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STUDENTS' COLLEGE PREPARATION LEVEL BASED ON QUALITY
FACTORS OF THE HIGH SCHOOL ATTENDED

A Dissertation

Presented to

The College of Graduate and Professional Studies

Department of Educational Leadership, Administration, and Foundations

Indiana State University

Terre Haute, Indiana

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Philosophy

by

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May 2011

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Keywords: college admissions, high school quality

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ABSTRACT

The present qualitative study examined the views and perspectives of five Executive Directors of Admissions of Midwestern colleges and universities to seek data on high school students' college preparation level based on the quality factors of the high school they attended. Interviews were conducted using multiple open-ended questions on various aspects of high school characteristics that had potential to impact college admissions and college success. Themes emerged that encompassed high school size, high school offerings, and factors of high school attended. All high schools were not viewed as providing neither equal opportunity nor adequate educational opportunities for all students sufficient enough for them to be admitted to a four-year college or university and/or to successfully graduate from college. Emerged themes of significance included larger high schools being more effective than smaller high schools; Advanced Placement courses being more effective than dual-credit classes; and the rigor of high school curriculum being unequal amongst schools. Each of these themes is identified in detail with examples, experiential stories, and views by the participants. School leaders can use this data as a piece in their continual search to further student success in high schools and beyond.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

There are many that I would like to warmly acknowledge for their consistent support, inspiration, and encouragement in the completion of this dissertation. I owe a debt of gratitude to my parents for encouraging the pursuit of the light that education can bring to one who strives. Ever since I can remember my brothers and I were told that college was within our reach even though it had never been afforded to them. The gift of education came from the walks to the little library in Roxanna through the chocolate chip cookies waiting for me on my way back into town late at night during a year of Wednesday classes.

I cannot imagine the completion of this project without my husband Rob by my side. This could not have been accomplished without his efforts to open the doors for me to seek my passion to return to classes, provide encouragement as I dragged through some long weeks juggling too many duties, humor to keep me going even during the seemingly unending days of transcription and data analysis, being my caffeine supplier no matter what time I needed to stay awake, chief editor, and mostly believing that I could accomplish this even during the times I did not believe I could continue. Yes, now we can go fishing more this coming spring.

I have been truly blessed to have Katie, Amy, and Benny each afford real support and never-ending love all through the years of my classes, homework, time away, and this ‘little project’ as it became known. They have each been patient in listening to my unending ramblings on the subject of colleges, admissions, and education from every angle, and infuse ample humor on the subjects through their teenage perspectives. Even as they would shake

their head at my elaborations, they each embraced me through the process, brought me dandelions and tea, and even said that they were proud of me. What more could I ever need.

I will be grateful to my committee members long beyond the defense process. Dr. Robert Boyd's willingness to take on my cause, my questions, and my off-the-wall ideas was priceless. His depth of educational knowledge and grasp on the real issues we face spans widely. Dr. Terry McDaniel and Dr. Marsh Turner-Shear, your encouragement for the topic and your vast superintendent knowledge in this Midwestern state has helped me to question the process, my inquiries, and the future for our schools. The wisdom each of you willingly shared will follow me on my future educational paths, and I will work diligently to infuse the genuine dedication to students and education that I have watched in each of you.

To those friends and family who have continually encouraged me through their interest and cheer throughout this process. Bill, Jodi, Michael, Tony, Barry, Kelly, Rick, Sharon, Nancy, Monique, Jimmy, Bruce, and Maria, I whole-heartedly appreciate each of you.

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CHAPTER 1

Rationale for the Study

Over the centuries, a myriad of Americans have been groomed to believe that personal hard work and dedication to a goal are the precursors for success in the work force, increased social status, influence in the political arena, and opportunities to surge forward in higher educational pursuits. One can search the history registers and find numerous examples of Americans with an unrelenting work ethic and dedication to a particular pursuit that they, in fact, did advance to laudable discoveries and accomplishments for themselves and for humanity as a whole. One prominent case in point is Thomas Edison and his creation of a non-gas light bulb in the year 1879. Edison utilized all of the persistence he had acquired over the years in his laboratory, tested no fewer than 6,000 fibers and metals for the filament refinement, and openly acknowledged that the work was monotonous and extremely demanding for himself and his assistants. Edison communicated the importance of determination and hard work to those around him as he persevered to his discovery (Israel, 1998). Hard work and dedication in America does pay off with tremendous rewards, sometimes. Unfortunately, we can also look back into history and witness times of despair and tragedy that followed people's dedication and hard work. The construction of the Titanic engulfed the dedication of countless crews, and the creative endeavors of numerous engineers (Eaton & Haas, 1995). Yet, the results for the Titanic were much different than Edison's revelry.

When higher education opportunities are considered for Americans who wish to pursue college, we may believe strongly that work and determination are the defining factors in the college admittance formula and are the keys to college acceptance and future college success. Most Americans appear to view college admissions as a fair system that is based on rewarding students' hard work and abilities, and a system that admits those students that rank well in both of these categories. In reality, however, the facts may show a more ambiguous correlation. Students' work ethic and accomplishments and the higher education pursuits in America may prove to be similar to either the account of Thomas Edison or the account of the Titanic venture.

Definitions

For the purpose of clarity, the following definitions were adhered to throughout this study's discussion. While reviewing the research on this topic, it became clear that there were many, varied definitions of each used by various writers, researchers, and institutions. It also became evident, at times, that some of these definitions were adjusted by the authors of articles to better promote their point of view. Therefore, these few terms are defined.

ACT - American college test.

SAT - Scholastic assessment test.

Rural school - School in an area that is at least 10 miles from a town of over 250 people.

Small high school - A high school with less than 800 students.

Large high school - A high school with more than 800 students.

College success - graduation from college within 6 years of entering as a freshman.

Modified diploma - a high school diploma including adaptations for special education, certificate of attendance, or a certificate of completion.

ECA assessments - Indiana's End-of -Course-assessments, mandatory language arts and algebra exams that must be passed prior to graduation.

HSCR - High school class rank.

HSCR* - Modified high school class rank (HSCR x high school's overall ACT/36).

HSGPA - High school grade point average.

IB - International baccalaureate.

SES - Socioeconomic status.

In the year 2011, one must consider if a definitive link does exist between graduating high school students' abilities, accomplishments, and overall work ethic and the college admission decisions that will affect their futures. Is there a direct correlation between a student's grades, high school classes passed, extra-curricular activities, and class rank, just to name a few, and their ability to be accepted into the school of their choice? Or does a student's hard work find itself in the shadow of the perceived quality of the high school they attended, the overall size or location of their school, their parents' social standing and affiliations in the community, their ethnicity, their athletic prowess or lack thereof, or the financial means of their families?

Shocking the college community and even the United States at large was the recent uncovering of the preferential treatment policies and procedures that were ingrained over decades at the University of Illinois. In June of 2009, a newspaper article regarding this scandal, in *USA Today* stated, "All college applications are equal. But some are more equal than others." (Pope, 2009, p. 1). This burlesque idea, originally captured from the book *Animal Farm* (Orwell, 1945), exemplifies the audaciousness of the Illinois lawmakers and officials at the University of Illinois to alter any attempt to maintain a fair admissions process for the university and its potential students. It was discovered that the admissions process to the University of Illinois was

replete with exceptions for those deemed suitable with the proper political, financial or social connections. Over 114 Illinois lawmakers and an undetermined number of university officials used their political or financial clout to provide an unfair advantage to over 481 students. In point, the Illinois Speaker of the House, Mike Madigan, had swayed officials to accept 28 applicants, all of which would not have been accepted at any level to the university if the decision had been based solely on the students' own merit. One particular student was given the lowest possible admissions rating through the university's general channels for admissions; and yet, due to Madigan's influence and the special exceptions that this put in motion, the student was admitted fully to the university (Kahlenberg, 2009). This investigation clearly discovered that applicants who were personally backed by lawmakers or university officials were accepted above more qualified students.

Unfortunately, the above-mentioned scandal is not the only one of its kind over the past few decades. There have been claims of unfair admittance practices at other universities as well including UCLA, Oxford, M.I.T., Diablo Valley College, and U.C. Berkeley. These have included bribes for admittance, paying for grade changes, special consideration for friends of alumni, and reconsideration of SAT scores. Through each revelation of unfair practices, students have been left asking the question, "What are the real factors that matter to enter college?" There appears to be a lack of central admissions procedures and acceptable standardized admittance practices (Tyson, 1989).

A brief look at the history of criteria for college admissions over the past five decades reveals several common core areas that have been taken into consideration, including high school grades, class rank, SAT scores, and extracurricular activities. Some believe that SAT scores are the best indicator of future college success. For a case in point, one may reflect on research

findings that show data that identifies a significant relationship between students' SAT scores and their future college success as viewed through college grades and college graduation. One particular review conducted by the College Board analyzed multiple sources of literature and research on potential correlations between preadmission SAT scores and high school grades with college GPA and college graduation rates. It concluded that there exists a significant correlation between a combination of high school grades and SAT scores and college GPA. To a lesser extent, but also statistically significant, there also existed a correlation between these indicators and college graduation rates. When the high school predictive factors of grades and SAT scores were combined, there was an 80% predictive graduation rate for students that accomplished an A grade average in high school grades and a 1300 or higher SAT score. On the other end of the spectrum, a predictive college graduation rate of only 10% became evident when a student had attained a C+ or lower high school grade average and a 700 or below SAT score (Burton & Ramist, 2001). In addition, Bowen and Bok (1998) found a lower correlation for college graduation than for college GPA when looking at high school grades and SAT scores as predictors. There appeared a correlation of .45 for predictive college class rank, and only between a .2 and .24 correlation for college graduation rate when looking at the high school predictors. In an older, but also comprehensive study, Willingham (1985) found that a strong correlation of .53 existed between a combination of high school GPA and SAT scores and college GPA. However, he found only a .29 correlation between this set of predictors and college graduation rates.

Therefore, if there does endure such a strong correlation between high school grades and preadmission SAT scores with college success, one may ask the question, "Why are these two predictors not used exclusively as the sole sources for college decisions?" In multiple validity

studies SAT scores and high school grades have been shown to be strong predictors for college success. In actuality, these findings are inclined to hold true even for all student subgroups in regard to their future college academic success (College Board, 2000). So again we must seek to ascertain why colleges and universities do not simply admit students based solely upon their high school GPA and SAT score.

High school transcripts appear to be one key in the college admissions process, and higher level courses generally carry additional weight above a student's basic GPA. However, Geiser and Santelices (2004) documented through their research that the actual number of Honors and Advanced Placement (AP) courses that a student attempted and had recorded on his/her transcript did not predict impending college success. Furthermore, there is clear evidence regarding the positive linear relationship between students taking and passing at least one AP class and exam, and a dramatic increase in their college graduation rate. The results, whether looking at descriptive statistics, a HLM regression model, or a school-level OLS regression, show a significant increase in college graduation rates when a student passes at least one AP exam during their high school years. For instance, there is up to a 45% increase in the five-year graduation rate of low-income students when they take and pass at least one AP exam compared to their equal counterparts who did not pass an AP exam (Dougherty, Mellor, & Jian, 2006).

Moreover, it is interesting to recognize that various colleges, especially those with large numbers of applicants for relatively few placements, also consider more subjective areas of student attainment such as positions of leadership, personality, family support, and character (Karabel, 2005). These additional fields of consideration open up a great deal of room for the bias of admissions directors to alter individual admissions procedures. Equality of opportunity is hampered at high ranking private colleges, for instance, such as Harvard, Yale, and Princeton

when they choose to provide additional support and special consideration for legacy students, those applying who had one or more relatives attend the university in the past. It is rationalized that in addition to what legacy a student brings to the school based on their own merit and character, he/she also brings with them a family that is devoted to the institution and therefore more likely and willing to donate financially to that institution. These funds are then used to support high caliber teaching, buildings, grounds, and programming in place for other students. The early admissions process at these institutions may also provide unequal opportunities for legacy students simply due to its early nature. Children of parents who attended these colleges have ample prior knowledge of the college, college life, and the admissions process. Therefore, these students may know early in their high school career where they wish to attend college. Generally, financial offers are not a limiting factor in choosing a school for these students either, and they acquire slots at the college before the bulk of admission applications even arrive at the college each fall. While it is good news that a few of the elite schools are beginning to terminate their early admissions options over the last decade, many are replacing them with more reserved slots for athletic team members to be hand-selected prior to open admissions (Karabel, 2005).

When one searches a bit deeper, prior to the past 50 years of college admissions history, the roots of college admissions criteria may be uncovered. Harvard University was a leader in initiating the momentum for a planned process of college admissions back at the turn of the 20th century. At this time in the higher education realms, apprehension was growing concerning the quality of men that were being admitted to Harvard. A fear began to spread amongst the leaders of Harvard regarding an impression that waves of mediocre men were beginning to be admitted to the institution rather than only students of the highest caliber (Synnott, 2010).

Therefore, in order to improve the quality of entering freshmen in 1905, Harvard officials implemented the mandate for potential students to submit to requirements of the College Entrance Examination Board including standardized testing. In like manner, other prominent universities of the times also adopted such procedures. For the first few years, the results of the standardized tests were clear to all as the mandate produced objective scores and student achievement data for comparison. This information was then to be intentionally utilized in admissions decisions. Anyone that acquired a sufficient score on the exams was provided acceptance to the university (Karabel, 1984).

However, what appeared to be a solution for admittance for only high caliber intellectual students quickly created secondary changes that were not pleasing to the white Anglo-Saxon, European descendent leaders of Harvard University. A precipitous increase in the number of Jewish students earning high marks and being accepted to Harvard became quite obvious. In 1900, there were no known Jewish students enrolled at Harvard. By 1908, 7% of the total student population was Jewish, and a decade later this percent had risen to 20%. The same trend was also noticed at Yale, and it was likewise not satisfying to those in charge. In order to reverse this unwanted secondary consequence of adhering to use of the College Entrance Examination Board, beginning in the early 1920s universities began to require additional character defining artifacts, including family history, recommendation letters, essays, and extracurricular activity scores (Zimmerman, 2010). This change of admissions policies allowed entrance staff to knowingly reject Jewish students. It is ironic now in the year 2011 that the very admissions procedures that were instituted to diminish potential student diversity are still in place. In fact, the artifacts used then such as essays, letters of recommendation, artifacts of accomplishment, and family details are used today in attempts to guarantee the student diversity of universities.

Preferential treatment of applicants may be given to those of various ethnicities or backgrounds when provided these documents. Moreover, just as it was difficult to identify a student's true, underlying character and work ethic, beyond ethnicity, with these means; it remains a questionable practice to base admissions decisions on supposed character defining compositions, recommendations, and outside of academic involvement.

There has been considerable debate over the years in regard to testing, and specifically, which method of testing is valid as a college success indicator. Atkinson's (2001) multiple works involving college admissions evaluations points to a history of assessment dating far back to the IQ testing that transpired during World War I. During 1917-1920 and beyond, men were assigned military duties based on their scores from a standardized IQ test (Atkinson, 2001). One key principle that led to this practice was the belief that an IQ test was an accurate and definitive measurement of an individual's innate abilities, future potential, and personality traits, all of which are not alterable. These personality and ability traits were believed to be perfect indicators to be applied when matching an individual to the military department and work task that they would be able to accomplish most efficiently (Kevles, 1968).

The SAT tests of today were developed using the same assumptions that the early IQ tests were created around. The widely-believed assumption was very explicit regarding the supposed fact that human potential and talent are uniquely inherited traits that cannot change over time, and they are traits that can be flawlessly measured (Atkinson, 2001). The IQ tests of the early 1900s were utilized to judge individuals and amplify or spoil their desires and goals for military duty and future employment. In the same manner, the SAT testing mandates have the ability to shift individuals' goals forward toward their desired college and professional

ambitions, or these assessment results may drastically alter their plans in the pursuit of higher education, at least at the institution of their first choice, and future employment.

Research continues to produce insights that confirm the enduring stark inequalities in the college admissions process that exist still today. One area of particular interest is the admittance and college success of potential students who come from low-income families. With the unwavering support of President Lyndon Johnson and his espousal for what was known at the time as the Great Society domestic agenda, the United States Congress overwhelmingly passed the Higher Education Act on November 8, 1965. One key component in this act was to ensure that all students would have equal access to college opportunities without limitations placed on low-income individuals. In other words, the intent was directed to reduce the college achievement gap between the wealthy and poor. To attain this goal, the act included strengthening educational resources to public universities and colleges while also providing financial assistance directly to college students no matter which university, public or private, that they chose to attend (National Trio Clearinghouse, 2003).

This act has been adjusted and reauthorized multiple times over the years, the last being in 2008, to support the noble goal of equal access for all students. Yet 45 years after the inception of the Higher Education Act, one still finds a tremendous achievement gap with college admissions percentages and college graduation rates between the rich and the poor subgroups. For example, data clearly shows that low-income students continue to be far behind their more affluent counterparts in the areas of college admittance, attendance, and graduation rates. This poor subgroup also lags behind in admissions to top tier selective colleges (Kahlenberg, 2009). For instance, high school graduates aged 18 through 24 from the highest quartile of income attend college at a 90% rate, most during their first two years after completing

high school. On the other side of the coin, those same age high school graduates that find themselves in families from the lowest quartile only enroll at a 60% rate and their entrance is spread out substantially more over the entire six year span (Kahlenberg, 2009). Even more daunting, the facts of various studies continue to conclude that for students that do enroll in college, those from the highest quartile of income graduate college within six years in a range between 57% to 91%, depending on the college attended and their ethnic subgroup. In contrast, those same subgroups of students that are in the bottom quartile of income only graduate between 8% and 23% (Greene & Forster, 2003; Horn & Carrol, 2006; Muraskin & Lee, 2004). Considering the above-mentioned figures for high school graduates along with the fact that students in poverty have a lower high school graduation rate to begin with, the goal of closing the achievement gap between rich and poor does not seem to be working. The dignified goal of The Higher Education Act does not appear to have been met by any measure.

In conclusion, there appears to remain a lack of definitive knowledge on what qualities, criteria, and factors are actually important for the college admissions process in the United States even in the year 2011. The focus of this dissertation is to uncover the relationship between the high school factors that affect college admissions in the Midwestern States for graduating high school students. While a study of just one area was not conclusive for the country, it shed informational knowledge on what may be happening in the Midwest region of the country, and this may mirror other areas of the country.

Statement of the Problem

The day has come, whether planned for or not, for all of our public educational funding sources, federal, state, and local, to be questioned, resources redefined, and accountability measures repeatedly sought after. In addition, the way of executing the business of education is

being constantly scrutinized by the media, researchers, business entities, universities, and most importantly, by the community at large. With this influx of increased attention to every aspect of the business of managing public schools and education, it is imperative to continue to search for the best model of school structure and delivery of education to the students.

One particular area of interest is the quality of our public high schools and the success that they demonstrate through student graduation rates and proper preparation for college. As one begins to review the diverse data on high schools, we must consider the varying factors that might contribute to the wide range of successes and failures that various high schools seem to produce. It is vital that we learn to clearly identify the factors that elicit a positive result for students as they seek to be productive after their high schools years are completed.

Colleges in particular earnestly search for ways of identifying potential students that can be successful if given the opportunity to attend their institutions. Admissions personnel attempt to identify the factors that prove to be the best indicators of success at this higher educational level. Particularly state colleges, those that are partially funded by state tax revenue, attempt to focus their financial resources on students who will, in fact, be able to graduate from their institution within a specified time frame, between four and six years (Killgore, 2009; Tam & Sukhatme, 2004).

Additionally, it is essential that we consider the widening needs of students in these historic times of a shrinking global environment. Our students of today will be working and living in a culture of tightly tied economies of many countries, and international business connections in most every field from medicine, to mechanics. Therefore, we come to ask ourselves challenging questions. Are we preparing our students well enough to meet the demands and the needs of their future?

In her book, *Curriculum 21: Essential Education for a Changing World*, Jacobs (2010) opens with an insightful question about students' views of their education:

I often wonder if many of our students feel like they are time traveling as they walk through the school door each morning. As they cross the threshold, do they feel as if they are entering a simulation of life in the 1980s? Then, at the end of the school day, do they feel that they have returned to the 21st century? (p. 1)

As educators, we must look at the complexities of this problem and consider if our high schools are adequately injecting the type of knowledge, inquiry, and technology into their daily routines for students to become proficient in enough areas to allow them to be successful in college and the greater global workforce.

The push for increasing college participation comes locally and even from our president. President Obama (2009) stated, "And so tonight, I ask every American to commit to at least one year or more of higher education or career training. This can be community college or a four-year school, vocational school or an apprenticeship." Obama did not come right out and say it, but the message is clear: College has become the new high school. Are we preparing our high school students adequately to prepare to meet this charge as a nation?

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to discover the factors that elicit positive student preparation for and success in college in relation to the size, offerings, and factors of high school attended. An analysis was generated to determine whether high school location (rural, urban, suburban), student body size, course offerings, curricular opportunities, extra-curricular

programming options, and environmental expectations play a role in the level of preparation students receive for college admission and success.

Significance of the Study

High school offerings, size, programming, and environment have the potential to have a significant impact, positive or negative, on the overall quality of education that the students attain while attending there. In addition, these factors also influence how each of their students' experiences in their school prepared them for the rigors of college admissions and future college success. There are numerous ideas that are stated by school boards, administrators, principals, and counselors regarding which of the factors are the most important in this quest for college admittance and success. However, we can clearly see by the different high school offerings and programs that are provided throughout the state that the factors vary widely. Students rarely have a choice in the school which they attend, and therefore, have very little choice in the courses that are made available to them and the programs they are able to choose. Therefore, it is imperative that we consider which factors are actually significant in positively preparing our students for higher education success, which factors should be supported, and which factors should then be evaluated for future opportunities in higher education. The significance of this study was to discover the specific factors that elicit positive student preparation for admission to and success in Midwestern, four-year public colleges.

Research Questions

This qualitative research study sought to answer the following essential question. What are the high school factors that best prepare students for college success? To facilitate this direction, the research looked to answer:

1. Which high school academic and extra-curricular programs are most effective in preparing high school students for college as perceived by college admission's directors?
2. What areas of a high schools' environment are the highest predictors of college success as perceived by college admission's directors?
3. What are the Director of College admissions perceptions of the impact of the identified high school quality factors on college admissions?
4. What are the Director of College admissions perceptions of the impact of the identified high school quality factors on college success?

Delimitations and Limitations

Delimitations. This study focused on the culmination of high school quality factors as they are perceived by the directors for college admissions at various Midwestern, four-year, public college institutions. The scope of this inquiry focused on the input that was obtained from these directors.

Limitations. Conversations with the public college admissions directors brought forth insight of their perceptions and knowledge of high school quality factors that were viewed as important for their institution. However, the subjects' willingness to openly share what they believed about this topic may have been oppressed by a lack of familiarity with the researcher, time constraints, and/or the protocols or politics of their institution that may have required them to only articulate the institution's stated philosophy on new student admissions criterion and the high schools from which students graduated. In addition, the interviews were confined to only five Midwestern colleges and universities. Private colleges, technical schools, and community colleges were beyond the scope of this particular research study. Finally, admissions criteria and

the perception of high school factors are in a constant state of fluctuation. Yet, this study gathered direct information from directors in only the fall of 2010. This provided a relevant study in that particular time period, which may or may not be able to be generalized for the future.

Summary

This research study sought to identify the high school quality factors that elicit positive student preparation for and success in college in relation to the size, offerings, and factors of the high school a student attended. The researcher believed that once the executive directors of college admissions were interviewed, threads of commonalities would be discovered that related to factors that are considered during the college admissions process which are beyond what some educators and students would recognize as being considered. The study reviewed current trends, decisions, and personal philosophies used in the college admissions process. Inquiry into this topic provided additional information that is useful to educators, students and parents as they strive to implement meaningful high school programs and useful supports that prepare high school students for future college success.

CHAPTER 2

Review of Related Literature

The function of this review was to analyze recent educational literature that has shed light on the quality of education high school students receive as they prepare for college. It provided the purpose and initial research questions for a study that was conducted to delve deeper into the Midwestern public college admissions processes which takes into account a large variety of high school structures, programs, and environments within the 12 Midwestern states of North Dakota, South Dakota, Missouri, Kansas, Minnesota, Iowa, Wisconsin, Illinois, Michigan, Indiana, and Ohio. In addition, a review and analysis of some pertinent research on the topic was laid out in the areas of college indicators, small rural school issues, school and district size, and high school programming options. The articles within this chapter portray an accurate sampling of the views and issues that are involved. Finally, an ever growing list of references on the topic is included.

College Indicators

College admission teams seek to accurately identify students that are capable of succeeding in the college environment. One view of college success is identified as those students who graduate with a degree within six years of entering as a freshman college student. College admissions personnel attempt to identify the factors that prove to be the best indicators of success at this higher educational level. Particularly state colleges, those that are partially

funded by state tax revenue, attempt to focus their financial resources on students who will, in fact, be able to graduate from their institution within this time frame (Tam & Sukhatme, 2004).

Several universities rely on a students' high school class rank (HSCR) as one indicator for admissions. Yet, some research generally concludes a significant relationship exists between the combined two factors of high school students' cumulative GPA in conjunction with their standardized test scores such as SAT or ACT, in predicting their future college success (Mattson, 2007; Trusty & Niles, 2004). A third view though, is proposed by some that a modified HSCR would be more appropriate for the purpose of identifying future success. According to a recent study, this would include taking into consideration the quality of the high school that the applicant attended (Tam & Sukhatme, 2004), and would be calculated to include the high school's overall American College Test (ACT) or Scholastic Assessment Test (SAT) score as this appears to affect college success rates. With this approach students who took rigorous coursework alongside a larger number of peers that were also taking rigorous courses were given a higher indicator score than students who were in a lower performing school or those who only had a limited amount of higher level courses to select. While this may not seem fair to students on the surface as they do not have a choice in which school they attend, the evidence is clear that the quality of the high school one attends does impact the level of achievement in preparing students for the university level. The trends seem to be clear that students who are with other strong students working at high academic levels do graduate with more skills and preparation proficiencies to succeed in college (Espenshade, Hale, & Chung, 2005; Tam & Sukhatme, 2004).

High schools across the country are working to embed various college readiness programs and assessments into their curriculum in an attempt to increase the number of students that will attend college and improve the success rate for college graduation by increasing their

college readiness skills. Some states have begun to create legislation that mandates college preparatory assessments such as the Preliminary Scholastic Assessment Test (PSAT), SAT, or ACT be taken by all students in high schools. Students who are planning on attending college benefit from the additional practice taking these assessments early in middle or high school while they are also able to have their weaknesses identified with interventions for improvement put into place. Also worth mentioning is the sub-group of students who were not planning to attend college, yet whom demonstrated a strong performance score on the exam (Dounay, 2006). This strong score can then in turn provide an incentive for these students to reconsider their options after high school. Case in point, both Illinois and Colorado implemented mandatory ACT testing in 2001. The following year, 2002, Illinois reported a marked 24% increase in the number of graduating seniors that chose to enroll in college while Colorado increased by 23%. Notably, in addition to more students overall taking the ACT and choosing to enroll in college, there was a significant increase among low-income and minority students choosing a college track after high school (Dounay, 2006). This is especially significant as one study found that low-income and Latino students are drastically less likely than their white or Asian counterparts to attend high schools with higher level class offerings (Adelman, 2006).

The quest is broad in the search for identifiable high school factors that affect college success. At the college level, it is observed by some that a student is more likely to complete their course of post-secondary study if their first year college grades are strong (Gifford, Briceno-Perriott, & Mianzo, 2006; Reason, 2003). Therefore, it behooves us to look back one link to determine what high school factors affect the first year GPA for college students. Some of these factors seem to be intertwined and hence it is advantageous to review them together to search for correlations of effectiveness. One recent study found that a statistically significant

correlation exists between first year college GPA and the gender of high school students, their GPA, and high school leadership experiences (Deberard, Spielmans, & Julka, 2004). Just as interesting to discern from the study, is the fact that students' SAT scores were not significant in prediction first year college GPA performance.

One study completed at Ohio University focused on the role of math courses taken in high schools as a college indicator for completion of a bachelor's degree in college. It was concluded that continuous enrollment in a high school math course work each year throughout a student's high school years did have a positive effect on the outcome of their completion of a bachelor's degree. In addition, students who had taken higher level math courses during their high school years, such as precalculus and calculus, showed the highest correlation with success for Bachelor completion (Zelkowski, 2008). These results were in alignment with previous work in attempting to identify indicators of college success. For example, earlier studies by Adelman (2006) reviewed multiple research indicators and concluded that the students taking meaningful math classes in high school was positively correlated to college success. The importance of strong math instruction in high schools is one of the most important variables to enhancing the chances for students to complete a college bachelor degree (Adelman, 2006). In addition, other high school level indicators that were reviewed included students' academic anticipation for their future education, high school class rank, senior year exams such as SAT and ACT, highest level of math completed in high school, high school momentum in science and math, number of foreign language units successfully completed, number of AP courses completed, academic intensity of high school curriculum, and academic recourses. Each of these areas has direct implications for high school planning and focus in order to assist student in their future pursuits (Adelman, 2006).

College admissions officers regularly consider how they will accept or process potential students that have earned modified diplomas in comparison to a standard or honors diploma. In one study, it was noted that the admissions officers of colleges treated graduated high school students who had earned a modified diploma such as a special education diploma, certificate of attendance, or a certificate of completion, in the same way as they did a student who had dropped out of high school (Gaumer & Morningstar, 2009). Noteworthy, some Midwestern schools are presently transitioning to more stringent end-of-course assessments in language arts and algebra (Gaumer & Morningstar, 2009). Worth consideration is the fact that these increased expectations for all students may or may not then also be producing increased implications. More schools may begin pushing to boost high school graduation rates through alternative educational tracks and alternative diploma offerings outside of the stringent ECA requirements.

On the opposite side of the weight of alternative diplomas in college admissions is the issue of the academic reputation that various high schools may have and the impact this has on the admissions of potential college students. From one study of college admissions regarding elite colleges, it became evident that the academic reputation of a student's high school did not overcompensate for their class rank or GPA as some had expected. Their findings led to the conclusion that the strong and positive academic environment of a high school actually has a negative effect on high achieving students when they are seeking college admissions to elite, private schools (Espenshade et al., 2005). Even though a student may be academically strong in a high environment school, they are not able to stand out compared to a large number of other academically strong students. It is suggested by analogy that it is better to be a big frog in a little pond than a little frog in a big pond. Inversely though, when considering the social and peer networks that influence college choice, there seems to be a direct correlation between these and

students' post high school options (Espenshade et al., 2005). Therefore, in areas and schools where there are limited social networks and low social capital, less exposure results directly in lower college options for students as they look to transition from high school to possible postsecondary schooling (Perez & McDonough, 2008).

In his work, *Redefining College Readiness*, Conley (2007) looked at transforming the previously held definition of college readiness to a more focused definition that can specifically assist students and schools in an updated understanding of a more comprehensive and expansive view of college readiness. He believed that previously college readiness was defined mainly in terms of high school grades received from the high school courses taken, and this combined with scores from SAT/ACT national exams. Conley (2007) asserted, "Because college is genuinely different from high school, college readiness is fundamentally different than high school competence" (p. 6). Conley proposes a new model to understand the facets of college readiness that includes key cognitive strategies, key content, academic behaviors, and contextual skills and awareness. He explains, "College readiness is a multifaceted concept comprising numerous variables that include factors both internal and external to the school environment" (p. 6). Conley (2007) added, "What is needed is a more comprehensive look at what it means to be college-ready, a perspective that emphasizes the interconnectedness of all of the facets" (p. 12).

While some college admission departments may still be utilizing the basic information from Conley's 'old' college readiness definition in the admissions process, they also articulate that there is much involved in college readiness, and some high schools are noticeably better than others in preparing their students for college success. In his work *Rigor on Trial*, Wagner (2006) also asserted that alternative measures of college readiness should be considered:

There is no question that all students must now graduate from high school college-ready, as the skills for work, college, and active and informed citizenship have converged. But I am deeply troubled by how we currently define and assess college-readiness-not only what is tested, but also what courses students must take to be college-eligible. (p. 29)

Small Rural School Issues

In an attempt to evaluate the benefits and challenges of small rural schools, one issue that surfaces is direct academic achievement for students. Interestingly, some recent studies have suggested that graduation and attendance rates may be inversely related to school size (Jones & Toma, 2008). Yet student achievement may not be directly related to attendance and graduation. For instance, a recent study concluded that smaller school size does not equate to higher math achievement when all student factors are leveled (Wyse, Keesler, & Schneider, 2008). Results indicated that students in smaller school environments do not necessarily have a higher mathematics achievement than those students in larger school environments. Hardré (2008) found significance regarding student perceptions with math when doing comparisons by academic subjects with student interest in schools progress. Particularly, rural students scored measurably lower on their expected school achievement, perceived competence, effort, and future schooling intentions with regard to their mathematics perspective than they did when responding with regard to any other subject areas (Hardré, Sullivan, & Crowson, 2009). We must consider other factors that may account for higher or lower academic achievement in schools than only looking at the size of the school.

A challenge to obtaining ample, clear measures on rural school issues is the fact that while over 30% of schools in the United States are considered to be in rural communities, less

than 6% of educational research conducted in the United States includes rural schools (Hardré, 2008). We proceed with the limited research that we do have however, and note that another rural school issue needing to be measured is the quality of the academic education that students receive in a rural school compared to their suburban counterparts. In general, rural schools do have higher poverty rates, 23% nation-wide; and of those living in poverty in rural areas, over 41% are in extreme poverty, meaning below the 50th percentile on national poverty scales (Bouck, 2004). We observe that even though rural schools educate over 40% of the students of the United States, these schools are not provided with this same percentage of federal education funding (National Education Association, 2003). Therefore, it is easy to see that financial shortfalls affect the offerings that rural schools can provide to their students including access to higher academic courses, electives, and technology.

Furthermore, it is argued that the overall teacher quality (i.e., teaching experience, teachers with graduate degrees, teachers skilled in their content area) in rural communities is not as strong as it is in suburban areas (Eppley, 2009). Finally, it is purported that in rural schools the expectations teachers hold for their students is lower than elsewhere. It was found that the more rural a community was and the lower the income level of the area, the lower the expectations teachers had for students (Bouck, 2004). There is also an apparent correlation between teacher expectations in rural schools and student motivation. Motivational factors which are directly linked to teachers and school-based opportunities in the rural setting appear to directly influence valued student outcomes of high school completion and enrollment in postsecondary education (Hadré et al., 2009). Teachers in rural schools state that their ability to academically motivate students and their ability to unite classroom learning with students' view on what is meaningful to them is restricted by the environment (Hardré & Sullivan, 2008).

Often times, educators clearly see the effects of parental influence on students in their schools. One area of particular interest is the influences that parents, a family, and the community at large have on a high school student's decisions and dedication to excel past the high school level. It is noted that college enrollment rates for rural areas are consistently lower than college enrollment rates are for those living in cities, towns, or suburban areas. To expand, rural areas have an average of 27% of all potential students ages 18 - 24 enrolled in college, while towns had 32%, and cities and suburban areas both ranked at 37%. In addition, there exists a greater discrepancy in rural areas, 8%, between female and male enrollment in college (Provasnik, KewalRamani, Coleman, Gilbertson, Herring, & Zie, 2007).

A rural community seems to have some unique persuasions regarding this momentum for college admissions with parental support. In one Pennsylvania study, repeated in both 1995 and 2005, the percent of students planning to attend college, whose parents did not have any postsecondary schooling, was found to significantly increase from 38% to 66% in a decade (Legutko, 2008). While this is encouraging, more study should be done in comparisons regarding other rural areas. Again, note the shortage of research on rural school initiatives and progress.

Following along with the influence of family and community, it is found that these ties highly affect a student's college success potential. When looking at academically competent students, ethnicity and SES have been proven to be potent forecasters of college success (Coldarci, 2006; Plank & Jordan, 2001). Yet beyond this indicator, significant adults in a student's life during high school have a tremendous effect on students' views and focus regarding their potential college admittance and success (Hudley, Moschetti, & Gonzalez, 2009). Successful adjustment to the rigors of academics, independent life, necessary social skills, and

especially transitioning if they are a first-generation college student, were taxing. While students thrive from positive adult interactions in these areas, students in rural schools commonly have fewer teacher interactions and rarely see opportunities for higher education embedded in their daily life (Hudley et al, 2009).

School and District Size

Public schools in the United States saw their history begin with small schools and small school districts. Over the last century, this has transitioned drastically with growth of towns, cities, and consolidation of schools. For example, in 1940 there were slightly over 117,000 school districts. By the year 2000, the number had plummeted to approximately 15,000 districts. Yet, during this same time frame, the average student population size for schools had grown dramatically from 115 to 509 students (National Center for Educational Statistics [NCES], 2003).

While reviewing literature for this study, it was discovered that there exists a reasonable amount of research written that extols the benefits of either small or large schools. Some of these 'size' concerns include district size, school size, funding formulas based on size, school consolidation considerations, academic impact, administrative costs, behavioral issues, socioeconomic disparities, culture, and climate (Andrews, Duncombe, & Yinger, 2002; Beeson, 2001; Cotton, 1996; Driscoll, Holcoussis, & Svorny 2003; Foreman-Peck & Foreman-Peck, 2006; Holcoussis & Svorny, 2003; Hubba, 1983; Killeen & Sipple, 2000; Shear, Means, & Mitchell, 2008). In addition, it is interesting to note the differences in the stated benefits of a school or district of a particular size based on the entity that funded the research. For example, many of the research and articles that are produced or printed in *The Rural Educator* conclude that smaller schools provide more value; whereas, the conclusion of research or articles funded

or printed in the *Economics of Education Review* are divided between the benefits promoting large or small schools based on the indicator discussed.

One Texas study found that the size of school districts, the size of high schools, and class size are inversely related to the attendance rate of the enrolled students (Jones & Toma, 2008). As there is a correlation between dropout rates and attendance rates in schools, this finding can be considered pertinent standing alone. However, the underlying cause of this inverse relationship between attendance and school size may also be related to budgeting decisions based on size, the socioeconomic status of the area for larger schools, or the accepted environment of the student population in each district. Whatever the cause though, the inverse relationship is worth consideration.

While there are some factors in a rural school that cannot be changed, such as large district area, long bus rides, or less extra-curricular activities based on less availability of resources, others are controllable, such as the amount of instructional leadership provided by the administrators, high expectations for all students, and frequent assessment of students to name just a few. Here it seems is where rural or small schools may have an opportunity to create a higher quality school (Kafka, 2008). How students perceive the relevance and rigor of their high school does impact their vision for future learning. For example, some rural high school graduates that were involved in vocational tracks perceived their high school experience to be effective in developing personal quality skill, thinking skills and management skills. In contrast, those students in the rural school's general or academic tracks considered the relevance of their academic preparations to be much less relevant than necessary for their future college endeavors (Baker, 1999). In addition, it was found through a rural school study in one southwestern state that teachers believed their small school size was a detriment to students. While they realized

the proclivity to have smaller classes, more individual attention, and social closeness, administrators and teachers generally have several, diverse responsibilities which then does not allow them to be highly effective with any of their duties (Hardré & Sullivan, 2008).

A capstone study in Michigan came to the conclusion that the ideal high school, defined in terms of effectiveness and learning, enrolls between 600 and 900 students. This research suggests that in schools smaller than 600, students will learn less. Conversely, in schools that are excessively large, particularly those over 2,100, students will learn significantly less (Lee & Smith, 1997). Additionally, this research suggested that the influence of school size on learning is different in schools that enroll students of diverse, minority backgrounds, and the varying proportion of poverty. They conclude that the enrollment size of a school has a stronger effect on learning in schools that maintain high concentrations of minority students and those with lower-SES students (Lee & Smith, 1997).

When we consider size, logic may guide the thinking that larger schools and particularly consolidating schools would bring more resources together for funding options for students. It is thought that larger schools could then capitalize on this additional funding and expand student services and academic course options. The advantage being that diversification of curricula will better be able to respond to a wider array of student interests and needs (Bard, Gardener, & Wieland, 2006; Ready, Lee, & Welner, 2004).

As small schools attempt to provide the minimum courses necessary to meet all state requirements and pertinent elective courses, scheduling becomes a major concern. There are many demands for offering all necessary classes, but only minimal staffing to cover each of the areas if the school is working to fill all of the needs of a comprehensive school. A diverse study of teacher perceptions on their effectiveness in various size school settings discovered that

teachers of small high schools regularly dealt with the pressure of unique schedules, rotating classes, a wide array of classes that they needed to teach, and teaching outside of their specialization area. Teachers believed that due to the issues they faced while teaching in a small school, they were not as effective for student achievement as they could be in a larger school (Lee, Smerdon, Alfeld-Liro, & Brown, 2000).

High School Programming Options

Advanced high school coursework, in the form of honors courses, Advanced Placement (AP) courses, and International Baccalaureate (IB) has been expanding across the country for the past 50 years. As of 2006, this movement involved over 1.2 million students taking AP classes. The students in these AP classes took over 2.1 million AP exams in one year which were spread out over 32 academic subjects (Sadler & Tai, 2007). There has been a huge increase in the number of these AP exams being taken by high school students over these years also. The percentage of pre-senior high school students taking AP exams has grown continuously over the last 10 years in every state. In Indiana for example, the percentage of students taking at least one AP exam has grown from 16.1% in 2004 to 20.7 in 2009, while as a nation those numbers have grown from 19.9% in 2004 to 26.5% in 2009 (College Examination Board, 2010). In addition, nationally the number of students passing AP exams with a score of three or higher has risen from 12.7% in 2004 to 15.9% in 2009. A strong relationship has been identified between students who take these advanced courses and their future college success in their similar subject coursework and grades. It is believed to be more challenging to earn a top grade in such classes considering the proclivity to have large numbers of academically superior students in the course and also a high degree of competition (College Board, 2000).

While it is documented that advanced high school coursework is a significant predictor of student performance in college courses, it is noted that the reason for the correlation cannot be clearly identified. It is understood that student motivation, socioeconomic status, family situation, and the availability of advanced placement classes for students in various size high schools all impact student success in both high school and college. In addition, we must also consider the controversial issues of weighted High School Grade Point Averages (HSGPA) which might provide students in higher socioeconomic areas with more access to a greater variety and availability of advanced placement courses, and accordingly may provide additional quality points resulting in higher HSGPA's for these students in more affluent school districts (Burdinan, 2000).

A recent study focused on specifying the details of the delineation between high school course performance (GPA) in comparison to the number of core and college preparation course units taken during the four years of high school on college success. It was theorized that college GPA would be higher for those students that had taken a higher number of college preparation courses in high school. Interestingly though, the results showed that there was in fact no significant correlation between more high school courses and the college success rate of GPA or college retention rates. There was a positive linear correlation though, between a student's performance in high school courses, their high school GPA, and their college GPA and retention rate. This evidence points to the fact that the number of core courses students participate in while attending high school is not as important as how well they perform in those classes they do take (Wilford, 2009).

Another programming area that is becoming more prevalent each year is early, certified college courses that high school students take before they graduate. These programs are set in a

variety of ways including dual-credit classes, university courses taught within the high school day, courses taken on the university campus with college students, and International Baccalaureate programs of various structures. Some of these courses may be set and taught by staff in a full four-year university, others are implemented through a two-year community college, and still others are taught by high school teachers in the regular high school setting. One related qualitative study took an in-depth look at high school students who attended college courses on the university campus alongside college students. The results revealed an overall negative outcome for both the set of high school students and the college students in the shared class (Taczak & Thelin, 2009). Called into question was the possibility that the cognitive capabilities of some of the high school students were not developed sufficiently to allow them to manage the rigor of contemporary conception of compositions at the level the course was intended. It may be prudent to look closely at these early college courses as well as stepping back and considering the many complexities of growing teenagers along with their mental and social development while looking at results of such courses (Taczak & Thelin, 2009).

High school programming options are only as strong as the willingness of students to participate in them. If we do not have students feeling comfortable with their school surroundings and the climate of their school environment, they will obviously not participate in the plethora of high school opportunities that may be available to them. One encompassing study looked specifically at this area of high school student adjustment and found that there were a few main factors that supported students' positive adjustment to their school environment and how much they liked school. These included peer relationships, teacher caring, participation in school and non-school activities, and the amount that the family cared about the student's school behavior (Stanley, Comello, Edwards & Marquart, 2008). In addition, they noted that the

characteristics associated with rural schools were related to student outcomes. So, we should consider that even if a school's has fine high school programming options in place, students' school factors may affect their overall achievement in their high school.

In one of their research pieces Kirst and Venezia (2001) expounded on some of the figures and trends in the educational bridge from high school to college for the approximately 2.5 million public high school graduates each year in the United States:

Over 70% of these graduates go on to postsecondary education within two years of graduating from high school, and over half of those students aspire to obtain a bachelor's degree. However, over 50% of students entering all postsecondary education institutions will take remedial courses, many in several subject areas. A large percentage of students do not continue on for a second year of college, and 41% who earn more than 10 credits at a two- or four-year school never complete a two- or four-year degree. (p. 92)

They, as well as other researchers, conclude that areas such as inadequate secondary preparation results in the challenges that colleges and universities continue to face as they seek to increase the quality of their applicants, decrease the need for academic remediation, and increase their graduation rates (Abraham, 1992; Barton, 2002; Education Trust, 1999; Horn, Kojaku, & Carroll, 2001; Kirst, 2001; Roper, 2008).

Gaps

After a great deal of searching and reviewing current research on the area of high school size, quality, and college success, it appears that there remained many gaps in documentation on this specific correlation of subjects. The lack of consistent outcomes and identifiable college success indicators throughout the research points to the fact that there is not a plethora of directly

related research on this topic that points to any one conclusion. However, as noted above through the four sections, some of the related fields such as rural schools, specific high school programs, and college admissions do exist as independent subject studies which relate to the topic. In addition, there appeared to be a lack of research that attends to the views and beliefs of the college admissions directors or deans as they work through the decision making processes each year with new college admission needs and criteria. What these individuals think, believe, know, and implement through the admission process, from their own use and interpretation of the data, is a critical piece that does not seem to be well documented. How these key individuals view the research, the data, and their college's needs and limitations was interesting to learn.

CHAPTER 3

Methodology

After careful review of the literature on the topic of high school quality factors, it became evident that there exists various, unique high school factors that may affect the college admissions and college success of Midwestern high school students. Variations in these factors and how relevant each of them is perceived were thought to affect how college admissions officers categorize and label each applicant. To find out more about how these factors were interpreted from Midwestern colleges, the following research methods were implemented for this comprehensive study. This chapter incorporates a description of the methods, participants, and research questions were implemented.

This research on high school quality factors for college success was set forth to gain a better understanding of the perceptions of college admissions personnel in regard to these factors. The focus was set to probe into the intricacies that lay beyond what text may be written in a college brochure or the surface doctrine that may be articulated to potential new students. As a qualitative study, this research worked in a case-study mode which allowed for an in-depth view of various Midwestern college admissions processes and the structural procedures and accompanying perceptions that meld to form the trajectory for each institution's yearly admissions of new students. As a qualitative study, this research worked in a five case-study

mode, which was a snapshot of this issue, bounded by the time and activity through which the research transpires.

It was decided that a qualitative design method for this study would have the highest yield for new and in-depth knowledge on the subject. Creswell (2003) recommends that a qualitative study include characteristics such as the research taking place in a natural setting; questions being emergent instead of closely prefigured; using interactive and humanistic methods; seeking ways to best uncover the central phenomenon of interest; is fundamentally interpretive; considers social phenomena from a holistic standpoint; the researcher carefully considering his/her personal biography and how this may influence the study; and/or using complex reasoning that is comprehensive across the data. This holistic, interactive approach worked well to gain valuable insight from each Director of College Admissions on the topic. This method is well suited as a researcher seeks to uncover emergent themes in an area of study such as through an interview process, even “understanding that individuals are not equally perceptive nor articulate” (Creswell, 2003, p. 186). Following the qualitative direction, this researcher found that the interviews were stronger due to the relatively few open-ended questions that were created and asked. The participants then were able to expand upon each question as well as infuse the conversation with additional areas of their interest.

The data that emerges from a qualitative study is descriptive in nature while focusing on the process that is occurring in addition to the final themes or outcome of the questions. (Merriam, 1998). Since humans are the source of information and knowledge retrieved in such a study, one must understand that it is the subjects’ realities, which may or may not be factual, that are being captured (Lincoln & Guba, 2000). Therefore, this researcher took notice of the mannerisms and nuances of each participant in regard to the ease or hesitancy with which they

answered questions and their willingness to speak or not about various areas of the admissions and college success process at their school.

Research Questions

This qualitative research study sought to answer the following essential question. What are the high school factors that best prepare students for college success? To facilitate this direction, the research looked to answer:

1. Which high school academic and extra-curricular programs are most effective in preparing high school students for college as perceived by college admission's directors?
2. What areas of a high schools' environment are the highest predictors of college success as perceived by college admission's directors?
3. What are the Director of College admissions perceptions of the impact of the identified high school quality factors on college admissions?
4. What are the Director of College admissions perceptions of the impact of the identified high school quality factors on college success?

Participants

This study concentrated on the views and perspectives of the five leaders of college admissions in four-year, Midwestern public colleges who chose to participate in this study. Requested were their views, perspectives, and beliefs regarding high school factors and how these influenced admissions decisions. Interviews were conducted with a director of admissions leader from the main campuses of five colleges and universities. Regional campus admissions officers and private colleges were not targeted in this study, and therefore, any unique perspectives that they may have had on the admissions process and priorities were not included

here. The participants identified were the leaders of the admissions division for their college. Any additional data or resources that were provided by the admissions leaders were reviewed by the researcher also.

Procedures

The researcher interviewed each director of admissions between one and three hours on their college campus. Interviews transpired for as long as the director was willing to speak on the topic of high school quality factors as they relate to college admissions. Open-ended questions led the discussions, with an emphasis on the leader sharing their detailed views on each topic. Each session was audio recorded for transcription of exact statements and analysis through the discussion. The interviews took place over a 14-day period in November of 2010.

Instrumentation

The Directors of Admissions of five Midwestern colleges were individually interviewed in a closed room in a building of the director's choice, on their school's campus. Each interview, which lasted between one and three hours, was audio recorded to allow for careful analysis after the session. The researcher asked each director a predetermined set of questions regarding their perceptions on high school quality factors in relation to college admissions. The directors' responses were followed by the researcher, and clarification was requested for any unclear portions of a response. In addition, three scenarios for college admissions were presented, and each director was given ample time to respond with their thoughts on the scenario. The researcher took limited notes during the interview, and then later listened to the audio tape to ensure clarity.

The interview questions and scenarios were based on data and specific information obtained through the literature review. Four prominent and recurring themes which became

evident in the research were a) high school programming options, b) school and district size, c) small rural school issues, and 4) college indicators. Therefore, these main themes were the basis of the questions and scenarios that were created for the personal interviews. While the breadth of each theme was wide, there emerged a few general trends in the research that led to further insight of college success based on high school quality factors as seen through the experiences of the directors of college admissions.

Data Analysis

This research study of the perceptions and possible connections between high school quality factors and college admissions drew on data collection, interpolation, correlation, theme identification, and overall analysis from the responses of the individuals interviewed at each college admissions office. The interviews with all five college department heads were conducted during the fall of 2010, followed by analysis of the responses through January of 2011. The audio recording of each interview was carefully transcribed in detail. Next, all of the directors' comments were grouped by topic. Once that was completed, topics and perceptions were identified and analyzed for recurrent themes, commonalities, and any significant differences that emerged.

Establishing Validity and Reliability

This study sought to establish both validity and reliability through the use of ethical means in all procedures. Interviews with college admissions directors had the potential to bring forth a vast quantity of pertinent information and insights regarding the procedures and policies, both written and unwritten, that each college follows and the perceptions regarding the actual adherence level of these. The researcher worked diligently to keep her own views, assumptions, biases and ideas out of the interview process while intentionally allowing the interviewed

individuals to freely express their thoughts. The researcher acknowledged that she does have a strong interest in the subject of high school rigor in preparing students for college, and fully comprehends that uncovering the facts in an impartial manner was the best means to compile accurate information.

One technique that this researcher implemented to ensure validity was member checking. After the interviews were completed and the information was documented, the researcher forwarded the tentative interpretations, and data, from each interview, back to the corresponding director of admissions that was interviewed. These individuals then had an opportunity to review the documents and evaluate them for accuracy of their intent and communication during the interview. They had an opportunity to share their opinion on the accuracy of the documents.

Conclusion

Gathering additional information directly from the directors of college admissions at the five Midwestern state colleges added insight and information to the knowledge base for college admissions and success. This chapter has described the qualitative methodology that the researcher used to gather the necessary data for analysis and to identify pertinent high school quality factors that significantly affect college admissions and success. A qualitative method was used.

Chapter four features an exhibit of the data acquired, pooled results, and analysis of this information. Also, included is some pertinent information regarding the enrollment, graduation rates, percent of minority students, degree offerings, retention rates and percent of applicants admitted for each college and university. As a summary, chapter five presents discussion on the acquired data, the developed themes, overall analysis, relevance to current research, limitations

of the study, and implementation for educational practice. In addition, this chapter expounds upon proposals for potential future research.

CHAPTER 4

Presentation of Results and Data Analysis

The purpose of this qualitative study was to discover the factors that elicit positive student preparation for and success in college in relation to the size, offerings, and factors of high school attended. An analysis of the responses from the executive directors of five Midwestern universities was done in order to determine whether high school location (rural, urban, suburban), student body size, course offerings, curricular opportunities, extra-curricular programming options, and environmental expectations play a role in the level of preparation students receive for college admission and success. Common themes that emerged were examined for their effect on high school student preparation for transition to college.

Chapter 4 submits and analyzes the findings gathered from interviews with the five executive directors of Midwestern colleges and universities. It also briefly details the demographics, size and student entrance data including first-year student retention rates, four, five, and six-year graduation rates, SAT and ACT entrance score medians, percent of applicants admitted, and percent of freshman who were Pell recipients for each college/university.

Research Questions

This qualitative research study sought to answer the following essential question: What are the high school factors that best prepare students for college success? To facilitate this direction, the researcher specifically inquired using the following questions:

1. Which high school academic and extra-curricular programs are most effective in preparing high school students for college?
2. What areas of a high schools' environment are the highest predictors of college success?
3. What are the Director of College Admissions perceptions of the impact of the identified high school quality factors on college admissions?
4. What are the Director of College Admissions perceptions of the impact of the identified high school quality factors on college success?

Participants

Interviewed were the Executive Directors of Admissions of five Midwestern, public colleges and universities of post-secondary education. Each of these institutions offers complete four-year bachelor's degree programs in various academic areas as well as additional masters degrees in certain areas. Three of the institutions offer post-masters coursework and doctoral level programs in some fields of study. Two of the institutions offer post-doctorate studies. Four of the five institutions support on-going research in three or more fields. Table 1 displays a few of the size, offerings, and student details of each institution.

Table 1

2009 Size and Enrollment Data for Participating Colleges/Universities

| College/University Identifier | # undergraduates | % minority (non-White) | Students over age 25 | Part time students | Pell Recipients Freshman | Highest Level Offerings |
|-------------------------------|------------------|------------------------|----------------------|--------------------|--------------------------|-------------------------|
| A | 8,493 | 20.9% | 21.2% | 14.4% | 32.0% | Doctoral research |
| B | 16,694 | 14.1% | 11.4% | 7.9% | 23.0% | Doctoral research |
| C | 9,225 | 8.8% | 17.7% | 17.2% | 27.0% | Masters |
| D | 30,394 | 17.1% | 4.7% | 5.3% | 13.0% | Post Doctoral research |
| E | 32,610 | 18.8% | 7.2% | 7.4% | 16.0% | Post Doctoral research |

Interviews took place in the offices of each Executive Director of Admissions during a regularly scheduled college school day in October or November when students and staff were present. Each of the five directors were very welcoming and appeared eager to discuss with the researcher the details of their school's successes, previous history, present areas of growth, challenges, and vision for the future. All of the directors offered many details, beyond answering the initial questions, regarding their thoughts and perceptions about what high school factors affect students' preparation for success at their colleges. However, a few chose not to share all of their thoughts on specific high schools. One in particular would begin naming a certain high school in his/her state, but would then stop in mid-sentence and say that the university's policy is to look at all students individually. There were points during these times that it was obvious that

the director had stronger thoughts and feelings about particular high schools but was not willing to share them. In addition, all five executive directors of admissions appeared genuinely quite pleased overall with the college/university that employed them.

All participants stated that they were choosing to remain in their present positions at the institution at this period of time. The individuals in this group had been working in their present jobs between 6 to 32 years, and all espoused their desire to remain. The pride that they had in their college/university was illuminated in many of their topic comments that they intertwined into the conversations, most diverting from the questions and topics to express the details of a program, vision, or area of study that they were fervent about. For example, one interviewee mentioned the institution's collaborative program option, in which students work on a project with local businesses, three times throughout our interview. Another individual began enthusiastically explaining the institution's opportunities for overseas programs, and brought it into the various topics of conversations three times as well. All five contributors appeared willing to spend ample time in our interview, never rushing through questions, answering very thoroughly, and expanding in areas that were not directly linked to the questions or explained focus of the interview. This researcher explained to each participant prior to the interview, and again at the beginning of the interview, that the plan was for an hour, but they could choose to go longer if they desired. In spite of the expected time frame, the interviews ranged from 82 minutes to two hours and 47 minutes.

Themes Based on the Experiences, Perceptions, and Views of College Admissions Directors

After reviewing the interview transcriptions from each interview, the researcher divided the comments into groups by the 12 most common theme topics that emerged. Some of these themes were expected since they were presented in the interview questions, including school

size, AP and dual-credit courses, high school class offerings, and extra-curricular participation. Other areas of interest and comment, however, were not expected, including high school advising factors, scholarship and funding issues, and grade inflation. Following is a description of the content, views, and explanations from each participant on these 12 topics.

High School Size

High school enrollment sizes in the Midwest vary greatly. One high school in the Midwestern area of study has a total student enrollment of 4,389 for grades nine through 12. On the other end of the spectrum is a school which educates a relatively minimal total of only 52 students in the entire high school student body. Each of the five directors had experiential knowledge and perceptions of how high school size affects the students' preparation and success in college.

One director, B, expressed a broad viewpoint about school size stating, "We use a holistic approach, therefore, it does not matter what size their school is or how many resources they have." In similar fashion, A stated,

Size depends on what support they have. Differences in outcomes depend on support. It depends on the funding the school gets, who the people are who are in the schools, and what type of impact or philosophy they have to make changes.

In another sweeping overall statement, D replied,

For the most part, the students who are coming to 'Q' (the institution's name) are, for the most part, really well prepared to make that transition from high school to college here, regardless of whether they have come from a tiny place or a huge place or someplace in the middle.

As each director continued to speak on the subject of school size, additional perceptions emerged. For instance, B declared that at times he has to take into account his recommendations to parents regarding high school size. He wonders if students should, “move to a high school with 17 AP classes compared to staying in a small rural school that may have all kinds of issues and not many resources.” He voiced that he was often prone to suggesting the larger school for the possibility of higher student success. In agreement, C verbalized, “They are just exposed to so many things in a larger school.” And he continued, “I would probably, in my heart of hearts, I hate saying this, but I would probably slant a little in favor of the large high school.”

Comments about smaller high schools included E’s statement that displays her view on the level of preparation a small school can provide, by saying, “Small schools are probably not competitive for engineering, just because, not competitive enough, but probably could be very successful in many other programs.” In the same realm, A proclaimed, “I worry about some smaller schools.” Also, he stated, “There are some kids sitting idle in these small schools.” And, “We have to consider if it is a small, ‘podunk’ school somewhere, where they don’t offer any services.” He thought that some of these small schools are not eager to consider new opportunities in curriculum, student supports, and level of student engagement. A concluded this topic stating, “As much as I would never put it on record, and tell individual schools, I would want to know what schools they were coming from.”

Interestingly, while discussing school size, three of the five participants brought up the reality that they see, in their admission decisions, that students in smaller high schools regularly apply with lower SAT and ACT scores than their similarly situated counterparts in larger high schools. Participant C exclaimed, “But those students (from small high schools) are extremely strong, good work ethic, good GPA, even if they don’t test well.” He continued, “In a small

school, those kids, the valedictorian, salutatorian, number 3 ranked student, they don't normally test well." Likewise, D reported, "Sometimes you see students in smaller areas (smaller schools) with SAT's that are lower for whatever reason." In like manner, E maintained,

The curriculum that they took is probably going to be different, because the 'L' (large high school name) kids compared to the 'M' (small high school name) have greater access to a wider range of courses, and particularly advanced courses, and the test scores will probably be different as well.

High School Location-Rural, Urban, or Suburban

When asked if the location, being rural, urban, or suburban, impacted high school preparation for college, the directors gave a wide variety of responses. The issue of resources was a factor with E voicing,

What fascinated me is the differences that we see in the opportunities for students and also their accomplishments, in what I would call inner-ring schools (urban public high schools) in 'X' (city name) versus those in the 'N' (suburban public high schools).

Demographically, the students are not that different, but what is available to them in the schools is drastically different.

Participant A accounted, "Yes, there is a difference with the three areas, rural, urban, and suburban." Then he included, "Rural schools have certain resource impediments."

Regarding whether they would have any preferences for a student coming from a rural, suburban, and urban area, B responded, "It is not going to matter to me. I am going to admit all three of them. For 'R' (institution's name) we will want every one of those students."

Participant D mentioned, "For the most part, our 'X' (state name) schools are doing a great job of preparing students for future options." She noted an exception to her general statement

saying, “Where we struggle a bit, because I think there have been so many changes within the urban schools, and the schools within a school and the charter schools.” Participant A also noted, “Urban schools are challenged because their resources are going for other things, police, drugs, and such.”

While focusing on rural schools, E articulated, “So, I do believe that college is possible for those students, but they are the ones that have beaten the odds in their particular environment, small, rural, lack of resources and opportunities.” She continued, “There is no doubt about it, and so the students who are in these small schools, particularly those in rural counties, just don’t have those kinds of opportunities.” Participant A asserted, “Kids in rural communities, it’s a whole different field.” And later, while he shared more about his concern for lower accomplishments in a rural school, he stated, “A student with a 4.0 in a class of 15 in a rural school, what does that 4.0 mean? But I would choose rural over urban. Urban would be my last choice.” He believes that suburban schools maintain a very different environment that leads to greater student success.

Participant C believed that urban schools were quite challenged when preparing students for college. He stated strongly, “We do have some success from kids from the inner city, they are really motivated.” However, he added, “All their classes are a bit lower level.” In line with this, while speaking on urban schools and preparing students for college, participant E pronounced,

Right now in ‘X’ (state name) we have these three different diploma tracks in high schools, and I worry very much, who, from a demographic point of view, is electing the technical track, is it mostly boys, are our students of color disproportionately represented, are low income students disproportionately represented?

She compared this by saying, “AP continues to be the coin of the realm for the suburban and well-off students, and I think the state needs to be very careful of that.”

Each of the five participants discussed a concern for increasing the expectation for college at each high school type and location, along with some frustration because they were not seeing these expectations held up. Participant E said it well when she shared a story about a memorable conversation she had with another educator. She explained,

I had a conversation with a career track educator a couple of years ago, from ‘X’ (state name), from a rural county, and we were just talking about some of these issues, and he said ‘We have to have really strong career tech programs in our high schools because only 20% of our kids go to college. Shouldn’t the first question be, that should be the first question, why do only 20% of your kids go to college?’

High School Curriculum

Concerns over the specifics in the high school curriculum at various schools surfaced in multiple areas. Each participant, at some point in their interview, shared a desire for better standards of quality in the delivery of curriculum at various high schools. Some articulated the details of the different types of diplomas available such as Core 40, Honors diplomas, and Technical diplomas, other comments revolved around the class choices available for students, and still others delved into rigor of coursework. As participant B declared,

Our admission decision is really based upon what the student has done whether they have had the resources or not, at their fingertips. It does come back to what the student has accomplished and what they have done in the classroom.

In regard to the high school curriculum, participant D stated, “We know all high schools are not created equal.” Also, “Well, for the most part we really try to put high schools on a level

playing field, and of course we know that's never going to be completely accurate." Along the same lines, participant E affirmed this view by saying, "Unfortunately, nationwide and even within 'X' (state name), we know that there is not equity in terms of the opportunities that students have, and that is kind of a passion of mine." She also added, "There is no question that the rigor of the high school curriculum is the best predictor of college success."

Participant D explained that she believed students would be better served if they took more basic classes such as English, science, math, history, and boldly stated, "I think in general, high school education has become too much of a cafeteria." She said that her experience over the years in admissions had led her to believe that high schools offered too many choices, and did not necessary prepare all students to be successful in college if they chose that path later. She stated,

There is nothing wrong with having a full slate of academic, core academic preparation, and then making that choice of getting that education (post-secondary) at 'Z' (a local community college) where it is readily available, through a certificate or an associate's degree.

In reference to the factors surrounding the high school curriculum participant D disclosed, "We really try to look at the student in his or her particular environment, what they have done, whether they have been persistent, if they struggled a little with something, and then improved a bit." Focusing exclusively on the class needs, participant C thought that writing was an area of great need for the high schools. He stated, "Generally speaking, I don't think kids write well anymore, even top students. I am concerned about that a lot. To interview for a job, and not use proper English." He also imparted, "The communication and math are big areas that they need

to improve.” In addition, participant B stated, “We are losing a lot of that, the rigor of writing at some high schools.”

A few comments were made on distance education or on-line courses being taken in the high schools. Participant D noted, “We haven’t seen a lot of that yet, in terms of the transcripts.” She continued, “We get transcripts constantly from ‘Q’ (college name) high school program that would be one example.” She pondered, “I don’t know how many high school age students or transfer students that are college-age are doing that much on-line.” She explained that what she was hearing was that older students were doing more on-line classes at this time as compared to high school students, though she realized that this venue of classes was just beginning to increase. Participant A stated, “We have to look at the modality of delivery.” And, “It depends on the rigor used for these (on-line type classes). It may be good or bad based on rigor.” He concluded with, “It all goes back to again, what is the expectation from that course in terms of participation.” Participant C stated, “Now we have this on-line this, on-line that. I don’t want to be anti high-tech, but we have quality issues we need to be sure about.”

AP course options. All five participants were willing to contribute their thoughts on AP and dual-credit courses and the perceived benefits to students who take them during their high school career. Generally, they each articulated their belief that both types of classes were advantageous for students. Participant B stated, “We are really interested in seeing honors courses, AP, **IB** classes, dual-credit courses. That is huge push right now.” When explaining how their institution considers these courses during the admissions process, he further stated, “When we are going through and making those calculations, we circle AP, IB, and dual-credit, or higher level classes.” Participant E mentioned, “We very much look with favor on advanced placement and IB.” She continued, “Because what AP does is kind of raise the boats for

everybody because it creates intellectual excitement in and amongst the students.” In reference to both AP and dual-credit classes, participant C said, “Those are all plusses.” Also, participant E supplemented her comments on AP and dual-credit with additional focus on IB by stating, “The interesting thing is IB is growing in ‘X’ (state name) which is great.” And she added, “IB curriculum provides students with the opportunity to make connections across disciplines probably more so than many of our college curricula.”

When comparing the quality of college preparation, the participants saw with incoming AP-experienced students as compared to those having only dual-credit experience, a positive slant toward AP courses was communicated. Participant E stated, “I think that to be competitive, certainly for the students who want to cross state lines to go to college, if given the choice, I think students should take AP.” She continued, “It is far more positive for students with AP in terms of their eventual college success.” Also on this comparison she stated,

It is something, along with IB, that is recognized by four-year universities all around the country. It (AP) is the only standardized curriculum we have nation-wide. It is constantly being assessed, constantly being improved, constantly being validated with college faculty.

In like manner, participant C pronounced, “I would slant a little toward the AP. It’s got a good reputation.” He also mentioned, “Colleges are less apt to question the integrity of the AP relative to the dual-credit.” A bit later he added, “If you backed me in a corner, and said you have to make a decision here, could only choose one, it would be the AP.” Participant B proclaimed, “If they are able to take them (AP courses) and do well in them, it absolutely is a huge benefit when we are looking at their admissions.” B explained further,

When we are reviewing to make the final decision, if that student is taking 15, 20 higher level courses or has that student taken one or two courses. That is a major indicator or a major piece of our decision making process.

In the same realm, participant E stated, “We expect to see that they have challenged themselves (taken the AP courses offered), that they have taken advantage of the opportunities that they have been afforded, that would be an expectation.”

Concern emerged from a few participants regarding the need to ensure the proper fit for students who are placed into AP courses in high school. They wondered if the students have strong enough abilities to manage through the course and grasp the concepts well. Participant D voiced,

We need to ensure rigor with reality. When a student is in an AP class who probably, who should really not be; they should be in a regular class, mastering that subject. Not struggling to hang on by a thread in an AP.

Participant B said, “Obviously, getting D’s or F’s have a negative impact at what we are looking at.” He included, “I see too many times when students are taking those classes, and they are passing them with flying colors, but not doing well on the AP tests, or not doing well on the standardized ACT or SAT test.” In like manner, participant E avowed, “And we don’t want students to take AP either if they are not ready. D’s in AP courses are not going to get you much.” She also shared her concern for which types of high schools are supporting and making available AP courses. She stated, “Now supposedly there is a bit of advanced placement everywhere. So, there are some opportunities, but clearly they’re disproportionately available in the college towns and the wealthier suburbs.”

Dual-credit course options. All five participants chose to communicate specifically about dual-credit classes, the availability of such courses, the rigor or lack thereof, transferability of the credits, expansion of offerings, and even the political arena that plays a part with dual-credit offerings. One of the most frequently asserted topics in this area was a concern for an appropriate level of rigor with the curriculum content and delivery of these courses in high schools. Participant B opened by saying,

Dual-credit, the positives I see there, is the students have the opportunity to take college level courses. As long as these classes are providing the level of instruction that they would be receiving at the institution, I'm okay with it.

He continued with more detail stating, "But that is a concern that the students are not receiving the same level of instruction at the high school level as they would at the institution." In reference to dual-credit opportunities for high school students, participant A stated, "There are some concerns there." In reference to dual-credit as compared to AP courses he pronounced, "Generally not, (with emphasis) as positive." Participant C asserted, "My concern is the rigor of those classes." He also stated, "Some schools where students get the dual-credit from, I question whether or not we should do that, because the reputation of the school is not great." He also declared, "Just because they have the (dual) credits or an AA (associates degree by credits) from high school does not mean they will be successful here." Along the same line, participant D said, "With the dual-credit classes, supposedly those classes are going to be taught as true college classes, which means there should be more rigor involved. I think that sometimes happens. I know sometimes it probably doesn't." Participant E directly stated, "Dual-credit should be a concern." She also announced, "They don't prepare a student to be successful." In reference to engineering degrees and the dual-credit coursework known as Project Lead the Way,

she articulated, “There was practically nothing that showed that it was particularly, nothing showed, that it was successful in preparing students to complete engineering degrees.”

The concept that arose multiple times was who was providing the dual-credit instruction and from what institution was it being backed. Participant A stated, “It goes down to who is providing the dual-credit.” He also spoke about more institutions beginning to provide dual-credit and said, “The more recent concern has been the influx of dual-credit. It isn’t diligent enough.” Participant E stated,

There are a number of universities that will not grant credit for courses that are taught in the high school by high school teachers to high school students. That’s nice that you are doing that, but it is not considered a college experience by some colleges and universities. She also stated,

I worry with the rapid expansion of dual-credit that students may think it is the same, and they may choose dual-credit because all I have to do is take the final, and I don’t need to take that dreaded AP exam. I think that is short-sighted, and unfortunate.

In addition she reflected, “The student who chooses dual-enrollment or dual-credit just needs to do so somewhat at their own risk.” Participant C included, “They (colleges and universities) don’t accept dual-credits much from the ‘Z’s’ (local community college) and ‘Y’s’ (another local community college) of the world.” He explained that their university is very selective in what dual-credits they accept from various high schools or community colleges. He stated, “We take more credits from the agreements we have with ‘P’ (community college) system. Those students that we get from those schools, they seem to be better prepared than the transfers we get from ‘Z’ and ‘Y.’” He clarified his point, saying,

Those kids from ‘P’ (out of state community college) are really prepared when they come here as freshman. That is not really the case from the ‘O’ (high school name) students that take dual-credit classes through ‘Z’, or ‘Y’ or ‘V’ (another local community college).

Participant D disclosed,

The con is that some students who aren’t necessarily prepared for dual-credit are sometimes encouraged to take these courses as a challenge in some cases, but if they really, truly are not prepared, or are not prepared to do the work to do well in these courses, it’s a playback fire.

Participant A stated,

Doing college courses at 16, 17 does make a difference. I have had students with dual-credit and a 1.9 (GPA), and we deny them college admission. I am not sure if it is working the way we are doing it now.

Yet, some participants noted that there resides a political push to continue to increase dual-credit offerings and for colleges and universities to accept them for credit. Some shared concerns that a struggle exists between those pushing dual-credit courses and colleges/universities not always choosing to accept them for credit. Regarding this matter, participant E declared, “There are no questions about it, and we sometimes bump up against what the Department of Education and some folks who are very much in favor of career technical education in high school are advocating.” She added,

Sometimes too, in some states, it becomes that there is this distribution of resources by income or where you happen to live, and dual enrollment becomes the default for the lower income kids and the rural kids, the inner-city kids.

And she added, “But none of those credits are going to count toward a baccalaureate degree for the most part.” Participant C voiced,

‘W’ (governor’s name) wants people to graduate from high school in about four months now. So, dual-credit is going to be a big part in getting kids graduated from college in a timely manner. That is a political mess.

Participant A explained his perception of a direct push to increase the dual-credit area more, but did not believe it was always being done for the correct reason. He stated, “Concern that ‘Z’ (community college) is using dual-credit just for additional head counts.” He also commented, “We are rushing students through high school too much.”

High School Expectations, Environment and Rigor

All participants imparted numerous insights from their college/university experiences over the years, on the expectations, environment, and rigor of the high schools which their potential college freshman had attended. Firstly, the expectations that each high school holds for their level of course rigor were described as a dynamic, changing, and maintained at different levels for different high schools. While conversing about the high school environments that he observed, participant C exclaimed, “There are some schools frankly that are just better than others.” He continued with an example saying,

Kids that go to ‘F’ (name of a high school) and ‘G’ (name of a high school), they are probably more prepared for college being ranked in the bottom half of their class, than some kids at some of the inner-city schools that are ranked in the top 10% of their class.

Participant E revealed, “And I worry also in some of our high schools, the expectations are somewhat low.” Additionally she verbalized, “S (name of high school) has a very different academic bar expectation (higher) for those students that you might find at some of the

neighborhood schools at 'T' (name of a district)." She added regarding school 'S' (high school name), "I can use 'S' as an example, one where the population is very diverse socioeconomically and racially, where they are setting the bar very high." On this subject, participant B pronounced, "Obviously, there are some schools that are more rigorous, I mean, to be very truthful; there are some schools that are more rigorous than others." He also noted,

Something, the material they are learning in class, the material, the rigor of the class, it's not generating the knowledge at the back end of it. It's not like it's just one student, not an oddity, but more of a standard for that school.

B also stated, "I just think the rigor is important. I feel in too many schools that there's not rigor." Participant D also noted, "The academic rigor is very different in different schools." While participant A expounded on his views of high school expectations and rigor, he asserted, "There is a lack of continuity across the state. There are different levels of expectations based on different regions." He also said, "There are different expectations based on the environment you're in. There is not a lot of continuity across the state." Also, "Based on the environment you're in, that sets the tone for what you think you're capable of doing." Participant A also said regarding his thoughts on high school expectations, "I think (high school) coursework needs to be improved, requirements need to be improved."

Participant A discussed various examples where the expectations from a high school's environment translated into higher or lower expectations for student achievement. He stated, "What type of environment are the students even in? A run down school, condemned? Trailers? Kids think if they (teachers and administrators) don't even care about the school, why do they care about me." He also imparted, "'H' (a high school that is in a very wealthy district) high school facilities are just gorgeous, like going into a shopping mall. You can't tell me that a kid

from 'H' doesn't have a sense of entitlement." Furthermore he states, "Which high school a student comes from may contribute to the financial, academic, and family support they have to be successful in college."

One particular item that surfaced in the interviews linked the expectations of a high school with assessment and graduation outcomes. Participant C expressed, "Every year I see a transcript from 'J' (high school name) or 'K' (high school name) in 'R' (town name). The student has a really high GPA, but tests 14 or 15 ACT. I just wonder about those schools." Also he stated, "A 2.8 GPA gets you in the top 25% in some high schools. Just wonder, how is this happening?" In addition, C said, "But sometimes, I think they (teachers and administrators) cower to loud, boisterous, loud, hot-headed parents sometimes, and I don't think they need to." Moreover he included, "They just can't pass people, just because they are nice people. Make them work." Participant B stated, "That would be my thing, to just make sure we are maintaining the rigor in the classroom and not just trying to get students to graduate to get them out." Participant A seemed to concur with his statement, "Students are incentivized to get through, rushed too much." He added, "Cheapened what a high school diploma is. They get by on the minimum." On the subject of environment and assessments, Participant E mentioned, "What the expectations are, honestly, frequently, you can tell a difference in terms of the standardized test scores." She also included,

When students have to have developmental work in college (remedial work), we blew it when they were in high school. When someone needs to take remedial math, that may go all the way back to fractions and decimals, when they just graduated from high school, we have a serious problem.

High school environmental explanations contained some references to the teachers that are in the classrooms. Participant C brought up, “High school teachers need to be held accountable.” Participant D mentioned other student growth areas beyond the course curriculum that high school teachers need to ensure their students learn, one being time management. She stated, “The students that are going to be the most successful, have to obviously be good time managers.” While discussing the rigor in the high school environment, participant A postulated, “We have to look at the evaluation of teachers, just as we evaluate students, and that is not always done even handedly.” On this topic, he also added, “We have to look at what the overall perspective is for the student themselves.” Participant B saw wide variations in teachers at high schools stating,

Truthfully, we feel like you can’t even compare teachers at the same school because of extra credit assignments, because of grading scales. There are many different factors that a teacher themselves changes, you can have two science teachers in the same high school, and they both have totally different standards and expectations.

Participant E believed that the teachers and principal have the ability to shift the environment of a high school so that the accepted expectation is that all students will be prepared for college. She asserted,

The difference is the teachers, the leadership, the way in which they have not only raised the expectations for kids, but involved their families. They have just made a conscious decision that every single one of these kids is precious, every single one of them is going to college, and it is my job to see that happens.

She also stated, “If the tone of the school is for college, not if, but where, and you expect every single one of your ninth graders to go, that’s just the expectation of the school, and that just

permeates everything.” In addition, “The principal can really set the stage for this is what this educational community is all about, and we are going to have high standards for discipline and academics, and very high expectations for our kids.” She concluded this topic with what she thought was happening in some locations due to low expectations from staff by saying, “If we don’t have high expectations of our young people when they are in high school, then we get what we deserve.”

High School Grading and Class Rank

High school grading scales, percentile cut offs, weighted grades versus unweighted grades, and grade inflation were all topics brought up by the participants throughout the interview process. While each college or university utilized the potential students’ high school GPA’s differently, they all applied each student’s grades from their transcript to a piece in the admissions process. Participant B disclosed, “We feel the academic GPA is one of the strongest predictors of students’ success here on campus.” Participant E noted, “But still, the grades in core academic courses are still the best predictor of success, and we will pay attention to particular areas depending on the program that the student is applying to at ‘X’ (college/university name).” On the importance of the high school GPA, participant D stated, “I prefer to see a GPA as being more important in a decision than a standardized test.” She continued with what she looks for with that GPA stating,

I would rather look at a GPA over time, because I think that tells more about a student as a potential college student, how committed they are, if they have taken advantage of resources in the high school, how persistent they have been.

For clarification she stated, “We want to see students who have been consistent, but if not completely consistent, at least improving.” Participant E also enunciated her focus stating, “So, we put greater weight on grades than we do on test scores.”

Each college/university, in different ways, accepts or adjusts which high school courses are taken into consideration for the college admission process and how a student’s total high school GPA is used or not. Participant A explained that his college/institution does not recalculate students’ GPA’s in any way. He stated, “We take their GPA, weighted or not, as it comes from the high school.” He explained how difficult it would be to recalculate GPA since many high schools do this process differently. He said,

In ‘X’ (state name) alone, we have schools that are on 4, 6, 7, 9, 11, and 12 point scales.

We have schools that do not offer grades, we have homeschools, we have homeschool associations, we have letter grades, we have schools who have letter grades that don’t have minuses but only have pluses; we actually have two schools right now that only have hand written transcripts, that don’t even have electronic transcripts at this point.

In like manner, participant D also noted that her institution does not recalculate the GPA’s of potential students seeking admissions to her college/university. She verbalized,

We don’t recalculate, we don’t pull out only the academic course, and some places do.

We don’t simply because, if you have 25 high schools, you could easily have 25 extremely complicated ways a GPA or class rank is determined.

On the flip side of the issue, participant B explained that his admission’s office does a hand recalculation of the high school grades of every student that applies, taking into account only core subjects. He imparted,

What we do, we actually recalculate a student's high school GPA based solely on the core academic classes. We look at their high school GPA, but we are more interested at looking at their English, math, sciences, social sciences and foreign language courses.

He included,

We take out their electives. So, for every application that we receive, we hand review the application. So we can recalculate the high school GPA to get an academic GPA.

Because we feel that looking at that is one of the stronger predictors of a student's success level here on campus.

In reference to accepting each individual grade on the transcript at face value, participant B said, "We take the transcript for what it is. I mean, we hope that no matter what the grading scale is, if the student did A work, they get an A." In addition B noted, "But as we look at grades, we are looking at grade trends as well, curriculum trends."

The college/university of participant C also does individual recalculations of students GPA's for admissions consideration. He pronounced,

A hand calculation of just what you have done in your core classes, not your electives.

We don't even consider foreign language for recalculation, because not everyone in the state takes a foreign language. So, we just do the science, math, English, government courses that everyone in the state has to take.

In regard to using a weighted or unweighted course grade, he stated, "I always give them the benefit of the doubt and give them the best one." Finally, the college/university of participant E also does a recalculation of GPA for every student who is applying. She stated, "We do, in a holistic admissions review, give the greatest weight to grades in core academic courses." On the

subject of doing recalculations, Participant E also incorporated, “No weighted (high school grades), because everybody weights differently.”

Grade inflation at the high schools was brought up by some participants. Participant A voiced, “Some schools artificially inflate their grades. We know some schools that do this and take it into consideration with admissions criteria.” Participant E shared, “Have we seen grade inflation? Yes, there is no question that most high schools would say most of their kids are above average. So, you wonder what’s average.” As an illustration she said, “When you see that a kid with a 3.3 is in the bottom quarter of his class, that tells you that there has been grade inflation going on.”

High school class rank previously was used in most schools, but over the years, some schools have stopped ranking their students, some schools have changed what they base the rank on, and some still keep the tradition of listing a class rank for each student. There was no common ground for how class rank is used with the five colleges/universities in this research study.

Participant D explained that they only use class rank, if they can even acquire them, for scholarship purposes, not for general admission decisions any longer. Participant E stated, “We really can’t use class rank anymore, because many schools are walking away from class rank, so we just can’t get it.” Participant A explained that they previously used class rank, but they no longer use this measure. He said, “Only 50% of this state still uses class rank.” Also, he noted, “We used to give class rank, if you were number one through five in your class, you automatically got \$4,000 scholarship. We compared ‘JK’ (high school in wealthy district) and ‘JL’ (high school in poverty area), where the salutatorian had a 2.6 and she got a scholarship based on class rank in that community; and the other kids weren’t given

a dollar. Twenty-two kids at 'JK' had over a 4.0. This has now changed from 5-6 years ago.

Participant B stated directly, "Where does class rank fit in? Not at all." He also stated,

Eight to 10 years ago we used class rank, but it didn't give us any information because you could have some students being in the top 10 of their class and being a 3.0. A student from another school not even in the top 100, and have a 3.9.

He added, "It just didn't make any sense any longer to have that part of our admissions criteria."

As trends have progressed at this institution, class rank now is only considered for support for some types of scholarships. Participant B noted, "Instead of saying you get the presidential scholarship now, based on class rank alone, you have to have the test scores, grades, etc." The only college/university that still uses high school class rank in the admissions criteria as well as for scholarships is institution C. Participant C announced, "I wish everybody would use class rank." Additionally he stated, "We have a presidential scholarship that is pretty competitive, you have to be ranked either number one or number two in your class." He also said, "There are probably times when there's a really good student, without a class rank. It might have cost them some scholarship dollars, because it is an estimate, we don't know."

College Enrollment Standards for Admissions

All five participants from the Midwestern colleges/universities referenced their institution's figures of the percentage of applicants that were admitted each year. All also explained how they attempt to estimate the coming school year's final freshman class enrollment based on this number of students that are admitted, as they each have many more students admitted that eventually finalize their enrollment and attend their institution. In addition, most of the directors of admission referenced their student retention rates and what the institution was

doing to increase those percentages. Table 2 details the latest figures available for each institution's retention rates, graduation rates, and the percentage of students admitted from the applicant pool. The percentage of students who were admitted to the colleges/universities compared to the total number of applicants desiring enrollment status ranged from 69.3% to 90.3%. All five directors generalized that between one third and one half of admitted students actually matriculate into their respective institutions.

Table 2

2009 Retention, Graduation, and Percent Admitted Rated

| College/University Identifier | Highest Level Offerings | 1 st yr Retention Rate | 4-yr Graduation Rate | 5-yr Graduation Rate | 6-yr Graduation Rate | % of Applicants Admitted |
|-------------------------------|-------------------------|-----------------------------------|----------------------|----------------------|----------------------|--------------------------|
| A | Doctoral research | 66.0% | 20.4% | 37.2% | 43.1% | 72.0% |
| B | Doctoral research | 78.0% | 33.6% | 55.2% | 59.4% | 72.0% |
| C | Masters | 66.0% | 11.9% | 27.4% | 32.1% | 90.3% |
| D | Post Doctoral research | 90.0% | 51.2% | 69.4% | 72.9% | 69.8% |
| E | Post Doctoral research | 86.0% | 38.0% | 65.0% | 71.8% | 78.8% |

All five participants stated that the percentage of applicants admitted compared to the number of students seeking enrollment was decreasing each year, and they were each working to increase the enrollment standards of every year's freshmen class by measures of higher SAT, ACT, and GPA mean scores, and higher percentage of incoming students completing an honors

diploma. Participant D stated, “The faculty and board of trustees wanted to increase its academic public profile as measured by standardized tests and GPA, which we have done.” Participant B mentioned, “Our strategic plan, 80% of the students would have the academic honors.” He included, “X’s (state name) core 40 is a minimum, or we don’t really have anything to discuss.” Also, he noted again, “Highly encourage the academic honors diploma; that is what we prefer.” On the subject of increasing standards for admissions, participant C expressed,

We are moving in the right direction. We had the highest retention rate from freshman to sophomore year. We would like to be higher, but it is the fourth straight year that it has increased, and it is the highest it has ever been right now.

In like manner, participant E stated “I think that has been a gradual shift over the last ten years as ‘S’ (college/university name) has become more selective.” However, she noted, “We haven’t yet seen gains in (college) completion.” Participant A spoke about the history of the institution. It had previously practiced open enrollment, admitting anyone who applied, but this has not been the case for over 15 years. As with other institutions, this institution also now has an internal push from its president and board for increased SAT/ACT and GPA means each year. He mentioned, “It is funny, because the perception of folks is that it is a guarantee, and it is not.” He also stated, “There is a perception of a sense of entitlement, and it is not guaranteed.”

Participants contributed comments involving their stances on enrollment minimums. Participant A pronounced, “A 2.0 (GPA) with a core 40 (diploma) is still a very baseline requirement.” He also stated, “Keep in mind the subjective aspect of schools (high schools), is just as important as what is supposed to be the objective, the grades, and transcripts, and things like that.” Participant D expressed, “There really isn’t a hard line. We have our SAT and GPA averages, but not a hard line.” She included, “We have a standard, where we do not require an

academic honors diploma, but 99% of our students from 'X' (state name) probably have the Academic Honors diploma.” In reference to any enrollment minimum expectations, participant B noted, “A student that has a GPA in the lower 2’s or below, we have enough research that shows that they are not going to do well here at ‘R’ (college/university name).” He continued on the subject saying, “Students who are not admissible at ‘R’ (by their standards) can go to ‘Z’ (community college), take 24 hours as long as they have a 2.0 or better.” He then explained how that student would subsequently be able to transfer into the four-year college. Participant C explained, “Our president agrees to that (increasing SAT/ACT and GPA means) to a certain point, but also hears from some trustees who say, we were founded to provide access and opportunity, and we don’t want to lose sight of that.” He went into further detail on GPA minimums, verbalizing,

We have conditional admit, at 2.4 GPA. If you are below a 2.5, we are going to do a recalculation of your GPA to see if we should admit you fully or conditionally.

Conditionally admitted students take a max of 12 hours per semester, and meet with their advisor one time each week.

He also inserted, “Before it (conditional admits) was 18% were conditional admits, and now it is 5%, actually 6%.” Participant D imparted, “Our administration is eager to have a student body that is well prepared to be successful.” She went on to explain that her school also had a land-grant tradition and as such previously accepted more students, but now the school continues to increase its requirements. Regarding the conditions of scenario three presented where each potential student had a 3.0 GPA, she stated, “Chances are, we wouldn’t admit any of them to be honest. 3.0 is getting down there.”

Generally speaking, each director admitted to looking at the basic and known areas of a high school student's credentials. Participant B stated, "So really, we look at the curriculum, academic GPA, extra-curricular activities, test scores, and grading curriculum trends. That's really what we're reviewing a student on, those indicators or predictors." He added, "It is a holistic look, based on all those indicators together." Also, "Reviewing our folders from a holistic standpoint, it really is based upon the students." In addition, he said, "We try to make our decisions based on do we think this student can be successful at 'S' (name of college/university)". Participant C spoke of his order of factors for enrollment saying, "They review applicants, look for GPA, class rank, the test scores, those final decisions come to me, because I still, to this day, will sign every acceptance letter." He added,

The most important thing we look at is GPA, class rank, on track for academic honors, core 40, test scores. It's got to be an academic thing for the most part. If it is close though, we look at some of the volunteer activities.

He diverged from these qualifiers and added, "The desire and motivation mean more than test scores and GPA, but it is so hard to measure that. And it is impossible to measure unless you have one on ones with the students." Participant D stated, "When we make an admissions decision, we are looking first for that college prep from high school." He continued on this topic, "First, we look at the courses, then second the GPA and or class rank, and then finally at the standardized test, SAT or ACT." Interestingly, rounding out this section on the order of factors considered for enrollment, participant A diverted and stated, "I am not a fan of homeschooling. Kids are set up for failure in such an anti-curriculum for so long." In conclusion, participant B noted, "That is the thing with admissions; it all comes down to potential."

Some of the colleges/universities take into consideration the potential students' senior year course selections even though they do not have grades recorded for these classes during the admissions time frame. Participant E shared,

We do look at the senior year course selections even if we do not have the grades. Oh, absolutely. Oh, my gosh, yes. The course selections again relative to what is available to the student would probably be the primary factor.

She added, "So that is the point that you start to craft the class. You don't just line them up by GPA and test score order, but we look at everything in the file to make those decisions."

Regarding those students that continue to work and try during all four years, she stated, "F (name of college/university) absolutely has a place for the striver kids." In like manner, participant B noted, "We want to see at least three or four core classes taken per semester, even senior year."

SAT and ACT Standardized Assessments

All five of the colleges/universities in this research study used standardized assessments from the SAT program, the ACT program, or both. All of the participants referenced the mean of these scores somewhere in their interviews and shared how they were either seeking to increase the mean of these scores each year from the previous year's scores, or not. Table 3 illustrates the detail of the averages for each test at each institution for the year 2009. It is interesting to note that there are two pairs of schools that ended up with the same combined scores for SAT and ACT, though the breaks for the verbal section and the math section diverge for one of those pairs. Also noteworthy is the fact that D and E, both the larger institutions have higher overall SAT and ACT averages than the smaller college/universities. Since the data is organized in order of the number of undergraduates per institution, one can note that the scores are also in order from lowest to highest.

Table 3

2009 Average SAT and ACT Scores for Student Applicants in Order of Enrollment of Undergraduates

| College/University Identifier | # Undergraduates | Median SAT Verbal | Median SAT Math | Combined SAT | Median ACT Composite |
|-------------------------------|------------------|-------------------|-----------------|--------------|----------------------|
| A | 8,493 | 465 | 475 | 940 | 20 |
| C | 9,225 | 465 | 475 | 940 | 20 |
| B | 16,694 | 520 | 525 | 1,045 | 22 |
| D | 30,394 | 565 | 580 | 1,145 | 26 |
| E | 32,610 | 550 | 595 | 1,145 | 26 |

Participant B began by stating, “SAT and ACT as well, is one of our predictors.” He then explained how his college/university looked at the best scores saying, “We always look at the highest score.” He continued, “With the SAT we take the best of each individual score, reading, math, and make a superscore. ACT, only take the best composite.” In regard to the SAT mean of the applying class of potential students this year and the quality of that of class, he announced,

Last year we brought in a smaller class, still around our goal, our incoming freshman class that is because we increased our quality pretty significantly. Anytime that you have a major increase in quality, obviously, most of the time you are going to have a smaller size in your class. Our SAT points went up 29 points. To go up 29 points as an average in one year, shows the level that we had to increase the quality of our incoming freshman class.

In regard to taking the SAT or ACT multiple times, participant A expressed, “I look at it as a positive that they are trying to improve their score. We give them highest score; highest

composite per test date is what we look at. I don't mind if they take it several times." While discussing the benefits to students of taking both exams he accounted, "One kid does great on multiple choice and the next does great on the essay, but never the two shall meet."

In regard to SAT scores and the most recent class, Participant A expressed, "We enrolled a freshman class of 2,707, an increase of 672 compared to last year. Able to maintain the exact same GPA as a whole and the SAT fell three points, big deal, statistically insignificant."

Participant D conveyed, "So, we encourage students to do both the SAT and ACT, because they are very different exams, and sometimes students will do much better on one than the other."

She also incorporated information regarding how her institution looks at each score, stating, "We take the highest critical reading and math from different exams, but can only do the highest composite for ACT now." Connecting with this in regard to any minimum or cut scores for these assessments, she said,

There are minimums, but they are in ranges, and that bottom line can vary during the year because we shift around the ranges for the decisions based on where we think we might be falling in terms of potential enrollment or not. And generally, the higher the GPA, the lower the test scores can be, and vice versa.

In contrast, participant C noted, "This Midwest university does not have a minimum SAT or ACT requirement, never has." He continued, "I am okay with that because I am not sure the ACT/SAT should be the only thing you look at anyway." He added, "We do look at those things. We usually look at the critical reading and math scores only." However, even though he made the comment about no minimums, later in the interview, he declared, "It is unusual for us to admit someone who has a critical reading and math of less than 800." Regarding how his institution works with the scores, he noted, "We give them (students) the highest score, highest

composite per test date is what we look at.” Furthermore, “I think kids score a little higher on the ACT than they do on the SAT.”

While conversing about her view of standardized assessments participant E explained, “Again, we put greater weight on grades, then test scores are the next, and they give us a clue to where a kid might be relative to their community to, to their peers from outside ‘X’ (state name).” In regard to what type of scores her college/university is looking for, E divulged, “They’re about 600 (on each subtest), 24 on the ACT, there can always be exceptions, but generally what we are looking at in terms of predicting success, but it is also just competitive.” She also articulated while focusing on the final admissions’ decisions as they relate to test scores,

There are kind of two stages to any admissions review. One, can they do the work, just as a baseline, and then within the students who can do the work, who are the most competitive, and how are we crafting our class in all kinds of ways in terms of their experiences, their background, etc.

In reference to taking the exams multiple times, participant B explained, “For some students, it shows up more positive if they take it repeatedly. They are persistent, hard working, and will do what it takes to be successful, even if it takes a little longer.” He incorporated, “We encourage them to take both tests, and have the opportunity to take it multiple times.” Also, “SAT, if you are below 1400, probably worth your time to retake.” He noted that, “The average is 1600 here for SAT.” Moreover, he clarified that he is looking beyond the test to students’ character qualities. If a student is struggling in the admissions process, he appreciates if they keep trying. He advised,

If they take the initiative, to come and meet with me or the assistant director, or just to learn what they can do, then they work hard to achieve what we have asked them to do.

As long as it is within reason, I am going to admit that student. Persistence and drive is part of being successful.

Participant A shared an interesting story from his experience with a high school in his state in reference to when students should take the SAT or ACT and how often they should take them. He explained,

One county in 'X' (state name) that actively tells all of their high school seniors not to take the standardized ACT, SAT until the second semester senior year. Their belief is that the further the student goes in the curriculum, the better they will place on the standardized testing, which the school then reports on its profile and sends back to the state that look at our SAT, our ACT averages. Meanwhile these students have lost out on scholarship deadlines, they have late admissions. And it is a county-wide push to tell kids, 'don't do it yet.' Even though I'll go into a school, or our staff will go into a school and say, 'take your SAT two or three times, we will take your highest score to get you your highest possible score', the school system is actually telling the students, 'Don't do it until second semester senior year.' And that is within our state. Different school corporations, different schools, different individual high school can do things entirely differently, and who suffers in that situation? A student may lose out on a full ride scholarship, because the deadline is December 1st and you must have standardized test scores on file.

Extra-Curricular Activities

All executive directors of admissions revealed their unique view on the subject of potential students' high school extra-curricular activities as they relate to their importance in the college admissions process. To begin, for admissions decisions, participant C reported, "We do

not take it (extra-curricular activities) into consideration a whole lot.” He further explained, “I don’t think participation in athletics, while it is important, is probably not as important for getting into a college or university as some people think it might be.” In like manner, participant D held, “We don’t put any weight in these for general admissions.” Conversely though, participant B announced, “We do look at extra-curricular activities that they do have, any, whether that is inside the classroom or outside.” He continued,

So, along with all the academic pieces of the application, the extra-curricular activities kind of gives us a feel of who the student is, better understand what they are involved with, their interests, their passions, and whether that’s sports, religious activities, boy scouts, girl scouts. That helps us, again, us understand the student better.

To some, extra-curricular activities were an indicator for perseverance. Participant A communicated, “We would look at how long they were committed to their extra-curricular activity.” He also stated, “I look to perseverance, consistency, follow through, and commitment. Those are things that bode well for college enrollment.” In like manner, participant E imparted, “We’re looking for perseverance, evidence of overcoming obstacles, evidence that not only has the student contributed to their community, but we can anticipate that to make those kinds of contributions to the ‘S’ (college/university name) community also.” Participant B mentioned again his support of extra-curricular activities in high school as well as supporting the continuation of that in the college/university setting. He noted,

As we can promote that (participation in extra-curricular activities) and encourage that, we can not only have someone graduate from ‘R’ (college/university name), we can help build who they are, really, a better member of society. That’s our goal in the end.

Whether they take extra-curricular activities into account or not for general admission, all five participants noted that they do take them into consideration in certain cases and for particular types of enrollments. One area where extra-curricular activities may make a difference in an admissions decision is when students are on the bubble or in gray areas for admissions, those not clearly admissible by the basic standards. Participant E disclosed,

They (high school extra-curricular activities) are taken into consideration, at the point that you are crafting the class, and for kids on the bubble, extraordinary contributions to their school or their community would be taken into consideration, more so for students who are on the academic bubble.

She also included,

So, special talents, whether it is a state or national science fair winner, star debater, star singer, not just the best singer in the high school, but some kind of competition beyond that, athletics, would all be taken into consideration too.

In the same realm, participant B stated, “Yeah, we’ll look at extra-curricular, recommendation letters based upon the activities, that is just to supplement the application, if a student is in the gray area between being admitted, waitlisted, or denied. That might give them that extra bump.” He added, “To see how they manage their time. That might give them the extra bump.”

An exception for taking extra-curricular activities into consideration for participant C was if they consisted of volunteer or leadership activities. He expressed, “We look at the student’s activities, and if they are in student government, president of the senior or junior class, we take that into account.” Additionally he emphasized,

Involvement in volunteer activities, student government, leadership things, national honor society, president of their class, they volunteer at their church a lot, chair certain

committees, if they are involved in community activities a lot and list it on their resume.

That means a lot; it means this student is pretty deep.

Participant B also explained a vision for community involvement by the students. He conveyed, “With what we are trying to accomplish on campus, and the atmosphere we want to see those students that are active in the community or their schools or both.” He detailed,

We want those students that not only have the ability in the classroom to do well, to participate to engage in discussion, we want them to be, active participants in the community to better, ‘R’ (college/university name) and ‘AA’ (town name), and once they leave here, a positive focus on wherever they begin their career and as they move through life.

Scholarship applications were also an area where some of the directors noted that extra-curricular participation was taken into account. Participant D explained, “Where things like activities, resumes, personal statement, the activity and interest resumes, recommendation, essays, where all those things come into play and are important will be if students are invited to apply for selective scholarships or scholar programs.” Likewise, participant E voiced, “It would be taken more into consideration for merit scholarship review; but again, those top students are generally top in a lot for what they do.” She added, “Honestly, for high achieving students who present top grades, etc. they usually also have a long list of activities.”

College and University Scholarship Factors

It is understood that being in the admissions department would obviously encompass work on numerous scholarship affairs. While this researcher did not specifically inquire about any areas related to scholarship preparation, a theme emerged as each participant brought in a few of their views of scholarship application factors through the interviews.. A few of the

comments involved high school extra-curricular activities and these were addressed in the above section. Furthermore, while some of the other scholarship-related items were not all in one realm, they each bring a bit of understanding to the admissions process and are, therefore, included here.

Automatic scholarships are awarded in some college/universities based on a combination of a potential student's GPA and test scores. Participant D proclaimed,

We are bringing in fantastic classes, incredible classes, and we are bringing in the best and the brightest students in the state of 'X' (state name). We are finally able to reward academic achievement in an automatic way for students in the state of 'X.'

Also, she incorporated, "Those automatic awards really have made a huge difference." When wrapping up her comments on this topic she stated, "There are now two automatic awards, and we now have the automatic valedictorian award for 'X' (state name) as well. The standards for scholarships are set for the coming year, based on what has happened the previous year."

Looking at what students have taken advantage of while they were in high school was important to some institutions. Participant E noted,

So, if you haven't challenged yourself in the environment that you have gone to school, that would give us pause, and very much so. That would be a student that would not be competitive at all for example, for merit scholarships because they have not taken advantage of that opportunity.

Participant A reported, "The student that does more in high school, like academic honors, is going to be eligible for more scholarships." Participant C explained, "You have to be in the top 25% to get a scholarship here." Plus, he said, "You have to apply to qualify for a scholarship

here, minimum 25%, on track for the academic honors diploma, and apply to ‘U’ (college/university name) by March 1.”

However, even though he made the above statement regarding scholarship requirements, participant C disclosed, “Sometimes you have to memorize the rule book and then throw it away. If they are talented and they produced good grades, taking top classes, they are worthy of a scholarship.” Participant C explained a bit about the athletic teams at the institution and the related scholarships that the athletic department manages, not the admissions office. He noted, “But if a coach wants a kid, they will scholarship a kid, we don’t have any clout as far as that is concerned.”

State supported scholarships are available for students in some Midwestern states. The focus of these programs is to provide financial assistance to students of low and moderate-income families, increasing the opportunity to attend college. Participant D noted, “The program covenant and the Pell (grant) promise has really for ‘X’ (state name) residents, made an incredible difference.” Participant A believed that there was a problem with a state funded scholarship program and mentioned, “Program scholars only have a 13% graduation rate.” On the topic he added, “Other issues are affecting their motivation beyond financial for these students.” On the matter, participant B held, “If they are a part of the program, they have a great opportunity in front of them. Higher education is accessible to them.” Participant A cautioned though saying, “A student may lose on a full-ride scholarship if they don’t take the SAT or ACT soon enough.”

High School Student Advising

Another theme emerged as all five participants brought up high school advising for students as they prepare for college. During their interviews, some included just a few

comments and others had many thoughts they wished to iterate. Participant A exclaimed, “There needs to be a more dedicated effort towards everything toward guidance, life choices, financial literacy. It is all these things about developing.”

When most of the participants reflected back on what high schools could do to better prepare their students to be successful in college, high school advising issues were named. While detailing his perceptions on the strength or weakness of some high school counseling structures with regard to how much they actually do or do not support college for all students, participant A conveyed that the counselors and administrators’ support for college gives them information if a student will be successful at their college/university. He described,

If you went into such and such high school, what kind of reception are you going to get from the school, the administration, the guidance counselor, things like that, because that sends a message as to what we think the students are being prepared for. Is a kid from X high school going to do well here? Oh well no, that guidance counselor doesn’t give a darn and doesn’t do anything for those kids. What does that say about the school and the curriculum if we can’t even have faith in some of them?

On the topic, participant C stated, “Guidance counselors do not always tell the universities the whole story. Do not always share that students are special ed or have other issues.”

Consistency in the high school counseling realm was brought up as a concern. Participant B discussed a few different local high schools and shared his views on how one was much stronger than the other in terms of how they support students with counseling. Speaking of what he saw as the weaker high school he revealed, “I have a big issue with the guidance counselor at the high school not really understanding higher ed, might understand it, but we don’t see eye to eye.” Participant A also expressed his perception on the lack of consistency

with high school counseling across the state's schools saying, "I am not confident that there is consistent or equitable advising going on to get students to where they want to be."

There was emphasis expressed to have high school guidance counselors actively assist high school students to make strong, positive choices for their high school years and beyond.

Participant A asserted, "It is all about choices; (counselors) need to help kids learn this."

Participant E talked about this type of counselor support needing to take place prior to students being in high school, and she stated,

So, there is absolutely no question, and I don't know though that those messages (about what classes to take to be college ready) get filtered down to 8th and 9th grade which is when the choices really start to happen.

She included her vision for counselors supporting students' class choices, and said, "Then within the resources that the school has, to encourage the students to take the most difficult courses that they can, to prepare them for academic success later." She additionally imparted,

Letting students know that their futures can be bright, but that the chances of their futures being bright are going to be higher if they do work hard in high school and prepare for academic life beyond high school, again, to have all those choices to them.

Similarly, participant D had thoughts on what she would like to tell the high schools to do in order to help students succeed in college. She stated, "What I would share is, and I know this is hard in certain places, if they (counselors) can look at students individually, and really help students make solid choices." In addition, she also relayed, "And somebody should tell him, and his parents, that just having an AP class on a transcript doesn't mean anything if the student is not prepared or chooses to not do the work." She wrapped up her thoughts on this topic by

saying, “I don’t know how counselors keep up with everything that is going on, all the changes from us, all the changes from the state, and other, and it is a mammoth job.”

A focus area involving high school students’ options became evident. One participant in particular had many things to share on this topic, most of which revolved around her experience and perception that students are allowed to choose, while still much too young in her opinion, their high school courses without proper guidance. These course selections then lead to a path that properly prepares them to attend a four-year college/university or it can stifle those options for them before they even graduate from high school. Initially, she stated,

I still become somewhat concerned that we have raised the bar in ‘X’ (state name) to a certain extent with Core 40; but I still don’t know that we are sending the message to all middle school and early high school students about what they need to do in high school to keep their options open.

She also stated, “I just don’t believe in cutting off kids’ options when they are that young, and different tracks do that.” She voiced her understanding regarding dual-credit and technical courses chosen, especially at too young of an age, saying, “Some high schools place a lot of emphasis that was placed in the technical honors diploma and the career tech tracks. This limits their future choices.” She further explained,

I worry about that, and I also worry about the 14-year-old who decides, ‘hey these sound like fun courses’ (technical and dual-credit courses), hands-on and doesn’t take the necessary science, math, foreign language to be able to choose a four-year university when he is a senior. Those options may be cut off or delayed.

Participant E clarified more also stating,

But selecting that when you are 14 at the expense of taking core academic courses, it will not lead you to ‘S’ (college/university name), at least not when you are 18, and it will be that much more difficult to ever get to ‘S.’

In like manner, participant C proclaimed,

If someone wants a four year degree, they really need to start at a four-year school. Even though we have arrangements with community colleges for transfer students, they need to start at a four-year school if they want a four-year degree.

Succinctly, participant A stated, “We need to better prepare students for their options.” He also brought forth comments regarding the dual-credit option and the challenges he believes it raises for college readiness, and stated, “Students are not told the draw backs of dual-credit. They need to understand dual versus AP.” In regard to what he believes is driving some of the dual-credit push at this present time, participant A stated, “The state is politicizing everything.” In conclusion, participant B summarized his wishes for high school counselors by stating, “Then we are hoping the counselors are just able to have the time to talk to the student.”

Summary

This chapter presented findings gathered from interviews with five executive directors of Midwestern colleges and universities. The items fused into three general categories: high school size including high school location; high school offerings – including high school curriculum, AP course options, and dual-credit course options; and factors of high school attended – including high school expectations, environment, and rigor, grading and class rank, college enrollment standards for admissions, SAT and ACT standardized assessments, extra-curricular activities, college and university scholarships, and high school student advising.

CHAPTER 5

Summary of Findings

The purpose of this study was to discover the factors that elicit positive student preparation for and success in college in relation to the size, offerings, and factors of high school attended. All five of the individuals were eager to talk and divulge numerous details of the admissions process at their institution as well as multiple perceptions regarding the high schools that their potential students attended. Therefore, a plethora of relevant factors emerged. The extensive amount of information that came forth was far beyond what this researcher anticipated.

Chapter four presented and organized the findings for analysis from the interviews with the directors of admissions. The majority of information that was communicated was quite insightful on multiple topics, and was added into this work. In general, each of the three areas of interest became readily evident with more depth and breadth than expected. Firstly, the aspect of high school size was well discussed. Secondly, the aspect of high school course offerings was well represented with emerged areas in overall high school curriculum, AP course options, and dual-credit course options. Thirdly, the aspect of factors of the high school that potential students attended was soundly represented and intertwined in multifarious components including high school location, high school expectations and environment, high school rigor, high school grading and class rank, college enrollment standards for admissions, SAT and ACT standardized

assessments, extra-curricular activities, college and university scholarships, and high school student advising.

Chapter 5 affords discussion on the data analysis of each of the above stated factors and subsequent conclusions. Secondly, the chapter explains this study's potential limitations, implications for future research, and implications for practice in the educational setting.

High School Size

The high school enrollment size of schools across the country has been studied for several decades and with increasing fortitude over the last 40 years. In 1964, Baker and Gump researched the simple impact that large and small schools had on student development, participation, and even school consolidation. In one example, they noted the correlations between the size of the school and the amount a student participated, stating, "When many persons are exposed to a limited number of settings, the performance opportunities and obligations for any one person are reduced" (Baker & Gump, 1964, p. 91). From this very basic research, continuing research on issues involving school size has expanded tremendously over the decades stretching to student performance indicators based on the enrollment size of a high school. On this subject Foreman-Peck and Foreman-Peck (2006) stated, "Reducing very large schools to around 600 pupils could produce significant gains in performance, both directly and through improved attendance" (p. 168). For various reasons, there continues to be support for both large and small high school sizes.

The Midwestern college/university directors in this study initially all articulated that they work diligently to look at students individually and from a holistic standpoint. They attempt to consider each student's accomplishments, growth, level of preparation for college, and other important conditions lending insight to student success in areas of academic involvement and

student life adjustments. As participant B stated, “We use a holistic approach, therefore, it does not matter what size their school is or how many resources they have.” This positive disposition to consider students individually reverberated with all directors on the surface.

However, when each of the directors detailed their views of high school size, it became evident that they each did have a preference for large high schools over small high schools in some areas of college preparation. Their many years of experience brought them to the conclusion that large high schools often offer better opportunities to strongly prepare high school students to transition well to college and move toward future success. Small schools may lack the resources and fortitude to consider new avenues in curriculum, student support, and levels of student engagement. In one telling example in reference to some college programs, participant E stated, “Small schools are probably not competitive for engineering, just because, not competitive enough.” Participant C made the statement, “I would probably, in my heart of hearts, I hate saying this, but I would probably slant a little in favor of the large high school.”

In the present depressed economic condition of 2010/2011 with multiple budget cuts happening across the country in most all entities receiving state and national funding, educational institutions are under the microscope. Against this backdrop, high school and district size are continuing to be scrutinized. Questions are asked such as, “What is the optimum learning environment for high student outcomes coupled with lower cost of operations?” Others inquire, “How can we reduce costs while increasing student impact in new ways?” At the time of this writing, for the last two years, 35 states across the country have significantly cut spending for K-12 and early education programs and 43 states have cut funding for higher education institutions in their states (Klein, 2011). In the recent article titled *Recession’s Toll on Education Budgets Proves Both Widespread and Uneven*, Klein (2011) references some of the most severe cuts

taking place in the Midwestern states. Klein states, “And in Illinois, Indiana, and Michigan, Rust Belt states long squeezed by the slowdown in manufacturing, an already-challenged economic climate turned even bleaker as the national economic boom that had virtually passed them by went bust” (p. 17). In response to the economic crisis, schools have been and continue to consider cutting programs, increasing class size, closing schools, and even merging districts. Connecting the past and this present research to this crisis begs one to wonder if combining some small high schools can possibly be an avenue to reduce educational spending while increasing student achievement and preparation for college success.

Ready et al. (2004) found that the impact of school and district size should be balanced with the needs of the diverse groups of students involved. In reference to possible school size adjustments they state, “Reforms that raise achievement of children at the lower end of the distribution without damaging those at the top are ones toward which we believe our nation should strive” (Ready et al., 2004, p. 1989). While on the subject of school size, Lee (2000) stated, “Defining the optimal size of a school has been an enduring issue for educational policy for educational research, and for school district staff who have to make decisions about drawing district lines and building” (p. 329). She added her views regarding the plethora of research on the topic, “The authors recognized that decisions about how large a school should be frequently recognize the need to balance students’ versatility of experiences, which favor small schools, with opportunities for specialization, which favor large schools” (p. 330). In this research study, participant A discussed how active student participation in high school would lead to higher college success and did not see this in the small schools consistently. He stated, “I worry about some smaller schools. There are some kids sitting idle in these small schools.”

High School Offerings

High school course offerings have expanded tremendously over the last century going from offering just the basics of reading, writing, math, history, and language skills in many locations to now having some high schools offer such a multiplicity of courses that they can compile a course selection book rivaling that of some colleges. A search of the offerings in Midwestern high schools today reveal a long list of diverse courses with titles such as Biomedical Engineering, Multivariable Calculus, International Business, Fashion Merchandising, Advanced Japanese Language Studies, Eastern European Cultural Studies for the Modern Age, Digital Communication Tools, and Technology Systems in Manufacturing Process, just to name a few. Whether this array of high school offerings including honors classes, AP, dual-credit, exploratory, and the surfeit of electives now available to students in most high schools, is actually improving students' readiness to enter and succeed in college or not is still quite debatable. Student enrollment in K-12 schools continues to rise each year, and more of these students are moving on to postsecondary training, colleges or universities. Yet the success of the present model in United States continues to fluctuate, and there remains little evidence of a solid bridge for success built from high school to college

In the same manner, the data gathered from this research provided many of the same insights and concerns regarding the bridge to success. High school curriculum choices, AP course offerings, and dual-credit offerings remain high on the list of areas that may have influence, positive or negative, on high school students' outcome and complete readiness for college admissions, college assimilation, and ultimately college success through graduation. While looking at the overall high school curriculum, all those interviewed expressed their desire for all high schools to hold to robust standards of quality in the delivery of curriculum.

Participant D stated, “We know all high schools are not created equal.” In like manner, Participant E affirmed, “Unfortunately, nationwide and even within ‘X’ (state name), we know that there is not equity in terms of the opportunities that student have.” Regarding how these classes are managed in the high schools whether they are traditionally delivered, or through new means such as on-line or distant courses, participant A stated, “We have to look at the modality of delivery. It depends on the rigor used...it may be good or bad based on rigor.”

A strong correlation is noted through various research studies on the type of high school courses taken and college success. For example, through the research of Rose and Bett (2004) evidence surfaced on a possible connection between high school math courses completed, college success, and the future earning potential for individuals. In addition, their work looked at incorporating other academic subjects to demonstrate how specific course combinations can explain the earnings premium.

Advanced Placement course offerings continue to be a highly discussed and researched topic as it relates to college admissions and college success. Adelman (1999) found parallels between AP courses taken in high school by students and their subsequent degree completion. He found that taking AP courses was even more strongly related to college completion at the bachelor’s level than it was to college access. Participant E’s experience as an admissions director led her to pronounce, “It is far more positive for students with AP in terms of their eventual college success.” Correspondingly, participant B expressed, “If they are able to take them (AP) and do well in them, it absolutely is a huge benefit when we are looking at their admissions.” Participant C also stated his preference for AP coursework saying, “Colleges are less apt to question the integrity of the AP relative to the dual-credit.”

This research study elicited vigorous data showing a preference for students to choose AP coursework instead of dual-credit courses when possible if they were seeking a college pathway after high school. In addition, evidence became clear that all five of the admissions directors interviewed preferred that high school students not choose a non-college pathway too early in their high school or even middle school career, as this was seen to drastically reduce their options for college access when they graduated from high school. Participant C stated, “Some schools where students get the dual-credit from, I question whether or not we should do that, because the reputation of the school is not great.” In regard to students taking dual-credit classes in high school participant A noted, “There are some concerns there.” When comparing dual-credit with AP courses, he was very emphatic that a student should take the AP and not dual-credit. In reference to a dual-credit course, he said, “Generally, not as positive (as an AP course).” Again, it appears that college admissions counselors persistently have several concerns about the curricular options that students have in high school, the benefits of AP courses, the concern over the lack of rigor with dual-credit courses and the non-college track that these courses may limit students to in their future choices.

Factors of High School Attended

High school quality factors, those tangible and intangible organizational attributes that make up the school’s climate, culture, the expectation level for students, working expectation levels for staff, operational norms, school history, and family connection customs, are unique in each school district. The individuals interviewed for this research each noted the lack of consistency in high school quality factors between districts in their state, and in neighboring states. So, as these admissions directors work with their college and university teams to create and implement fair and equitable admissions policies that can judge student accomplishments

and their potential for college success, they struggle at times due to the unequal quality factors of the high schools that students have attended.

Those interviewed expressed comments multiple times about the rigor of some high schools being much lower than the rigor at other high schools. Participant B stated, “Obviously, there are some schools that are more rigorous, I mean, to be very truthful; there are some schools that are more rigorous than others.” Participant C noted directly, “There are some schools frankly that are just better than others.” Participant D’s views concurred when he said, “The academic rigor is very different in different schools.” Even though rigor was not a direct topic of any of the research questions, nor was the word ‘rigor’ ever introduced by the researcher, all five of the interviewed directors had several comments regarding their perception of the lack of consistency of academic rigor in different high schools. With such differences noticeable in our high schools, one may come to ask, how then will the educational community as a whole, be able to define college readiness success? Furthermore, how can we look to improve college readiness in our high schools if each is already on a different track?

Wagner (2006) stated well what the challenge of rigor is in our high schools when he said,

Rigor, it seems, is the new reform de jour. As a nation, we appear to have come to a consensus that all children deserve a ‘challenging and rigorous’ education. The problem is, we have no common agreement about what constitutes rigor. (p. 28)

Along these same lines, when the researcher of this study reviewed the collective data from all of the interviews, it became apparent that the college admissions directors clearly experienced the lack of rigor consistency through the high school’s they interacted with regularly. This overriding theme of rigor crossed into the details brought forth in the areas of high school

grading, college enrollment standards, SAT and ACT assessment preparation, extra-curricular considerations, scholarship aspects, and high school advising concerns. College readiness factors seemed rooted in the expectations of high schools in all these areas. It can be seen easily through the comment of participant E when she stated, “If the tone of the school is for college, not if, but where, and you expect every single one of your ninth graders to go, that’s just the expectation of the school, and that just permeates everything.”

As participant C attempted to look beyond the basics of grade and test scores for student admissions he stated, “The desire and motivation mean more than test scores and GPA, but it is so hard to measure that.” Participant A conveyed, “I look to perseverance, consistency, follow through, and commitment. Those are things that bode well for college enrollment.” In connection beyond just scores, high school guidance counseling was a subject that all participants brought up as an area that may be lacking in some schools and can be better developed to support more college readiness for all students. Participant A reported, “I am not confident that there is consistent or equitable advising going on to get students to where they want to be.” In regard to what these high school counselors can do, participant E verbalized,

Letting students know that their futures can be bright, but that the chances of their futures being bright are going to be higher if they do work hard in high school and prepare for academic life beyond high school, again, to have all those choices to them.

The data from this research points to the professional aspirations of the directors of college admissions to support a holistic approach to enrollment while they manage and work in a present educational environment that does not allow for easy access to college readiness data for students beyond numerical scores.

Limitations

This research study has limitations that are defined and acknowledged here. Firstly, one limitation is defined by the number of participants involved. Only five executive directors of college admissions from Midwestern public four-year institutions were interviewed. Commonly, twelve states are considered to be Midwestern states: North Dakota, South Dakota, Nebraska, Kansas, Minnesota, Iowa, Missouri, Wisconsin, Illinois, Michigan, Indiana, and Ohio. Each of these states has between three and 14 four year-public colleges or universities. Therefore, since the sample only interviewed five of the college/university admission directors, there are quite a few others that were not in the study, and who may have alternate opinions.

Second, this study was conducted in the fall of the year 2010. Therefore, any information and details that were articulated must be considered in this timeframe. Public educational policies, institutions, personnel, procedures, expectations and norms are dynamic and ever-changing issues. Therefore, the knowledge gleaned from this study must be considered relevant in 2010, and it may or may not be relevant in the future.

Third, there was only one researcher conducting the interviews. This researcher has been in various education settings as a student and educator for more than 40 years. Consequently, the researcher's life experiences in and out of educational settings may have been unintentionally incorporated while listening to the interviewees. A different researcher may have interacted differently with the participants and uncovered different themes.

Implications for Future Research

Based on this qualitative study, there are four main areas that future research appears to be warranted. First, this same general study outline can be utilized with a different group of participants from other United States colleges and universities. Based on the substantial number

of colleges and universities across the United States, the input of another group of individuals from other public universities would be valuable. The individuals from other institutions may have the same or different perspectives on each of the identified areas. Second, while the research gathered here elicited numerous common themes from all participants, it may be interesting to study like-size colleges and universities together. For example, a possible sample group could be one that focuses on comparing all small-sized, four-year, public universities, possibly those with a student enrollment of 10,000 or less. Then a similar study could be conducted that compares the insights from only larger, four-year, public universities, those with 10,001 or more students. The researcher might be able to identify additional themes regarding their perceptions of high school quality factors that are unique to the size of the higher education institution.

Third, another option for further research could include participants from only private colleges and universities. Their views on high school quality factors may be quite different based on their unique set of admissions criterion. Some private colleges and universities have a more specific or narrow focus for enrollment, and the research data stemming from these types of institutions could be extremely enlightening. This researcher suspects that some of the themes that would emerge would in fact be quite similar to this original study. However, others would be quite different as they may capture a dissimilar expectation level from the college, a specific focus based on the history of the college, and a consistency or divergence from its original founders' purpose for enrollment, endowments, research, and growth plan.

Fourth, this researcher did not anticipate the theme of high school guidance counseling and advising to be discussed with such great detail from all five of the directors of admissions that were interviewed. This provided insight that there may be meaningful details and views on

this subject that can be expounded upon with further research on this specific area. A study of the perspectives of college/university admissions directors regarding the present status of high school counselors, details of various counseling programs in high schools across their state, and their vision for improving student advising to impact college entrance and success would be beneficial.

Implications for Practice in the Educational Setting

After a thorough investigation into the relevant research, it became clear that several of these areas have, and continue, to render new insights regarding both high school quality factors and college success. Lacking in archived and current research, however, are definitive, accepted definitions of the most important factors. It seems prudent then, for K-12 educational administrators, teachers, and boards to even more diligently scrutinize the colleges and universities their students plan to attend, and choose the college identified factors they most need to focus on to support their students' transitions to higher education institutions.

This research specifically identified a theme of the superiority of AP coursework versus dual-credit options if students are seeking college admission and success. Therefore, it would behoove high schools to carefully evaluate their present course offerings and strategic plan for future expansion or elimination of courses. With limited resources and staffing, particularly in the smaller high schools, limited course options do become a problem. The outcome of this research suggests that if a decision must be made between funding an AP course or a dual-credit course, the AP course should be supported if the high school wishes to help their students be college-focused and college ready.

From the themes that surfaced in this study, it would be wise for some high schools to reexamine their focus and vision for college matriculation for their students. Portions of the

research genres that appeared related to their views on the wide variation in high school rigor for college preparation, and their concern for the low expectations for students in some high schools. This researcher concurs with the participants of the study, that all high schools in the United States should actively arrange their class offerings, supports, and policies to ensure that all students will be fully prepared to enter a four-year college or university upon graduation. This then allows graduating students the opportunity to choose or decide against a college track, without limiting them due to a lack of preparation and focus from the high school which they attended.

Furthermore, in this research study the theme of high school size showed that students are generally better prepared for college if they have attended a larger high school compared to a smaller high school. This data indicates that small school districts in the Midwest would positively impact student learning, preparation for college, and increasing college opportunities available for students if they would pursue school consolidation at least on the high school level. This might include areas such as shared course opportunities across districts, elevating course expectations between multiple schools, expanding course and extra-curricular activities to maximize opportunities for student engagement, or fully combining facilities to create larger high schools with more student focused opportunities. For example, a single county in one of the Midwestern states has five independent school districts. The districts have high school enrollments of 267, 307, 322, 371, and 426 students each. The data from this county indicates that it may be beneficial to consider some type of joint venture between these small high schools to increase the depth and breadth of opportunities for students as they prepare for college.

Summary

This chapter presented data and analysis collected on the four overriding themes that were expounded upon by five executive admissions directors of Midwestern colleges and universities. The themes were high school size, high school offerings, factors of high school attended and high school advising. It also explained the potential limitations, implications for future research, and implications for practice in the educational setting.

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APPENDIX A: INVITATION TO PARTICIPATE IN RESEARCH

Study on High School Quality Factors as They Relate to College Success

Lori M. Richmond
PhD Candidate
Indiana State University
(812) 327-6526

Robert Boyd
Faculty Sponsor
Indiana State University
(812) 237-2900

November 1, 2010

Dear Sir/Madam:

You are invited to participate in a research study that I am conducting as a doctoral student with the Educational Leadership, Administration, and Foundations department at Indiana State University. This study is being conducted under the guidance of Dr. Robert Boyd, esteemed professor and educational expert.

The purpose of this study is to discover the factors that elicit positive student preparation for and success in college in relation to the size, offerings, and factors of high school attended as perceived by college admissions personnel. As you are undoubtedly aware, high school offerings, school size, programming options, and environment have the potential to have a momentous impact, positive or negative, on the overall quality of education that students attain while attending high school and their readiness to then succeed in college. Therefore, it is imperative that we consider which factors are actually significant in preparing our students for higher education accomplishments, which factors should be supported, and options for high school programming adjustments based on these determinations.

This study will concentrate on the views and perspectives of five leaders of college admissions departments in Midwestern, four-year, public colleges or universities. It is my hope that I may conduct interviews with a director of admissions from the main campuses of five of these colleges or universities.

Your expertise and input on this subject are vitally important for future students' success both in high school and their future college achievements. I would greatly appreciate your participation in this endeavor so that we may acquire useful information directly from Midwestern colleges. I will be contacting you within the next seven days to discuss your thoughts and potential participation with this research. Please feel free to contact me directly at the number above prior to my call if you wish. I thank you in advance for your consideration of participation for these efforts.

Sincerely,

Lori M. Richmond
PhD Candidate
Indiana State University

APPENDIX B: CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN RESEARCH

Students' College Preparation Level Based on Quality Factors of the High School Attended

You are invited to participate in a research study conducted by Lori M. Richmond, who is a doctoral student from the Education, Leadership, Administration, and Foundations Department at Indiana State University. Ms. Richmond is conducting this study for her doctoral dissertation. Dr. Robert Boyd is her faculty sponsor for this project. This study is being conducted as a dissertation project.

Your participation in this study is entirely voluntary. You should read the information below and ask questions about anything you do not understand, before deciding whether or not to participate. You are being asked to participate in this study because you are involved in the college admissions process at your university.

• PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The purpose of this study is to discover the factors that elicit positive student preparation for and success in college in relation to the size, offerings, and factors of high school attended. An analysis will be generated to determine whether high school location (rural, urban, suburban), student body size, course offerings, curricular opportunities, extra-curricular programming options, and environmental expectations play a role in the level of preparation students receive for college admissions and success.

• PROCEDURES

If you volunteer to participate in this study, you will be asked to do the following things:

1. You will be asked to take part in one interview that will last between one and two hours.
2. The interview will take place in an office or room of your choice on your campus grounds.
3. You will be asked six open ended questions.
4. You will be provided with three scenarios and asked to share your thoughts on each.
5. The interview will be videotaped with a small video camera put in place in a corner of the room.

- **POTENTIAL RISKS AND DISCOMFORTS**

We expect that any risks, discomforts, or inconveniences will be minor and we believe that they are not likely to happen. If discomforts become a problem, you may discontinue your participation.

- **POTENTIAL BENEFITS TO SUBJECTS AND/OR TO SOCIETY**

It is not likely that you will benefit directly from participation in this study, but the research should help us learn how to identify the high school quality factors in Midwestern states that have an impact on college admissions and college success.

This research may be useful for educators, administrators and school boards to use when identifying, supporting, and adjusting programming options and school environmental pieces within high schools.

- **PAYMENT FOR PARTICIPATION**

You will not receive any payment or other compensation for participation in this study. There is also no cost to your for participation.

- **CONFIDENTIALITY**

Any information that is obtained in connection with this study and that can be identified with you will remain confidential and will be disclosed only with your permission or as required by law. The information will only be connected to each university. We will not use your name in any of the information we retrieve from this study or in any of the research reports.

Ms. Richmond will use the information collected in her dissertation and other publications. Your name will not be used in any print. We may also use any information that we gather from this study in any way we think is best for publication or education. Any information we use for publication will not identify you individually.

The audiotape of the interview will not be listened to by anyone outside the study unless we have you sign a separate permission form allowing us to use it. The audio will be destroyed three years after the end of the study.

- **PARTICIPATION AND WITHDRAWAL**

You can choose whether or not to be in this study. If you volunteer to be in this study, you may withdraw at any time without consequences of any kind. You may also refuse to answer any questions you do not want to answer. There is no penalty if you withdraw from the study.

- **IDENTIFICATION OF INVESTIGATORS**

If you have any questions or concerns about this research, please feel free to contact

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- **RIGHTS OF RESEARCH SUBJECTS**

If you have any questions about your rights as a research subject, you may contact the Indiana State University Institutional Review Board (IRB) by mail at Indiana State University, Office of Sponsored Programs, Terre Haute, IN 47809, by phone at (812) 237-8217, or e-mail the IRB at irb@indstate.edu. You will be given the opportunity to discuss any questions about your rights as a research subject with a member of the IRB. The IRB is an independent committee composed of members of the University community, as well as lay members of the community not connected with ISU. The IRB has reviewed and approved this study.

I understand the procedures described above. My questions have been answered to my satisfaction, and I agree to participate in this study. I have been given a copy of this form.

Printed Name of Subject

Signature of Subject

Date

APPENDIX C: QUESTIONS AND SCENARIOS

Questions:

1. What is the process that your department takes to review applications for admission? Has this process or standards for admissions changed over the past 5 years? If so, how?
2. Do you see any particular trends in who is applying to your institution over the last 5-10 years? Any changes in which high schools or types of high schools they attended?
3. Which high school academic and extra-curricular programs are most effective in preparing high school students for college?
4. What areas of a high schools' environment are the highest predictors of college success? Size? Rural/urban/suburban location?
5. What do you consider when you look at GPA, class rank, and SAT/ACT scores? Any reason for an application packet to be directed to a "hands-on" review outside of the cut scores?
6. Does which high school a student attended affect their future college success?

SCENARIOS

1. If you have only one slot for admissions open, and the following two students applying, which would you choose?

Student A

GPA 3.6
 Top 10% class rank
 SAT 2100 total
 2 extra-curricular activities
 High school size 2,550

Student B

GPA 3.6
 Top 10% class rank
 SAT 2100 total
 2 extra-curricular activities
 High school size 385

2. Again, only one slot for admissions open, and the following two students applying, which would you choose?

Student A

GPA 3.2
 Top 20% class rank
 SAT 1900 total
 1 extra-curricular activity
 2 AP courses and passed AP exams
 English +4
 Calculus +4

Student B

GPA 3.2
 Top 20% class rank
 SAT 1900 total
 1 extra-curricular activity
 2 dual-credit courses
 English - grade of A
 Calculus - grade of A

3. Again, only one slot for admissions open, and the following students applying, which would you choose?

Student A

GPA 3.0
 Top 25% class rank
 SAT 1800 total
 0 extra activities
 Rural
 Midwestern school

Student B

GPA 3.0
 Top 25% class rank
 SAT 1800 total
 0 extra activities
 Urban
 Midwestern school

Student C

GPA 3.0
 Top 25% class rank
 SAT 1800 total
 0 extra activities
 Suburban
 Midwestern school

