

ABSTRACT

Randy E. St.Clair, ENHANCING OPPORTUNITY BY INCREASING ACCESS FOR AFRICAN AMERICAN MALES AT AN EARLY COLLEGE HIGH SCHOOL (Under the direction of Dr. Daniel Novey). Department of Educational Leadership, May 2022.

Much of the research surrounding African American males and their performance in education has centered strictly on their outcomes on standardized tests. The African American male subgroup has historically performed significantly lower on such tests than their White counterparts and too often those performance measures are used to determine what types of opportunities they receive in education. This mixed methods research study considers an educational reform model at the secondary level of education: Early College High Schools. The study examines one particular early college high school and its application process to determine if there are any barriers or disincentives for African American male enrollment in the school. Analysis of the application process allows for the conversation about enrollment into the innovative high school to shift from achievement to opportunity. Through an environmental scan of the school's legacy application process members of the school's Recruitment Committee will create categories of what could serve as potential barriers or disincentives for the enrollment of African American male students. From the creation of the categories a questionnaire will be made and given to teachers, parents, and students to help identify an intervention that can be used in the application process. An evaluation of the implementation of that intervention will take place through interviews of African American male applicants, which will give them the opportunity to share insight on the process. The data collected from the student interviews will allow me to determine if the intervention was successful or needs to be modified or replaced.

ENHANCING OPPORTUNITY BY INCREASING ACCESS FOR AFRICAN AMERICAN
MALES AT AN EARLY COLLEGE HIGH SCHOOL

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by

Randy E. St.Clair

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MALES AT AN EARLY COLLEGE HIGH SCHOOL

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DEDICATION

The fulfillment of this dissertation work is evidence that with God all things are possible. The measure of grace I experienced through the completion of this work speaks to how glorious, wonderful, and merciful the Lord, God Almighty really is. He is a present help in time of need, and He is a friend that sticks closer than a brother. I am humbled and thankful to have had the Lord on my side as the work manifested. I am also eternally grateful for the wife he has given me. A wife who is understanding and relentless in giving hope. Heather, your love and faith have inspired me in ways I did not believe were possible. Your sacrifice was at times overwhelming, but you made me realize this work was our work. You were dedicated to the completion of this assignment just as much as I was (at times even more). Thank you for your endless love and for always finding a way to keep things light when I felt the heaviest.

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

High school reform has had no better poster child than that of the Early College High School (ECHS) (Ongaga, 2010). Purposed to target problems in secondary education like academic preparedness, student attrition rates, and college success, the early college high school has proven that with academic rigor, relationships, and relevance, success can be attained by the high school student (Brewer et al., 2007). Early colleges are designed so that low-income youth, first-generation college attendees, English language learners, students of color, and students who are often underrepresented in higher education can earn a high school diploma and one to two years of transferable college credit—tuition-free (Ongaga, 2010). Schools like ECHS were established to lower high school drop-out rates and guide more students to success in college (Brewer et al., 2007). ECHSs are unconventional and can be designed to meet the needs of their students (Brewer et al., 2007). In North Carolina, the byproduct of this approach has been an increase in high school graduation rates as well as the establishment of a robust number of early colleges: 133 statewide (North Carolina Cooperative Innovative High Schools Design and Implementation Guide, 2017).

Although the success of the ECHS concept is demonstrable and its unique design to reach underrepresented population of students is admirable, it is at this point exactly that we find one of the biggest inequities in this reform: African American males are significantly underrepresented at ECHSs. As an example, North Carolina Early College High School (a pseudonym, NCECHS)—an early college high school in Eastern North Carolina—has operated as an early college for more than 11 years. In that time, African American male students have made up just 9% of its enrollment. To further demonstrate the disparity among demographics in enrollment at ECHSs or as they are known in North Carolina, Cooperative Innovative High

Schools (CIHS), North Carolina's annual report on enrollment at CIHS serves as a useful data source. In the fall of 2017, CIHS student enrollment numbers at ECHSs showed just 16% of African Americans were enrolled at an early college, in comparison to 51% White students. Emdin (2012) stressed how important it was for schools to provide different learning experiences and how critical it was to the academic success of African American males. To address the low achievement of African American males, schools must be willing to accept that there is a uniqueness to the way that African American males see the world, and therefore, the way we teach and learn should be in line with that experience (Emdin, 2012). Exploring processes, policies, mission and vision of early colleges may be helpful in pinpointing why there is such a gap between the enrollment of African American male students and other ethnic groups. Access to early colleges for African American males can literally mean saving lives and keeping them out of harm's way (Edmunds, 2016). According to Edmunds's (2016) interview of an 18-year-old African American male student (Jamal) at an early college, Jamal attributed the fact that he was able to graduate to his attendance at a school where he did not have to contend with fights, drugs, and low expectations. Purposefully looking into enrollment barriers and disincentives could lead to more African American males having an experience like Jamal's. A significant aspect of this study takes a deeper look at the admissions process at NCECHS and how that process may contribute to the low number of African American males at the school. This research will also allow for a greater examination of innovative high schools across the state and how intentional they are in ensuring the opportunity for African American males to attend is equitable.

Background of Focus of Practice

North Carolina early colleges are also referred to as CIHS and were established in 2004 in response to legislation from the NC General Assembly (North Carolina Cooperative Innovative High Schools Design and Implementation Guide, 2017). The legislation sought to combine what was then known as the Learn and Earn Initiative and the Career and College Promise (CCP) program. CCP is a program that allows high school students to be dual-enrolled in high school and community college courses that provide pathways that lead to a certificate, diploma, or degree, as well as provide entry-level jobs skills. CIHSs not only include Early College High Schools but also Career Academies, Middle Colleges, and STEM-focused high schools (North Carolina Cooperative Innovative High Schools Design and Implementation Guide, 2017). These are all referred to as innovative models of learning.

ECHSs partner with institutions of higher education (IHE) and are located on the campus of their higher education partner. The target group for innovative schools like the ECHS is students who would be the first in their families to graduate from college, students who are at risk of dropping out of high school, and students who would benefit from accelerated academic instruction (Hall, 2008; North Carolina Cooperative Innovative High Schools Design and Implementation Guide, 2017; Ongaga, 2010). ECHS are also intended for students who typically are underrepresented in college, students from low-income families, and minorities (Ongaga, 2010). Small in nature, the ECHS serves no more than 100 students per grade level, again emphasizing the desire to build strong relationships with its students (North Carolina Cooperative Innovative High Schools Design and Implementation Guide, 2017).

The success of ECHS has been noteworthy. A new national student report of early colleges, published by the American Institute of Research, found that students who attended

early colleges were more likely to enroll in college than those who attended traditional high schools (Song & Zeiser, 2019). According to Song and Zeiser (2019), early college students were also more likely to complete a bachelor's degree than their counterparts. Yet, with all of their success, there is the issue of underrepresentation of African American males at ECHSs. The African American male subgroup is often referred to as an endangered species or a subgroup that may soon be gone, and the treatment of African American males in education is often similar to their treatment in society (Bryant, 2000). Bryant (2000) continued by stating that there are still inequalities in the academic performance and intellect of African American males that show up in the classrooms they attend, which lead to discouragement and lack of motivation. For some African American male students, the belief that it is not "cool" to be smart or to earn A's and B's contributes to their poor performance in school (Bryant, 2000). This is another example of the "deficit mindset" (Ford et al., 2011) and how it has plagued African American males in education. Other African American male students run the risk of losing friends if they perform well in school (Bryant, 2000). The social pressures that exist for African American male students should be considered when initiatives like the ECHS are created. Likewise, taking into consideration social norms and mindsets in impoverished African American communities should also be considered.

The disjunction between intention and reality evident in the demographics of students attending ECHSs is the under-representation of African American males and is the same one that exists in high school programs like Advanced Placement (Fluker, 2018) or gifted education (Ford et al., 2011). Exploring programming like Gifted Education in early grades to determine what barriers and disincentives exist may be a logical starting place in trying to understand this lack of representation. Deficit thinking is the major reason gifted education under-representation exists

and persists (Ford et al., 2011). Educational deficit thinking is "blaming the victim" by viewing what is considered to be the deficits of the low-income group and holding them responsible for their problems in school and society, while not giving any of that responsibility to the structures or systems that created the inequities (Ford et al., 2011). Ford et al. (2011) indicated that such thinking has a significant impact on behavior and validates teachers' having low expectations. At the classroom level, it manifests in less challenge and rigor in the curriculum for African American students, which was a significant factor in the conversation about the achievement gap (Ford et al., 2011). The negative perceptions of African American male students can be factors as to why they are not thought of by those who make recommendations for students who may benefit from attending innovative opportunities like ECHSs.

NCECHS, a pseudonym for an innovative high school set in rural eastern North Carolina, serves as an example of a school that struggles to exhibit enrollment demographic numbers that are similar to the school district in which it is located. NCECHS has been in existence since 2009 and for more than half of that time, it has averaged an enrollment of nearly 300 students. However, only 9% percent of that enrollment is African American male students. This is a demonstrable discrepancy, given that the largest demographic subgroup for Eastern County Schools (ECS, a pseudonym) is African Americans. There are nearly 5,000 African American students enrolled in ECS, which comprises almost 50% of the system's student population. These students are not performing well on state-mandated assessments in comparison to other demographics in the county. This discrepancy is aligned with the achievement gap that exists in education between African American males and their White counterparts (Ransaw & Green, 2016). Often African American male students experience negative peer pressure not to perform well in school (Ransaw & Green, 2016). A remedy to this issue is to have high expectations for

African American males, and place them in settings that allow them to work in small peer groups where they can work cooperatively with peers who are seeking the same outcome (Ransaw & Green, 2016). The early college is designed to be a place where such expectations exist.

Context of Study

NCECHS is located on the campus of Eastern Community College (ECC, a pseudonym) in eastern North Carolina and is part of North Carolina's Cooperative Innovative High Schools (CIHS) endeavor. CIHSs are designed to give students who may be at risk of dropping out of high school the opportunity to earn a high school diploma and a college degree simultaneously within four to five years (North Carolina Cooperative Innovative High Schools Design and Implementation Guide, 2017). NCECHS opened in 2009 and in its more than a decade of existence has averaged roughly 300 students annually. However, African American males have made up just 9% of the student population since the school opened its doors. NCECHS is the highest performing high school in the ECS district. The North Carolina Department of Public Instruction (NCDPI) evaluates schools in North Carolina, awarding each a performance grade of A-F on the basis of state-mandated and created assessments. NCECHS has earned a grade of A, indicating that its students are performing above state expectations. The faculty report that the school is an excellent place to work, according to the North Carolina Teacher Working Conditions Survey results. The school also has a lengthy wait list of students wanting to attend. Yet, the school struggles to enroll African American male students, who would be prime candidates for the school.

To highlight the significance of this issue, consider the ECS demographic data. Nearly 50% of the students who attend ECS are African American. African Americans make up the bulk of the school system's discipline and suspension data. In the 2018-2019 school year, ECS district

reported that African American students accounted for 72% of all discipline referrals. African American males received 47% of those. Finally, African Americans perform the lowest on the district's state assessments. Again, in the 2018-2019 school year, only 43% of African American students were proficient in all subjects on the state End-of-Grade assessments in comparison to 75% proficient for White students. All of these areas (academic performance, school discipline, and minority status) are seen as criteria for CIHS to consider for student enrollment. Exploring what factors could be hindering the enrollment of African American males at this school of distinction is necessary. Depending on what findings show, eradicating any barriers or disincentives to enrollment may lead to the increase in African American male enrollment, as well as highlight any additional issues unintended or not that can be considered inequitable.

Statement of Focus of Practice

The focus of this inquiry is to reconceptualize the admissions process at NCECHS to allow for increased enrollment of African American males. Through exploration of potential barriers and disincentives, this study aims to bring awareness to what could potentially be a systemic issue plaguing African American males in education. Historically, African American males are seen as the inferior subgroup and low expectations have been placed on them regarding school performance (Edmunds, 2016). One of the primary purposes of the ECHS is to provide opportunities for underrepresented minorities and low-income families (North Carolina Cooperative Innovative High Schools Design and Implementation Guide, 2017). It can be seen as alarming that African American males make up such a small percent of the enrollment at NCECHS, especially since African Americans make up more than 50% of the student population of Eastern County Schools. A collection of survey data will be analyzed to determine what intervention can be used to create a more diverse admissions process that looks beyond grades,

state test scores, and discipline data. The subjects of the surveys will include teachers, students, and parents of NCECHS. An evaluation of the intervention will be conducted to determine if the intervention used helped to eliminate or lessen the barriers or disincentives towards African American male students to attend the school. Analysis of quantitative data will include the last four years of enrollment into the early college and application data.

This study will also show that the cumulative educational achievement gap between African Americans as a group, particularly African American males, and Whites begins with the early years of schooling and worsens throughout the postsecondary education (Patton, 1995). African American males represent only 9% of the enrollment at NCECHS in comparison to 40% percent White. This problem of having such low numbers of African American males enrolled in NCECHS requires a deeper look into the school's admissions process and anything that could be limiting access for them into the school. Greater access for African American males to attend NCECHS would be beneficial in allowing them to work in an environment that has high expectations and strong peer support (Ransaw & Green, 2016). Eliminating recruitment bias and subjective application processes and rubrics—should my research find that they exist—would be worth examining more closely to ensure access. The gap that currently exists between African American males and the majority subgroup is staggering. It nullifies one of the goals of the CIHS, which is to increase representation of underrepresented demographics (North Carolina Cooperative Innovative High Schools Design and Implementation Guide, 2017). Being able to change the landscape of a community by providing access and opportunity to postsecondary education for its most underserved and challenging demographic may lead to a change in the way poverty is viewed and ultimately to a decrease in African American males living in poverty.

African American male students are few in number at NCECHS; however, what is unclear is whether or not simply poor recruitment is to blame for that. Taking a closer look at the admissions process from the application to how students are selected for an interview may reveal barriers that should be eliminated. Additional factors may include involvement in extracurricular activities. For example, students at NCECHS take college classes from 3:30 p.m. to 5:00 p.m., which conflicts with when traditional high schools would have sports practice and games. For the African American male student, sports can be a crucial factor contributing to academic performance and the difference between staying in school and dropping out (Holcomb-McCoy, 2007).

Focus of Practice Guiding Questions

The questions guiding this focus of practice inquiry are:

1. What factors in the legacy application process may act as barriers or disincentives to the enrollment of African American male students at an early college high school?
2. What effect does the reconceptualization of an early college high school's admission process have on African American male enrollment?

Overview of Inquiry

To attempt to answer the questions guiding this focus of practice inquiry, I will conduct a mixed methods study. The data will be collected in a pre-phase with two additional phases. The pre-phase will address research question one and conduct an environmental scan of the admission process at NCECHS. This environmental scan refers to the gathering of information about the admissions process that may reveal what could be barriers and disincentives for African American males attending the school. In the pre-phase, I will use the affinity diagram process with the Recruitment Committee (Glickman et al., 2013) to detect and categorize

potential barriers or disincentives for African American males in the admission process. Surveys will be given to teachers, students, and parents of NCECHS to gather information on what they see as potential barriers or disincentives for African American male enrollment.

After the pre-phase, I will shift into phase one of the research study which is to focus on the implementation of an intervention that would help to eliminate or significantly lessen any barriers or disincentives to the admission process at NCECHS. The intervention I design will be based on my analysis of the data gathered in the pre-phase, and from the affinity diagram process used by the Recruitment Committee and the completion of the stakeholder surveys

The second and final phase of this study will focus on conducting an evaluation of the intervention used in phase one to determine its impact on the admissions process. As part of the evaluation, I will interview students who applied to NCECHS to get their perspective on the admissions process. Student interviews will consist of African American males. In addition to evaluating the invention through student interviews, the Recruitment Committee will make revisions to the intervention used based on the analysis of the data that we collect in the evaluation. From the analysis of the data collected the Recruitment Committee will determine if the intervention used was successful or if there is a need to implement something different.

Inquiry Partners

Working to identify what may be barriers or disincentives of the admission process for African American males at NCECHS will require me to work closely the school's Recruitment Committee. The Recruitment Committee, which is comprised of the school's principal, school counselor, and career counselor, is responsible for governing the recruitment and admissions process. In this study, the Recruitment Committee will assist with the creation, distributions, collection, and analysis of data from surveys and interview questions. The Recruitment

Committee will be heavily involved in the environmental scan in the pre-phase and will help to implement an intervention in the admissions process.

I will also work alongside the ECS district personnel--district data manager and accountability coordinator--for the analysis of quantitative data, including current and past enrollment of students at NCECHS. I will also collect and analyze districtwide demographic data, assessment data, and discipline data to obtain a greater view of how African American males perform in the district. Determining if there are equitable practices and approaches to meeting the needs of African American male students could be a positive result of the data analysis. For example, having the Gifted and Talented Coordinator for ECS working as an inquiry partner may show that there is a disparity between the number of White males and the number of African American males identified as Academically Intellectually Gifted (AIG). Ford et al. (2011) speak specifically to this inequity in education stating that at the core of the underrepresentation of African Americans in gifted education is attributed to deficit thinking.

Another group serving as an important inquiry partner in this research study are consultants of the North Carolina Department of Instruction (NCDPI), who are responsible for managing Cooperative Innovative High Schools (CIHS) statewide. Quantitative data from NCDPI concerning early college performance and enrollment data across the state is significant in determining whether state accountability measures like the enrollment of minority and at-risk students are attained.

Theoretical or Conceptual Framework

When considering factors that may contribute to the absence of African American males in academically rigorous courses or experiences, considering the cultural dynamics in which African American males grow up in is pivotal. It is essential to explore how the African

American male sees himself in the world of public education and what that may enable him to do or not do. There are influences, seen and unseen, that help to shape the identity of African American males (McKown, 2013). Those influences shape that male's identity and ultimately lead him on a path to success or far from it. Social Equity Theory (SET) suggests that there are social processes that contribute to racial-ethnic achievement gaps (McKown, 2013). This theory explains the differences in achievement levels of ethnicities by looking at variables within and without that ethnic group. African American males face an unfair comparison to other ethnic groups because they have to contend with the negative stereotypes and biases that are embedded in society (McKown, 2013). Some of those stereotypes include being seen as athletically gifted and academically insufficient or simply being viewed as a threat because of their appearance (Wright, 2009).

The interactions or social processes as described in SET between individuals or groups of people have a direct impact on how ready a child is and how well they will achieve in that setting. Social processes refer to verbal and nonverbal communication. Those processes also refer to the communication between individuals and social settings, in which an event or characteristic of the setting communicates something of social consequence (McKown, 2013). McKown (2013) described the impact of SET and social processes social settings by breaking them down into two classes that influence racial-ethnic achievement gaps. The two classes are direct influences and signal influences. Direct influences are social processes that support achievement. Direct influences contribute to the racial-ethnic achievement gap when they are distributed differently to people from different racial-ethnic groups (McKown, 2013). Signal influences are cues that communicate negative expectations about a child's racial-ethnic group.

When children from negatively stereotyped groups detect such cues, this can hamper achievement (McKown, 2013).

When determining what barriers or disincentives might exist related to the enrollment of African American males in early college high schools, one has to consider SET. The achievement gap that exists between African American males and other subgroups continues to see little improvement (Wright, 2009). Overall, as a subgroup African American students are performing lower than White students, especially in the area of reading. According to a 2015 study conducted by the National Assessment of Educational Progress, African Americans in Grade 12 scored nearly 30 percentage points lower than White students. Determining the social influences as to why that might be is key in breaking down those barriers. It is important to consider factors like home, school, peer-to-peer interactions, and neighborhoods as having a direct correlation to how students achieve in school settings (McKown, 2013).

Definition of Key Terms

The following terms are critical to this study and, as such, are defined herein.

Academically or Intellectually Gifted (AIG) - Academically or intellectually gifted (AIG) students perform or show the potential to perform at substantially higher levels of accomplishment when compared with others of similar age, experiences or environment. Academically or intellectually gifted students exhibit high-performance capability in intellectual areas, specific academic fields, or in both the intellectual areas and specific academic fields (North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, 2019a).

Achievement Gap - The differences in scores on state or national achievement tests between various student demographics (Anderson et al., 2007)

Advanced Placement (AP) - Advanced Placement (AP) is a program in the United States and Canada created by the College Board, which offers college-level curricula and examinations to high school students (North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, 2019b).

At-Risk - Students who may underachieve or who may drop out of school. Unmet economic, physical, emotional, linguistic, and/or academic needs may inhibit a student's ability to learn or attend school (North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, 2019c).

Barrier - A limit or boundary of any kind (Barrier, n.d.)

Cooperative Innovative High School (CIHS) - North Carolina's early colleges and other innovative high schools are small public high schools, usually located on the campus of a university or community college, which expand students' opportunities for educational success through high-quality instructional programming. Cooperative Innovative High Schools target students who are at risk of dropping out of high school, first-generation college students, and/or students who would benefit from accelerated learning opportunities (North Carolina Cooperative Innovative High Schools Design and Implementation Guide, 2017).

Disincentive - Something that discourages or deters (Disincentive, n.d.)

Early College High School (ECHS) - A Cooperative Innovative High School that offers a five-year program of study where students earn a high school diploma and transferable college credit that can lead to an associate's degree (North Carolina Cooperative Innovative High Schools Design and Implementation Guide, 2017).

International Baccalaureate (IB) - According to the North Carolina Department of Instruction (2019), International Baccalaureate (IB) courses follow a curriculum created by the International Baccalaureate Organization (IBO), a non-profit educational foundation located in Cardiff, Wales. Students can take individual IB classes and earn a certificate of completion for

each class (with a score of 4 or higher on the corresponding IB exam) or can be IB diploma students, which is a 2-year program for juniors and seniors. Students who decide to pursue an IB diploma must complete a specific set of courses, the Theory of Knowledge course, a 4,000-word Extended Essay, and 150 hours of creativity, action, and service hours.

Institutions of Higher Education (IHE) - North Carolina community colleges, colleges, and universities are referred to as institutions of higher education (North Carolina Cooperative Innovative High Schools Design and Implementation Guide, 2017).

Recruitment Committee – A collection of individuals responsible for the recruitment of students to NCECHS who also oversee the admissions process. The committee is comprised of the school principal, school counselor, and career counselor.

Social Equity Theory (SET) - A theory that describes processes that contribute to racial-ethnic achievement gaps (McKown, 2013).

Social Emotional Learning (SEL) - Social and emotional learning (SEL) is the process through which children and adults understand and manage emotions, set and achieve positive goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain positive relationships, and make responsible decisions (Weissberg & Cascarino, 2013).

Assumptions

Terms such as endangered, at-risk, dangerous, and uneducated used to describe African American males evoke strong emotions and perpetuate negative stereotypes (Jackson & Moore, 2006). They can also lead to misconceptions about African American male performance or their ability to perform socially and in educational settings. African American males throughout various levels of education have found themselves performing lower than White males. They are also more likely to be suspended or expelled from school and to be underrepresented in gifted

education programs and college preparatory courses, including advanced placement (Jackson & Moore, 2006).

While the performance of African American males continues to be the subject of much discussion in education, it is important to note that African American males possess a number of overlapping identities and diverse experiences, and as such, they should not be characterized as simply being one thing or having one identity (Howard, 2014). Capturing the full essence of the African American experience in education is essential. It is important to offer an anti-deficit view when discussing this subgroup and looking at what the data says (Howard, 2014).

In this study, I assume that most educators view African American males as a subgroup in need of a different educational experience as a means to motivate and move them towards success. The perspective of African American males needing inspiration more than any other subgroup is a mindset that has long been adopted by most educators. In the context of this study it is important to point out how educators view African American male students and what opportunities they are willing to present them with to further their development in education. In this study, I also assume that African American males want to take advantage of opportunities that promote advancement and acceptance of more challenging and rigorous learning environments. In addition to assuming that African American males want the opportunity to attend ECHSs, I also assume that school administrators desire to find ways to close the opportunity gap that exists between African American males and other subgroups.

Scope and Delimitations

This study is delimited to African American male students at NCECHS. While there is another early college in the Eastern County Schools District, its focus is much different from NCECHS. The second early college in the ECS district has a focus on STEM programs and

advanced manufacturing and offers pathways to earn an Associates' degree in several of the applied sciences. NCECHS focuses solely on the college transfer pathway, which leads to an Associates of Arts or Science degree. While there are early colleges in the surrounding counties, the focus on this early college is significant because of the level of poverty that exists in this county, as well as, the significant achievement gap that exists between African American males and other subgroups in this school district. Focusing on this early college high school and its makeup allows for deeper insight and examination into the infrastructure of the school and how well it seeks to recruit students who are underrepresented in rigorous educational opportunities, potential dropouts, or first-generation college students.

Limitations

North Carolina's ECHS initiative is one that comes with proven results. Since the implementation of ECHS, they have outperformed traditional high schools across the state showcasing higher graduation rates, higher student retention rates, higher student completion rates, and lower school drop-out rates, which are below the state average (North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, 2018). In addition, early college high schools are outperforming traditional schools in assessment areas like Math 1, Math 3, Biology, and English II (North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, 2018).

Expanding college access to students who are at-risk of dropping out or come from low-income households is one of the aims of ECHS. Many African American males can be identified as belonging to one of the groups of students ECHS seeks to reach. The research conducted at NCECHS will show the need for a broader net to be cast to give African American males an opportunity to attend the school. The scope of the quantitative data collected is a significant limitation because it comes from just one ECHS (NCECHS). Research was primarily conducted

with teachers, parents and students currently enrolled in NCECHS. However, qualitative data will also be collected from middle school students who are applying to attend the early college. A limitation with that data collection may involve not having the ability to track those students longitudinally to see what their attitudes about the early college were prior to entering middle school and what their attitudes are now that they are preparing to leave middle school.

Significance of Inquiry

The traditional American high school can be seen as a fragmented system that is not always inclusive of all that it serves (Thompson & Ongaga, 2011). The creation of the ECHS has met the need for education reform in this area and provides students with opportunities for advancement and preparedness for postsecondary education in a manner that opens the door for students who may be first-generation college students, come from low-income homes, or have struggled with the pressures of attending a traditional high school (Brewer et al., 2007; Edmunds et al., 2010; Ongaga, 2010; Thompson & Ongaga, 2011). Today, it is more prevalent that high school students are taking college-level courses while completing graduation requirements (Tinberg & Nadeau, 2011). North Carolina offers programs like Career and College Promise (CCP) that allow students to earn college credit from local community colleges and universities while also earning high school credit. In 2018, nearly 60% of high school students in the state of North Carolina earned college credit prior to graduating from high school (North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, 2018). Through the efforts of the North Carolina State Board of Education and the North Carolina State Board of Community Colleges, CCP was created with the purpose of providing pathways that lead to a certificate, diploma, degree or State or industry-recognized credentials, as well as provide entry-level job skills (North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, 2018). In addition to the various pathways, certificates, and degrees offered

through CCP more students are taking advantage of gaining some level of post-secondary course experience through the program. In the 2017-2018 school year, 214,000 students took advantage of taking a college-level course. However, a careful look at the ethnicity data shows a significant disparity between who is taking advantage of dual enrollment. In the 2017-18 school year more than 60% of the students who took a college class for credit were White students. Only 13% were black students (North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, 2018).

The same trend is true about Cooperative Innovative High Schools (CIHS). The North Carolina Department of Public Instruction (NCDPI) initially established CIHS in 2004 with the NC Community Colleges System (NCCCS) and the University of North Carolina General Administration (UNCGA) (North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, 2018). The goal was to expand students' opportunities for educational success through high-quality instructional programming (North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, 2018). CIHS programs were to target students who were at risk of dropping out of high school and first-generation college students. The creation of ECHS allows for students to earn their high school diploma and an associate's degree in four to five years and leads to higher rates of academic completion, graduation, and postsecondary enrollment and completion (North Carolina Cooperative Innovative High Schools Design and Implementation Guide, 2017). In the 2017-18 school year, 14,322 students were enrolled in an early college high school, but the ethnicity data shows that while 51% of the students who attend CIHS are White students, only 16% are Black students (North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, 2018).

One facet of this study aims to show that while programs like CCP and CIHS are intended to bridge the opportunity gap for those who are underserved in traditional high school settings, there is still one subgroup vastly being overlooked, African American males. In 2018

NCDPI reported (North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, 2018) just 13% of the students who enrolled in CCP were African Americans. That same report showed that only 16% of students enrolled at a CIHS were African Americans. Analysis of the data collected for this particular study may provide details on what specific barriers and disincentives exist for the enrollment of African American males at ECHS, as well as provide a basis for the reconceptualization of an admissions process that may help to provide a better balance between the school and community demographics.

Advancing Equity and Social Justice

Determining barriers and disincentives that could exist in the enrollment of African American males at an early college high school is significant and helps to broaden the lens on educational equity. To this day, there is still a gulf between the academic performance of the African American subgroup and the White subgroup (McKown, 2013). McKown (2013) describes the gap that exists between these two groups as a consequential social problem. It has been proven that the more academically ready and the higher the level of achievement students have, the more likely they are to secure jobs with good wages (McKown, 2013). The proposed research study intends to analyze the admissions process of an ECHS to determine how to eliminate or lessen any barriers or disincentives to African American male enrollment by gathering survey data from teachers, students, and parents at NCECHS on what they see as potential barriers and disincentives to the enrollment of African American male students. That data will be used to implement an intervention and assist in changing the admissions process. Providing an intervention based on stakeholder input and having that intervention evaluated by students and parents who are applying to the school will give information to the school's Recruitment Committee to make improvements to its admissions process that would create

greater opportunity for African American males to attend the school. The data that come from the interviews of parents and students in the evaluation of the intervention will show how equitable, or not, the process has become. After the evaluation will be an opportunity to revise the intervention used and a template that can be used at an ECHS to see true change.

Advances in Practice

This focus of practice inquiry seeks to advance the discussion on the educational experience of African American males by exploring the history of K-12 education from the African American perspective. The study will also emphasize the barriers African American males face when seeking more rigorous educational opportunities. In the discussion on the African American male experience in education, I plan to reveal that the negative stereotypes and biases that still exist in many schools play a significant factor in initiatives like the early college high school stifling the interest of African American males to attend. The awareness of these issues will allow me to reconceptualize the admissions process of an ECHS to eliminate or lessen any barriers of disincentives for the enrollment of African American male students.

Summary

In an attempt to address high school dropout rates and give students from low-socioeconomic backgrounds access to collegiate coursework in a rigorous educational setting, the state of North Carolina created CIHS, which included the creation of early college high schools, middle colleges, and STEM-focused high schools (North Carolina Cooperative Innovative High Schools Design and Implementation Guide, 2017). These innovative models of schools provide students with an opportunity to complete high school while earning college credit. In the case of the early college high school, students are earning an associate's degree from the partnered institution of higher education. ECHS is intended for students who typically

are underrepresented in college, students from low-income families, and minorities (Ongaga, 2010).

While the opportunity for advancement and acceptance into post-secondary education is open to all through CIHS, this study seeks to take a closer look at the gap that exists in the enrollment of African American males at one ECHS in particular, NCECHS. Since its inception in 2009, NCECHS has averaged an enrollment of 285 students, yet only 9% of those students are African American males in comparison to 40% of its enrollment of White males. Analyzing factors like Social Equity Theory (SET) to determine what could be the cause of poor enrollment into the school is essential. SET suggests that there are social processes that contribute to racial-ethnic achievement gaps (McKown, 2013), which could explain why African American males do not seek out opportunities for rigorous and innovative instruction or why adults do not consider them for such opportunities. This action research design begins with a pre-phase that gathers information about the current admissions process and potential barriers or disincentives that exist in the lack of enrollment of African American males at the school. The Recruitment Committee will plan and survey teachers, students, and parents of the school for input on potential interventions for this issue. From the pre-phase there will be an implementation of an intervention in phase one. The second and final phase will focus on evaluating the intervention used in phase one through student interviews and making any revisions that may be necessary based off the data collected in the interviews.

In the next chapter, there will be closer examination of the relevant literature, including the history of early colleges, the identity of African American males in education, and the barriers to African American male performance as a means to showcasing the need for the

African American male presence in early college high school programs, as well as to understand why the current gap exists.

CHAPTER 2: REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Students who are underrepresented in college or are at risk of dropping out of high school are a few of the target audiences of ECHS (Edmunds et al., 2010; Onaga, 2010). Exploring barriers or disincentives to the enrollment of African American males at an ECHS by reconceptualizing the admissions process will allow for greater access for African American males. ECHS in North Carolina is part of the state's Cooperative Innovative High Schools (CIHS), an approach to education reform that seeks to lower the high school dropout rate and provide students from low-income homes access to college classes for free (North Carolina Cooperative Innovative High Schools Design and Implementation Guide, 2017). However, the state's ECHSs are yielding positive results in the fight against high school dropouts by having more than 95% of its seniors graduate from high school (North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, 2018). It is struggling to find equity in enrollment numbers across the state. In 2018 more than 14,000 students were enrolled in an ECHS. Fifty-two percent of the students enrolled were White students, while 18% were Hispanic, and 16% were African Americans. The same trend holds true at North Carolina Early College High School (NCECHS). African American males make up just 9% of the student enrollment since the school's inception, while White students make up more than 40% of the school's enrollment.

The first section of this literature review focuses on understanding the opportunity gap. Ladson-Billings (2007) makes it clear that there are many gaps in education; the academic gap is one of them. Milner (2012) contends that the most significant impact on student performance is the gap in opportunity. The second section gives an introduction to the ECHS in North Carolina by exploring how it came to fruition, its purpose, and its successes. ECHSs in the state continue to grow and offer opportunities for STEM education, Career Academies, and a pathway to

College (North Carolina Cooperative Innovative High Schools Design and Implementation Guide, 2017).

The third section takes a closer look at the African American male identity in education. Many African American males have had to deal with negative stereotypes placed on them by society and peer groups (Barnett & Flynn, 2014; Emdin, 2012; Jackson & Moore, 2006). Dealing with the emotional, physical, and mental toll of such stereotypes has resulted in poor academic performance and identity of African American males in the educational setting (Howard, 2013; Howard, 2014; Jackson & Moore, 2006). The fourth and final section of this literature review addresses some of the educational barriers to African American male performance in schools. Programs like Advanced Placement (AP) have had a history of low African American male enrollment, and White and Asian students disproportionately represent those who take and pass these courses at the high school level (Bush, 2015). Exploring what educational barriers exist in African American male performance in education will further highlight why reform is a necessity.

Theoretical or Conceptual Framework

Because of their history of success, there is an air of prestige often associated with ECHSs. In many school districts, parents, students, and teachers speak highly about the opportunities the early college high school presents for students and their futures. ECHSs address student academic performance, high school attrition rates, and college readiness (Brewer et al., 2007). The early colleges also provide students with the opportunity to earn high school and college credits, which is why in most school districts there is a waiting list of students eager to be accepted. ECHSs are a promising approach to education reform that, for many students, helps to ease the transition to high school and increases the chances they will be successful in post-

secondary education (Brewer et al., 2007). However, even in ECHSs, inequities exist. Exploring factors that may contribute to the gap in opportunity for African American male students to attend early college high schools may provide school districts with information on how to address barriers or disincentives that hamper enrollment of African American males and help create strategies that encourage more African American males to apply.

ECHSs in North Carolina seek to reach students who would be first-generation college students, students who come from low socioeconomic backgrounds, and students who are members of racial or ethnic groups that are underrepresented in college (Edmunds, 2016). Yet according to the 2019 North Carolina Department of Public Instruction's (NCDPI) annual report on CIHS, in 2017 African Americans made up just 16% of the enrollment in ECHS. White students made up 52% of the enrollment in ECHS. The disparity in enrollment numbers in North Carolina's ECHS sheds light on the inequities that still exist in education and show the gap between racial and ethnic opportunity and achievement is still wide.

The academic achievement gap between racial and ethnic groups spans several decades of commentary and research. McKown (2013) states that the Black-White achievement gap is a significant problem and adds that school readiness and academic achievement are related to the types of jobs and salaries people are able to get. In an article that discusses racial identity and achievement from the African American male student's perspective, Wright (2009) asserts that the African American male's opposition to school and his negative feelings about school can be attributed to a curriculum, along with other processes and materials, which often portrays his ethnic group poorly. There are influences, such as negative stereotypes among adults and peers and a devalued sense of belonging that help to shape the identity of the African American male that contribute to the achievement gap, and these influences are found in various settings (school,

home, peer groups, and neighborhoods) and among various ethnic groups (McKown, 2013). These influences play a major role in the interest of educational opportunities like the ECHS. Social Equity Theory (SET) suggests that there are social processes that contribute to racial-ethnic achievement gaps (McKown, 2013). This theory explains the differences in achievement levels of ethnicities by looking at variables within and outside of that ethnic group. This theory makes up the foundation of this study.

When Congress took on the task of attempting to close the racial and achievement gap with the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, it is unclear if they understood the time necessary to make such a grand change (Nisbett, 2011). Yet, it is clear that even after the No Child Left Behind Act that there still exists a class, ethnic, and achievement gap in our educational system (Nisbett, 2011). In particular, some have argued that racial differences, cultural values, family structures, and academic stereotypes have all played a part in the continued existence of the achievement gap (McKown, 2013). SET allows a closer look at the social processes that may have given rise to the racial-ethnic achievement gaps, especially those among Black and White students.

African American males face an unfair comparison to other ethnic groups because they have to contend with the negative stereotypes and biases that are embedded in society (McKown, 2013). Take for instance, the portrayal of African American males in media. Often they are portrayed as villainous and foolish (Barnett & Flynn, 2014). No matter the medium, African American males are portrayed negatively, and those portrayals become a part of popular culture (Barnett & Flynn, 2014). From the stereotypes that exist to the interactions or social processes as described in SET, between individuals or groups of people have a direct impact on how well a child will achieve in that setting (McKown, 2013). The verbal and nonverbal communication

(social processes) from one person to another can have social consequences that weigh heavily on a child (McKown, 2013). For example, an African American male student who walks into a classroom and sees a poster of a confederate flag hanging may view that poster communicating something of social consequence without having a personal conversation about it. McKown (2013) continues to describe the impact of SET and social processes by breaking them down into two classes that influence racial-ethnic achievement gaps. They are direct influences and signal influences. Direct influences are social processes that support achievement. Direct influences contribute to the racial-ethnic achievement gap when they are distributed differently to people from different racial-ethnic groups (McKown, 2013). Signal influences are cues that communicate negative expectations about a child's racial-ethnic group. When children from negatively stereotyped groups detect such cues, this can hamper achievement (McKown, 2013).

SET is not as frequently utilized in educational settings, although it is used more often in public administration settings. Social equity in public administration is defined as the fair and just management and distribution of services to the public (Woolridge & Gooden, 2009).

Woolridge and Gooden attribute the foundation of social equity theories in public administration to John Rawls's *A Theory of Justice* (Woolridge & Gooden, 2009). Rawls emphasized fairness and justice for all and that every person had the equal right to liberty. He went on to argue that government should equalize the distribution of social and economic advantages (Woolridge & Gooden, 2009). Social equity theories address societal inequities in race, ethnicity, gender, and income. The same inequities can be seen in education. Much like public administration, every student is entitled to equal opportunity and resources in education.

In addition to correlations to social equity in public administration and policy, SET also finds a connection to the discussions on the opportunity gap. While SET identifies social

constructs and contexts to explain behavior and academic performance between races and ethnic groups to explain academic gaps (McKown, 2013), it can also explain the opportunity gap.

While it is necessary that educators provide optimal learning for all students, it is important to understand the social context in which students live and learn (Milner, 2012). Milner suggests that a focus on the academic gap oftentimes is limited to test scores and that the real issue is with lack of opportunities. Addressing gaps in other areas of education like teacher quality, school funding, the digital divide, and curriculum may help improve the academic achievement gap (Milner, 2012). Much like McKown, Milner (2012) attributes the normality of social issues like racism and classism as factors that create gaps in education.

The use of SET highlights deeply rooted issues and factors that impact African American students. There are direct influences that aid in the racial achievement gap at home, at school, with peers, and in neighborhoods (McKown, 2013). African American males, in particular, oftentimes have to toggle back and forth from one group to the next to be accepted, which influences the decision to choose what is best and displays a struggle for identity (McKown, 2013). The overarching research question for this study seeks to expose any barrier or process that limits the opportunity for enrollment of African American males at an early college high school. Determining the racial-ethnic gaps and societal influences helps to create an understanding that the stereotype that may exist regarding the ability levels and desires of African American male students have broader influences, which SET describes well and speaks to the need for systematic change.

Understanding the Opportunity Gap

Dealing with issues like voting rights, owning property, gaining employment, and even pursuing education have been inequities that African Americans have long had to deal with

(Harris & Herrington, 2006; Swanson, 2013). In the world of education, it has been reported that school performance is one of the greatest indicators of future success, especially for African Americans (Bowman et al., 2018). Yet, the level of achievement African Americans have in comparison to other ethnic groups is significantly lower (Bowman et al., 2018). This is often referred to as the achievement gap. The trouble with such a gap is that more and more, there is a correlation between the academic achievement of a student and their eventual working income and class status (Bowman et al., 2018; Harris & Herrington, 2006).

However, Milner (2012) shifts the conversation from lack of achievement to lack of opportunity, and while Milner agrees that there is a gap in academic achievement between African Americans and other ethnic groups, the predominant thought is that for most African Americans it is opportunity that is lacking, which leads to poor academic achievement. At the heart of the achievement gap are standardized test scores, dropout rates, advanced placement, and gifted education placement (Bowman et al., 2018; Milner, 2012; Swanson, 2013). Milner (2012) argues that the standardization of policies and practices is at the heart of reform efforts to decrease and eventually close the achievement gap. The problem with the focus on the “achievement gap” is that it suggests that one group of students is doing fine while all the other groups of students need to catch up with them (Ladson-Billings, 2007). According to Ladson-Billings (2007) student performance is not static:

Those students who are achieving at acceptable levels are not waiting for those who are lagging to catch up with them. Thus, the primary premise of closing the gap rests on a notion of slowed performance at the top while there is a simultaneously increased performance at the lower levels. (p. 316)

Standardized tests are important; however, they are only one part of a much more complex issue (Milner, 2012). The focus from the academic gap, which is primarily based on analysis of standardized test results to the gaps in opportunity, which focuses on analyzing and explaining educational practices, will help to better understand overall performance measures of African American students (Milner, 2012). Milner's (2012) opportunity gap explanatory framework requires researchers and theorists to deepen and expand their view of educational practices and move away from the emphasis and analysis on the academic gap. There are gaps at all levels of education (Bowman et al., 2018; Ladson-Billing, 2007; Milner, 2012). Some of those gaps are rooted in stereotypes and racism (Johnson-Ahorlu, 2012). Johnson-Ahorlu (2012) contends that even at the post-secondary level where there is a significant gap in African American student performance compared to White student performance, the basis of that gap is in opportunity. Inequitable school conditions and resources create a disparity in academic achievement for African American students (Johnson-Ahrulo, 2012).

Focusing on the educational outcomes without considering what led to those outcomes is determining and defines the achievement gap (Ladson-Billings, 2007; Milner, 2012). Milner (2012) states, "Issues related to opportunity are complicatedly multifaceted, process-oriented, and much more nuanced than what an achievement gap explanation can provide" (p. 696). Milner's opportunity gap explanatory framework covers five interconnected areas: (a) color blindness, (b) cultural conflicts, (c) myth of meritocracy, (d) low expectations and deficit mindsets, and (e) context-neutral mindsets and practices. The framework identifies situations in educational practices where teachers both do and do not exhibit these behaviors. The purpose of the framework is to look at the positive and negative aspects of the construct. What the framework ultimately reveals is that there are practices that educators perform that are shaped by

the five areas listed above. If educators are going to deal with the gap in opportunity, then they must be willing to analyze their practices and understand the why behind what they do and the impact it may have in their social contexts (Milner, 2012).

Addressing the opportunity gap can lead to academic achievement for children of color because it will allow practitioners, theorists, and researchers to move away from deficit thinking and practices (Milner, 2012). The focus on processes and procedures removes the “myths” that children of color have parents who do not care or come from families that do not value education which has been associated with the achievement gap (Ladson-Billings, 2007). In fact, in one study, the success of African American males in college was attributed to the encouragement of parents, grandparents, teachers, and counselors (Baber, 2014). The support of family and peers resulted in motivation from students to achieve. In Baber’s interview with a student it was shared that had the student not been pushed from family to go to college and make the most of the opportunity it would not have happened. While there have been many studies on the lack of success African American males have had at the postsecondary level what Baber shares in his findings is that with encouragement along with understanding how to navigate pathways to access and persistence through stereotypes and barriers, some African American male students are finding success. Furthermore, the continued involvement of families as a part of the educational community will help to encourage academic success for all (Bailey & Bradley-Bailey, 2010).

Introduction of Early College High Schools in North Carolina

In 2004, the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction (NCDPI) partnered with the University of North Carolina General Administration (UNCGA) and the North Carolina Community Colleges System (NCCCS) to create Cooperative Innovative High Schools (CIHS)

(North Carolina Cooperative Innovative High Schools Design and Implementation Guide, 2017). The purpose of CIHS was to create opportunities for first-generation college students, students who were at risk of dropping out of school, and students who wanted to accelerate their learning to earn their high school diploma and begin or complete an associate degree program (North Carolina Cooperative Innovative High Schools Design and Implementation Guide, 2017). CIHS in North Carolina serves no more than 100 students per grade level. The small school approach is intentional and designed to create a positive school culture where the whole child is developed (North Carolina Cooperative Innovative High Schools Design and Implementation Guide, 2017).

Early college high schools (ECHS) in the state of North Carolina fall under the umbrella of CIHS, along with Middle Colleges, STEM-themed high schools, Career Academies, and other innovative models (North Carolina Cooperative Innovative High Schools Design and Implementation Guide, 2017). ECHS partner with an institution of higher learning (IHE), like a community college or university, and are typically located on the campus of their higher education partner (North Carolina Cooperative Innovative High Schools Design and Implementation Guide, 2017). There are 133 CIHS in the state of North Carolina, and most of the schools identify themselves as ECHS. The early college model allows dual enrollment in high school and college courses with the goal of preparing students for college-level coursework and a smoother transition to higher education (Brewer et al., 2007). Students at ECHS are able to obtain their high school diploma and college credit within five years. As CIHS continue to open in more school districts, a growing number of students are benefiting from new opportunities, leading to higher rates of achievement, graduation, and post-secondary enrollment (North Carolina Cooperative Innovative High Schools Design and Implementation Guide, 2017).

Success of Early College High Schools

What grabs the attention of parents, students, and educators about the approach of the early college model is that not only are they located on the campuses of 2- and 4-year colleges and universities, but students are taking college classes at no cost to them or their families. ECHS aims to provide a rigorous course of study with the goal of ensuring that all students graduate with a high school diploma and up to two years of university transfer credit or an associate's degree (Edmunds et al., 2010). ECHS target students who are first-generation college students, live in low-income households, are English Language Learners, students of color, and students who are underrepresented at institutions of higher learning (Edmunds et al., 2010). In 2017, North Carolina had more than 14,000 students enrolled in early college high schools across the state. These students benefit from the establishment of small, autonomous schools that purposefully provide rigorous and relevant instruction to all students (Edmunds et al., 2010). The focus of ECHS is to address student performance and to provide opportunity and access to students who oftentimes find barriers to obtaining college credit and rigorous instruction (Edmunds et al., 2010). The goal is to lower student attrition and guide more students to succeed in college graduation (Brewer et al., 2007).

The early college model features rigorous academic basics and a clear career pathway that begins to address the lack of accurate information on students' academic and professional options (Brewer et al., 2007). Early colleges dispel the one size fits all approach that many schools adopt. Instructional practices are typically differentiated and geared towards the learning styles of the students (Brewer et al., 2007). The small school structure further affirms that teachers can do more with less. Smallness for ECHS is an aspect of school structure that helps to create a personalized learning environment and a collaborative environment for teachers

(Edmunds et al., 2010). These factors then enable teachers to engage in more rigorous and relevant instruction and to support students as they receive a college preparatory curriculum (Edmunds et al., 2010). ECHS are established to incorporate five core design principles: purposeful design, professionalism, personalization, college readiness, and powerful teaching and learning (Edmunds et al., 2010). According to Edmunds et al. (2010), student success hinges on all five principles at work simultaneously, which the authors believe will lead to high student performance.

An indication of those principles at work can be found in student performance results outlined in the 2017 NCDPI CIHS Annual Report, which provides a summary and breakdown of performance of all CIHS in the state. The report shows that ECHS students earn a grade of C or better in nearly 86% of all their classes and take more than five college classes in a term, which is more than Middle Colleges and other innovative school models in the state. Students who attend ECHS significantly perform better than those who attend traditional high schools, according to the American Institutes for Research. ECHS students are more likely to complete a postsecondary degree, an associate's degree, and a bachelor's degree faster than those students who did not attend an early college (Song & Zeiser, 2019). Song and Zeiser go deeper in their findings to conclude that overall 81% of ECHS students enrolled in college compared with 72% of students in standard secondary education settings. This information further illustrates the benefits of the ECHS approach and design.

Family Involvement and Social-Emotional Influence

Customizing learning and educating the whole child is one of the goals of North Carolina's CIHS (North Carolina Cooperative Innovative High Schools Design and Implementation Guide, 2017). Family influence is a factor for many students when choosing to

attend an ECHS and ultimately experiencing academic success (Ongaga, 2010). Initially, some students do not see the benefit in completing two years of college course work and cutting down on college tuition costs as a factor in choosing to attend an early college (Ongaga, 2010), but oftentimes when parents point out those features students tend to change their perspectives. An example of that is in Ongaga's (2010) interview with a student, Keanna.

My mom made me. Initially, I did not want to come here 'cause a lot of my friends had gone to my home school and they were involved in sports. I did not like it at the beginning but now I really like it. I have a lot of friends here and college is almost a reality (Ongaga, 2010, p. 379)

Beyond small classroom sizes, the early college seeks to foster an environment that engages in high social and emotional learning (SEL). Staff members at ECHS are encouraged to know the students they teach so that each student is aware that they are being cared for and respected by the adults in the school (North Carolina Cooperative Innovative High Schools Design and Implementation Guide, 2017). Research suggests that social and emotional learning matters a great deal for important life outcomes like success in school, college entry and completion, and later earnings (Jones & Doolittle, 2017). Jones and Doolittle (2017) advise that SEL can be taught and nurtured in schools so that students increase their ability to integrate thinking, emotions, and behavior in ways that lead to positive school and life outcomes. For early colleges in North Carolina this is something harnessed in the implementation model.

African American Male Identity in Education

Various quantitative measures, such as low test scores, high dropout rates, involvement in crime, and high rates of incarceration, support research that suggests that the African American male is unsuccessful in school and society (Hucks, 2011). African American males are often

portrayed negatively in school systems and in media (Garibaldi, 1992; Ransaw & Green, 2016; Wright, 2009). These negative stereotypes include being labeled as at-risk, endangered, dysfunctional, problematic, dangerous, incapable, and unwilling (Jackson & Moore, 2006). Academic failure, exclusionary discipline practices, and dropout have been identified as the key factors in the school-to-prison pipeline (Christle et al., 2005). Throughout the American education construct from elementary, secondary, and post-secondary schools, many African American males are further behind academically than any other ethnic group (Jackson & Moore, 2006). In addition to lagging behind academically, many African American males are more likely to experience high rates of discipline occurrences in school (Holcomb-McCoy, 2007). Perceptions on what the African American male can do are relegated to the results of standardized test scores, inequitable discipline practices, and the teaching of a curriculum that is irrelevant to the African American male history or experience (Jackson & Moore, 2006). In response to these perceptions, it is believed that some young African American male students may demonstrate an “oppositional stance” toward their academic subjects in school (Wright, 2009). However, this is not because some may lack the ability to actually do the work or feel that education is unimportant in their lives, but rather because of the negative ways in which they are presented in the curriculum (Wright, 2009). The research that exists currently on African American male performance in schools mainly focuses on the problems that this subgroup faces and rarely any real attention is paid to alternative views that may bring light to what African American males experience in our public school system (Jackson & Moore, 2006). Jackson and Moore (2006) suggest that the current body of knowledge surrounding the African American male experience is disjointed and limited, further explaining that it neglects to examine

collectively the educational experiences of African American males throughout the educational pipeline.

When considering the social, cultural, and political construct of the African American male, school systems have not worked to build relationships that seek to explore the broader impacts of the success, or lack thereof, of African American males in the educational system (Garibaldi, 1992; Garibaldi, 2007). Howard (2008) describes the failure to address the disenfranchisement of African American males in the PreK-12 system as reaching the level of being a pandemic and life-threatening. School failures of African American males have implications not only in PreK-12 schools but also in higher education (Howard, 2008). There is a correlation between African American males who perform poorly in school or drop out and their involvement in the judicial system (Howard, 2008). Some view the futures of African American males as hopeless or impossible to salvage because of statistics that point to African American males leading in criminal activity but lagging behind academically (Garibaldi, 1992; Garibaldi, 2007). Too much attention has been given to the problem with African American males and not in taking a deeper look as to how this group came to have this distinction in the first place.

There are many significant transitions in a child's educational career that can have effects on a child's performance and success in school (Holcomb-McCoy, 2007). There is none more critical than the transition from middle school to high school (Holcomb-McCoy, 2007). For African Americans this transition presents its own set of unique challenges. Many students experience a decrease in their academic achievement and grade point average (Holcomb-McCoy, 2007). Minority students, in particular, seem to be at a greater risk for adjustment and academic difficulties post-transition to high school (Holcomb-McCoy, 2007). At risk for African American students is their identity, a sense of who they are and where they belong. The process of

transitioning from middle to high school involves a new environment and new roles and behaviors for the student (Reyes et al., 2000). These include increased student population size, changes in the daily schedule, learning new teachers and teaching styles, changes in rules and expectations, and more rigorous grading (Reyes et al., 2000). Students' grades, self-esteem, and sense of academic efficacy are likely to decline after the transition to high school (Fuligni et al., 2001). For African American students, the greater challenge is contending with stereotypes about their race that preceded them and that are adopted by teachers (Holcomb-McCoy, 2007). African American students, especially males, are typically seen as great athletes and are encouraged to be the best athlete possible (Holcomb-McCoy, 2007). They unfortunately are not seen as students who could excel academically and in turn are not encouraged in the same way as they are in sports (Holcomb-McCoy, 2007).

Students of different races receive systematically different treatment by their teachers based on stereotypes (Holcomb-McCoy, 2007). Stereotypes of different racial groups can shape the ways in which teachers interact with students (Holcomb-McCoy, 2007). African American males are portrayed by the media in a way that tends to aid in that belief and treatment from teachers. Images in media take characteristics of the African American male in culture and portray them as being anti-school, violent, and misogynistic for the sake of entertainment (Edmin, 2012). Unfortunately, the public view of African American males does not include a desire or ability to be academically successful (Edmin, 2012). These stereotypes include believing that African American males are hostile, volatile, academically inferior, and emotionally disturbed (Holcomb-McCoy, 2007). As a result of these stereotyped beliefs, African American males are disproportionately affected by the increased emphasis on discipline in many schools.

Negative stereotypes can also become internalized, which in turn undermines African American students' motivation to achieve (Swanson et al., 2003). The internalization of stereotypes places African American students in a vulnerable position and creates what Steele (1999) has called "stereotype threat." Stereotype threat is essentially the fear of doing something that would inadvertently confirm a negative stereotype. This phenomenon, according to Steele, either can paralyze an African American student from achieving or can create such extreme anxiety that he or she is incapable of performing. The influence of stereotype threat on African American students during the transition process is unknown, yet it is something that has to be considered. Steele (1999) shares that identity contingencies affect our everyday behavior and perpetuate broader societal problems. When teachers project their stereotypes on African American males, it creates a fear that is hard to break and leads to behaviors that are sometimes atypical of that student (Holcomb-McCoy, 2007). The example Steele gives in his book, *Whistling Vivaldi*, is a perfect example of this. Steele describes a situation where an African American male walking down the street at night faces the threat of being seen as potentially violent. Steele (1999) recounts that African American *New York Times* writer Brent Staples deflected this stereotype threat by whistling Vivaldi while walking the streets of Hyde Park at night to signal to White people that he was educated and nonviolent.

Secondary schools must work to create school environments that give African American students the best opportunities possible and that are not places in which only the resilient can be successful (Holcomb-McCoy, 2007). There are many academic, personal, and social changes that adolescents undergo as they transition to high school. The achievement gap that exists with African American students and African American males in particular can be traced back to how they are viewed when the transition is made (Holcomb-McCoy, 2007). Dispelling the notions of

negative stereotypes associated with this group will rest on how well teachers are trained to teach those students.

Performance of African American males in public schools has been well documented. While transitions from one grade level to the next are a factor in academic growth, organizational practices of schools are another. School organizational practices have contributed to stunting the educational growth of the collective African American males (Patton, 1995). Homogeneous grouping and tracking continue to constrict the total development of African American males, as well as the overrepresentation of African American males in special education (Cloonan, 2016). These students are also underserved in gifted education or talented education programs (Ford et al., 2011). These organizational policies, procedures, teaching practices, and curricula tend to have an impact on and affect the quantity and quality of African American males' participation in postsecondary institutions and professional schools (Patton, 1995). The structures of our public schools and how we identify students directly impact what they do after they leave school or if they leave school, which is why the over-identification of African American males in special education is so significant (Patton, 1995). African American males seem to be more prevalent in special education classrooms due to cultural differences, academic misidentifications, fluidity of labeling, and the lack of drive or cultural knowledge from school faculty members such as school psychologists, counselors, administrators and teachers (Cloonan, 2016). It is not that the African American male is incapable of performing at high levels; in fact, it is the structure that they are often times placed in that hinders their success because it plays into a negative stereotype.

African American Male Educational Performance Barriers

College-prep classes like Advanced Placement (AP) and International Baccalaureate (IB) have been a part of secondary high schools for years. Students seeking rigorous educational

experiences and access to college-level courses typically enroll in these classes looking to be better prepared for the transition to a post-secondary school. More than 60% of public high schools offer Advanced Placement classes or the International Baccalaureate program, according to the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), and more than 80% of schools offer a dual credit program that allows students to earn college and high school credit at the same time. Yet the students who actually take college-prep courses and pass them are disproportionately affluent, White, or Asian (Bush, 2015). In those AP or IB courses, African American students are performing at a much lower success rate than other races. Only 23% of African American students are earning credit in AP or IB classes according to NCES. However, the much bigger issue is the scarcity in which African American students and males are seen in these accelerated educational courses.

For years there has been a gap between African American students in access and success in AP courses (Davis et al., 2013). College Board (2019) has noted the underrepresentation of African American students in AP programs. African American students take fewer AP courses and perform lower on AP exams than all but American Indian/Alaska Native students (College Board, 2019). The barriers that African American students face to gain access to college-prep courses, like AP, first start with the high school counselor (Davis et al., 2013). High school counselors have the responsibility to ensure that the school's counseling program is closing the gap in achievement, as well as ensure that there is representation in AP courses since in most school settings the school counselor is the gatekeeper to those courses (Davis et al., 2013). Because of the counselor's role in AP enrollment, counselors are in a position where they can reverse institutional barriers and challenge the deficit thinking with AP course equity and excellence (Davis et al., 2013).

While family, health, physical and psychological factors can play an important role and affect individual student academic performance and potential, our educational system is mandated to provide sound and engaging educational programs and services to all students (Lawson-McKinnie, 2016). To address this gap of representation in college-prep courses, we have to understand that the gap has been there from the beginning of our educational system. Segregation was the foundation of the American education system. Most educational experts agree that the minority achievement gap in our nation's schools is a long-standing problem (Lawson-McKinnie, 2016). An achievement gap is the disparity between the academic performances of different groups of students (Lawson-McKinnie, 2016). Those disparities can be seen in economic and racial and ethnic variables. Most of those variables are out of the control of educators, but what the school can control is who is educating these students (Lawson-McKinnie, 2016). School elements that may contribute to the gap may include teacher selection, school rules, a lack of rigorous curriculum or classes, inexperienced or poorly trained teachers, lack of adequate funding, negative peer pressure, lack of preschool and other readiness programs, and disciplinary and safety issues (Frasier & Passow, 2004; Rowley & Wright, 2011).

The prevailing thought of schools that have African American students is that they are not interested in college prep courses (Silvernail, 2010). In some instances, the African American student never thought of enrolling in them, or has the mindset that does not coincide with how he sees himself as a student (Silvernail, 2010). Taliaferro and DeCuir-Gunby (2007) declared the process for inclusion in advanced programs deprives Black students of "operational citizenship," which they defined as more than having rights, but as a person's capacity to exercise those rights. If operational citizenship is in place, then all members of the society (school, in this case) have the same access to those rights. In school this reflects equal opportunities to learn as well as

diverse learning experiences (Silvernail, 2010). However, in some cases it is said that prohibitive costs, lack of teacher recommendations, and a lack of knowledge about waiver and appeal processes for admittance to advanced courses make them only hypothetically available to African American students, thus depriving them of operational citizenship (Silvernail, 2010). For example, students becoming aware of information about course offerings based on track placement (Silvernail, 2010) is an example of a systemic barrier. The disproportionate underrepresentation of African American students in advanced classes is related to the decisions made by schools to qualify or disqualify them for those opportunities (Silvernail, 2010).

Summary

The emphasis on the achievement gap poses many problems (Milner, 2012). Focusing on the achievement gap can frame White students as the norm from which other racial groups should be compared (Milner, 2012). Milner (2012) suggests that the issue with the achievement gap is opportunity and not students' ability to do well on standardized tests (Bowmen et al., 2018; Milner, 2012; Swanson, 2013). Opportunity will lead to academic achievement for students of color (Milner, 2012).

The ECHS approach to education reform grants students who are at risk of dropping out of high school or would be first-generation college students an opportunity to gain both a high school diploma and college credit simultaneously (North Carolina Cooperative Innovative High Schools Design and Implementation Guide, 2017). Rooted in rigor, relationships, and relevance, ECHS create learning experiences that lead to significant academic success (Ongaga, 2010). In 2017 North Carolina had 17,934 students enrolled in a CIHS and 80% of those students were enrolled in ECHS. However, just 13% of the students enrolled in ECHS were African American.

Often characterized as at-risk, the African American male identity and status in education is often referred to as endangered or uncertain (Jackson & Moore, 2006). Throughout education African American males have lagged behind academically and typically are suspended from school at much higher rates than any other subgroup (Jackson & Moore, 2006). Because of such negative perceptions, African American males have taken an “oppositional stance” towards academics in school (Wright, 2009).

The literature in this chapter discusses the importance of understanding the opportunity gap, provides a detailed history of the creation of the ECHS in North Carolina, gives insight to the identity of African American males in the American educational system, and explores what are systematic performance barriers that often aid in the lack of success of African American males in education. Recognizing that issues of equity in education for African Americans often start with the lack of opportunity and not a lack of ability helps to shift the focus towards processes and not test scores (Milner, 2012). Understanding the scope and depth of the African American male identity and how it has been shaped by negative stereotypes and educational barriers will widen the lens that we view NCECHS and its processes to allow for greater opportunity for this subgroup.

CHAPTER 3: METHODS OF INQUIRY

The purpose of this mixed methods research study was to determine what factors exist in the admissions process of NCECHS that could potentially serve as barriers or disincentives for African American males to attend. This study sought to reconceptualize the admissions process to allow for an increase in enrollment of African American male students. This study also sought to bring awareness of opportunity gaps that may exist at other ECHS across the state and provide a blueprint for how to close those gaps.

Examining and ultimately reconceptualizing the admissions process at NCECHS required greater analysis into the school's current process for admission. The Recruitment Committee was at the head of this analysis as they started with an environmental scan of the admissions process, through the use of the affinity diagram process (Glickman et al., 2013). After gathering ideas and categorizing those ideas into themes, the Recruitment Committee extended the information gathering to the school's stakeholders by inviting current teachers, students, and parents to take part in a survey that gave further insight to potential barriers and disincentives for African American male enrollment in the school. The Recruitment Committee analyzed the information from the surveys and came up with several options for an intervention, which was implemented during the NCECHS recruitment process.

The intervention chosen specifically addressed the reconceptualization of the admissions process but also focused on increasing enrollment of African American males at the school. After the intervention was implemented, the Recruitment Committee began a process to evaluate the effectiveness of the intervention. The evaluation consisted of interviewing students who went through the application process to determine the type of impact the intervention had. Finally, after the evaluation of the intervention the Recruitment Committee gathered the data from the

evaluation and determined what revisions were needed to the intervention and whether the intervention was successful or not.

Focus of Practice Guiding Questions

This study was guided by the following questions:

1. What factors in the legacy application process may act as barriers or disincentives to the enrollment of African American male students at an early college high school?
2. What effect does the reconceptualization of an early college high school's admission process have on African American male enrollment?

Inquiry Design and Rationale

To better understand the unique challenges or barriers that exist in the enrollment of African American male students at an early college high school, I conducted a mixed methods research study. Conducting a mixed methods research study allows for the integration of qualitative and quantitative data to provide greater and additional insights to the research (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). ECHSs provide students with an opportunity to earn a high school diploma and an associate's degree within four to five years (North Carolina Cooperative Innovative High Schools Design and Implementation Guide, 2017). This mixed methods research study allowed for deeper analysis of what may be keeping African American males from taking advantage of attending NCECHS, as well as determining if there were processes in place that served as barriers or disincentives for their attendance at the school. Being able to study this issue in the context of a real setting and to be able to capture the voices of those who were directly related to the problem as well as use district data as a means to bring attention to the issue is another reason mixed methods research was the best approach for this study.

Adopting an action research approach was the most meaningful way to capture the most accurate information in this mixed methods study because it occurred in a real-life setting (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The focus was on NCECHS and its current admission. Through the examination of that process and the collection of multiple sources of information as to what may be potential barriers and disincentives for African American male enrollment at NCECHS, I hoped to create an admissions process that increased the number of African American males who applied to attend the school and who are enrolled.

Context of the Study

ECHS are an innovative approach to giving high school students who are at risk of dropping out of school an opportunity to simultaneously earn both a high school diploma and a college degree within four to five years (North Carolina Cooperative Innovative High Schools Design and Implementation Guide, 2017). ECHS also help to close the gap between minority students' access to higher education, especially that of students of color (Edmunds, 2016). This study sought to examine more closely the access African American male students have to ECHSs, specifically, if there are processes in place that serve as barriers or disincentives to African American males attending. According to North Carolina's Department of Public Instruction's report on CIHSs, only 16% of African Americans attended an early college in the fall semester of 2018. An even closer look at one of those early colleges showed that at NCECHS African American male students make up an average of only 9% of the student population since its inception in 2009. That equates to being roughly a little more than 20 African American male students in a school that has averaged nearly 300 students since the school's existence.

NCECHS is located on the campus of ECC. Based on the NCDPI reporting system that evaluates schools in North Carolina, NCECHS has earned a school report card grade of A since the system was put in place. It is a school that many students desire to attend. In fact, the school has a waiting list of well over 100 students who wish to enroll. It is an instructionally rigorous school that has a very positive learning environment, according to the 2017-18 NC Teacher Working Conditions Survey and the 2019 Eastern County School District student survey. Even with as much interest as the school has from middle school students across the district, administrators still have not seen an increase in African American male admission into the program. According to the last four years of enrollment data from 2016 to 2019, NCECHS has enrolled an average of only six African American male students as freshmen, which is less than 10% of the 70 new students it enrolls each year.

In a district where African Americans make up the bulk of student discipline and suspensions, the early college high school is an alternative means of education that can help to put African American males on the path to higher academic attainment. Early colleges are designed to serve students for whom access to college has been problematic and questionable (Edmunds, 2016). Edmunds's (2016) first-hand account of an African American male's first two years at an early college gives the reader insight into how the school structure and environment helped to turn a student's life around that had routinely been in trouble in and outside of school. Jamal, the student Edmunds interviews, recounts how different the early college experience was for him by describing it this way:

When I got here to Hancock, I couldn't shake the habits I made in middle school, and I stopped doing my work. I had an attitude. I was fighting in my neighborhood. I was running around with people who were doing stuff they shouldn't have been doing. I was

getting in trouble here. Once I tried to start a fight with somebody here at school, but they didn't let me. There are not really any fighters here. Also, now you look really immature when you do that type of stuff here. It's just not a good look anymore. Back then it was funny. It was cool. 'Oh, he won. He's cool, blah, blah, blah.' You go to a public school now, you can get the recognition or respect because you can fight, but that's probably because they don't look at you like, 'oh, he's smart' or 'he's cool, he's going to do something with his life.' You don't really get that a lot at public school. Here if you're smart, you can get the recognition for it. You can get the respect that you deserve for something positive. (Edmunds, 2016, p. 39)

The experiences Jamal relates are an example of what more African American male students could have. However, having those experiences first starts with access to the opportunities, which speaks to the importance of this study. There is peer pressure that African American students face daily (Ransaw & Green, 2016). Some of that peer pressure is positive and some negative. The negative peer pressure for African American students comes in the form of risk-taking behavior, substance abuse, and low academic achievement (Ransaw & Green, 2016). Ransaw and Green (2016) state that the peer pressure that African Americans receive comes from both other African Americans and Whites, as both groups seem to view academic success to be reserved only for Whites. It is that kind of thinking that this study aspires to change. The demographics at NCECHS are diverse, but they are not balanced in number. White students are the majority demographic at NCECHS at over 40% representation in comparison to just 9% African American males in 2019. In the ECS district, African Americans make up nearly 50% of the student population while White students make up close to 30% of the student population. The numbers show a significant imbalance. Seeking to determine what the barriers or

disincentives are that were prohibiting African American males from having this rigorous educational opportunity and providing strategies to overcome them helped to aid in increasing that number and hopefully providing experiences similar to what Jamal described. To analyze what those barriers and disincentives were, it was important to review the current admissions process and hear from all stakeholders as to what could be potential issues in the opportunity gap that African American males were experiencing.

Inquiry Partners

In this study I worked closely with the school's Recruitment Committee, which was comprised of the school principal, school counselor, and career counselor. The Recruitment Committee oversees the recruitment of students and the admission of students into the school. The Recruitment Committee was responsible for analyzing data that was collected in the pre-phase and phase 2 of this study. They were also responsible for disseminating the data that was collected to the school's stakeholders. In addition to working with the Recruitment Committee, I worked closely with the ECS district personnel--district data manager and accountability coordinator--for an analysis of quantitative data, including current and past enrollment of students at NCECHS. Districtwide demographic data, assessment data, and discipline data was also collected and analyzed to obtain a greater view of how African American males performed in the district. The consultants at the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction (NCDPI) were also important inquiry partners. The collection of quantitative data about CIHS and ECHS came directly from NCDPI and included performance, demographic, and enrollment data of ECHS across the state.

Ethical Considerations

Prior to conducting any research with students and school personnel, I completed Collaborative Institutional Training Initiative (CITI) program training on the ethical principles of conducting research with children, as well as federal regulations, assessing risk, informed consent, and privacy and confidentiality. To further ensure that ethical practices were followed, I applied for local Internal Review Board (IRB) approval from East Carolina University. Protecting the privacy and confidentiality of the participants involved in the study was paramount. Prior to any data collection, I considered who would be impacted by this study and what issues may arise throughout the study that could potentially be of concern. Ethical issues in qualitative research can occur at the beginning, during, and in publishing the study (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Therefore, I took several precautions to make sure that the participants were comfortable and knowledgeable in regard to the study and their roles in it. Survey and interview questions were submitted to IRB for approval prior to being used and participants of the study knew the full scope of the research and were assured that there was minimal risk in being a part of the study.

The process by which the data was collected was clear. The participants were interviewed in a manner that did not conflict with core instructional time. Interviews of students who participated in the admissions process took place during a time that the principal and parent deemed appropriate. Surveys of teachers, parents, and students were made accessible online and by paper for those who did not have access to the internet or have reliable internet. I provided the option of anonymity for any participant that would rather not have their name or likeness used. One significant conflict of this study was that I am the principal of NCECHS, and I am also the one conducting the research. I worked closely with my dissertation chair and the Recruitment

Committee to ensure that there was no bias in the questions asked and that the research was done with integrity.

Protecting the data collected was of great importance. To ensure the confidentiality of what the participants have said, all interviews were recorded with the same recorder and were locked away in a safe that only I have access to. All recordings and transcripts for this study will be permanently destroyed five years after the awarding of the degree for which this research was conducted. While student participants of this study have been purposefully sampled because they are African American males and are in a position to attend the early college, they were made aware that they could withdraw from participating in the study at any time, for any reason. The same held true for all other participants of the study. They also had the right to request that the information I obtain from them in interviews or surveys not be used. Throughout the study, it was important that the participants feel comfortable. When the study was completed, the findings were shared with all participants, which gave them the opportunity to validate whether the information collected was accurate and suited their comfort level.

As I referred to earlier in this section, one significant conflict was that I am the principal of NCECHS, the early college where the study was being conducted. I made sure that the information gathered in the phases of research was shared with the school and the necessary stakeholders. I also was honest about the results while protecting the participants who were interviewed at the school. Proving to be trustworthy to the participants and what they share as well as to the staff of the school was critical.

Inquiry Procedures

For this study, I examined the admissions process at NCECHS. The study began with a pre-phase and two subsequent phases, as shown in Figure 1. Starting with an extensive document

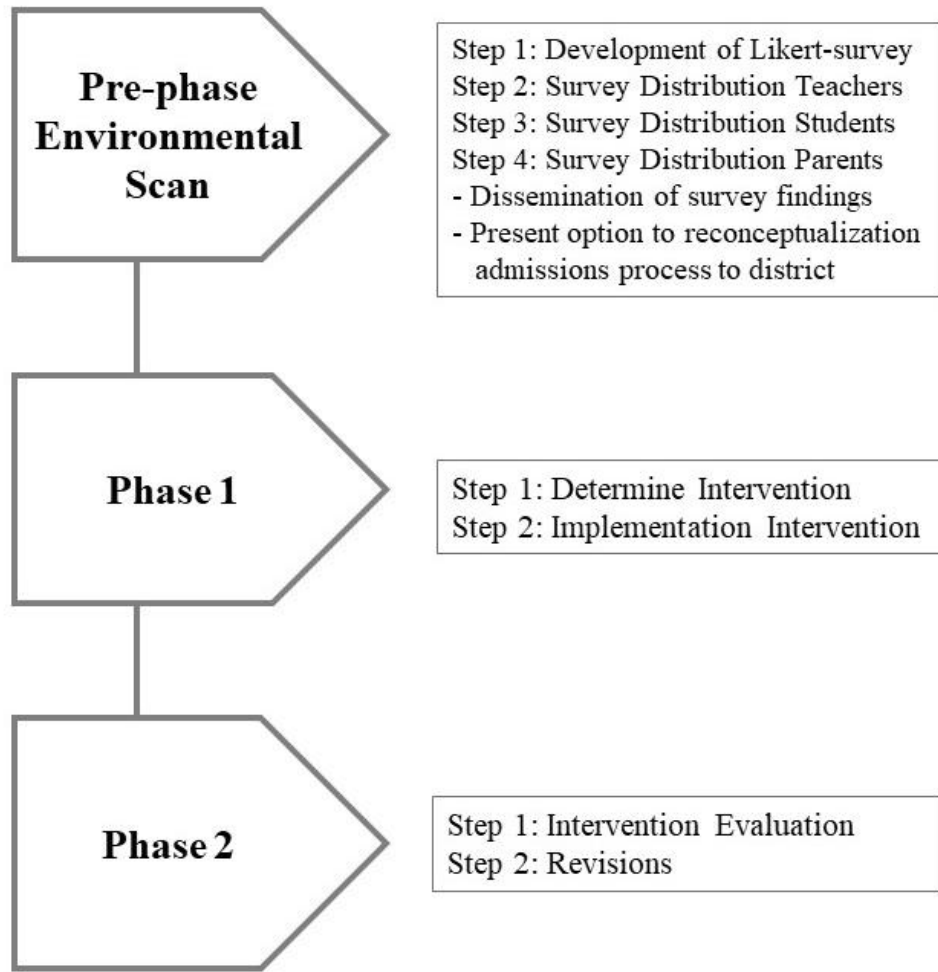


Figure 1. Phases of research.

review with the Recruitment Committee in the pre-phase allowed the committee to openly brainstorm about the current state of the application process. According to Yin (2017), document review should be a part of the data collection process. Gathering detailed insight to the admissions process by reviewing the application itself gave me an in-depth look at what types of student information were being requested and reviewed by the early college. The review of the admissions process included a review of the timeline (see Appendix C) that the school has in making its decisions and the events that take place prior to the final decision being made. I also examined the interview questions used for student selection as well as any rubrics used in scoring the applications and interviews.

After the Recruitment Committee went through the document review, it participated in an environmental scan through the affinity diagram process (Glickman et al., 2013). The affinity diagram process is a way of clustering needs and identifying broader goals that address those needs (Glickman et al., 2013). One way to begin the building of an affinity diagram is to list the needs on an index card or sticky note and to place those index cards or sticky notes on a board or table. Once all the cards and sticky notes are posted, they can then be categorized based off the themes that may become apparent from what was written on the cards and sticky notes. In the case of this study, each member of the Recruitment Committee contributed to the listing of potential barriers or disincentives by placing them on a sticky note. After the Recruitment Committee categorized the information, we created a survey for teachers, parents, and students to give feedback on the current admissions process that led to the identification of potential barriers or disincentives to African American males attending the school.

The analysis of the survey data developed collaboratively by the Recruitment Committee (led by me) was shared with the NCECHS staff and school community. The Recruitment

Committee reconceptualized the admissions process and worked on a plan for implementation of an intervention that changed the way the admissions process was currently constructed to eliminate or lessen barriers or disincentives for African American male's admittance into the school. The intervention took place during the school's recruitment season.

After the recruitment season ended and students applied and were accepted into the school, the Recruitment Committee participate in an evaluation of the intervention used in phase 1, which marked the beginning of phase 2. In phase 2 the Recruitment Committee specifically interviewed students who were African American males to get their perspective on the process they went through and to garner feedback on the intervention that was used in phase 1. In addition to conducting an evaluation of the intervention through interviews of African American male students, the Recruitment Committee focused on making any revisions to the intervention that were necessary from the data that was collected in the student interviews. The Recruitment Committee also determined if the goal of lessening or eliminating barriers or disincentives for African American male enrollment into the school was achieved.

Pre-Phase

In the pre-phase I addressed the first research question and conducted an environmental scan of the admissions process at NCECHS. The environmental scan refers to the gathering of information about the admissions process that may reveal what could be barriers and disincentives for African American males attending the school. The Recruitment Committee used the affinity diagram process (Glickman et al., 2013) to uncover and categorize potential barriers or disincentives for African American males in the admission process. As part of the affinity diagram process, the Recruitment Committee reviewed the following documents: (a) the rubric used to score each student and determine who is invited for an interview, (b) the interview

questions used during the student interviews, and (c) the actual application students complete for admittance into the school. Reviewing the documents allowed for the Recruitment Committee to have a good sense of what the process for admissions had been like and aided in the process of building the affinity diagram.

Environmental Scan

Step 1. In conjunction with the Recruitment Committee, I developed an online Likert-scale survey based on the categories of potential barriers or disincentives that surfaced through the development of the affinity diagram. In a trial of the survey, I administered the survey to three volunteers from among the staff across the experience continuum. In conjunction with the Recruitment Committee, I refined the online survey on the basis of the findings from the trial.

Step 2. I then made the survey available to all the staff and invited them to complete it anonymously. I developed findings from the whole staff survey collaboratively with the Recruitment Committee and then shared them with the staff.

Step 3. I made further refinements to the survey in conjunction with the Recruitment Committee to adjust the survey for distribution among the students for their anonymous participation.

Step 4. Last, I developed and distributed a revised form of the survey among their parents/caregivers for their anonymous participation. Paper copies of the parallel form for parents/caregivers were mailed home to those who needed it to ensure that problematic access to the internet was not a barrier to participation.

Dissemination. I distributed consolidated findings through the school website, a medium often used to communicate news and information to parents and families. Physical copies of the

findings were available at the school for those who did not have the capabilities to go online and review the findings.

Reconceptualization

Following this initial fact-finding environmental scan, I led the Recruitment Committee in reconceptualizing the admission process to lessen or eliminate the impact of the barriers and disincentives and shared our reconceptualized process with the teachers. At this stage, I shared the findings and the details of the reconceptualized admission process with the district superintendent and sought approval to share it with the school community and publicize it to the wider community.

Phase I

This phase focused on addressing research question one and focused on the implementation of an intervention that would help to eliminate or significantly lessen any barriers or disincentives to the admission process at NCECHS. The intervention used was created from the data gathered in the pre-phase from the affinity diagram process used by the Recruitment Committee and the completion of the stakeholder surveys. Once a decision was made on the intervention needed, then the Recruitment Committee shared the changes with the school's teachers as well as the school community, including the feeder middle school principals, counselors, teachers, and students, and moved towards full implementation of the intervention during NCECHS's recruitment season. The goal of the intervention was to have an increase of African American males apply and be admitted into the school for the upcoming school year.

Phase 2

Once NCECHS went through its full recruitment season and processed all applicants, conducted interviews, and made its selection of students, the Recruitment Committee engaged in

an evaluation of the intervention that was used to eliminate or lessen any barriers or disincentives for African American male admission to the school to see if it was successful. The evaluation helped to fully answer research question two and took place through student interviews. The Recruitment Committee specifically targeted speaking to African American male students for feedback. It was uncertain how many African American male students would be selected to take part in the interviews because it was uncertain how many would apply. However, the Recruitment Committee's goal was to interview no less than five students. After the evaluation of the intervention, the Recruitment Committee took the data gathered and determined what revisions needed to be made to the implementation of the intervention.

Inquiry Design Rigor

This action research study involved the collection of both quantitative and qualitative data. In the inquiry procedures outlined earlier in this chapter, there were surveys and interviews that were conducted of the teachers, students, and parents of NCECHS. To be sure that the information collected was valid and trustworthy, I used member checking (Sagor & Williams, 2017) as a means to add credibility to the qualitative data collected. After phase one of the study, the Recruitment Committee evaluated the implementation of the intervention through student interviews. After those interviews were conducted and transcribed using Sonix (www.sonix.ai) software, I shared the results of the data with the participants of the interviews. Allowing them to see the results of the data collected ensured that the presentation of that data was accurate and true and allowed any improvement to be made before publishing.

Prior to the actual implementation of any phase in this study, there was a pre-phase where the Recruitment Committee gathered information through surveys. The Recruitment Committee consisted of the school principal, two counselors, and a teacher. They assisted in the creation of

the surveys administered to the teachers, parents, and students of NCECHS. They also assisted in the collection and interpretation of the data. The results of the surveys were made available to the school via the school's website and in the school's front office for pick up for anyone who did not have access to or reliable internet connectivity. The Recruitment Committee served as an internal measure to ensure that the procedures used in each phase of this study were true.

It is vital to dispel any thought or notion that the information collected in this study was biased in any nature because the researcher is an African American male. Making the results of the surveys in the pre-phase public was a part of minimizing that threat. Being transparent about the impact of the intervention in the evaluation phase was equally as important to combat any threat that the data collected was not accurate.

Delimitations, Limitations, and Assumptions

Developing an understanding of needed change for a marginalized group is at the heart of mixed methods research (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Being sure to gather information from a variety of sources is pivotal. With mixed methods research, it is important to project expected outcomes and to state clearly what the purpose of the study is (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Some of the delimitations of this study included looking solely at the admissions process as the key factor to determine what were potential barriers and disincentives to African American male enrollment at the early college. There were certainly other factors to explore, such as what types of extracurricular activities does the school offer, what are the hours of the school day, and the fact that there was not any comparative data in the study.

There were several limitations to this research. The first significant limitation was the fact that it was a single case study. I only looked at one early college high school and the African American male enrollment at that school. The data collected did not speak to a large number of

schools and, therefore, could be seen as an isolated problem and not one that is present at every early college high school in the state or the regions involving the early college high school. Another limitation was that I am the principal of the school where the research was being conducted, I am an African American male, and I am the researcher of this case study. If not careful, the questions that I created could be seen as biased or leading the interviewees to answer a particular way. I had to be able to focus on interpreting the data as it is received and being transparent about the purpose of this study with the participants.

My reliance on one primary source of data collection was also a limitation. While I administered questionnaires and reviewed documents related to the enrollment process at NCECHS, I relied heavily on the interviews of the participants after the intervention to shape the findings of this study. Again, depending on the types and strengths of the questions I ask, they could be seen as biased or subjective, which is why ensuring the questions are open-ended was a must.

The validity of this study in terms of trustworthiness and credibility was seen in my collaboration with the school's teachers and the school community to get their input into what could be potential issues in the admission process for African American males. I also conducted the research alongside the school's Recruitment Committee, which helped to ensure that the decisions, thoughts, and ideas belong to the committee and not just to me.

In terms of the validity of the questions I created, I worked with my dissertation chair and a peer reviewer to ensure that the questions were unbiased and did not guide participants to answering a certain way. I also utilized the input of the Recruitment Committee in the pre-phase to help with the survey and interview question creation. Furthermore, all surveys and interviews took place at the consideration of the participants. Finally, all participants were aware that they

did not have to answer any question posed to them and that at any time, they could withdraw from participation in the study. I also triangulated the data to make sure that the findings between the participants and me were valid (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Role of the Scholarly Practitioner

As the scholarly practitioner of this study, I am also the principal of NCECHS. I took precautions with the participants of this study, all of whom are teachers, students, and parents of students at my school, by working closely with my dissertation chair to ensure that the research questions were robust, relevant, and focused on the focus of practice. I also used the Recruitment Committee to help with the organization and creation of part of this research. I worked closely with the principals of the feeder middle schools to ensure they have full understanding of the purpose of the research and to collaborate on the selection of students for the study. The principals helped to make sure that we received consent from the students and their parents to take part in the study.

An area that I was especially cautious in working with was the students and Recruitment Committee at NCECHS. Because I am the principal of the school and the direct supervisor of those who serve on the Recruitment Committee, it was imperative that they understand the purpose of the study and that they were reassured there would be no negative consequences to their responses to surveys or input on the creation of surveys and interview questions. I made the Recruitment Committee aware that data collection was shared with the school. All participants who were interviewed also received a transcribed copy of their interview to assure alignment between what was recorded and what was shared in the study. Sharing the results of the interviews and questionnaires along with guidance from my dissertation chair helped to make sure there was no bias or misunderstandings in what was reported.

Summary

This mixed methods research study aimed to determine factors in the admission process at NCECHS that potentially served as barriers or disincentives for African American male enrollment into the school. By examining the admission process through the use of the affinity diagram process (Glickman et al., 2013), the Recruitment Committee was able to implement an intervention that helped to lessen or eliminate any barriers or disincentives for enrollment of African American males at NCECHS. The intervention attempted to balance the racial demographics of the school and community. At the end of the recruitment season and when all applications were reviewed and interviews conducted, the Recruitment Committee conducted an evaluation of the intervention by interviewing some of the students (African American males) who applied to the school. The Recruitment Committee gathered this feedback and worked to revise the admissions process again. In Chapter 4, the findings of this study and analysis of the data collected will be shared in full.

CHAPTER 4: RESULTS

The North Carolina Department of Public Instruction (2018) reported in their Cooperative Innovative High Schools (CIHS) report that African American males make up 16% of the enrollment in early college high schools. At NCECHS, a rural early college in Wilson, NC, African American males make up 9% of the student population. This study examined more closely the access African American male students have to NCECHS. Addressing the opportunity gap can lead to academic achievement for children of color because it allows for practitioners, theorists, and researchers to move away from deficit thinking and practices (Milner, 2012). While school performance has been one of the greatest indicators of future success, especially for African Americans (Bowman et al., 2018), examining the admissions process at NCECHS will help to address an issue of opportunity that can contribute to that success.

The purpose of this study was to reconceptualize the admissions process by eliminating or lessening any barriers or disincentives for enrollment of African American male students at NCECHS. In this study, I collected and analyzed quantitative and qualitative data. The quantitative data, in the form of parent, student, and teacher surveys, garnered feedback on the current admissions process that led to the identification of any potential barriers or disincentives to African American males attending the school as well as led to further discussion by the Recruitment Committee on possible interventions in the admissions process. The qualitative data, in the form of student interviews of African American male students who applied to attend the school, explored the perspectives of the students on the process of applying to the school and feedback in the intervention used by the Recruitment Committee in the admissions process. The following are the original study questions to this research:

1. What factors in the legacy application process may act as barriers or disincentives to the enrollment of African American male students at an early college high school?
2. What effect does the reconceptualization of an early college high schools' admission process have on African American male enrollment?

Participants

The teacher participants of this study varied in age, gender, and experience. In the pre-phase of the study, three teacher volunteers (one male and two females) participated in the trial Likert-scale surveys used to evaluate the effectiveness of the questions that would be asked to participants of the surveys once they were finalized. The teacher volunteers were in three different content areas and had a combined 40 years of experience teaching in the classroom, and each had more than five years of teaching experience at NCECHS. Table 1 reflects the total years of experience and years at the early college of the teacher volunteers. The number of participants in the final Likert-scale surveys included: (a) eight teachers, (b) 89 students, and (c) five parents. Additionally, there were four African American male students who participated in interviews of the evaluation of the intervention that was used to help lessen or eliminate barriers or disincentives to the enrollment of African American males into the school. Each African American male student interviewed was a student in one of the feeder schools in the school district and a rising Grade 9 student who applied to attend NCECHS.

Table 2 shows the past academic performance of students in the core subjects of math and language arts classes as well as their performance on state required End-of-Grade (EOG) tests in math and reading. End-of-Grade tests are given to students in grades 3-8 in reading and math. A science test is given to students in grades 5 and 8. The EOG's are designed to measure student performance on goals and objectives related to the North Carolina Standard Course of

Table 1

Teachers Who Volunteered to Participate in Trial Likert-Scale Survey

Teacher ID #	Content Area	Years of Experience	Years at NCECHS
Teacher 01	Science	5	5
Teacher 02	Social Studies	25	9
Teacher 03	English	10	6

Table 2

Students Interview Participant Middle School Grades, Testing Results, and Discipline History

Grade	Core Subjects & EOG Tests	Student			
		Student 1	Student 2	Student 3	Student 4
6th	Math Grade	A	B	C	C
	Lang. Arts Grade	A	A	C	B
	Math EOG Test	Level 5	Level 5	Not Prof.*	Level 2
	Rdg EOG Test	Level 5	Level 4	Not Prof.*	Level 2
7th	Math Grade	PC19**	PC19**	PC19**	PC19**
	Lang. Arts Grade	PC19**	PC19**	PC19**	PC19**
	Math EOG Test	NA^	NA^	NA^	NA^
	Rdg EOG Test	NA^	NA^	NA^	NA^
8th	Math Grade	A	B	C	C
	Lang. Arts Grade	A	A	C	B
	Math EOG Test	NA	NA	Not Prof.**	Not Prof.**
	Rdg EOG Test	Level 4	Level 5	Not Prof.**	Not Prof.**

Note. *Not Proficient, meaning student did not score in a range that was considered on grade level. **Students received PC19 as grades due to remote learning during the Covid-19 pandemic. ^No End-of-Grade tests were given due to the Covid-19 pandemic.

Study (NCSCOS). The range of scores on the EOG's for a student who is on grade level is 3-5. Students who are not on grade level receive a Not Proficient score. Two of the four students interviewed were students who were identified as Academically Gifted in elementary and middle school. All of the students interviewed had no disciplinary infractions in middle school and received good grades through their middle school years as well as tested well on EOG tests.

Data Collection

Data collection for this study began in the winter of the 2020-2021 school year and continued through the spring semester. Shortly after successfully defending the first three chapters of my dissertation and receiving approval to conduct the research from the East Carolina University and Medical Institutional Review Board (see Appendix A), I held a faculty meeting to present the study to my staff detailing the phases of research and explaining the timeline for data collection and the role they might have in it. The collection of data started with the Recruitment Committee going through the affinity diagram process (see Chapter 3, Glickman et al., 2013) to uncover and categorize any potential barriers or disincentives for African American males to enroll in NCECHS. The process included a review of school documents related to the application processes. The Recruitment Committee also administered surveys to teachers, students, and parents to obtain information from each that would help guide the Recruitment Committee in coming up with an intervention to be used in the reconceptualization of the admissions process. As discussed above, prior to the surveys being administered to the school's stakeholders, the Recruitment Committee had three teacher volunteers take the questionnaire and provide feedback on the questions and their usefulness. Additional data were collected through students interviews from African American male students who went through

the application process to give the Recruitment Committee feedback on the success of the intervention and determine its impact.

Treatment and/or Intervention Fidelity

Phase 1 of the research focused on the implementation of an intervention that could help to eliminate or significantly lessen any barriers or disincentives to the admission process at NCECHS in the enrollment of African American male students. As discussed above, in the pre-phase, the Recruitment Committee conducted an environmental scan and used the affinity diagram process (Glickman et al., 2013) to consider themes that would present themselves in a review of the admissions process. Some of the categories that were discovered as disincentives and barriers were limited marketing/branding, an overemphasis on academics, lack of diversity in demographics, and the non-existence of extracurricular activities. An area that was intensely discussed with the Recruitment Committee centered around the documents that the school uses as part of the admissions process, and much emphasis was placed on the interview questions, application, and rubric.

After reviewing the documents, the Recruitment Committee surmised that the documents had little to no focus on the qualities in students that typically do not show up on a traditional application. Many of the interview questions focused on past academic success and future goals. The actual application focused primarily on past and current academic performance and discipline history. The application did not allow for students to share any part of their reasoning for wanting to attend or what activities, clubs, or community organizations they were involved in. The rubric gave significant points to students who earned grades of As and Bs but did not give points for any soft skills the student may have displayed in the interview or for functions

students were involved in that were non-school related that may have exhibited leadership skills or other skills that could prove helpful in the classroom.

With that information, a major theme emerged that the Recruitment Committee thought was the most significant disincentive to the enrollment of African American males at the school, the omission of personal qualities as factors for admission. The personal qualities included the applicants' being caring, open-minded, disciplined, knowledgeable, and well-rounded. Therefore, as an intervention, the Recruitment Committee decided to revise the application, interview questions, and rubric by adding components to each that would allow for and give credit to students who showed such qualities. The application was revised by giving student applicants digital access to the form and allowing them to submit a 2-minute video titled, *All About Me*. The video allowed students to share aspects of themselves that would not be seen in a traditional application. Students could share their hobbies, interests, and activities that they were involved in outside of school, as well as give insight into why they wanted to attend NCECHS. The Recruitment Committee believed that one of the most significant 21st Century Skills that students have is the use of digital media to convey messages, which is why the committee members believed that a video would be a complement to the student application. Today's students are very comfortable with creating videos and multimedia platforms. The Recruitment Committee also believed that the creation of a video would give students an opportunity to talk about themselves in a less formal way and setting. Revisions to the interview questions included asking questions about the student's character, interests in and out of school, and their upbringing. The rubric was revised to give points for (a) completing the *All About Me* video, (b) showing poise and professionalism, and (c) displaying integrity and character.

The implementation of the intervention was flawless. There were no setbacks or unforeseen issues that arose with the revisions that were made. However, the timeline for distribution of the application and the timeline for when we interviewed students was impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic. We did not distribute the applications with revisions until late February 2020, and interviews of potential candidates did not take place until mid-March 2020. Phase 2 focused on the evaluation of the intervention to determine if it was a success.

Data Analysis for Pre-Phase (Environmental Scan)

In managing the data collected in the pre-phase of the study, a Google document was used to collect and sort information that the Recruitment Committee discussed as it went through the environmental scan of the admissions process at NCECHS. Utilizing the affinity diagram process (Glickman et al., 2013) to identify potential barriers or disincentives for African American male enrollment in the school, the Recruitment Committee initially used sticky notes to write down thoughts, phrases, or current practices that were placed on a table. We then sorted the sticky notes into two predetermined groups: barriers and disincentives. Normally in the affinity diagram process, the groups would not be predetermined, but because of the conversations within the Recruitment Committee regarding the recruitment process, it was clear that there were flaws in this process that we felt were barriers and disincentives (while unintended). The team just needed to identify what they were. We defined a barrier as a limitation or boundary and defined a disincentive as something that serves as a discouragement or deterrent. The list of barriers and disincentives was discussed and analyzed by the Recruitment Committee to determine if there were any categories we could place these lists in. Using the Google document, the committee created a table that listed the categories that emerged from the initial brainstorming. Figure 2 shows that there were four categories that emerged from

the initial brainstorming: personnel, academics, non-instructional, and application process. Under the categories is the information that was originally written on the sticky notes.

The information in Figure 2 shows slight differences. The first chart in the figure shows that the Recruitment Committee listed more overall disincentives (15) than barriers (11). It also shows that there was more information listed in three out of the four categories in comparison to the second chart on barriers. However, there were a few areas where there was overlap in the information listed. In the figure, both tables show that under the personnel category, the Recruitment Committee listed that having African American males make up fewer than 10% of the student enrollment was both a disincentive and a barrier. In the non-instructional category, both tables show that African American males with a poor self-image could serve as a disincentive and barrier to enrollment at the school. Another area of overlap was in the application process category, where not having an application that focused solely on academics could be seen as both a barrier and disincentive.

There were several themes that emerged within the predetermined groupings as the Recruitment Committee went through the affinity diagram process in relation to what barriers and disincentives may exist in the enrollment of African American males at NCECHS. The Recruitment Committee surmised that academic expectations was an area that needed attention. A review of the tables in the Figure 2 shows that in the academics and application process category, there was an overemphasis on grades. The second table also shows that students with poor grades were not typically given an opportunity to enroll. One of the most significant themes that emerged was that there was little to no opportunity to focus on anything other than academics. In the first table, under the non-instructional category listed is that students

Disincentives to the Enrollment of African American Males at NCECHS

Personnel	Academics	Non-Instructional	Application Process
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> No other black males on teaching staff. Fewer than 10% of students are black males Small student body Lack of diversity among student population 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Overemphasis on grades College classes Perception of school being for smart kids or weird kids High academic expectations Rigor of classes 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> No participation in high school sports No extracurricular activities No mentorship Poor self image (identity) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Overemphasis on grades Interviewing Application doesn't provide opportunity to share out of school interests

Barriers to the Enrollment of African American males at NCECHS

Personnel	Academics	Non-Instructional	Application Process
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Fewer than 10% of students are black males 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Students with low grades are not accepted College classes Poor prior academic performance Bad academic experiences 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Poor self-image (identity) Limited marketing and branding (branding focuses on academics) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Current rubric unbalanced (does not give points for anything non-academic) Interview question types (mostly academic related) Interview process Application requests only academic information

Figure 2. Pre-phase brainstorm of disincentives and barriers.

do not have the opportunity to play sports, and there are no extra-curricular activities for students to participate in. The second table lists that limited marketing and branding are concentrated on what the school can do for a student academically. The fact that in the second table under the application process category that the school's current scoring rubric does not allot points for non-academic areas further highlights this theme as a barrier.

Analysis of Surveys

Continuing through the pre-phase and environmental scan of the admissions process, the Recruitment Committee created an online Likert-scale survey for teachers, parents, and students using a Google Form. The surveys were created in response to the themes and categories that were listed as a result of going through the affinity diagram process (Glickman et al., 2013). The number of questions differed from two out of the three surveys, with the teacher and student surveys including 13 questions and the parent survey only including 10 questions. Before disseminating the surveys to teachers, parents, or students, three teachers were chosen to take the teacher survey and give verbal feedback to the Recruitment Committee that would help to refine the questions asked if necessary. The teacher's feedback was consistent. They each thought that the survey questions would help to bring attention to any issues surrounding the admissions process. One teacher stated that the survey did not feel like an interrogation of the admissions process but rather asked teachers to evaluate their experience, and those experiences would help to identify issues, if any, with the admissions process.

In managing the survey data collected, I created an Excel spreadsheet (see Tables 3-5) that showed the results of each survey question. I listed those who responded to the teacher and parent survey because those numbers were much smaller than the student numbers (89). The student results survey lists the numbered questions and the average total of the 89 responders.

Table 3

Teacher Survey Results

Teacher Survey Question Numbers	TR 1	TR 2	TR 3	TR 4	TR 5	TR 6	TR 7	TR 8	Avg.
TSQ1. Thorough Application	4	5	5	4	5	4	4	4	4.38
TSQ2. Equitable/Fair	5	5	5	4	5	4	4	3	4.38
TSQ3. Sense of Accomplishment	5	4	4	4	5	3	3	4	4.00
TSQ4. Teacher Input and Connection	5	4	4	4	5	1	2	2	3.38
TSQ5. Past academics	4	4	4	5	4	2	4	4	3.88
TSQ6. Share Experiences	4	4	4	4	4	5	4	4	4.13
TSQ7. Showcase talents	4	4	4	5	4	4	4	2	3.88
TSQ8. Student-teacher connection	3	3	3	3	4	1	2	2	2.63
TSQ9. Academic Motivation	5	4	4	4	5	4	4	4	4.25
TSQ10. Question and Feedback	4	5	5	4	5	4	4	3	4.25
TSQ11. Extracurricular	4	3	3	2	4	3	3	3	3.13
TSQ12. Student Mentorship	2	4	4	3	2	2	3	2	2.75
TSQ13. Demographics	4	3	3	4	5	4	4	2	3.63

Table 4

Parent Survey Results

Parent Survey Question Numbers	PR 1	PR 2	PR 3	PR 4	PR 5	Average
PSQ1. Thorough Application	4	4	4	4	5	4.20
PSQ2. Equitable/Fair	3	3	3	4	5	3.60
PSQ3. Sense of Accomplishment	4	4	3	3	4	3.60
PSQ4. Teacher Connection	5	5	4	5	5	4.80
PSQ5. Academic Performance	3	3	2	4	4	3.20
PSQ6. Interests	4	4	3	4	4	3.80
PSQ7. Student-teacher Connection	4	5	4	5	4	4.40
PSQ8. Academic Motivation	4	4	4	4	4	4.00
PSQ9. Student Mentorship	4	4	3	4	4	3.80
PSQ10. Demographics	4	4	3	4	4	3.80

Table 5

Student Survey Results

Student Survey Question Numbers	Average Score
SSQ1. Clear Application	4.39
SSQ2. Equitable/Fair	4.20
SSQ3. Sense of Accomplishment	4.32
SSQ4. Teacher Connection	4.05
SSQ5. Academic Performance	3.87
SSQ6. Interests	3.58
SSQ7. Share Experiences	3.88
SSQ8. Student-teacher Connection	4.44
SSQ9. Academic Motivation	4.40
SSQ10. Questions/Feedback	4.01
SSQ11. Extracurricular	4.01
SSQ12. Student Mentorship	3.75
SSQ13. Demographics	4.62

Points were assigned to each survey response ranging from 1-5 in association with the Likert scale. The point assignments were as follows: Strongly Agree – 5 points, Agree 4 points, Neutral – 3 points, Disagree – 2 points, and Strongly Disagree – 1 point. On the left side of each spreadsheet are the questions labeled with an abbreviation that identifies who the question was for (teachers, student, or parent) with the question number next to it. For example, on the teacher spreadsheet, “TSQ1” stands for Teacher Survey Question 1. “PSQ” stands for Parent Survey Question, and “SSQ” Stands for Student Survey Question. At the top of the teacher and parent table is an abbreviation for who responded to each question. For example, on the teacher survey, the top line is abbreviated “TR 1”, which stands for Teacher Response 1. “PR” stands for parent response. Additionally, I included a column at the end of each spreadsheet to record the average of the scores for each question by each responder.

The data for each survey were collected through an online survey that teachers, parents, and students were given access to. The number of participants of each survey varied significantly, with 66% of the teaching staff completing the survey, 37% of the student body completing the survey, and just 2% of parents completing the survey. Using the Google form allowed me to see the responses of each participant and enabled me to identify similarities, differences, and themes.

Survey Similarities, Differences, and Themes

As stated above, the teacher and student survey questions were the same in number, with a total of 13 questions. In contrast, the parent survey had just 10 questions to answer. Of the 13 questions asked of the teachers and students, 11 of them were similar, while just 8 of the questions that were asked of the parents were similar to the ones asked of teachers and students.

The differences between some of the questions asked related to the role of the stakeholder. For example, Question 4 on the teacher survey asked whether or not “teachers have significant input in the selection process.” While on the student survey Question 4 asked whether “teachers at the school look like me and connect with me.” Both of those questions are very specific to the role and experience the teacher and student have at the school and would not necessarily be able to be answered by the other. Yet, the data from both of those questions help in evaluating the application process and student experience.

The scores on the Likert scale varied in several areas by each group surveyed. Figure 3 shows a comparison of the average scores of the responses from each group. There was agreement across all three survey groups regarding the very first question (TSQ1, SSQ1, PSQ1), which asked if the application process “is thorough/clear and understandable for all.” Each survey group had a favorable response to this question with teachers having an average score of 4.38, students an average score of 4.39, and parents an average score of 4.20, which showed they “Agree” with that question. Question 2, teachers and students also “Agree” that the application process was “equitable/fair,” with teachers having an average score of 4.38 and students having an average score of 4.20. However, the average score of the parents for that question was 3.60, which indicates that parents were more inclined to be neutral. There was an additional area where all three groups had a score of “Agree” among them, and that was with Question 9, which asked if “academic motivation” was a factor in the application process. The average teacher score was 4.25, the average student score was 4.40, and the average parent score was 4.

More notable variance in the score ranges included Questions 3, 5, 8, 12, and 13. The average score ranges for each group surveyed show a group or two differing responses to the question asked. For example, Question 3 asked if students and parents felt a “sense of

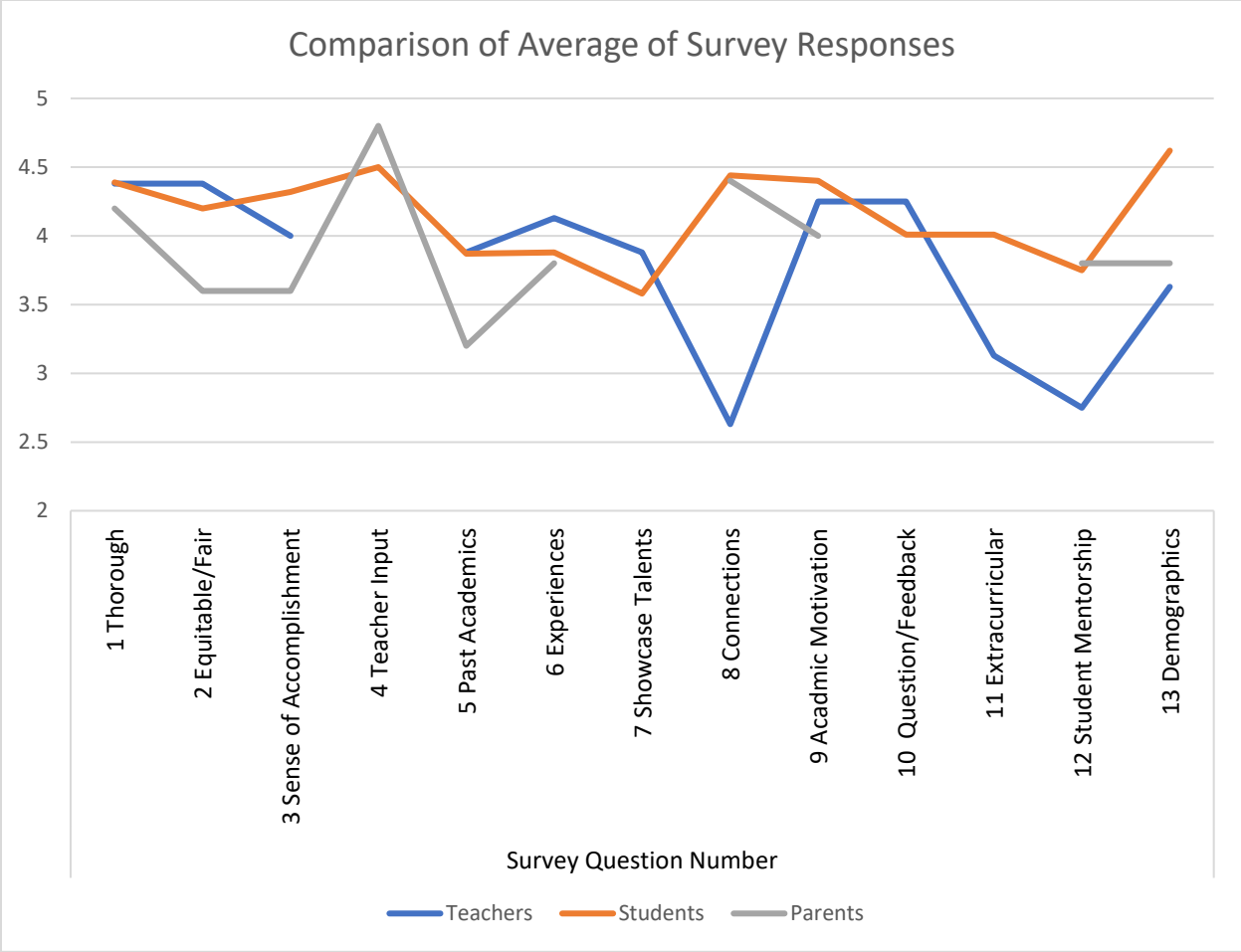


Figure 3. Comparison of average of survey responses.

accomplishment” after going through the application process. Teachers responded with an average score of 4, and student averages were 4.20; however, the average parent score in response to that question was 3.60. The teachers and students “Agree” that there was a sense of accomplishment in completing the application process, yet the parents were neutral regarding that question. Another example is Question 8, which asked about “connections” with teachers during the application process. The average score of students surveyed was 4.44, and the average score of parents was 4.40, indicating that both groups “Agree” with that statement. However, the average score of teachers for that question was 2.63, putting them in the “Disagree” category for that question. Question 12 is another example of score variance among the three groups. It asked whether “student mentorship” was important. Students and parents responded with overall neutral scores of 3.75 (students) and 3.80 (parents). Yet, teachers had an overall score of 2.75 with that question showing that they “Disagree.” A final example of some variance in the survey scores was Question 13, which asked about the importance of the school reflecting a balanced “demographic.” Students responded with an average score of 4.62, while teachers (3.63) and parents (3.80). Students overall “Agree” that having a balanced demographic was important to them, while both teachers and parents “Neither Agree or Disagree.”

There are additional conclusions worth noting from the survey responses among the groups surveyed, such as the question regarding extracurricular activities (Question 11). Students and teachers differed in their response to this question, with students having an average score of 4.10, agreeing that extracurricular activities were important to them. While the teacher’s average score was 3.13, neither agreeing or disagreeing that extracurricular activities were important to students.

Data Analysis for Interviews (Phase 2)

After the implementation of the intervention in Phase 1, I conducted interviews of four African American male students who applied to attend NCECHS. These students went through the 4-month process of attending information sessions, completing the application to attend, and going through the interview process to determine if they would be accepted into the school. We hoped to have at least five African American males participate in the interview and had another student agree to interview, but I was unable to find a time that worked best for him and his family. Due to COVID-19 safety restrictions, all of the interviews were conducted through Zoom (www.zoom.com), an online video conferencing tool. There was a total of 14 questions that I asked each student (Appendix E). I took notes while each student responded to the questions asked. I recorded the interviews through Zoom, and, as a backup, I used my cell phone to record the interviews as well. I transcribed the interviews using Sonix (www.sonix.ai), a transcription service that helps to transcribe recorded videos.

Several themes became clear after I analyzed the responses from the interviews. Table 6 shows the themes that I discerned from the responses of the four interviewees to each question I asked. The responses to the first question I asked of the study participants showed that one of the driving forces behind their interest in the early college was taking care of their families. The participants were fully aware that they would be earning an associate's degree along with a high school diploma, and they perceived that would give them the ability to help their families financially. In addition to helping their families financially, each participant had an intrinsic motivation to want to do well in school for themselves. In Question 3, each participant shared that they had good experiences with school. In Question 9, two of the participants stated they were identified as Academically Gifted in elementary and middle school, and the two others

Table 6

Themes from Students' Responses to Interview Questions

Student Interview Questions	Themes from Student Responses
1. What made you decide to apply to an early college high school?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Wanted a better future - Helping out family in the future - Want a challenging experience/Personally motivated
2. When did you know that you wanted to attend an early college high school and who influenced that decision?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Going into middle school or 8th-grade year - Parents were highly influential in deciding to apply.
3. What has your past educational experience been like for you?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Good experience with great teachers - Received good grades in school
4. Did you find the process to be something that made you want to apply or discourage you from applying?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Process was easy. - Help from parents made it easier - Use of technology was helpful (digital application and videos)
5. How influential were your parents in your decision-making (1-10 scale of impact)?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Two had scores at 8 or above - One had a score of a 5 - One had a score of 3 - Parents had some impact on decision - Felt ultimately the decision was theirs to make
6. Did you do the video submission (All About Me video?)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - 3 out 4 did the video - 3 out of 4 felt the video gave a personal touch - 3 out of 4 felt that they could show more of their personality with the video
7. Thoughts on interest videos created by both early college high schools?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Students felt the video by NCECHS was more informative than the other early college. - Taking college classes immediately was of greatest interest. - Opportunities to get ahead mattered most

Table 6 (continued)

Student Interview Questions	Themes from Student Responses
8. What was the interview process like?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - 3 out of 4 students this was their first interview - Different than what was expected. Turned out to be friendlier and more comfortable
9. What have your previous experiences in schools been like?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Felt comfortable with experience - 2 out of 4 students were AIG - Having success in school helped - Had good teachers and went to good schools - Made good grades and didn't get in trouble
10. Were there things about the application process you did not like?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - There was nothing they did not like about the interview process.
11. Were there things about the process you really liked?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Virtual interview
12. How did you feel getting accepted into the early college?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Relieved, happy, and excited - Accomplished - Proud and surprised
13. On a scale of 1-10 how successful do you think you'll be at the early college?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - All students rated 8 or higher as
14. Why do you think some black males don't apply?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Lack of believe they'll get accepted - Grades and discipline - Not really a cool thing to do - You can't play sports

stated that they made good grades in school. One participant stated that he had never had a bad experience in school and that his teachers always encouraged him to do his best. In fact, in Question 2, the participants shared that they could not wait until they got to middle school to start preparing for acceptance into the early college. One interviewee recalled, “I heard other students in school talking about it, especially the 8th graders who had attended a meeting about [the school]. I knew from the time I was in sixth grade that I wanted to attend.”

Each study participant shared in Question 5 that their parents had a role to play in their interest in NCECHS. However, each made it clear that, while the assistance in completing the application and talking through the decision with their parents was helpful, it was ultimately what they wanted to do and that they were not forced to attend. Question 6 required the participants to give their opinion on the intervention that was used in Phase 1 of this study. Applicants were encouraged to create a two-minute video titled, *All About Me*, and share information about themselves that would not necessarily show up on an application. Three out of four of the study participants created the video, which was optional, and submitted it with their application. The three who completed the video felt that the video allowed them to be more themselves and showcase their personality. One participant said, “It gave a personal touch” to his application that he wanted the Recruitment Committee to see.

The study participants also shared that one of their main interests in the school was having the ability to be a college student and being able to take college classes as a freshman, which is different from the other early college in the district, which requires students to wait until their sophomore year to take college classes. Even with that focus on higher education, good grades, and intrinsic motivation, all of the study participants shared their surprise when they were accepted into the school, citing that they knew many people applied, and they just did not think

they would get in. Each participant was very confident that they would be successful as an early college student because of past school success. While they felt confident in their ability to be successful, the participants expressed they felt that some African American males do not apply to attend the school because “most do not think it is cool” or that they were good enough to attend. A few of the study participants shared that discipline and grades have a lot to do with it, “and the fact that you cannot play high school sports is a big reason why some will not apply.”

Results

In this section, I answer my research questions by synthesizing the data analysis from the above sections. I connect the data to each research question.

Findings for Research Question 1

The first research question in this study asked, “What factors in the legacy application process may act as barriers or disincentives to the enrollment of African American male students at an early college high school?” In the pre-phase of the study, the Recruitment Committee conducted an environmental scan of the admission process, which required the Recruitment Committee to use the affinity diagram process (Glickman et al., 2013) to categorize potential disincentives and barriers to the enrollment of African American males in the school. The analysis provided in Figure 2 shows that there were four categories that emerged from the initial brainstorming: personnel, academics, non-instructional, and application process. Some of the disincentives that were noted by the Recruitment Committee in the personnel area included that there were no other Black males as part of the teaching staff at the school and that fewer than 10% of the student population is Black. The Recruitment Committee also felt that having a small study body was a disincentive for African American males.

One major disincentive that appeared in the academics and application process category was an overemphasis on grades. The Recruitment Committee felt that was one of the most significant disincentives for the African American male student. In the academics category, other disincentives included the perception of the school only being for smart students, taking college classes upon immediate entry into the school, and the rigor of the classes. In the non-instructional category, the major disincentive recorded there was that the school did not allow participation in high school athletics, nor did it have any extracurricular activities like band or chorus for students to be a part of. The Recruitment Committee also felt that not having a mentorship program that would help African American males' transition to handle being at an early college was a disincentive as well. As the Recruitment Committee brainstormed potential disincentives in the category of the application process, they felt that for some African American males having to go through a face-to-face interview could be a disincentive, along with the fact that the application process in its current format did not allow for opportunities to share interests outside of school.

When identifying potential barriers to the enrollment of African American males at NCECHS, again, the Recruitment Committee placed them in four categories: personnel, academics, non-instructional, and application process. Similar to the disincentives in the personnel category, the Recruitment Committee thought that fewer than 10% of the student population being Black males was a barrier as well. In the academics category, the fact that students with a poor academic history are not accepted was identified as a barrier. In the same category, the Recruitment Committee felt that students who had bad academic experiences were not apt to try something rigorous like an early college high school and therefore listed that as a barrier. Having a poor self-image or lack of identity was listed as both a barrier and disincentive.

In the category of the application process, the Recruitment Committee found that the rubric was unbalanced and could serve as a barrier by not allotting points for anything non-academic. The Recruitment Committee also felt that the interview questions were mainly academic-related and the application focused only on academic information and that both were significant barriers.

Some of the themes that came out of the affinity diagram process (Glickman et al., 2013) conducted by the Recruitment Committee was that there was an overemphasis on academics that could frighten or intimidate African American males from applying as well as keep them from having the opportunity to apply, especially if their grades are porous or they have had a bad experience in education. Other themes that emerged were having a poor self-image, lack of mentorship, and an application process that leaned too heavily on academic information. One of the most telling themes from the process was that having a lack of representation of African American male students was both a disincentive and a barrier.

Survey Results

Continuing the review of the application process in the pre-phase and environmental scan of the student application process, the Recruitment Committee created student, parent, and teacher surveys in response to the themes and categories that were listed as a result of going through the affinity diagram process. The student survey consisted of 13 questions, and the data revealed that most students surveyed “Agree” that the application process was thorough and clear (Question 1), averaging a Likert scale score of 4.39. Students also “Agree” that the application was equitable and fair, with an average Likert scale score of 4.20 (Question 2). Question 5 of the survey was a significant question for students to respond to. It asked if students felt that their previous academic performance was a major factor in the application process. The average Likert scale score for that question was 3.87, signifying a neutral response of “Neither

Agree or Disagree,” but looking deeper into that question it reveals that of the 89 students who responded to that question 57 of them responded “Strongly Agree” or “Agree” with that statement, which is 61% of the students surveyed. This is in line with what the Recruitment Committee thought could be a barrier and disincentive for African American males to apply to the school.

Question 6 of the student survey asked students to respond to “if interests outside of school were of interest in the application process.” The average Likert scale score for that question was 3.88, a neutral response. However, 52.8% (47 students) of the responses to that question were “Strongly Agree” or “Agree.” Students also “Agree” that connecting with teachers is important to them (Question 8) with a Likert scale score of 4.44. Question 9 asked about motivation for students to apply and students “Agree” that being motivated should be a factor in acceptance to the school with an average Likert scale score of 4.40. Students “Agree” that taking part in extracurricular activities is important (Question 11), averaging a Likert scale score of 4.01. When asked if having an academic mentor was important to their success at the school (Questions 12) 56.2% of the students “Strongly Agree” or “Agree” with that statement, although the average Likert scale score was 3.75. Again, this was an area the Recruitment Committee believed would serve as both a barrier or disincentive to the enrollment of African American males in the school. When it came to the importance of diversity in the classroom, 75% of the students agreed or strongly agreed that classrooms should be diverse.

The teacher surveys were completed by 66% of the teaching staff at NCECHS and had similar outcomes to the student surveys. Like the student surveys, teachers responded to 13 questions. All but two of the questions asked (85%) of the students and teachers were similar. Question 1 asked if teachers thought the application process was thorough and understandable,

and 100% of the teachers surveyed “Strongly Agree” or “Agree” with that statement, with an average Likert scale score of 4.38. Like the students, teachers also “Agree” that the application process was equitable and fair, with an average Likert scale score of 4.38. In regard to Question 5, which asked if past academic performance is a major factor in the application process, 87.5% of the teachers “Strongly Agree” or “Agree” with that statement, although the average Likert scale score was 3.88. All teachers surveyed “Agree” that student experiences (Question 6) are considered as part of the application process, with an average Likert scale score of 4.13. That differs from how the students responded to that question. However, only 25% of the teachers surveyed “Agree” that extracurricular activities were important and encouraged (Question 11), with an average Likert scale score of 3.13. Teachers were also asked to respond to whether a “detailed plan for student mentorship” (Question 12) was shared with students when they applied. Only 25% “Agree” that was the case. Only 50% of the teachers surveyed felt that an effort was made by the school to reflect the district demographics (Question 13).

The parent survey had fewer questions than the student and teacher surveys with only 10 questions and fewer respondees (5) to the survey questions. Eight of the questions asked of parents were similar to ones asked of students and teachers. Parents, too, “Agree” that the application process was thorough and understandable (Question 1), with an average Likert scale score of 4.20. Parents, however, “Neither Agree or Disagree” that the application process was equitable and fair, with an average scale score of 3.60. This is different from both the averages of the students and teachers. Sixty percent of the parents surveyed “Agree” that their child’s previous academic performance was a major factor (Question 5) in the application process, with an average Likert scale of 3.20. Question 7 of the parent survey coincided with Question 6 (student experiences outside of school) of the student and teacher surveys. The average Likert

scale score for that question was 3.80. However, 80% of the parents surveyed “Agree” that their child’s interests outside of school were considered in the application process. One-hundred percent of the parents surveyed felt that academic motivation (Question 9) should be a major part of the application process (4.00 average Likert scale score), and 80% felt that student mentorship programs were of interest to them in the application process (Question 12), with an average Likert scale score of 3.80. Parents also felt that having a diverse learning environment (Question 13) was important to them, with 80% agreeing or strongly agreeing with that statement.

Several questions in each of the surveys confirmed what the Recruitment Committee believed could be potential barriers and disincentives for the enrollment of African American males into the school. While all three survey groups felt that the application process was fair, equitable, and thorough (Questions 1 and 2), all three groups were neutral in their average Likert scale score (Teachers 3.88, Students 3.87, and Parents 3.20) that past academic performance is a major part of the application process (Question 5). However, further analysis of each separate score shows that more students, parents, and teachers “Strongly Agree” or “Agree” with that statement. While students’ and parents’ overall Likert scale scores were neutral regarding Question 12 (student mentorship), most teachers chose “Disagree” for that question, with an average Likert scale score of 2.75. Referring to Figure 2, the Recruitment Committee listed mentorship as a potential barrier and disincentive for African American males. Another contrasting data point was in regards to Question 11 (extracurricular activities). That question was asked of students and teachers only. Most students chose “Agree” that extracurricular activities were important with an average Likert scale score of 4.01, while the teacher’s average Likert scale score was 3.13. Lastly, Question 13 (balanced demographics) was asked of all three survey groups. The student’s average score (4.62) to that question “Agree” with that statement,

while both the parent (3.80) and teacher (3.63) scores were neutral. The Recruitment Committee listed the lack of diversity and only a few African American male students as both barrier and disincentive.

Findings for Research Question 2

Research Question 2 of my study asked, “What effect does the reconceptualization of an early college high schools’ admissions process have on African American male enrollment?” At the conclusion of the fact-finding environmental scan in the pre-phase, the Recruitment Committee began reconceptualizing the admissions process to lessen or eliminate the impact of the barriers and disincentives. Taking the results of the surveys and using the lists created of barriers and disincentives, the Recruitment committee shared with teachers that it would focus on implementing an intervention that would aim to lessen or eliminate any barriers or disincentives of the enrollment of African American males in the admissions process at NCECHS. The intervention used to reconceptualize the admissions process was to revise the student application, interview questions, and rubric by adding components to each that would allow for and give credit for personal qualities such as involvement in extra-curricular activities, being open-minded, and being well-rounded.

The application was revised to give students digital access and to include an optional video component with the application that allowed students to share information about themselves that would not typically show up on an application. Students were asked to take no more than two minutes to share their hobbies, interests, involvements outside of school or anything about themselves that would give the Recruitment Committee more information about them. The video had the title, *All About Me*. Revisions to the interview questions included asking questions about the student’s character, interests in and out of school, and their upbringing.

Figure 4 shows the types of questions that were asked of students before and after the Recruitment Committee revised the questions. You will see a noticeable difference in the types of questions asked. The Recruitment Committee now uses a mix of both types of questions to get to know the students better. The rubric was revised to give points for completing the *All About Me* video, poise, and professionalism in the interview, as well as integrity and character. In Figure 5, the second image shows the revisions that were made by the Recruitment Committee. There are two scoring categories on that image, one for additional qualities and the other for the admissions interview. The additional qualities category is completely new to the rubric. The admissions interview category has been there before, but the Recruitment Committee decided to change the factors that are looked for in the interview. The factors new to that category are: ability to communicate, character and integrity, and maturity and professionalism.

The intervention was implemented without any setbacks. However, the goal of the intervention was to increase the enrollment of African American males at NCECHS by lessening or eliminating any barriers or disincentives; however, we did not increase the enrollment. Overall, there were 13 African American males who applied to attend NCECHS. Of those 13 males that applied, only five were accepted to enroll at NCECHS. The total number of students who applied to attend NCECHS during its enrollment season was 155 students, which is actually lower than the enrollment number in the 2020 recruitment season, when there were 280 students to apply. Only 8.3% of the total number of students who applied to attend NCECHS were African American males. Of that 8.3%, 38% (five out of 13) were accepted to enroll.

NCECHS enrolled 56 students in its spring recruitment and only five of those students were African American males, meaning the percent of African American males enrolled at

Sample Early College Student Interview Questions Before Revisions

1. What are some of your goals after high school?
2. What are some of your hobbies?
3. How would your teacher describe you?
4. What's your definition of a good teacher?
5. What is your favorite part of the school day?
6. What's your least favorite part of the school day?
7. How would you handle a problem with a friend?
8. What seems challenging to you at school?
9. What do you like best/least about working in groups
10. What are some of your strengths and weaknesses?
11. Why do you want to attend our school?

Sample Early College Student Interview Questions After Revisions

1. How would you describe yourself?
2. What makes you unique?
3. How do you like to spend your time outside of school?
4. If you could be any character in a book or movie who would it be and why?
5. Have you ever done community service? If so, what did you do and what did you learn from that experience?
6. Who is your favorite teacher and what did you like best about his/her teaching style?
7. If you could spend time with one person from history, who would it be and why?
8. What's something that you are most proud of?
9. What has been your greatest achievement in school or life so far?
10. What are your plans after high school?
11. What do you value most in a family?
12. Is there anything else you would like to share or want us to know about you?

Figure 4. Comparison of revised interview questions.

Early College Application Rubric

Scoring Scale: 1-Poor 2-Below Average 3-Average 4-Above Average 5-Exceptional

Report Card Scoring:

7th Grade/Semester 1	Grade	Point Value	7th Grade/Semester 2	Grade	Point Value	8th Grade/Semester 1	Grade	Point Value
Language Arts			Language Arts			Language Arts		
Math			Math			Math		
Science			Science			Science		
Social Studies			Social Studies			Social Studies		
		Total			0			0

Demographics Scoring:

EOG/EOC Scoring:

Factor	Point Value	7th Grade	Level/SS*	Point Value
Mother /Guardian Education (CC)		Scores as Applicable: Reading EOG Math EOG Math EOC		
Father/Guardian Education				
Free/Reduced Lunch				
No Lunch Assistance				
Absences (4)				
# Discipline Infractions - NO				
Total				0

Student Name _____

SIBLING: _____

Early College Application Rubric

Scoring Scale: 1-Poor 2-Below Average 3-Average 4-Above Average 5-Exceptional

Additional Qualities:		Admissions Interview:	
Area	Point Value	Factors	Point Value
Leadership		Commitment	
Extracurricular Activities		Ability to Communicate	
Resilience		Integrity/Character	
Community Involvement		Maturity/Professionalism	
Video (All About Me)		Responsibility	
Total		Total	
		Number of Interviewers	

Composite Score:			
Interview Date	____/____/____	Interview Time	____:____ AM/PM
Point Summary	Total Application Score:	0	
	Total Interview Score:		
	Total Score:	0	
Admission	Admission Letter Sent		
	Waiting List Letter Sent		
	Regret Letter Sent		

Figure 5. Revised scoring rubric.

NCECHS for the 2021-2022 school year is 8.9%, which is lower than the previous year, which was 15% (9 out of 60 students enrolled were African American male students).

The low number of African American male applicants, as well as the lower number of all student applicants, may have attributed to the impact of COVID-19. During the 2020-21 school, the Recruitment Committee was not able to visit schools in person to recruit students. In years past this has proven to be an effective practice in helping to increase the number of applicants; this is especially true for African American male students. NCECHS partners with the feeder middle schools to give a presentation to the entire 8th grade. Afterward, it fields questions and talks with students one-on-one. Instead, the Recruitment Committee was left to hold a virtual information night which yielded fewer participants, an estimated 80 families, than the in-person recruitment has attracted in previous years, which has had more than 200 families participate. A virtual information night in place of an in-person information night was held because our school was still designated remote due to COVID-19.

Interview Results

The Recruitment Committee, after a full recruitment season, interviewed four of the five African American students who were accepted at NCECHS. The interviews were conducted to get an evaluation of the intervention used to reconceptualize the admissions process, which was intended to allow for an increase in enrollment of African American males. The interviews of these students offered more insight into the research question. When asked what they thought of the interview process Student Participant #1 stated that the process was “different from what I expected. It’s was friendlier and casual. I wasn’t being hammered with questions.” Student Participant #3 stated that while he was nervous, he felt “very comfortable” and that for his first interview, he really “enjoyed it.”

Each student participant was asked to give their thoughts on the video component of the application. Three out of the four students decided to do the video with Student Participant #4 stating, “my reason for doing the video is so that people get to know more about me.” Student Participant #1 stated, “I felt like I was going to freeze up during the interview. I’m good with being on camera and not so much live. The video helped a lot. It allowed me to be myself.” Student Participant #2 was the only student not to do the video, and he stated he did not do it because he really is not good on camera.

Overall, the student participants stated that there was not a thing about the application process they did not like. One participant stated that his favorite part of the process was the interview. The student participants also stated that they found the process to apply to the school easier because the application was digital and that the parent information night was helpful. A common theme from each participant was that there was an intrinsic motivation to be a part of the early college high school and that because they had previous positive experiences that helped in their decision. The students also discussed the impact their parents had on their decision to apply, with each stating that their parents were involved, but they were not the reason they chose to attend.

Summary

My research study was driven by two questions that required a deeper look into the admissions process at NCECHS. The analysis of the admissions process provided insight into what could be deemed as barriers and disincentives to the enrollment of African American males at the school. In reviewing research Question 1, my analysis of the application process revealed that academic history served as a crucial barrier to enrollment. While the average Likert scale score for Question 5 (Past Academics) of teachers (3.88), students (3.87), and parents (3.80) was

neutral. Further analysis of the data showed that the majority of teachers (87.5%), students (64%), and parents (60%) “Strongly Agree” or “Agree” that past academic performance is a major factor in the application process. Students who were interviewed also agreed that their past academic history was the reason they were accepted into the school. If students’ past academic experience and grades are strong, then this is not an issue, but if there are areas that show weakness or underperformance, this can severely hurt the chances of students getting accepted into the school. Poor academic performance and low grades was an area the Recruitment Committee listed as barriers in their brainstorming.

Some survey data conflicted with what the Recruitment Committee thought were possible barriers and disincentives. For example, each survey group was asked about the importance of student mentorship as part of the application process (Question 12). While the average Likert scale score of students (3.75) and parents (3.80) was neutral, the average teacher score was significantly lower at 2.63. Even though the majority of students (56.2%) and parents (80%) “Strongly Agree” or “Agree” that student mentorship is an area of importance for students applying to the school, the difference in the teacher score shows that is not a unanimous opinion shared by all three groups. Another area of conflicting data was regarding extracurricular activities. The Recruitment Committee listed the absence of extracurricular activities as a barrier and disincentive in their brainstorming, but teachers and students responded to that question differently. The average student response on the Likert scale was 4.01, and the average teacher response was 3.13. Students (76.4%) “Strongly Agree” or “Agree” that extracurricular activities are an important part of their education. In contrast, only 25% of the teachers felt that extracurricular activities were encouraged and supported. The fact that NCECHS does not have extracurricular activities, especially sports, can be seen as a barrier and disincentive to students,

especially African American males. However, teachers feel differently about that, and so for teachers, it is not viewed as a barrier or disincentive to apply.

The review of research Question 2 revealed that reconceptualizing the admissions process had a positive impact on the African American male students that applied. All of the student participants who were interviewed felt that the process was “easy.” Student Participant #1 shared that his favorite part of the application process was the interview. The student participants also shared their thoughts on the implementation of the video as part of the reconceptualization of the process. Student Participant #3 shared that the creation of the video helped “to give more of a personal touch and to show who I truly am.” While the African American male students had good things to say about the application process, the change in the process did not lead to a greater number of students applying or being accepted into the school. In fact, there was a decrease in the number of African American males who applied as well as those who were accepted. I attribute the decrease to the fact that there were limitations on getting information out to schools during recruiting season and not to the actual change in the admissions process.

In the following chapter, I will provide my reflections on the results of this study based on the literature and the data collected. I will share the challenges faced in conducting the study during a pandemic, and I will share what I believe is needed to move the needle forward in addressing the opportunity gap that exists at NCECHS among African American males and other student demographic groups represented at the school.

CHAPTER 5: SUMMARY, CONCLUSIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Early college high schools are designed so that low-income youth, first-generation college attendees, English language learners, students of color, and students who are often underrepresented in higher education can earn a high school diploma and one to two years of transferable college credit—tuition-free (Ongaga, 2010). They provide an opportunity for advancement in life and can significantly alter the trajectory of student lives. I designed this project because I believe that more students of color, specifically African American male students, should have access to early college high schools. The number of African American male students who attend early college high schools in North Carolina is 16% (North Carolina General Assembly Report, 2017). The number of African American male students who attend North Carolina Early College High School (NCECHS), the site of the study, is 9%.

I believe that exploring the processes for enrollment into NCECHS would expose what could be a systemic issue that may be significantly impacting the enrollment of African American males at the school. Reconceptualizing the admissions process by identifying barriers and disincentives, I believe, would allow for an increase of African American male students and would lessen the opportunity gap that currently exists. Giving African American males access to early colleges can literally mean saving lives and keeping them out of harm's way (Edmunds, 2016).

Summary of the Findings

There were two significant findings in my study that I believe have helped to potentially increase the number of African American males who choose to apply and accept enrollment at NCECHS. The first finding is that there were several factors in the application process that acted as barriers and disincentives in the enrollment of African American males in the school. In the

pre-phase environmental scan of the school's initial documents, we found that no points were given to applicants for information in their application that included things like extra-curricular activities, leadership opportunities, or community involvement. In fact, the application did not have a place for that information to be shared. In addition, the initial application rubric allotted the majority of the points on how well a student performed academically. The importance of past academic performance was something that was noted in the student, teacher, and parent surveys. All three surveys asked if "previous academic performance was a major factor in the application process." Eighty-seven percent of the teachers who completed the survey, 60% of the parents who completed the survey, and 64% of the students who completed the survey "Strongly Agree" that past academic performance was a major factor in the application process.

We found the overemphasis on academics to be both a barrier and disincentive for African American male enrollment as the Recruitment Committee went through the affinity diagram process (Glickman et al., 2013). It was found to be a disincentive for African American males because even the literature states that there still exists today a significant gap between the academic performance of the African American subgroup and the White subgroup (McKown, 2013). Not only that, but the African American male identity is not usually associated with how well he does academically in school. To have academics play such a significant role in the enrollment of students at NCECHS serves as a deterrent to some African American males. Even the African American males who were interviewed as part of phase 2 of the study, when asked why they felt more African American males do not apply to the school, stated that grades are a factor. That response is telling. It affirms Wright's (2009) assertion that the African American male's opposition and negative feelings about school can be attributed to the curriculum, along with processes and materials, that portray him negatively, which leads to why the overemphasis

on academics as part of the application process is a barrier for African American males at NCECHS.

Only 9% of the enrollment at NCECHS is African American male. Nevertheless, the process by which students are recruited to the school does not include things that would interest African American males. There are few things in place to balance academics with non-academics. For example, at NCECHS, students are not permitted to participate in high school athletics or high school performing arts, such as dance, band, or chorus. Again, in interviewing the African American males who applied to the school, another factor that was mentioned as to why they felt more African American males did not apply to attend the school was the fact that the school did not have sports or allow for extra-curricular activities. As one male student put it, “We like to play sports and do other things that are not about grades.” Even in the student Likert survey, students were asked about the importance of extracurricular activities. The average student response to that question was 4.01. A further breakdown of that data point revealed that 76% of the students surveyed “Strongly Agree” or “Agree” that extracurricular activities are an important part of their education. Academics matter, but when they are a significant factor for enrollment or acceptance, it can serve as a barrier and disincentive for the African American male because his identity is not made up of how well he can perform in the classroom, a place where many African American male students have had to deal with negative stereotypes from society and their peer groups (Barnett & Flynn, 2014; Emdin, 2012; Jackson & Moore, 2006).

The second significant finding from this study is that while the reconceptualization of the admissions process at NCECHS had a positive effect on African American male students who applied, it did not lead to an increase in enrollment of African American males in the school. The intervention used to reconceptualize the admissions processes at NCECHS and aim to reduce the

barriers and disincentives for the enrollment of more African American male students included a revision of the student application, student interview questions, and rubric by adding components to each that would allow for more points to be gained and give credit for personal qualities such as being well-rounded, open-minded, and involved in extra-curricular activities. In addition to those revised components of the application, students were given the opportunity to submit a 2-minute video that shared their interests and hobbies and allowed them to give more detailed information about themselves that would not typically show up on an application.

According to the African American males we interviewed, 100% of them felt that there would be nothing they would change about the application process. In fact, one student mentioned how much he liked the virtual aspect of the interview, and three out of four of the candidates really liked the ability to submit a video detailing information about themselves outside of what was asked in the application. All four of the students interviewed stated how “happy, relieved, and excited” they were to be accepted at the school. While the students expressed great pleasure in their experience, still only 13 out of 155 total applicants were African American males, and only five out of those 13 students were actually accepted to enroll in NCECHS. The reconceptualization of the process proved to be beneficial in creating a process that was more balanced and allowed for more factors to be considered for the enrollment of students. Unfortunately, it did not produce an increase in African American male enrollment.

Interpretation of the Findings

Seeking to determine what factors in the application process served as barriers or disincentives in the enrollment of African American males at NCECHS gave a greater insight into whether or not the opportunity for the enrollment of African American males was equitable. According to the literature in Chapter 2, understanding the opportunity gap is to go beyond

achievement in school. Milner (2012) states that there must be a shift from focusing solely on achievement levels to opportunity, which impacts achievement. The achievement levels of African American males at NCECHS are not the primary issue. It is the fact that African American males are scarcely represented on campus and that there is a process that may be contributing to that fact. A review of opportunity requires focusing on analyzing and explaining educational practices and processes (Milner, 2012).

After the Recruitment Committee went through the affinity diagram process (Glickman et al., 2013) in the pre-phase environmental scan of the study, we found there to be a number of barriers and disincentives that would impact the opportunity for African American males to attend. Looking back at Figure 2, it was noted that in the application process, the overemphasis on academics was seen as a deterrent for African American males. The Recruitment Committee also noted that the interview questions were heavily focused on academics, and the rubric was unbalanced, giving no points for anything non-academic such as leadership and extracurricular activities. Therefore, this finding confirmed what Milner (2012) stated that issues of opportunity are much more nuanced than what an achievement gap explanation can provide. Issues of opportunity are multifaceted and process-oriented (Milner, 2012). The Recruitment Committee's work in the pre-phase environmental scan indicated that. The overemphasis on academics was clearly an area that served as a barrier and disincentive for African American male enrollment. As a member of the Recruitment Committee and the principal of the school, this discovery is eye-opening. The school's emphasis on past academics was not meant to serve as an exclusionary measure but one that would fall in line with the school's focus on having a strong academic culture. However, that finding led to the incorporation of an intervention that I believe

will create more opportunities for African American males to attend and help the school build a culture that extends beyond academic performance.

Another area in which this study correlated with the literature was in the area of African American male identity. In the pre-phase environmental scan and the student interviews, the issue of identity was brought up. The literature states that African American males are often negatively stereotyped as at-risk, endangered, problematic, dysfunctional, incapable, and unwilling (Howard, 2013; Jackson & Moore, 2006; Wright, 2009). Perceptions of what the African American male can do are relegated to standardized test scores, inequitable discipline practices, and the teaching of a curriculum that is irrelevant to the African American male history or experience (Howard, 2013; Jackson & Moore, 2006). In Figure 2, the Recruitment Committee listed poor self-image as both a barrier and disincentive to the enrollment of African Americans at the school. That imaging is primarily because of how African Americans see themselves in the landscape of academics. When I interviewed the African American male students who went through the application process, I asked them why they believed more African American males did not apply to attend the school, and each one of them mentioned grades as a reason. One student mentioned that a lot of black males do not think it is cool to get good grades. Another student mentioned that some black males struggle with school.

Both of those comments suggest something deeper, which aligns with the literature. The fact that an African American male student may not think it is cool to get good grades can suggest that it is not the grades they do not think is cool but rather the curriculum. It may be that the African American male student does not see himself in the curriculum that is taught or has an issue with how he is portrayed in the curriculum (Wright, 2009). Wright (2009) says that African American male students may demonstrate an “oppositional stance” toward academic subjects

because of their portrayal in them. It has less to do with ability and more to do with relevance. If an African American male student has struggled with school, it may have nothing at all to do with academic performance. It may have everything to do with identity or connections with the school. In the student Likert survey, students were asked if the teachers at the school connected with them. The average score for that question was 4.14, suggesting that students “Agree” that teachers did connect with them. Connections are important to a child feeling a sense of belonging at the school.

We asked each African American male student we interviewed why they chose to apply to NCECHS. Each of the students referenced their futures. Each student mentioned wanting better for their families and being personally motivated. One student, in particular, mentioned that he wanted to be able to provide for his family, and having an associate’s degree by the time he graduated would allow him to get a job at a higher paying rate. These African American male students did not equate their desire to attend the school with academics. They equated their desire to attend with what they felt was their responsibility in taking care of their families, which speaks to their identity as an African American male. While each of the students we interviewed had solid grades going in and coming out of middle school, that was not their end goal. Their end goal was not to be at the top of their class academically; instead, their goal was to make their families proud by doing something that would help support their families later in life. One of their final responses to the question as to why they felt more African American males did not attend the school was that there were no sports at the school. Each student mentioned how sports were a big part of black males’ focus and their lives. They described the desire to play on a team and how some boys had been playing a sport all their lives, so not being able to would be a problem. In my 18 years as a teacher and school administrator, I have found sports or athletics to

be an integral part of the lives of many African American males. They see themselves as the next greatest football or basketball player. In my opinion, not having the opportunity to do that at NCECHS is in some way diminishes the identity and opportunity for African American males.

Lastly, I think that only having 13 African American males apply out of 155 students total student applicants speaks to some of the educational barriers in college prep courses that African American males still face. High school Advanced Placement (AP) and International Baccalaureate (IB) courses typically have a very low representation of African American males. For years there has been a gap between African American access in AP and IB programs. College Board (2019) noted that there was an underrepresentation of African Americans in AP programs across the US. At NCECHS the issue of underrepresentation of African American males exists partly because of the emphasis on past academic history or grades. It ties directly to African American male opportunity and identity. NCECHS is promoted and marketed as an academically advancing and rigorous experience. That description does not align with the interests of most African American males based on their educational experiences starting in elementary school. Silvernail (2010) states that the prevailing thought is that African American students are either not interested in college prep courses or do not see themselves as the type of students who would take such courses. Having such a low percentage of African American male students apply and be accepted, in my opinion, speaks to that.

Limitations of the Study

One of the most significant limitations of the study was the impact of COVID-19. It required me to push back the start of the recruitment process and limited my access to speaking to students, teachers, and parents. COVID-19 required the school to change its recruitment process to one that was strictly online. That meant that those who attended the virtual interest

meetings were those who had reliable internet, a computer, and the time to be online at home. The change, unfortunately, created an unintended barrier that I could do nothing about.

Another limitation was getting information out to the middle schools for the purpose of recruiting students. Middle schools provided remote learning only for most of the 2020-2021 school year, which meant that all information about the study and changes in the application process were shared through email, video, or Google Classroom. We did not have the opportunity to visit each middle school as we typically do and talk with students in an intimate setting where we share what we have to offer and how they can be a part of it. I feel our inability to reach out had a direct impact on the number of African American male students who applied to the school. We saw a decrease in that number, but I believe it is because we were not able to make face-to-face contact with those students and tell them that our school welcomes all and focuses on more than just academics.

There were limitations in getting parents to complete the surveys. In a non-COVID-19 situation, I would have had an in-person meeting with parents to explain the study and give background information on the study and ways they could be involved. Because we were not holding in-person meetings, much of that information was left to be done in a virtual meeting and through Blackboard Connect calls that saw little participation and response. With so few parent participants, the surveys do not reflect a large consensus of thought or input.

Implications of the Findings for Practice

I believe the impact of my study will allow for greater access and more opportunity for African American male enrollment in NCECHS. In addition, it has already created a more equitable application process for the school. The work that was done by the Recruitment Committee in the pre-phase environmental scan set the tone for the rest of the study and was

hard work. Coming up with categories and lists of barriers and disincentives was not easy. It required the Recruitment Committee to let go of assumptions and intentions and look at the current practice. That work will benefit the school overall. It educated the Recruitment Committee on unintended barriers and disincentives. The Recruitment Committee was left to answer the question many times: “Why did we choose to do that?” The study allowed for the Recruitment Committee to revisit a process that was created in year one of the school’s implementation. After being in existence for 11 years, it was the right time to evaluate the process and determine its effectiveness.

Sharing the results of the stakeholder surveys resulted in deeper conversations with the Recruitment Committee and staff. The fact that we did not have many parents take the survey led to a greater conversation around parent involvement in a remote setting and how we could improve that. None of the data shared alarmed the Recruitment Committee or school. We did feel that the desire for student mentorship is something we should really pay attention to and work towards. It is an area that we had not focused on as a school but could really see the benefits in providing. As a school, we felt that the need to provide extracurricular activities was really important, whether through clubs or intramural sports. We know that is a way to get students to want to come to our school, especially African American male students.

The implementation of the intervention in phase 1 has had a great impact on the school. The school now has an application process that is more balanced and equitable than before. Updating the interview questions to focus less on academic performance and incorporate non-academic questions led to a better conversation with the students and allowed the students to be more relaxed, which is something one of the students we interviewed stated. The change in the rubric to allot points for character, leadership, and extra-curricular activities gave a better sense

of whom we are saying yes to. It allowed the Recruitment Committee to use factors other than grades and test scores to predict future success. The addition, the *All About Me* video had a tremendous impact on the Recruitment Committee and those who applied. The video allowed students to share things about themselves that would not show up on an application. It provided depth and insight about whom we were reading. As one student we interviewed put it, “It gave me a chance to show more of my personality.” The *All About Me* videos allowed the Recruitment Committee to see the benefit of looking at other factors other than academics.

Hearing from some of the African American males who applied to the school gave this study a personal connection. I believe that feedback from the students we interviewed confirms that the changes we made to the application process had positive results. It did not ultimately result in more students applying or being accepted, but it did result in a positive experience. I believe that more applications should focus on areas that are non-academic and give a better sense of whom you are considering for entry into your school. I also believe that the African American male students we interviewed made it clear that ability was not the deterrent to applying. Each student described how they thought the process would be harder or different. I believe that having the video and the change in the interview questions resulted in a greater desire to be a part of the school. We made connections in a way we had not before. Overall, I believe the findings show that reconceptualizing the application process was a good and beneficial step for the school.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, my first recommendation is that the school continue to revisit its purpose. Early college high schools were created to first give students who would be first-generation college students access to college while obtaining a high school diploma. Many

of first-generation college students come from minority homes, which would include African American males. The focus on students who want to accelerate their learning is one that should not be ignored, but it cannot be the primary focus. There should be more intentionality to target the African American male subgroup by making it clear that if they are a first-generation college student, the early college is where they should want to attend. Revising the application process was a great start to making that happen. The addition of the video gave a human element to the process that allowed African American males to provide further insight into what makes them unique apart from what they can do in the classroom. I would recommend that the Recruitment Committee revisit the video as an intervention and ensure that all students have access to making a video, whether at school or at home.

A second recommendation is for the school to be intentional about changing the way it promotes and markets itself. Currently, the school markets itself as an academically challenging and rigorous environment with a lot of support. Each of the stakeholder surveys included a statement on whether the student's previous academic performance played a major factor in the application process. In each survey, the vast majority felt so. The issue with that is with African Americans males, that factor can be a disincentive and barrier. Historically, we know how African American males have fared in school. The literature and educator experience underscore that their academic experiences are laden with negative stereotypes, low expectations, misidentification in special education, and being targets of disciplinary action (Howard, 2013; Swanson, 2013). There is nothing wrong with having a challenging and rigorous academic environment, but that alone does not promote or market what would make an African American male want to apply or attend. In addition to promoting an academically rigorous and supportive environment, the school should promote relationships, the varied learning experiences a student

would get, and student mentorship. If the goal is to increase enrollment of African American males, then early colleges must speak their language. Relationships and family matter a great deal in the African American community. These are features of a school environment that would entice the African American male to attend.

A focus on a balanced and broad curriculum would also be something that would cater to the African American male subgroup. Standardized test performance has been the focus of most elementary and middle schools. The scope of the curriculum has shrunk and has become mainly about how to perform well on a high-stakes test that occurs at the end of the school year. At an early college, there are pathways that would be of interest to African American males, such as automotive, entrepreneurship, STEM, technology, and more. NCECHS should share these opportunities in their marketing and allow African American males to see themselves at a school that will make them better, more rounded individuals, not just better test-takers or those who take hard classes.

My final recommendation for the school is to find ways to get students involved in extracurricular activities. As stated earlier, sports are a significant part of the African American male identity. Having an opportunity to collaborate with a traditional high school and play a sport while gaining access to college courses is the best of both worlds. African American males like sports, and sports take on a very different meaning and opportunity for that subgroup than for any other. Not having sports is a barrier that is really hard for a 14-year-old African American male, who sees playing football as a means to get his family out of poverty, to see past. It should be possible to do both. Choosing one over the other hurts African American males more than any other subgroup because from the time they are born, many are coached and told that sports are their meal ticket and their way out of poverty. In addition to having sports as an

extracurricular activity, there should also be an opportunity for involvement in the performing arts. Arts education would also be a way to recruit African American males and would serve to get greater interest in attending an early college. Walton (2018) explains in his journal article, “Taking it to the stage: Performing arts education and African American male identity development,” that African American males who are involved in performing arts had a positive experience with school and that performing arts had a positive impact on their academic performance.

Suggested Future Research

One of the challenges I faced with this study was finding articles that related to African American males and their experiences at early college high schools. Literature exists in reference to African American male experiences in college prep programs like Advanced Placement (AP) and International Baccalaureate (IB), but there is little or no literature on early colleges and African American males. There is a plethora of research on African American male identity in education and their performance in school. However, much of that research seems to be relegated to the early and mid-2000s. Most of the literature on early colleges focuses on the benefits of the early college program, why they exist, and the overall performance of students who attend. Future research should dig deeper into the outcomes of students of minority who attend early college high schools. Future research should also include the access that minority students, especially students of color and African American males, have to attend such schools. In addition to focusing on who attends, research should include the percentage of minority students, precisely African American males, who leave the early college high school with the attainment of both the high school diploma and the associate's degree in comparison to other subgroups.

It is important that research focus on both the access that African American males have to attend early college high schools and how they fare during their tenure at the schools. District leaders and principals should be intentional about meeting the need to have more representation of African American males at early college high schools and should see the model of the early college high school as an answer to how to address African American male performance in education. Small classrooms, emphasis on strong teacher-student relationships, student mentorship, diverse curriculum, and educational experiences are ways to help advance and improve the overall performance of African American males in high schools.

I also believe that further research on this topic should include investigating academic rigor or expectations at the early college high school as a means for acceptance. One of the struggles of this study was identifying what an appropriate amount of emphasis on academics and what is not is. It is necessary that incoming students show a degree of seriousness and success in the classroom by receiving good grades. However, it would be interesting to explore what other early colleges do as a way to balance the academic history of a child and other factors like leadership, extracurricular involvement, and maturity, which are equally important and do not show up on a report card or standardized test.

Conclusions

My grandfather told me as a young boy that when opportunity knocks, answer. What happens, however, when there is no “knock”? Enhancing the opportunity for African American males to attend an early college high school is giving them the chance to answer an opportunity that will literally change their trajectory in life. NCECHS analyzed and reconceptualized its application process to allow for an increase in African American male enrollment. Reconstructing the interview questions allowed for a balance between academic and non-

academic questions and gave a better perspective on whom we were talking to. The addition of the *All About Me* video gave students an opportunity to share with us things we cannot see on an application. Changing the scoring rubric to give points for non-academic qualities such as character, leadership, and extracurricular involvement allowed for a shift in how the points were distributed.

The fact of the matter is that for many African American males, their identity is not relegated to academic performance; therefore, there should be structures and processes in place when recruiting students to attend an early college high school that allow for a more accurate picture of whom that child truly is. The African American male student does not lack the ability to do rigorous work, but for too long, the curriculum that he has been exposed to has opposed him or portrayed him in a manner that is inconsistent with who he is and what he values. The African American male is quite capable of making good grades in school. The key is making school relevant enough for him to want to do so, thereby allowing him to see himself as more than a letter or number grade.

In conclusion, I believe my project showed that reconceptualizing an application process can begin to eradicate any bias or inequities and can have positive outcomes. Determining what may serve as barriers or disincentives to the application process exposed that NCECHS had some unintentional barriers and disincentives that limited access for African American males. However, the work of the Recruitment Committee to reconceptualize the process was a great leap to making it so that those inequities no longer exist.

Scholarly Practitioner Reflections on Leadership

Three years ago, when I began this journey, I was full of imposter syndrome. I was completely uncertain if I had the stamina and capability to conduct a research study and see it

through. I was unsure, even, as to what exactly would be my problem of practice (later coined focus of practice). What I did know was that I had a superintendent who believed in my ability to do this work. What I did know was that I had more than a decade of experience as a building administrator in low-performing schools and, at the time of the study, a very successful school. There was a lot I had experienced that I did believe could serve me well in doing this work. The professors at East Carolina University (ECU) also made it a point to instill a sense of belief that the journey I was embarking on was both needful and doable.

When I finally landed on a research study. I was excited to have the opportunity as a school leader to do work that would not only impact the world of education but the very school I was leading and the district I worked in. As a school leader and an African American male, equity, equality, and opportunity are missional aspects of my personal and professional life. They are not just words or catchphrases to me. They paint a picture of something greater, something that, when understood and embraced by all, can have the power to revolutionize the experience of both student and educator. Working to increase access for African American males at an early college high school and potentially addressing issues of equity, equality, and opportunity aligned with the purpose-driven life I aspire to lead. From that standpoint, this work became very personal. I was aware that I was leading an early college high school that hired its first African American principal, who happens to be male. I was aware that when I started this work, I was newly hired and that I did not know the staff or community very well. Yet, at the onset, I was attempting to address an issue that is very sensitive.

Throughout this study, I have collaborated with the teachers of my school and district leaders. In doing so, I have often had to reflect on my purpose to ensure that the practices I was employed to gather information and data were not biased or self-serving. I had the trust of my

school family and of my superintendent to address an issue that was very real in a way that would not be divisive but would move the school and the school district forward in addressing issues of equity. As I researched foundational aspects of this study, my confidence soared as to the impact this study could have on the school and the school district as a whole. Working with the Recruitment Committee to identify what could be barriers and disincentives for enrollment of African American males led to some very honest discussions about intent versus reality. What I learned through those conversations is that as a school leader, you must make very clear how every decision you make or do not make serves and benefits the entire school community. It is not okay to simply be well-intentioned. It is not okay for any process created to isolate or exclude any group of people, and the moment you find it does, it should be scrutinized and improved.

This journey took me back to my time in the classrooms of the public schools I attended. It caused me to come face-to-face with some of my experiences as an African American male student in schools that were predominately White, just like the school I was leading, and how there were certain opportunities that were never presented to me. I shared that information with the Recruitment Committee. I shared how at that moment, I did not know that I was being overlooked or simply excluded from certain educational opportunities. I certainly cannot prove at this time that the fact that I was never pushed to take an honors class or higher in high school had anything to do with my gender or race, but I can certainly prove that my counselor never had conversations with me about taking more rigorous courses. This work was very personal, and it made me, as a school leader, understand the power and duty I have in creating or reworking a process that could help a group of people that are commonly viewed as uncaring about those opportunities.

One of the most rewarding parts of this journey was being named Principal of the Year in my school district and being asked to serve on the Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion committee of the school district. I learned as part of the DEI committee that my research study would be part of what will be used to address inequities in opportunity in our district. My work is literally moving our district forward, literally making a change in the lives of underrepresented people. This work has caused me to grow in learning how to be vulnerable with people and learning how to be honest about the truths that are sometimes ugly. As a school leader having crucial conversations is a necessity, and so is breaking the mold of what is known as common. There are some common practices and processes that deserve the attention of those who believe in change, growth, and the inclusion of all.

I am proud of the collaborative work that was done with the Recruitment Committee. Their support and willingness to walk this road with me is evidence that equity is not a one ethnicity issue. It is a human issue. I am grateful for the misunderstandings and the awkward silences that were had as we discussed current practices, results, findings, and ways to move forward. It was in those moments that trust was built. It was in those moments that love kept us from walking in offense and reminding us to always keep at the forefront who it is we are serving. I know that I am a better leader and person because of this work, and I am eternally thankful to the students, teachers, parents, and district leaders who had a hand in making this work come to fruition.

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APPENDIX A: INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD APPROVAL



EAST CAROLINA UNIVERSITY
University & Medical Center Institutional Review Board
4N-64 Brody Medical Sciences Building· Mail Stop 682
600 Moye Boulevard · Greenville, NC 27834
Office **252-744-2914** · Fax **252-744-2284** · rede.ecu.edu/umcirb/

Notification of Initial Approval: Expedited

From: Social/Behavioral IRB
To: Randy St.Clair
CC: Daniel Novey
Date: 12/16/2020
Re: UMCIRB 20-002663
Enhancing Opportunity by Increasing Access for African American Males at an Early College High School

I am pleased to inform you that your Expedited Application was approved. Approval of the study and any consent form(s) is for the period of 12/16/2020 to . The research study is eligible for review under expedited category # 6&7. The Chairperson (or designee) deemed this study no more than minimal risk.

As the Principal Investigator you are explicitly responsible for the conduct of all aspects of this study and must adhere to all reporting requirements for the study. Your responsibilities include but are not limited to:

The approval includes the following items:

Name	Description
Consent to Participate	Consent Forms
Interview Questions	Interview/Focus Group Scripts/Questions
Minor Assent Form	Consent Forms
Parent Consent for Child to Participate	Consent Forms
Recruitment Scripts	Recruitment Documents/Scripts
Survey Consent Paragraph	Consent Forms
Survey Questions	Surveys and Questionnaires

For research studies where a waiver or alteration of HIPAA Authorization has been approved, the IRB states that each of the waiver criteria in 45 CFR 164.512(i)(1)(i)(A) and (2)(i) through (v) have been met. Additionally, the elements of PHI to be collected as described in items 1 and 2 of the Application for Waiver of Authorization have been determined to be the minimal necessary for the specified research.

The Chairperson (or designee) does not have a potential for conflict of interest on this study.

APPENDIX B: INFORMED CONSENT



Informed Consent to Participate in Research
Information to consider before taking part in research
that has no more than minimal risk.

Title of Research Study: Enhancing Opportunity By Increasing Access for African American Males at an Early College High School

Principal Investigator: Randy St.Clair (Person in Charge of this Study)
Institution, Department or Division: East Carolina University
Address: 4815 Country Club Dr. N.
Telephone #: 252-917-7665

Researchers at East Carolina University (ECU) study issues related to society, health problems, environmental problems, behavior problems and the human condition. To do this, we need the help of volunteers who are willing to take part in research.

Why am I being invited to take part in this research?

The purpose of this research is to reconceptualize the admissions process at NCECHS to allow for increased enrollment of African American males. You are being invited to take part in this research because you work in a position in the school district that directly impacts enrollment of African American males at the early college high school where the research is being conducted. The decision to take part in this research is yours to make. By doing this research, we hope to increase the opportunity African American males have to enroll in the early college high school. If you volunteer to take part in this research, you will be one of about 10 people to do so.

Are there reasons I should not take part in this research?

You should not participate in this study if you are unwilling to be truthful about your experience in education.

What other choices do I have if I do not take part in this research?

You can choose not to participate.

Where is the research going to take place and how long will it last?

The research will be conducted at North Carolina Early College High School (NCECHS). Participants of the study who work at NCECHS will need to come to the teacher's lounge during the times of the study. The total amount of time you will be asked to volunteer for this study is no more than five hours over the next year.

What will I be asked to do?

You will be asked to do the following:

- Answer questions about your knowledge and beliefs about the early college high school.
- Answer questions about your knowledge and beliefs about African American males in education.
- Answer questions about the early college high school enrollment and recruitment process.
- Audio will be collected from interviews and will only be used by the researcher. The audio will be kept in a safe at the researcher's home and will be destroyed after the researcher has successfully defended the research.

What might I experience if I take part in the research?

We don't know of any risks (the chance of harm) associated with this research. Any risks that may occur with this research are no more than what you would experience in everyday life. We don't know if you will benefit from taking part in this study. There may not be any personal benefit to you but the information gained by doing this research may help others in the future.

Will I be paid for taking part in this research?

We will not be able to pay you for the time you volunteer while being in this study.

Will it cost me to take part in this research?

It will not cost you any money to be part of the research.

Who will know that I took part in this research and learn personal information about me?

ECU and the people and organizations listed below may know that you took part in this research and may see information about you that is normally kept private. With your permission, these people may use your private information to do this research:

- Any agency of the federal, state, or local government that regulates human research. This includes the Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS), the North Carolina Department of Health, and the Office for Human Research Protections.
- The University & Medical Center Institutional Review Board (UMCIRB) and its staff have responsibility for overseeing your welfare during this research and may need to see research records that identify you.
- People designated by Wilson County Schools.

How will you keep the information you collect about me secure? How long will you keep it?

The information collected in this study will be securely kept on my personal laptop and on a secure flash drive that will be kept in a safe in my home. I will keep this information until I successfully defend my research. All audio recorded and written interviews will be destroyed after a successful dissertation defense.

What if I decide I don't want to continue in this research?

You can stop at any time after it has already started. There will be no consequences if you stop and you will not be criticized. You will not lose any benefits that you normally receive.

Who should I contact if I have questions?

The people conducting this study will be able to answer any questions concerning this research, now or in the future. You may contact the Principal Investigator at 252-917-7665, Monday-Friday between 9:00 a.m. and 8:00 p.m.

If you have questions about your rights as someone taking part in research, you may call the University & Medical Center Institutional Review Board (UMCIRB) at phone number 252-744-2914 (days, 8:00 am-5:00 pm). If you would like to report a complaint or concern about this research study, you may call the Director for Human Research Protections, at 252-744-2914

I have decided I want to take part in this research. What should I do now?

The person obtaining informed consent will ask you to read the following and if you agree, you should sign this form:

- I have read (or had read to me) all of the above information.
- I have had an opportunity to ask questions about things in this research I did not understand and have received satisfactory answers.
- I know that I can stop taking part in this study at any time.
- By signing this informed consent form, I am not giving up any of my rights.
- I have been given a copy of this consent document, and it is mine to keep.

Participant's Name (PRINT)	Signature	Date
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Person Obtaining Informed Consent: I have conducted the initial informed consent process. I have orally reviewed the contents of the consent document with the person who has signed above, and answered all of the person’s questions about the research.

Person Obtaining Consent (PRINT)	Signature	Date
---	------------------	-------------



**Parental/Legal Guardian
Permission to Allow Your Child to Take Part
in Research**

Information to consider before allowing your child to take part in research that has no more than minimal risk.

Title of Research Study: Enhanced Opportunity By Increasing Access for African American Males at an Early College High School

Principal Investigator: Randy St.Clair (Person in Charge of this Study)
Institution, Department or Division: East Carolina University
Address: 4815 Country Club Dr. N., Wilson, NC 27896

Researchers at East Carolina University (ECU) study issues related to society, health problems, environmental problems, behavior problems and the human condition. To do this, we need the help of volunteers who are willing to take part in research.

Why is my child being invited to take part in this research?

The purpose of this research is to reconceptualize the admissions process at NCECHS to allow for increased enrollment of African American males. Your child is being invited to take part in this research because your child is an African American male and a candidate for enrollment in the early college high school. The decision for your child to take part in this research will also depend upon whether your child wants to participate. By doing this research, we hope to learn your child's thoughts and feelings about their ability and desire to attend the early college. If you and your child agree for him/her to volunteer for this research, your child will be one of up to 10 people to do so.

Are there reasons my child should not take part in this research?

Your child should not participate in this study if they are unwilling to be honest about their experience in education.

What other choices do I have if my child does not take part in this research?

Your child can choose not to participate.

Where is the research going to take place and how long will it last?

The research will be conducted at North Carolina Early College High School. Students will work with their school administrator on a day and time that is beneficial for the student to take part in the study. Students participating in the study at NCECHS will go to the teacher's lounge during the time for the study. The total amount of time your child will be asked to volunteer for this study is two hours over the next year. There will not be space available for you to wait for your child during the research.

What will my child be asked to do?

Your child will be asked to do the following:

- Answer questions about their the admissions process for attending the early college high school.
- Audio recording will be used during the interviews, but will be kept in a safe in my home. The recordings will be destroyed after successful dissertation defense.

What might I experience if I take part in the research?

We don't know of any risks (the chance of harm) associated with this research. Any risks that may occur with this research are no more than what you would experience in everyday life. We don't know if your child will benefit from taking part in this study. There may not be any personal benefit to your child but the information gained by doing this research may help others in the future.

Will my child be paid for taking part in this research?

We will not be able to pay you or your child for the time you volunteer while being in this study

Will it cost me anything for my child to take part in this research?

It will not cost you any money to be part of the research.

Who will know that I took part in this research and learn personal information about me?

ECU and the people and organizations listed below may know that your child took part in this research and may see information about your child that is normally kept private. With your permission, these people may use your child's private information to do this research:

- The University & Medical Center Institutional Review Board (UMCIRB) and its staff have responsibility for overseeing your child's welfare during this research and may need to see research records that identify your child.
- People designated by Wilson County Schools District

If your child is a patient at ECU or Vidant, a copy of this form will be placed in your medical records.

How will you keep the information you collect about my child secure? How long will you keep it?

The information collected in this study will be securely kept on my personal laptop and on a secure flash drive that will be kept in a safe in my home. I will keep this information until I successfully defend my research. All audio recorded and written interviews will be destroyed after a successful dissertation defense.

What if my child decides he/she doesn't want to continue in this research?

Your child can stop at any time after it has already started. There will be no consequences if he stops and he will not be criticized. Your child will not lose any benefits that he/she would normally receive.

Who should I contact if I have questions?

The people conducting this study will be able to answer any questions concerning this research, now or in the future. You may contact the Principal Investigator at 252-917-7665 between 9:00 a.m. and 8:00 p.m.

If you have questions about your child’s rights as someone taking part in research, you may call the University and Medical Center Institutional Review Board (UMCIRB) at phone number 252-744-2914 (days, 8:00 am-5:00 pm). If you would like to report a complaint or concern about this research study, you may call the Director of Human Research Protections, at 252-744-2914.

I have decided my child can take part in this research. What should I do now?

The person obtaining informed consent will ask you to read the following and if you agree, you should sign this form:

- I have read (or had read to me) all of the above information.
- I have had an opportunity to ask questions about things in this research I did not understand and have received satisfactory answers.
- I know that my child can stop taking part in this study at any time.
- By signing this informed consent form, my child is not giving up any of his/her rights.
- I have been given a copy of this consent document, and it is mine to keep.

Parent's Name (PRINT)	Signature	Date
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Person Obtaining Informed Consent: I have conducted the initial informed consent process. I have orally reviewed the contents of the consent document with the person who has signed above, and answered all of the person’s questions about the research.

Person Obtaining Consent (PRINT)	Signature	Date
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APPENDIX D: PRE-PHASE QUESTIONNAIRES

Teacher, Student, and Parent Surveys conducted during the Pre-Phase.

Teacher Survey

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neither Agree or Disagree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
1. The school's application process is thorough and understandable to all.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
2. The school's application process is equitable and includes a variety of academic and non-academic information to consider for enrollment.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
3. Students and parents feel a sense of accomplishment after going through the application process.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
4. Teachers have significant input in the selection process.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
5. Past academic performance is a major factor in the application process.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
6. Students have the opportunity to share their educational experiences and their reason for applying during the application process.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
7. Students have the ability to showcase their talents as part of the application process.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
8. Teachers get a chance to get to know the students deeply when they apply.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

9. Student academic motivation is a major factor in the application process.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
10. Student's willingness to ask questions and seek out feedback is instrumental in acceptance at the school.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
11. Extracurricular interests are encouraged and supported	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
12. A detail plan of student mentorship is shared with students who apply.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
13. A significant effort is made to reflect the district demographics in the enrollment of students to the school.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Student Survey

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neither Agree or Disagree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
1. I feel the application process was clear and understandable.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
2. The application process was fair and included information that did not simply focus on academics.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
3. I felt a sense of accomplishment after applying.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
4. The teachers at the school look like me and connect with me.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
5. I felt my previous academic performance was a major factor in the application process.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

6. My interests outside of school were of interest in the application process.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
7. Having the ability to share my past educational experiences is important to me.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
8. Getting to know who the teachers are is important to me.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
9. Being academically motivated should be a major factor for acceptance into the school.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
10. I find it easy to ask questions and seek out feedback from teachers	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
11. Taking part in extracurricular activities while being educated is important.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
12. Having an academic mentor is important to me.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
13. Classrooms should have diversity of students in it.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Parent Survey

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neither Agree or Disagree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
1. The application process was thorough and understandable.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
2. The application process was fair and included information that did not simply focus on academics.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

3. I felt a sense of accomplishment after my child completed the application.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
4. It's important that my child connects with his/her teachers.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
5. My child's previous academic performance was a major factor in the application process	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
6. My child's interests outside of school were considered in the application process.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
7. Getting to know who will be teaching my child is important to me.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
8. Academic motivation should be a major factor for acceptance into the school	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
9. Mentorship programs are of interest to me and my child.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Student diversity is important to me.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

APPENDIX E: INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

NCECHS Interview Questions

The following interview questions will be asked to select students who went through the application process in an effort to enroll in North Carolina Early College High School (NCECHS).

1. What made you decide to apply to an early college high school?
2. When did you know that you wanted to attend an early college high school and who influenced that decision?
3. What had your past educational experience been like for you?
4. Did you find the process to be something that made you want to apply or discourage you from applying?
5. How influential were your parents in your decision making (1-10 scale of impact)?
6. Did you do the video submission (All About Me video)?
7. Thoughts on interest videos created by the early colleges?
8. What was the interview process like?
9. What have your previous experiences in schools been like?
10. Were there things about the application process you did not like?
11. Were there things about the process you really liked?
12. How did you feel getting accepted into the early college?
13. On a scale of 1-10 how successful do you think you'll be at the early college?
14. Why do you think some black males don't apply?

