1977). If college leaders are going to be effective in working with K-12 educators, they must cognizant of their own level of awareness as it pertains to college readiness. According to Crippen (2004), one develops awareness by doing the following: reflecting, listening to what others tell them about him or herself, being open to learning, and by making the transition from believing and knowing to actually saying and putting it into action. Osterman and Kottkamp (2004) believe that awareness is essential for behavioral change. The authors posit that, “Individuals must come to a deeper understanding of their own behavior within the context of their goals, the consequences of their actions, and the ideas or theories-in-use that shape their action strategies” (p. 23). When college leaders take on an awareness mindset, they do not mind asking the hard questions about their role, or lack thereof, in college readiness because they are sincere in knowing the truth about their involvement. They engage in dialogue with other educators and practitioners to determine what

discrepancies and inequities exists. They are willing to invite others outside of their organization to help inform their practice. Moreover, these leaders want to ensure that their espoused theories align with their theories-in-use (Argyris & Schon, 1974).

College leaders should adopt a more comprehensive view of what it means for a student to be college ready. For many community colleges, placement exams and other assessments are used to “predict students’ readiness for college” (Byrd & McDonald, 2005, p. 23). Studies have shown, however, that these instruments may not be the best indicators of whether students will be successful (Armstrong, 1999; Bailey, 2009; King, et al., 1994; Scott-Clayton, 2012). The placement exam only focuses on the academic preparation of a student. It does not take in consideration the other aspects of college readiness. The placement exam is not design to assess whether a student has cognitive and contextual skills or can demonstrate the necessary academic behaviors to be successful in college. Usually, community colleges want prospective students to be academically ready, but being academically ready is different from being college ready. Leaders tend to focus on one or two aspects of college readiness, not recognizing that the concept is multifaceted.

According to Conley (2008), college readiness should be viewed from four perspectives: key cognitive strategies, academic knowledge, academic behaviors, and contextual skills and awareness. Key cognitive strategies are comprised of students possessing skills like problem solving and knowing how to engage in research. When students have academic knowledge and skills, they show competence in understanding and engaging with rigorous academic subject matter. Academic behaviors include students having self-awareness and self-control. When students show that they have

contextual skills and awareness, they are able to access and use college knowledge. College readiness should be viewed as a holistic concept.

### **Recommendations for Practice**

In my interview with the high school counselors, one of them suggested that an affinity group should be created to deal specifically with preparing students for college. This would be a great recommendation because it would give college enrollment staff members and high school counselors the opportunity to explore and discuss the common misconceptions, attitudes, and beliefs that students have about college and how those issues can negatively impact how well they are prepared (The RP Group, 2010). Instead of implementing an affinity group, I would suggest that the two create a professional learning community (PLC). Although PLCs are mostly popular in K-12 schools, they may be beneficial for two- and four-year institutions as well if implemented and sustained correctly. Rasberry and Mahajan (2008) define professional learning communities “as groups of individuals committed to continuous improvement through shared values and reflection. In PLCs, teams are open to critical thinking, reflective dialogue, self-examination, and resolving issues that impede student success” (p. 2).

Professional learning communities would serve as a great way for college enrollment staff and high school counselors to collaborate with each other to have conversations about college readiness. Not only should these two groups be involved in the PLC, but high school faculty and other college personnel should be invited as well (Rasberry & Mahajan, 2008). Preparing students for college should not be the job of a few groups of people; it takes an entire team of educators to help students succeed. As high school and community college personnel engage with one another, there is much for

both groups to learn and share. For example, school counselors can share with college personnel the different populations of students who are planning to enter their institution and what their needs are. The counselors may possess the best practices at the high school level when interacting with certain populations that would be extremely helpful to college personnel. Once colleges know which populations they will encounter, they then can create transition programs and initiatives and tailor them to meet those needs (The RP Group, 2010).

Participating in a professional learning community could also help college and high school personnel improve their own social network (Lin, 2001). In chapter two, I discussed the importance for students to have connections and relationships with high school and college professionals because these individuals possess the knowledge and resources they need to navigate the college-going process. Students' success at the two-year college is contingent on the institutional agents they are connected to and how resources and information are provided to them (Stanton-Salazar, 2011). While it is important for students to be connected to institutional agents at the high school and college level, it is equally important for both entities to be interconnected themselves. When they are interconnected, the two have a greater probability of strengthening the "structure and resourcefulness of their own social networks" (Stanton-Salazar, 2011, p. 1068). In other words, they can network more effectively because they understand each other's structure and know how to navigate in each other's environment. To better serve incoming college students, both high school and community college personnel must look for ways to better understand each other's role and responsibility as it relates to college readiness.

## **Suggestions for Future Research**

Based on the data collected for this study, it is apparent that more research needs to be conducted on this subject. This study developed an understanding of the collaborative relationship between the community college and the high school counselors. One suggestion for future research is to design a study to determine whether students receive information and what types from their school counselors and college representatives. A sequential study should be done to determine whether and to what extent that information that is shared between the community college and the high school counselors is given to students. The researcher may want to create a survey to give to students or conduct focus groups to examine if they feel prepared for college. If the researcher wanted to conduct a longitudinal study, he or she may want to examine how prepared graduating high school students feel entering college, how they feel midway, and how prepared they felt after the first year. Action research may also be an appropriate approach.

## **Strengths and Limitations of the Study**

Several strengths in the study are acknowledged. First, the use of multiple data sources served as a major strength of this explorative case study (Yin, 2014). Each of the data sources was essential and contributed a unique aspect to the study. For example, in the beginning of data collection, observing the Erlington County Professional Counselors' Association meetings provided me with an understanding of what information was shared between community college and high school personnel and how the two interacted with one another. From those observations, I gained additional insight

about how to structure my interview protocol in a way that would yield more meaningful and relevant data.

Another strength of the study was the knowledge and dispositions of the participants. Each of the participants was knowledgeable of their respective roles and of the collaborative relationship between Erlington County College and the high schools. At first, I was hesitant to interview thirteen participants because I felt that it was too many. After hearing each of their viewpoints and experiences, however, opportunities were created for deeper dialogue and understanding.

The study also had some limitations. First, the data collection process took longer than expected. Originally, my goal was to conduct interviews between the months of March and June. However, I did not finish interviewing participants until mid-December. Due to the rigidity of some of the school counselors' schedules, it was difficult to schedule interviews. They had various responsibilities that they had to attend to. For some counselors, I had to interview them during their lunch break or free period because their time was severely limited. There were times I had to rush through some of my interview questions due to the various obligations they had. While I believe that the data I obtained was adequate, I can only wonder some of the information that was not disclosed during some of those interviews. It is also important to note that I was not able to collect as many electronic and paper documents as intended. While I was able to collect some items, they proved not to be as helpful when analyzing the data.

## **Conclusion**

I became interested in conducting this research based on my experiences as an academic advisor at a two-year institution. Year after year, I met with countless students

who had dreams and high hopes, but they were unaware of the knowledge and skills that were needed to be successful in college and, as a result, they made critical mistakes that either hindered their success or removed them from the college experience altogether. I was interested in finding where the information or resource gaps existed for these students and how we, as educators in secondary and higher education, can address them.

If community colleges expect for their students to be successful at their institutions, they must rethink their approach in how information and support is provided to counselors and their students. Community colleges can longer assume that students are getting the necessary information and resources from their high school experience. Instead of dealing with this issue passively, colleges should be more proactive in working closely with high school counselors to discuss what college readiness means for students who will be attending their institutions and ensuring that students are given the information and resources they need to prepare *before* they enter. By working collaboratively, they can provide a solid foundation for how students transition to the two-year college and increase their probability of being successful.

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## Appendix A

### Office of Enrollment Interview Protocol

**Time of Interview:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Date:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Interviewee:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Interviewee's Title:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Interviewer:** Dyron J. Corley

**Location:** \_\_\_\_\_

#### Research Statement:

The purpose of this inquiry is to explore how the enrollment office at Erlington County College [pseudonym] collaborates with neighboring high school counselors to ensure that incoming students receive the information and support they need to understand college expectations and make a successful transition to the two-year college.

#### Questions:

1. Do you have any questions before we start?
2. What positions do each of you hold in the Office of Enrollment at Erlington County College? How long have you worked in your particular role?
3. What is the overall mission/purpose of the Office of Enrollment at ECC?
4. For the last few years, ECC has made strong efforts to create a collaborative relationship with the high school counselors. Please discuss the rationale behind this decision? Walk me through the history of this collaborative relationship.
  - a. Why do you believe the counselors are an important piece to what you do as an office?
  - b. What exactly do they contribute?
  - c. How many high schools do you collaborate with?
  - d. Describe your interaction with each school? How is each school different?
5. In what ways do you as an office collaborate with the high school counselors? Discuss some of your initiatives.
  - a. When those initiatives were developed, what were some of your goals and objectives?
  - b. What were the results?
  - c. What could your office have done differently? What could the high school counselors have done differently?
  - d. How important was collaboration in reaching your goals?
6. We live in an educational environment where completion is the main priority for many colleges/universities. In communicating with the high school counselors, what information about the college is conveyed? What information about college expectations or college readiness is shared with the counselors?
  - a. Do you see sharing information about college expectations or college readiness as a part of your role?

- i. If so, what is the message you would like for high school counselors to give to incoming students about ECC? About college readiness?
      1. What types of support do you offer?
    - ii. How do you know that students who are planning to enroll at ECC are receiving that information?
    - iii. What types of questions do you receive from high school counselors about the college?
7. What are your thoughts about collaboration or communication between yourselves and the high school counselors? What are some of the strengths? What are some of the weaknesses?
  - a. What results are you seeing?
  - b. How do you know if it is successful?
8. Reflecting on your past experiences, what roadblocks or inconsistencies did you encounter in trying to collaborate or share information about the college with the counselors? How did these roadblocks or inconsistencies prohibit collaboration or make collaboration difficult?
9. If it was possible for you as an office to have unlimited time and resources and support from the high school counselors, what more would you want to do to help the counselors be more comfortable in helping students be more academically prepared for college?
10. That is it for my questions. Is there anything else that you would like to add?

## Appendix B

### High School Counselor Interview Protocol

**Time of Interview:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Date:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Interviewee:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Interviewee's Title:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Interviewer:** Dyron J. Corley

**Location:** \_\_\_\_\_

#### Research Statement:

The purpose of this inquiry is to explore how the Office of Enrollment at Erlington County College [pseudonym] collaborates with neighboring high school counselors to ensure that incoming students receive the information and support they need to understand college expectations and be able to make a successful transition to the two-year college.

#### Questions:

1. Do you have any questions before we start?
2. What is your position here at the high school?
  - a. How long have you worked in this role?
  - b. What previous roles did you have?
3. How many students are on your caseload?
  - a. How many of those students are interested in attending college?
  - b. How many of those students are interested in attending college at Erlington County College?
4. What are some of your responsibilities as a school counselor?
  - a. How much of your time is dedicated to college counseling?
  - b. What makes a student academically prepared for college? How do you assist students with college preparation? At what point in their high school career do you start having conversations about college? Why at that particular time?
  - c. How much of that time is dedicated to counseling students planning to enroll at Erlington County College?
5. Please describe your level of comfort when providing academic counseling for college preparation?
6. What type of information about ECC do you receive from the recruitment team?
  - a. How is that information dispersed to your graduating students?
  - b. Is any information about college expectations or college readiness shared with the counselors? If so, what?
  - c. What types of questions do you receive from high school students about the college?
  - d. What works smoothly or what assists you in sharing information about the college with your students?

- e. What difficulties do you have in sharing information about the college to students?
7. In what ways do you as high school counselors collaborate with ECC? Discuss some of your initiatives.
  - a. When those initiatives were developed, what were some of your goals and objectives?
  - b. What were the results?
  - c. What could the counselors have done differently? What could the recruitment team at ECC have done differently?
  - d. How important was collaboration in reaching your goals?
8. What are your thoughts about collaboration or communication between yourselves and the recruitment team members?
  - a. What are some of the strengths?
  - b. What are some of the weaknesses?
  - c. What results are you seeing?
    - i. How do you know if they are successful?
    - ii. How do you know if your students are benefiting from what is being communicated?
9. Reflecting on your past experiences, what roadblocks or inconsistencies did you encounter in trying to collaborate with the college or receive information about ECC? How did these roadblocks or inconsistencies prohibit collaboration or make collaboration difficult?
10. As a high school counselor, do you feel as though you are an important contributor to this relationship? If so, how? If not, why?
11. If it was possible for you as a school counselor to have unlimited time and resources and support from the college, what more would you want to do to help students be more academically prepared for college?
12. That is it for my questions. Is there anything else that you would like to add?