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# The Transition Experiences of High Achieving High School Students from Secondary Education to College : A Case Study

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Concordia University–Portland  
College of Education  
Doctorate of Education Program

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The Transition Experiences of High Achieving High School Students

From Secondary Education to College: A Case Study

Lori Christine Lachowsky

Concordia University–Portland

College of Education

Dissertation submitted to the Faculty of the College of Education

in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Education in

Transformational Leadership

Floralba Marrero, Ed.D., Faculty Chair Dissertation Committee

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Concordia University–Portland

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## **Abstract**

This qualitative multiple case study explored the experiences of eight students from an urban high school in the southern United States as they transitioned from high school to college. Participants were high-achieving students, 18 years of age, who participated who participated in a teacher preparation class and took the Motivation Strategies for Learning Questionnaire (MSLQ) for a class project during the last semester of their senior year of high school. The researcher collected and triangulated data to ensure reliability: archival MSLQ scores from the participants' senior year, open-ended interviews after the participants' first year of college, document review of syllabi as well as college websites, and college courses observations. Four themes emerged in this study including high school preparation, college academic readiness, college emotional readiness, and navigating independence. Additionally, 11 subthemes deepened the understanding of the thematic analysis of the participants' experiences. The results of the study revealed that students who take college preparatory classes in high school are more prepared for the high-performance, postsecondary education demands. However, they are not emotionally ready to meet the time constraints, separation from friends and family, and independence a college environment requires. The study can suggest, based on student perceptions, improvements in the high school course of study that can help students be successful in their transition to higher education.

*Keywords:* college student transition, college performance expectations, high-school performance expectations, high-school college readiness curriculum, college retention

## **Dedication**

The moment I became a teacher, I knew my destiny lay with helping high-school students achieve their destiny through higher education. My own pursuit in obtaining the education to help in this endeavor eventually led to my highest calling and accomplishment to date: achieving a Doctor of Education in Transformational Leadership. This journey would have been impossible without the people in my life who blessed me with unwavering support and love over the last four years.

First and foremost, I want to dedicate this dissertation to my son, Mitchell Stewart Lachowsky. Mitchell unselfishly gave four years of his childhood to a mother who was constantly working and writing. He has grown into an amazing young man and student. I pray my findings and future studies will impact his transition from secondary education to a college institution. I do believe he has a fabulous destiny ahead of him. I love you, Mitchell, beyond belief. Thank you for believing in me and encouraging me when I felt too tired to move.

To my mother, Susan Pelton Miller, who set the bar high when I was a child and never ceased to believe I was destined for great things. You always said, “Whenever you set your mind to it, you do not give up until you accomplish it.” Those words were my mantra throughout this process. You also said the most meaningful words anyone has ever spoken to me. You told me one night I was the “kindest person you have ever met.” That kindness transforms to tenacity when I believe in a project that can change lives. Thank you, Mom, for instilling in me a passion and work ethic that can be super human at times.

To my father, Chas Bryan Stewart, who is absolutely my best friend. Dad, you taught me to embrace life, which includes the people in it. We never meet a stranger and will give the “shirts off our back” for our fellow man. You taught me to laugh at my many mistakes. You

said to me words that I have taken to heart. Dad, you said that if I fall “to get back up, shake off the dust, and keep on going.” You also said, “Take the bull by the horns and do not give up.” This dissertation is the product of your belief in me and the times you picked me up out of the dust, brushed me off, and sent me on my way.

To Rick Lachowsky, I do believe I have been in college since we met 20 years ago. Thank you for the sacrifice you made to make way for my passion in education and my dreams. You have listened, commiserated, and lent a helping hand when life overwhelmed me. I have earned my last degree.

Lastly, this dissertation dedication is to myself. I have completed a lifelong goal.

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Thank you to my dissertation committee for helping me through the rigorous process of writing a quality dissertation. Your insight and encouragement allowed me to navigate through the methods of research, literature review, and pulling it all together to find the results. I am amazed at the depth of your knowledge and experience. I am proud to have been mentored by such talented educators.

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## **Chapter 1: Introduction**

College success and degree completion are important for students as well as United States national economy (SREB, 2010). A college degree in the United States has a higher return on investment than in any other nation due to the added professional expertise and certification graduate degrees incurs (College Atlas, 2017). Of the 70% of high-achieving high-school graduates who enroll in a 4-year public university, only 65% will graduate with a degree, and only 33% of students enrolled in community colleges will complete their degrees. After the first year, 30% of first-year undergraduate students drop out of college. Indeed, only 86% of students enrolled in postsecondary institutions believe they are prepared for the coursework (College Atlas, 2017).

However, studies show that 68% of incoming college students who felt prepared for college course work, were required to take a remedial course to catch them up to college performance standards (Center for Community College Student Engagement, 2016; SREB, 2010). Even though students could benefit from interventions that remedial courses provide, remedial courses are costly and delay degree achievement (SREB, 2010). This issue has been recognized in efforts by the United States Department of Education as they enacted into law Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) in which secondary schools focus on improving student achievement in English language arts and math (U.S. Department of Education, 2010). This focus is to increase the availability of college for all students through higher ACT scores and college placement tests (SREB, 2010). Indeed, students' choice to attend either community colleges or four-year universities vary upon their needs as well as the ability to meet entrance requirements. The fact still remains that most incoming college students are not prepared for the next step in their education journey regardless of performance on collegial entrance exams

(Pannoni, 2015). It is pertinent to address that distinct differences between community college and a four-year university in entrance requirements exist as well as why students choose to attend one or the other. Community colleges are necessary to increase student enrollment in higher education endeavors (Ma & Baum, 2016). Due to location as well as open admission, students who were lower achieving in high school tend to gravitate toward community colleges for the lower tuition or post-graduate certifications (Pannoni, 2016). Furthermore, community colleges specialize in regional needs, which help contribute to the professionalization of the local workforce (Sutton, 2016).

Another major difference between a four-year university and community college is the certification and degrees offered. Community colleges offer two-year associate degrees or professional certification (College Board, 2018). However, there are a few community colleges that are beginning to offer four-year bachelor's degrees (Povich, 2018). The four-year university awards undergraduate bachelor's degrees and graduate degrees from master's to doctoral levels. Thus, enrollment requirements for entrance to the colleges are substantially different (College Board, 2018; Sutton, 2016). Community colleges have open admission but may require students to take a placement test to assess whether incoming students need remediation before attempting college-level courses (College Board, 2018). Universities, on the other hand, vary with enrollment qualifications.

University acceptance policies and tuition are based on the ranking of the school and its specialty (Ma & Baum, 2015). Most four-year colleges base entrance requirements on GPA and ACT scores with a minimum of a 3.0 GPA and an ACT score of 27 (College Board, 2018). Tuition can range from \$10,000 a semester upwards (Sutton, 2016). Community colleges can be an alternative to postsecondary education for low-income and first-generation students because

traditionally two-year colleges have lower tuition. In 2015-2016, the average tuition was \$3,435 a semester, 37% of tuition paid by students who attended four-year universities in state and 11% of those who enrolled in private four-year non-profit colleges (Ma & Baum, 2015).

Even though community colleges are a gateway to higher education, they are mainly commuter schools. Students who attend do not live on campus since most community colleges do not offer housing (Sutton, 2016). Thus, getting involved may require more effort at community colleges even though they offer the same kinds of extracurricular activities that are found at traditional four-year universities, such as student clubs, events, and sports (Holles, 2016; Ma & Baum, 2015; Sutton, 2016). However, students who commute daily do not usually stay for activities that do not involve requirements for their classes (Ma & Baum, 2015).

Today's college student is multifaceted and complex as evidenced in emerging research in educational psychology (Complete College America, 2011; Heller & Cassady, 2017). Nearly 60% of first-year undergraduate students discovered a disconnect between their college eligibility and college preparation (NCES, 2017). The majority of high achieving high school students meet the requirements for college entrance as well as scholarships (SREB, 2010). However, this does not necessarily mean undergraduate students are prepared for the rigors and academic skills needed to be successful in their higher education endeavors (Heller & Cassady, 2017). This study was designed to explore the perceptions and experiences of high-achieving high-school students, now first year undergraduate students, regarding their preparation for undergraduate college-level coursework. Throughout this study, the term *college* refers to postsecondary education unless specified as a four-year college or a community college (two-year). The term *high achieving* signifies high school students who take college preparatory

classes, exhibit above average academic performance, and participate in leadership and academic club activities.

### **Background, Context, and History**

Smooth transitions from secondary education to undergraduate degree programs are pivotal for student success in higher education. However, a disconnect between what is learned in high school and what a student needs to be successful in college exists (Holles, 2017; McCarthy & Kuh, 2006; Sutton, 2016). A large number of incoming college freshman do not have the knowledge, academic skills, and practical competencies to effectively perform in the workplace or college (Holles, 2017; McCarthy & Kuh, 2006; SREB, 2010; Sutton, 2016). At the undergraduate level, lack of achievement is due to emotionally and academically unprepared students having to perform at the standards required to succeed (Balduf, 2009; Worthley, Gloeckner, & Kennedy, 2016). There is a need, according to the research findings, to further explore the gap which exists in the knowledge and skills taught in high school to what skills are vital for success in higher education courses (Sparkman, Maulding, & Roberts, 2012; Sutton, 2016; Tuckman & Kennedy, 2011).

The gap in skills needed to transition from high school to college-level courses has been the subject of prior research, yet college degree attainment remains elusive to a large percentage of high-achieving students (Balduf, 2009; Sutton, 2016). While access to college entrance through prerequisite scores on the ACT and GPA scores has been successful in the admittance of high-achieving students, states are challenged, as evidenced through student retention and graduation rates, to provide students with the knowledge and skills necessary to finish college with higher education degrees (Sparks & Mathis, 2013; SREB, 2010).

### **Statement of the Problem**

Student retention is an ongoing issue in the United States with 62% students attaining a postsecondary degree within six years of entering a four-year college and 30% within three years entering a two-year college (NCES, 2018). Among the problems noted in the literature is the high school to college transition; some researchers have argued that high-school students are ill-prepared for the rigors of college (American Association of Community Colleges, 2002; Balduf, 2009; SREB, 2010; Sutton, 2016; Tuckman & Kennedy, 2011). When college freshmen are not academically or emotionally ready for postsecondary institutions, they tend to perform poorly and, in some cases, drop out altogether (Balduf, 2009; Richardson, et al., 2012; Tuckman & Kennedy, 2011). The problem is that many high-achieving students do not fare as well academically, socially, and emotionally in college as they did in high school (Richardson, et al., 2012; Sutton, 2016).

The traditional predictors for college eligibility (standardized test scores and GPA) do not adequately assess college preparation for high-achieving students (College Atlas, 2017). The gap between college eligibility and college readiness continues unabated (American Association of Community Colleges, 2002; SREB, 2010; Sutton, 2016; Tuckman & Kennedy, 2011). A predominant theme that emerges from prior research studies is students' lack of preparation for the rigor of college, which includes academic performance as well as emotional maturity (Balduf, 2009; Sutton, 2016). Figure 1 represents the percentage of college ready students per institution sector.

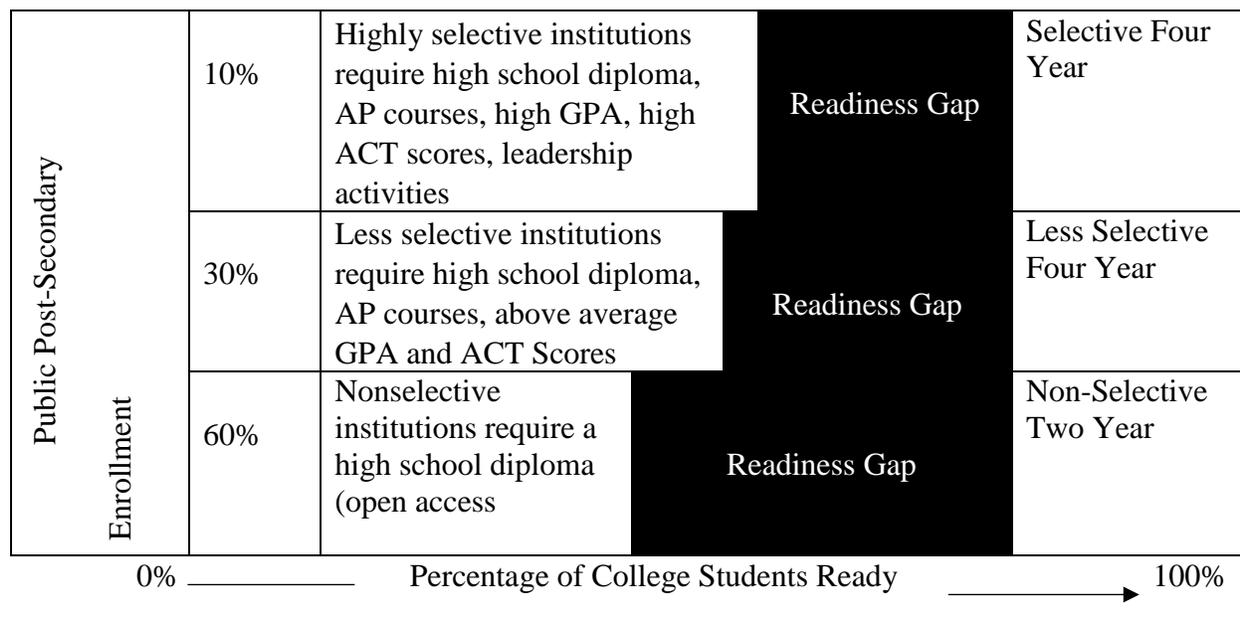


Figure 1. The readiness gap by institution category (SREB, 2010).

Past research on the transition from secondary education to college-level courses for high-achieving students found that high-school courses did not provide the necessary rigor needed to help students master motivational and strategic skills in learning (Balduf, 2009; Sutton, 2016). Students reported they could receive high grades and test scores with minimal effort. College, on the other hand, presented these students a new learning environment, which required students to rely on their own internal and external resources (Sutton, 2016; Tuckman & Kennedy, 2011). Students found when they encountered college course work that academic intelligence alone was not sufficient for them to meet or exceed course expectations (Balduff, 2009; SREB, 2010; Sutton, 2016). Academic tasks at the college level require a higher level of thinking and learning than expected in secondary school. Skills developed in cognitive (learning strategies), metacognitive (study skills), and affective (learning behaviors) domains are essential for collegiate success (Pintrich, 1991; Sutton, 2010; Tuckman & Kennedy, 2011).

The transition from secondary education to the college campus experience not only involves the need to learn new academic skills, but the need to adjust to a more independent social and learning environment. The need to balance college courses, study time, social activities, work, and family can be overwhelming. These interacting factors, along with the high-performance expectations, influence a student's decision whether to stay in school or leave after the first-year transition (Richardson, King, Garrett, & Wench, 2012). A study conducted by Richardson et al. (2012) focused on students who were thriving versus those who were struggling during their first year in postsecondary education. Differences were found between these two categories of students in the ability to form close relationships with peers, good time management, organizational skills, as well as effective coping skills and self-control.

Current research is needed to expose further gaps that may exist between what skills students acquire through their initial K–12 education and the skills required for satisfactory performance in their higher-education endeavors. Exploration can focus on what interventions, whether through high-school curriculum or college remedial courses, can address the needs of high achieving secondary school students who lack the academic skills and motivation to succeed in college. (Kelly, 1988; Sutton, 2016; Tuckman & Kennedy, 2011).

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this qualitative multiple case study was to explore the experiences of high-achieving students who entered college regarding their high-school academic preparation, college academic preparation, emotional readiness, and their navigation of independence. Exploring the experiences of first-year college students helped to gain an understanding of the academic obstacles and successes students experience during their transition from high school to

college. This exploration can offer insight to high schools and colleges to better prepare students for higher education and reduce the large numbers of students mandated to take remedial courses or who drop out altogether.

### **Research Questions**

This multiple case study applied four research questions to guide the collection of data. These questions allowed for the exploration of student perceptions and experiences as they navigated the transition from secondary education to the college environment. Emerging themes can lead to understanding, thus building upon ways to address the readiness gap between high school and college expectations. The following are the research questions.

1. What high-school experiences do high-achieving high-school students believe helped them prepare for college course work?
2. What are the academic experiences of high-achieving high-school students during their first year of college?
3. What are the social and emotional experiences of high-achieving high-school students during their first year of college?
4. What experiences do former high-achieving high-school students attribute to their first-year college retention?

### **Rationale, Relevance, and Significance of the Proposed Study**

The transition from secondary education to the college-campus experience not only involves the need to learn new academic skills, but the need to adjust to a more independent social and learning environment. Balancing school, study time, social activities, work, and family can be overwhelming for freshman students. These interacting factors, along with the

high-performance expectations, influence a student's decision whether to stay in school or leave after the first-year transition (Richardson et al., 2012).

This case study was designed to explore the readiness of recent high-achieving students for college entrance. Recognizing the need to prepare students for college and career readiness has become a priority in secondary education, evidenced in the adoption of college and career readiness standards for student initial education (ASCD, 2017). Even though there has been a slight drop in remediation rates after the alignment of high-school standards with college readiness standards throughout the nation (Butrymowicz, 2017; SREB, 2010), the identification of essential skills that students need to succeed in college-level courses has not been thoroughly researched (Hanford, 2016). The study can suggest, based on student perceptions, improvements in the high-school course of study that can help students be successful in college.

### **Definition of Terms**

*Acuity:* In the context of this study, *acuity* is defined by the academic excellence regarding intelligence, academic skills, and self-efficacy (ASCD, 2017).

*Affective:* In the context of this study, *affective* is defined by the behavioral aspects of a student academic maturity (Kennedy et al., 2016). These behaviors include, but are not limited to, conflict management, self-control, relationship building, and coping skills.

*Cognitive:* In the context of this study, *cognitive* is defined by student learning strategies (Tuckman & Kennedy, 2011), which include, but are not limited to, note taking, summarizing, organization, and critical thinking.

*College:* In the context of this study, *college* is defined as an institute of higher education (SREB, 2010).

*Community College:* In the context of this study, *community college* is defined as a college that offers only a two-year associate degree (Sutton, 2016).

*High Achieving Students:* In the context of this study, *high achieving* refers to high school students who take college preparatory classes, exhibit above average academic performance, and participate in leadership and academic club activities (Holles, 2016; Sparks & Mathis, 2013).

*Learning Strategies:* In the context of this study, *learning strategies* are defined by how a student approaches, progress through, and evaluates a learning task (Tuckman & Kennedy, 2011).

*Meta-Cognitive:* In the context of this study, *metacognitive* is defined by student control of their cognitive abilities (Pintrich, 1991). Metacognition includes planning, monitoring progress, and regulation of effort to a task.

*Motivation:* In the context of this study, *motivation* is defined by the student value of a learning task (Pintrich, 1991). Motivated students view learning as worthwhile both intrinsically and extrinsically (Hanford, 2016; Lynch, 2006).

*Navigation:* In the context of this study, *navigation* is defined by a student's choices and actions in regard to college course work and environment (SREB, 2010).

*Perception:* In the context of this study, *perception* is defined by how students perceive their academic acuity, behaviors, choices, and actions (Kikas & Jõgi, 2015; Schellings & Van Hout-Wolters, 2011).

*Remediation:* In the context of this study, *remediation* is defined by courses required by universities and community colleges to correct the deficiency in required student skills, so they may perform successfully in college level courses (Butrymowicz, 2017; Sutton, 2016).

*Retention:* In the context of this study, *retention* is defined by a student taking a course for a second time due to a failing grade (SREB, 2010; Sutton, 2016).

*Secondary Education:* In the context of this study, *secondary education* is defined by a public or private education grades 7 through 12 (ADE, 2017).

*Self-efficacy:* In the context of this study, *self-efficacy* is defined by the belief in one's ability to succeed at something (Bandura, 1997).

## **Research Design**

This study utilized a multiple case study research design. By using an exploratory approach to the study, I gathered numerous forms of data, including student perceptions and experiences. Data was collected using the Motivated Strategies for Learning Questionnaire (Pintrich, 1999) to measure student perceptions as to their readiness for college. The scores from each subscale were aligned with qualitative data in the form of interview questions to explore emergent themes and/or categories of skills that are essential for college success. Using document review methods, data was collected from student demographics, grades, and ACT scores. Lastly, to provide valid references to college instruction, observation of college core classes was conducted and recorded using field notes. After the collection of data, a thematic approach to analysis was used. Themes emerged through the triangulation of data. The triangulation of data provided validity to the occurrence of themes through the coding process (Creswell, 2010; Willis, 2007). The population of the study included eight students who graduated in 2017. The participants were 18 years old and attending college in various locations.

## **Assumptions, Delimitations, and Limitations**

With the numerous gaps in the literature as to why high-achieving students experience obstacles in the transition between high school and college-level courses, I undertook this

research with the assumption that high schools do not always adequately prepare students to navigate the complexities of college. I also assumed that discovering the gaps through a multiple case study approach to the students' first-year college experiences would help provide interventions within the high-school curriculum to reduce college remedial courses as well as increase college retention rates. Therefore, this study sought to explore how eight high-achieving students transitioned from secondary education to college-level courses and what obstacles as well as successes they encountered.

Limitations to a study are any situational or conditional circumstances that may affect the results and findings (Creswell, 2010). For this multiple case study, a survey and semi-structured interviews were conducted to gain the perceptions of eight first-year college students about their high-school academic preparation, college readiness, emotional readiness, and navigation of independence. The first limitation was using self-report data in the form of the MSLQ. The overall validity of self-report questionnaires has been questioned in both qualitative and quantitative data collection and analysis (Kikas & Jõgi, 2015; Schellings & Van Hout-Wolters, 2011). However, researchers regularly use self-reports with Likert-type instruments when measuring learning strategies (Schellings & Van Hout-Wolters, 2009; Veenman, 2011).

This study was delimited to high-achieving students who participated in a teacher-preparation class, volunteered to participate in taking the MSLQ the last semester of their senior year of high school, and were willing to be interviewed the following May after their first year of college. I began this study with the intention of exploring the transitional experiences of these students; thus, this study was exploratory and interpretive in data collection and analysis.

## **Summary**

Chapter 1 introduced the background and purpose for this study; the problem of college eligibility versus college preparation. The transition from secondary education to college level courses can be difficult for students who are not adequately prepared for the complexity college education presents. Through relevant research, the background of the problem is presented along with the statement of the problem. Research questions are provided to guide this multiple case study to pursue definitive areas that students need additional instruction and guidance to be prepared and successful in their higher education endeavors. Limitations are discussed as well as the need to alleviate researcher bias. Lastly, key terms are defined in context of the study.

Presented in chapter 2, the literature review is an in-depth consideration of prior research to the phenomenon of student under-achievement in college-level courses. Chapter 3 describes the multiple case study research approach and explains the specific research methods and procedures of this study. Chapter 4 presents the findings and results of the study. Chapter 5 discusses the implications of the findings, potential for further research, and conclusion.

## **Chapter 2: Literature Review**

### **Introduction to the Literature Review**

Employment in the United States has become increasingly competitive due to the globalization of the economy. Many employers require professional certification or a college degree for entry-level work (Balduf, 2009; Sutton, 2016). According to the Torpey (2018), the median income difference between a person with a bachelor's degree compared to only a high school diploma is 55 %. Likewise, a person achieving an associate degree earns 40 % more. As a result, high-school graduates have found it increasingly difficult to find employment that produces enough income to support themselves, much less a household (SREB, 2010; Stuart, 2009). Pursuing post-secondary education offerings has therefore become a priority for students after high school completion.

In 2017, The United States Bureau of Labor reported that 66% of high-school graduates were enrolled in college (Division of Labor Force Statistics, 2018). Of individuals who had received a bachelor's degree in 2017, 77% were employed. Even though a college degree increases employment opportunities, a concerning trend among colleges is the retention of first-year students. According to the National Center for Education Statistics (2018), the retention rate of undergraduate students beginning in the fall 2015 semester at selective public four-year institutions was 81%. However, at public higher education institutions with open admissions, the retention rate was 62%.

Considering the priority among high-school graduates to receive a college degree, a large percentage of high-achieving high-school students are not college ready. Aside from being academically ready for coursework, the transition period between high school and first year of college can be a stressful experience. There are several factors that determine successful

transition to college-level courses, which include student expectations, characteristics, and cognitive skills (Pintrich, 1999; Sutton, 2016; Tuckman & Kennedy, 2011). In addition to the challenge of collegial transition, the requirement to take preparatory remedial courses cause additional strain both emotionally and financially (American Association of Community Colleges, 2016; SREB, 2010). Almost all two-year colleges and many public four-year colleges require new students to take a placement test when they arrive on campus (College Board, 2018; Taylor, 2012). Colleges use placement tests in subjects like English language arts and math to check the academic skill levels of entering students. Based on scores taken from college placement tests, students may be required to take remedial courses to help them reach proficiency requirements in English and math so they can take a college-level general education courses required for degree programs (College Board, 2018). However, college credit is not given for the remediation courses that some freshman must complete before moving on to general education courses. Figure 2 represents the percentage of students taking remedial courses in 2016 according to a study by Hanford (2016).

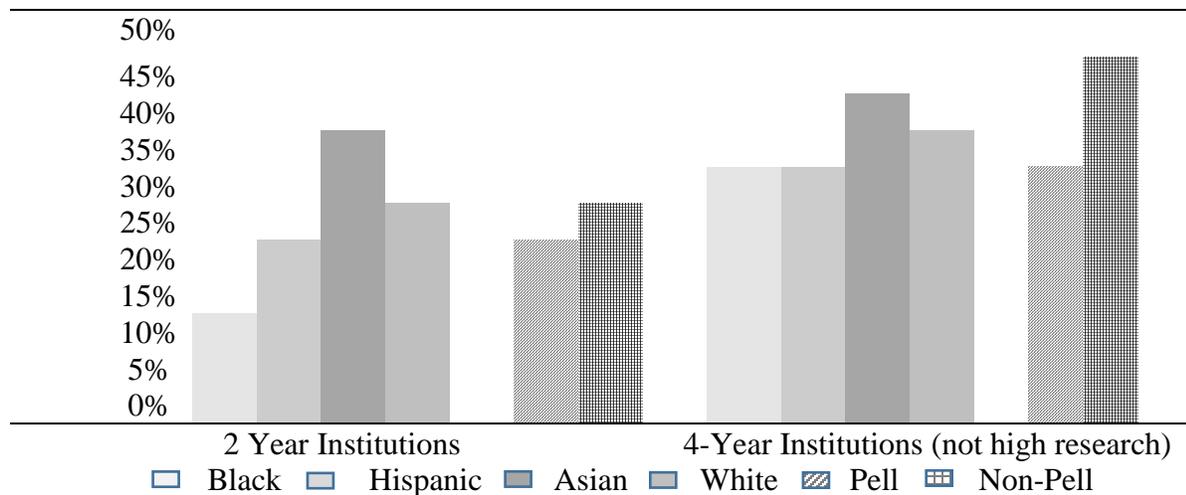


Figure 2. Percentage of students in remedial courses in 2010 (Hartford, 2016).

Even though students could benefit from interventions that remedial courses provide, remedial courses are costly and delay degree achievement (SREB, 2010). A primary goal of the United States Department of Education's Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) Blueprint for Reform is to increase college readiness of secondary school students (U.S. Department of Education, 2010). The traditional predictors for college eligibility (standardized test scores and GPA) do not adequately represent college preparation. High achievement benchmarks do not address student motivation (College Atlas, 2017). ESEA encourages school districts to put in place skill-driven curriculum during students' initial education (kindergarten through 12th grade) that will help encourage goal-oriented behaviors, such as self-awareness, resource management, cognitive strategies, and conflict resolution (Balduf, 2009; Richardson et al., 2012; Sutton, 2016; Tuckman & Kennedy, 2011).

Although there have been numerous studies that investigate the transition from high school to college-level courses, a thick description of the experiences these students encounter is lacking. As SREB (2010) pointed out, there is a gap in the literature, as well as in communication between secondary education and college institutions, as to which interventions can increase collegiate success. For this reason, a multiple case study was commenced to explore eight first-year college students' experiences and any successes or obstacles they faced to further research by providing the whole picture instead of just focal points. This review of literature provides a conceptual framework that is based on five areas previous research studied in the pursuit to find solutions to college remediation and the student drop-out dilemma.

Presented in this chapter is literature pertaining to student preparation for the transition to college from secondary education. Topics covered in the review include student motivation, academic skills, cognitive/metacognitive strategies, resource management, affective behaviors,

and self-regulation. For this study, the Concordia University online library was used to access three databases: ERIC, ProQuest Central, ProQuest Education, and SAGE Publications.

Keywords used in the literature search included retention, remediation, motivation strategies, cognitive strategies, resource management, student efficacy, student transitions, college preparation, organization strategies, opportunity cost, MSLQ questionnaire, methodology issues.

### **Conceptual Framework**

The conceptual framework for this study is based on constructs that have the potential to influence high-school student transition to college. Smooth transitions from secondary education to undergraduate programs are pivotal for student success in higher education. However, there seems to be a lack of alignment of academic content in high school to best prepare students for the academic rigor of college coursework (Holles, 2017; McCarthy & Kuh, 2006; Sutton, 2016). At the college level, lack of achievement is due to either unprepared students or students who do not perform at the standards needed to succeed (Balduf, 2009; Worthley et al., 2016). The question then arises as to how interventions through high-school curricula can address the needs of students who lack the academic skills and motivation to be successful in their higher-education endeavors (Kelly, 1988; Sutton, 2016; Tuckman & Kennedy, 2011). Indeed, students could benefit from interventions that help them understand their goal-oriented behaviors, develop self-confidence in their learning abilities, and to engage in higher-level learning strategies (Balduf, 2009; Tuckman & Kennedy, 2011). The following graph (Figure 3) was developed as a visual representation of the constructs that influence the transition from high school to college:

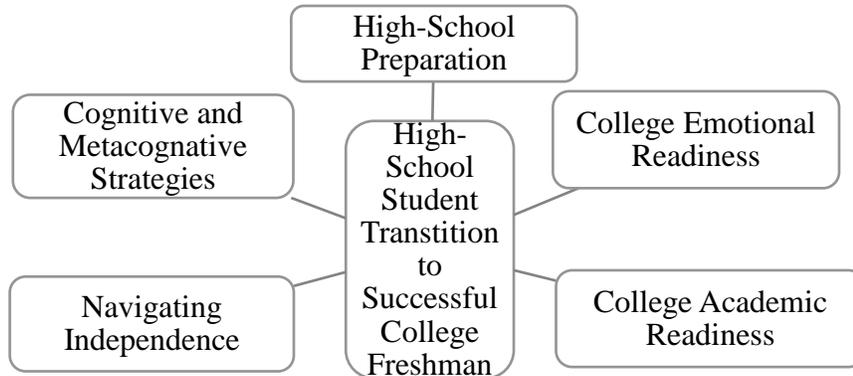


Figure 3. Conceptual framework.

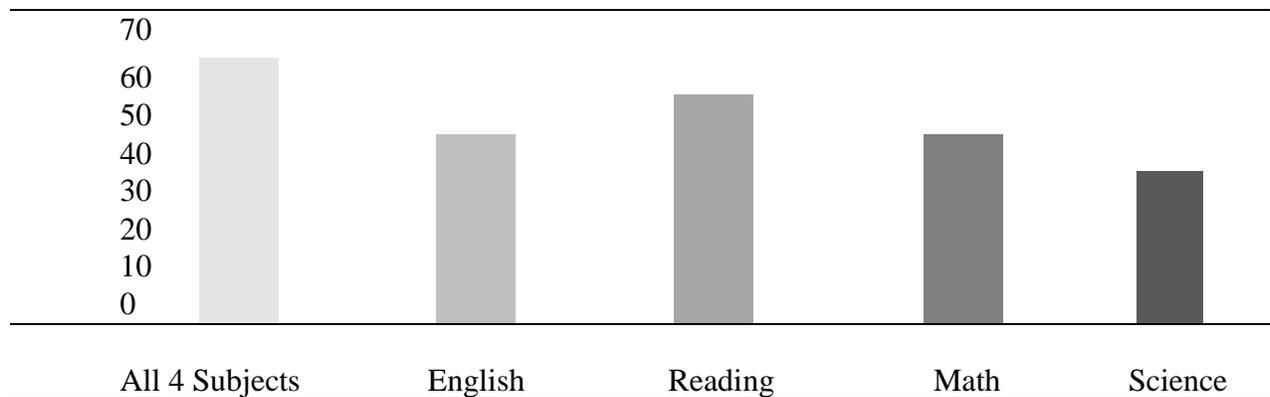
**High-school preparation.** Initial public education (P–12) and college expectations are not aligned, which leaves students unprepared to navigate the complexities of college-level courses. There is a gap between what high schools teach and what skills are necessary to master college standards (CCCSE, 2016; Sparks & Malkus, 2013; SREB, 2010; Stuart, 2009). Even though the federal and state standards movement in public education focus on college and career readiness, high-school and college curricula remain inconsistent. Standards-based performance in high schools still focus on course requirements for graduation, which supports the idea that if the right courses are taken and they earn good grades, high-school students will be college ready. According to the SREB (2010), this assumption is substantiated with the misalignment of high school senior English classes, which focus on literature, versus entry-level college English courses, which focus on expository reading and writing. It is essential that initial education emphasizes the integration of higher-level learning skills in reading, writing, and math to provide students the needed skills to be collegially successful (CCCSE, 2016; SREB, 2010).

Even though Common Core State Standards have attempted to address the skills needed for college and career readiness, teachers are not reliable guides in focusing their instruction directly on helping their students become ready for college-level courses (Appleby, 2014; SREB,

2010). Schools are under pressure to account for graduation rates as well as growth in standardized test scores. Thus, little attention is given to writing and implementing rigorous collegiate-aligned curricula to insure students are equipped with the academic and soft skills needed for higher education (Appleby, 2014; Sparkman, Maulding, & Roberts, 2012).

Lastly, students are not prepared for the rigor of college course work. Appleby (2014) stated that high schools should help students be aware that professors are different than their high-school teachers, the work will be harder with higher expectations, and assignments must be completed in a shorter period and outside of the classroom. Students who transitioned from high school to college have reported increased amount of responsibility for them to learn on their own as well as the increased amount of reading to prepare for assignments (Bambrick-Santoy, 2017; Sparkman et al., 2012). Thus, it is essential students begin their educational work ethic before they enter college.

**College academic readiness.** The college readiness gap exposes the disparity between the skills and knowledge students acquire in high school versus the skills and knowledge that colleges and universities require for successful navigation through college-level courses (Sparkman et al., 2012; SREB, 2010). Even though a student earns a high-school diploma, this does not mean they are prepared to pursue higher education. The traditional predictors for college eligibility (standardized test scores and GPA) do not adequately represent college preparation (College Atlas, 2017). According to the SREB (2010), standardized national assessments of college readiness are not connected state standards and curriculum. Until they are aligned, college readiness assessments inaccurately portray if students are prepared for college level courses in literacy and math. Figure 4 represents the national percentage of students that met the 2017 ACT benchmark scores per subject.



*Figure 4.* National percentage of students who met 2017 ACT benchmarks per subject (ACT, 2017).

Due to inadequately informed perceptions of college readiness, students may be ill-equipped to navigate the transition from high school to college. Thus, it is vital to equip college-bound students with the knowledge, skills, and attitudes that are required for successful transition to the higher-education environment (Appleby, 2014; Sparkman et al., 2012). For example, incoming students should be made aware of the resources their colleges provide, such as the library, peer tutoring, academic advising, and the writing center. Not only will students need to know available resources, but they need to be prepared for the skills college-level courses require, such as following instructions, classroom participation, and time management (Appleby, 2014; Sparkman et al., 2012; SREB, 2010). Lastly, entrance into the higher-education classroom requires students to be responsible for their learning and to be active in their education (Appleby, 2014).

**Cognitive and metacognitive strategies.** In the classroom, there are numerous ways in which learners process and apply information. Students use cognitive skills to retrieve prior information and make connections to the new information given by the instructor. According to Page (2014), students utilize focusing skills, information-gathering skills, remembering skills,

and organizing skills to learn the information required for the lesson. While these skills are a vital part of mastery of content for college-level courses, a majority of students tend to rely on surface approaches to information processing, which handicaps their success (Ferla, Valcke, & Schuyten, 2009; Keller & Cassady, 2017; Kikas & Jögi, 2016; Tuckman et al., 2011). Figure 5 provides a visual of the flow of information from input, memory storage, and retrieval.

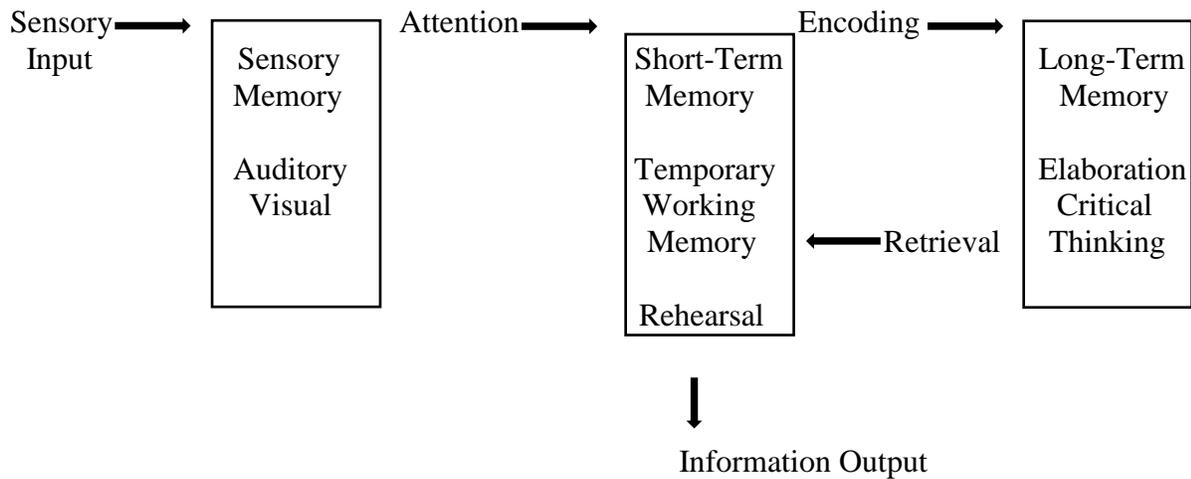


Figure 5. Information flow chart partially adapted from Expert Learners (2011).

Surface approaches to learning involve the memorization of information through repetition. Such rehearsal techniques are not enough for complex and significant information to make it into long-term memory (Expert Learners, 2016; Keller & Cassady, 2017). The most reliable approach to learning occurs through elaboration strategies, which include the encoding of information. To make new material memorable, students need to learn how to organize information through categorization, outlines, concept ideas, and imagery (Expert Learners, 2011; Keller & Cassady, 2017). However, every student learns differently, and it would benefit students to be taught different elaboration strategies such as self-questioning and organization (Ferla et al., 2009; Kikas & Jögi, 2016; Tuckman et al., 2011).

**College emotional readiness.** According to a study by Shinogaya (2017), student beliefs about learning correlated to their intrinsic and extrinsic motives to succeed as well as the task value of the course. When balancing the cost-benefit analysis of spending time to prepare for a lesson, students will choose to spend time on what they value most. Thus, if succeeding in college is important due to familial or career expectations, students will motivate themselves to meet or exceed course requirements. However, the recent economical demand for young adults to have college degrees pressures students to pursue higher education whether they have goals in place or not (Cerasoli et al., 2014; Deci & Ryan, 1985; SDTO, 2018). High schools can help students prepare and plan for their college education. Too often, students enter college without a plan of action; thus, they enroll in irrelevant courses and endure degree delay (Conley, 2011; Sutton, 2016). By providing students information as well as opportunities to plan, entering scholars will have a goal-oriented base for which to strive.

**Navigating independence.** Holles (2016) proposed that determining college preparation is a complex process because so many factors are involved that may help or hinder college success. Academic data is not a definitive or reliable predictor of student success because outside factors are just as influential. For students to be successful in college, they must navigate the transition from the restrictive environment of high school to the more independent and self-reliant college campus (Holles, 2016; Shinogaya, 2017; Sutton, 2016). Students with emotional maturity can maintain control of their impulses as well as adapt to different environments (Cerasoli et al., 2014; List & Alexander, 2017; Yang, 2011). According to Akers and Porter (2018), emotional intelligence is more important than one's academic acuity for high performance in college. Emotional intelligence involves time management, study skills, and self-determination.

However, successful academic behaviors include social, emotional, and academic components as well (Durlak, Weissburg, Dymnicki, Taylor, & Schellinger, 2011; Holles, 2016). The learning process is not an isolated event, for students learn in collaboration with their teachers, peers, and families (Durlak et al., 2011; Shinogaya, 2017). Thus, peer learning and help seeking are paramount to collegiate success. Student satisfaction can facilitate or impede academic achievement as well as the commitment to the course and task (Durlak et al., 2011; Sutton, 2016).

### **Review of the Literature and Methodological Literature**

The gap in skills needed to transition from high school to college-level courses has been the subject of prior research, yet college-degree attainment remains elusive to a high percentage of students (Balduf, 2009; Sutton, 2016). While access to college entrance through prerequisite scores on the ACT and GPA scores has been successful in the admittance of students, states are challenged, as evidenced through student retention and graduation rates, to provide students with the knowledge and skills necessary to finish college with higher education degrees (Sparks & Mathis, 2013; SREB, 2010). The struggle begins with first-year college students who invariably perform under expectations in content, academic skills, and self-efficacy requiring higher education institutions to provide remedial programs (Heller & Cassidy, 2017; SREB, 2010).

Therefore, prudence demands new and current tools to expose any gaps that may exist between what skills students acquire through their initial K–12 education and the skills required for satisfactory performance in their higher-education endeavors (Appleby, 2014). In order to traverse the complexities involved with the transition from secondary education to college-level courses, students must acquire the skills necessary to be successful. These involve higher-level

cognitive and metacognitive learning strategies, emotional intelligence and maturity, and navigating independence (Appleby, 2014; Holles, 2016; SREB, 2010).

**High-school preparation.** According to a research study by Hart Research POS (2015), college instructors reported significant gaps in the level of academic preparation needed for college course work. Most specifically, college instructors wished high schools would focus on critical thinking, writing, and study habits as pertinent skills for success in college-level courses (Hart Research Associates, 2015; Venezia & Jaeger, 2013). Table 1 represents gaps in high-school preparation of critical academic skill areas needed for higher education courses.

Table 1

*Percentage of Incoming Students Prepared Academically in Specific Areas Reported by College Professors (Hart Research Associates, 2015)*

	Two-Year Colleges	Four-Year Colleges
Conducting Research	14%	20%
Reading Comprehension	28%	31%
Work and Study Habits	28%	43%
Problem Solving	33%	38%
Writing	34%	39%
Written Communication	39%	42%
Science	22%	31%
Mathematics	20%	36%

With the adoption of Common Core Standards for Career and College Readiness, high schools have changed their curricula but not significantly in instructional practices (SREB, 2010). The most common assessment of high-school classes that adequately prepare students for higher education are those that provide rigorous academic coursework that prepares students for

the demands of college-level work (Johnston, 2010; Venezia & Jaeger, 2013). However, academic rigor cannot be an isolated event. The standards for high expectations for students must be applied across all disciplines, adopted by the whole faculty, and reinforced in academic effort and behavior (Johnston, 2010; Kikas & Jõgi, 2016; Sparkman et al., 2012). According to the Hart Research POS (2015), 87% of high-school graduates reported they would have worked harder if classroom expectations for coursework and studying to earn their diploma had been higher. The Hart Research (2015) also reported that student satisfaction of high-school preparation for college included schools that communicated about classes and grades needed to enroll in college, encouraged students to take advanced courses, provided learning strategies and opportunities for students to acquire metacognitive skills, and helped them make definitive course plans for their first year of college.

Indeed, high schools are expected to give students the support needed to not only graduate from secondary education but to navigate the transition from high school to college-level courses. Important strategies high schools can implement for college-bound students are providing a support network, using data to help students track their academic progress, and arranging access to college information and expectations (Johnston, 2013; SREB, 2010). With the adoption of ACT Aspire Interim and Summative Assessments in some states, students can track their academic preparation for the ACT college-entrance exam. Schools can then, in turn, use this data to employ student interventions to provide students the opportunity to revisit skills and master areas of academic weaknesses (Appleby, 2014; College Atlas, 2017; Sparkman et al., 2012).

Another support high schools can provide to prepare students for college entrance is access to college information and expectations. Including college preparation as a course can

help students transition from the strict rituals and rules of secondary education to the freer and more relaxed college environment (Holles, 2016). The course can provide trips to college campuses, scholarship guidance, college acceptance requirements, and help for students to focus goal planning for their college career (Holles, 2016; Johnston, 2013; Sutton, 2016).

**College academic readiness.** As new college students enter the next step in their academic career, they are unlikely to be aware of their academic strengths and weaknesses (Holles, 2016; Lynch, 2006; Sutton, 2016). College admittance is determined by quantitative data such as GPA, ACT, and Accuplacer tests. However, there is a noted difference between the rigid structure and instruction in high school versus the more independent and self-regulated learning experienced in both four-year and two-year college institutions (Balduf, 2009; Holles, 2016). Balduf (2009) used a qualitative approach to study college readiness. The findings determined that the participants in the study felt they were not ready for the complexity and challenges of college. Furthermore, all the participants believed that their secondary education did not require the rigor or expectations of hard work as they earned high grades with very little effort. Thus, competency perceptions are skewed due to success in the secondary education setting (Holles, 2016; Sutton, 2016). Another study searching to foster students' adaptation to college was a study of 24 students and their perceived differences between high-school classes and college classes (Appleby, 2014). Table 2 details the main findings of the study.

Table 2

*Perceived Differences Between High-School Classes and College Classes (Appleby, 2014)*

Component	High School Classes	College Classes
Difficulty	Less reading, easy to pass, surface learning	Independent reading, work hard to succeed, In-depth
Time	Less material covered, short assignments, late work accepted	More material covered in less time, more time to complete assignments, no late work or make-up tests
Location for learning	Most learning occurred during class	Independent learning outside of class
Responsibility for Learning Communication	Teacher-led instruction Teachers assign work for the next day, remind students of upcoming due dates, explain assignments and expectations	Student-led learning Students must rely on the syllabus for due dates, do not explain assignments
Resources	Textbook assignments	Textbook as resource, require students to seek knowledge
Availability	High-school teachers are available for questions, explanations, and they call home to parents if performance is low	Office hours only, responsibility of student to get to know professor

Thus, adaptation from the high-school environment to the differences in college is vital. Appleby (2015) suggested that students be prepared for self-taught and more challenging work. The need for a strong work ethic is imperative due to the fact most of college work is done outside of the classroom and within strict deadlines. Time management is another crucial element in that professors expect the learning to begin after class instead of during class like high school. Professors will give students a syllabus at the start of the semester and expect the student

to independently traverse the course and its required readings and assignments (Holles, 2016; Miqdadi et al., 2014; Worthley et al., 2015). Indeed, the need for emotional intelligence and maturity is a major factor in whether a student will be successful in college. Sparkman et al. (2012) conducted a study about the need for emotional intelligence in order for students to function effectively in college-level courses and the college environment. Emotional intelligence is related to self-discipline, impulse control, conflict management, good decision making, social responsibility, and flexibility.

*Cognitive learning strategies.* Learning strategies describe the activities a student employs to process the material in a course (Kikas & Jõgi, 2016). Examples of cognitive learning strategies include looking for relationships within the information, identifying the main idea and contributing key details, chunking, thinking of examples, summarizing, and note taking (Ferla et al., 2009; Kikas & Jõgi, 2016; Tuckman et al., 2011). These processing strategies help to transfer information from one memory stage to the next (Pappas, 2014). To explore the cognitive domain of learning strategies used by college students, it is essential to interchange the above aspects and categorize them as deep approach to learning (the pursuit to understand the information) and surface approach to learning (recall and reproduction) (Keller & Cassady, 2017).

*Critical thinking.* In a survey conducted by the UCLA Higher Education Research Institute (2009), researchers found that 99.6% of university teachers agreed that critical thinking is a "very important" or "essential" goal for undergraduate education. According to Pintrich et al. (1991), critical thinking is the degree to which students utilize prior knowledge in new situations to understand the task, solve problems, make decisions, or evaluate the expectations for successful performance outcomes. Critical thinking is the ability to make solid decisions in

what to do or believe. Reflective and independent thinking requires a person to make logical connections between ideas, identify and evaluate conflicting viewpoints, detect inconsistencies in rationale, problem solve, and identify key ideas and their relevance.

*Elaboration.* There are positive approaches to learning (deep approaches in the dissemination of information) and problems in learning approaches (surface approach by relying on memorization, self-handicapping, and test anxiety) (Heikkilä & Lonka, 2006; Sutton, 2016). Thus, intelligence alone does not account for a successful college experience. The most basic cognitive learning strategy is rehearsal, which is memorization and recitation (Kikas & Jõgi, 2016; Pintrich et al., 1991). These strategies are suited for simple assignments or tasks that require accessing information from the working memory. Pintrich et al. (1991) stated that memorization does not help students understand the information. The more complex strategies are elaboration, paraphrasing, summarizing, and clustering of information (Grunshceta, Schwingerb, Steinmayrc, & Friesa, 2016; Kikas & Jõgi, 2016). Rehearsal involves surface processing, while the more complex strategies rely on deeper processing (Ferla et al., 2016). Elaboration strategies require students to make internal connections to the material (Kikas & Jõgi, 2016; Pintrich et al., 1991; Worthley et al., 2015).

Students who view learning as meaningful are more likely to use deep learning strategies, as compared to students who are passive learners (Kikas & Jõgi, 2016; Worthley et al., 2015). Research studies have produced evidence that students who use cognitive learning strategies as well as take responsibility for their own learning outcomes enhance academic performance (Kikas & Jõgi, 2016; Pintrich et al, 1991; Worthley et al., 2015). Cognitive strategies that contribute to information being stored in long-term memory include comparing information, creating analogies, and connecting to prior knowledge (Ferla, et al., 2009; Kikas &

Jõgi, 2016; Pintrich et al., 1991; Tuckman et al., 2011). Other deep learning strategies use proactive behaviors such as seeking additional resources and information, connecting ideas, as well as a discernable effort to understand the content being taught (Worthley et al., 2015). These deeper approaches to learning allow for information and analytical applications to reside in long-term memory (Crossland, 2011). Crossland (2011) also concluded that memories are formed from learning experiences in which students build their own meaning. Ferla et al. (2009) called this learning strategy “meaning-oriented” in which students exhibited strong self-efficacy and self-regulation in their academic performance.

*Rehearsal.* A surface approach to learning constitutes learning strategies such as rote memorization and repetition with the focus on the recall of information (Worthley et al., 2015). Ferla et al. (2009) called this the “reproduction-oriented” learning model. Students who rely on reproduction of information tend to have low self-efficacy and attribute their academic performance to measures beyond their control. The student relies mainly upon the teacher for learning. Students who adhere to memorization as well as trying to understand the material may do so in order to achieve higher grades (Ferla et al., 2009). Rehearsal strategies, such as memorizing information to be learned then later recalled, involve the working memory, which is short-term (Pintrich et al., 1991). Using a basic skill such as recitation does not lend to the acquisition of knowledge and the ability to connect and integrate the information with prior learning (Pintrich et al., 1991).

Ferla et al. (2009) characterized students who rely on rote memorization as helpless students. The basic skills to successfully perform in the course are lacking, so the students feel disconnected from their learning and therefore rely on the teacher to provide the knowledge they need to learn. These students have not developed the deeper learning skills necessary to acquire

information independently, which is a requirement in higher-education courses (Ferla et al., 2009). Another consequence of surface learning strategies is test anxiety, which is attributed to rehearsal and rote memorization (Simsek & Balaban, 2010). Students who experienced test anxiety lack confidence in their abilities and self-handicapped themselves by procrastinating their studies (Miqdadi et al., 2014). Anxiety during an assessment rises when students exhibit low self-efficacy, procrastinate, and wait to study right before the test, making memorization the only technique available for the students to become familiar with the required information (Worthley et al., 2016). Students with high anxiety cultivate destructive beliefs of their capabilities, which in turn lead to a decline in self-efficacy (Aydin et al., 2011).

***Metacognitive learning strategies.*** Metacognition is defined as an awareness or analysis of one's own learning or thinking processes (Pintrich et al., 1991). Metacognitive strategies include self-evaluation, taking responsibility for learning, reflection on progress, and changing study habits if current methods are not working (Simsek & Balaban, 2010). Such self-regulation prompts students to plan, monitor, and adjust their learning as needed. These three strategies allow the students to connect learning to prior knowledge, organize and understand the material, and correct any problems they may encounter during the learning process (Aydin et al., 2011).

***Self-regulation.*** Regulation strategies describe how students use their learning strategies. Self-regulation is metacognitive in that students exhibit an awareness or analysis of their own learning or thinking processes (Ferla et al., 2009; Kikas & Jõgi, 2016; Pintrich et al., 1991). Examples include checking progress and identifying reasons that goals are not being met (Ferla et al., 2009; Kikas & Jõgi, 2016). Constructivist theories and research on self-regulated learning strategies described students as active participants in the processing of information during instruction and instructional tasks (Kikas & Jõgi, 2016). Problems students may

encounter are outside distractions or the need to persist in uninteresting tasks (Pintrich et al., 1991; Sutton, 2016). Thus, self-regulation also equates to the commitment to complete study goals regardless of other events that might deter a student from completing a mandated and time-sensitive task (Kikas & Jõgi, 2016; McKreachie & Duncan, 2005).

*Organizational strategies.* Organizational strategies help students select key information and make connections among the information provided through the course (Pintrich et al., 1991). Organizational skills and strategies, such as grouping information, outlining notes and texts, determining the main idea, and concepts within assigned readings, help students select pertinent information. These types of organizational skills are beneficial in courses that require a large quantity of information to be disseminated (Pintrich et al., 1991). Students who take notes during class, organize class material, analyze information, make connections, and prepare for assessments on a continuing basis demonstrate learning strategy skills that increase higher academic performance (Keller & Cassady, 2017). Organization strategies help students to determine whether the material is understandable, and if not, provide them with the ability to structure the information so they can comprehend it (Simsek & Balaban, 2010). The mastery of these skills is vital for the post-secondary environment where students must disseminate course material and demonstrate their learning via a verbal or written process (Worthley et al., 2016).

*Study skills.* One of the many obstacles that students face when entering college is the self-discipline to study. According to Lei (2015), the term "study" refers to the amount of time spent pursuing any academically related activities. Such activities include setting realistic goals, employing appropriate note taking and test-taking strategies, managing anxiety, and selecting conducive study habits and environments (Proctor, Prevatt, Adams, Hurst, & Petscher, 2006;

Worthley et al., 2016). Students who have well-thought-out study patterns do academically well in college (Lei, 2015).

Motivation and study strategies are a precursor to the outcome of successful first-year undergraduate grades. Not only are study strategies necessary for students to be successful, but they also must exhibit self-efficacy and organization (Worthley et al., 2016). Study habits are essential in the mastery of the knowledge and skills that college courses require a student to attain. However, due to the busy lives of students, previous research indicates that students devote inadequate time to their studies (Higher Education Research Institute, 2003; Kim & Seo, 2015). Other research studies allude to the fact that students do not know how to study when they leave secondary education for college-level courses (Balduf, 2009)

Procrastination, the delay of studying, is generally due to task-aversion (Miqdadi et al, 2014). With the distractions of quick and easy entertainment, such as video games, social media, and proximity to friends, students place studying as the last thing they want to do. Researchers have noted a distinct connection between time management and academic performance (Adamson, Covic, & Lincoln, 2009; Kim & Seo, 2015). In Balduf's (2009) study of college underachievement, research findings suggested that the lack of structure in college gave the participants an exaggerated sense of free time, so they chose their activities unwisely. Thus, the development of strong management skills is imperative to meet the demands of college-level courses as well as the college environment (Holles, 2016).

**College emotional readiness.** A student's emotional readiness determines if they may exhibit motivation for successful performance in college (Komarraju & Dial, 2014). Individuals who have high self-efficacy will exert effort to achieve successful outcomes, whereas those with low self-efficacy are likely to fail (Aydin et al., 2011; Stajkovic & Luthans, 1998; Sutton, 2016).

Students with self-efficacy exhibit an expectancy for successful performance of a task as well as confidence in their abilities to master the task (Komarraju & Dial, 2014; Ng & Lucianetti, 2016; Sutton, 2016). Self-efficacy is critical to a students' feelings towards their capabilities to operate in various situations (Bandura, 1982). Expectations of self-efficacy govern whether individuals manage obstacles and the amount of effort they are willing to put forth to surmount those obstacles.

The relationship between student motivation and their beliefs towards the learning task is yet another area explored in whether students are emotionally ready for college (Heikkilä & Lonka, 2006; McKeachie, 2005). Yet, motivation is complex in that it involves more than one attribute and is highly dynamic (Conley, 2011). What motivates one student might not inspire another. The interplay between extrinsic motivation to perform and intrinsic motives to succeed is the basis of the self-determination theory (Cerasoli et al., 2014; Deci & Ryan, 1985; SDTO, 2018). Student motivation is multi-faceted and composed of performance goals, task values, and competency beliefs.

***Performance goals.*** Performance goals are what students are striving to accomplish within the course. A student whose purpose is to master information will have different motivation strategies than the student whose purpose is to achieve the highest course grade or the student who is taking the course to appease parents or a coach (Conley, 2011; Heller & Cassady, 2016). Thus, achievement goals include the reasons students pursue the goal as well as the standards they devise to assess their mastery (Pintrich et al., 1991). Intrinsic motivation and extrinsic motivation are linked to factors such as academic persistence and achievement outcomes (Lei, 2015). These individual constructs are either positive or negative regarding

performance and task completion in college-level courses (Grunshel, Swinger, Steinmayr, & Fries, 2016; Heller & Cassady, 2016).

The mastery of a collegiate course depends upon the “why” behind the performance goal. Constructs can involve mastery, progress, and self-improvement as well as striving for superiority by achieving higher grades than others (Conley, 2011; Grunshel et al., 2016). In an earlier research study, Lynch (2006) claimed that intrinsically oriented students viewed learning as valuable and enriching to their knowledge base whereas extrinsically oriented students aimed to achieve external goals of high grades, meet outside expectations, or avoid negative consequences. Heller and Cassady (2016) concluded that intrinsic motivation consistently demonstrated a positive relationship with realistic performance goals, study strategies, and academic success.

***Task values.*** Task values refer to the appraisal by the student of the pertinence and purposefulness of the task (Ferla et al., 2009). The importance of the assignment determines the amount of effort a student will expend to master the learning. One of the predictors of value placed upon a task is the impact of the assignment on the student’s grade and the necessity of the task towards the completion of the student’s achievement goal (Conley, 2011; Sutton, 2016). Student satisfaction becomes strained if the course is too rigorous or difficult to comprehend (Simsek & Balaban, 2010). A predictor of low task value can be attributed to students who either did not understand what kind of course they were enrolling in or where their own interests lay (Worthley et al., 2015). Students who exhibited low task value largely were undecided in their major or course of study (Heller & Cassady, 2016). Negative student perception as to the applicability of a college course to future achievement goals puts students at risk of failing

and/or dropping out of college altogether (Heller & Cassady, 2016; Kamphorst, Hofman, Jansen, & Terlouw, 2013).

**Competency beliefs.** If students believe that they can learn, the effort they put forth will result in positive outcomes. Learning control beliefs are a predictor that students will strategically apply their skills to be successful and effective in college (Holles, 2016; Pintrich et al., 1991; Sutton, 2016). Students who demonstrate high levels of control beliefs experience success unencumbered by worry of failure because they are confident, they will be succeed in their academic pursuits. In the absence of high levels of control beliefs, individuals are less confident of academic success and tend to dwell on the possibility of failure and exhibit ambivalence towards their performance (Law et al., 2012). Thus, performance avoidance such as missing class, lack of participation, and avoiding studying occurs (Law et al., 2012; Sutton, 2016).

**Navigating independence.** Holles (2016) proposed that determining college preparation is a complex process because so many factors are involved that may help or hinder college success. Academic data is not a definitive or reliable predictor of student success because outside factors are just as influential. Outlying variables to consider when determining performance factors include study skills, financial and social responsibilities, academic maturity, and familial influences (Holles, 2016).

**Peer learning.** Collaborating with peers in study groups has a positive effect on college achievement (Holles, 2016; Pintrich et al., 1991). As with any teaming approach, exchanging ideas or course material with other involved parties helps clarify or add to one's current knowledge. In a study conducted by Richardson et al., (2012), thriving college students indicated that new friendships in college were satisfying and revolved around studying with each

other and socializing outside of classes as well. Richardson et al. (2012) also reported that thriving collegiate students developed learning communities with other students for support beyond the classroom. Bean and Eaton (2001) theorized that a student's interactions with other students are more important to institutional satisfaction and success than contact with the faculty. Indeed, students are more impacted by peer groups, and peer learning is the most influential in college integration (Astin, 1993; Holles, 2016; Sparkman et al., 2012; Sutton, 2016).

***Help seeking.*** According to Sparkman et al. (2012), students who successfully transitioned from secondary education to college were actively engaged in campus life, which includes contact with their professors or other campus organizations. Richardson et al. (2012) reported that thriving college students also had positive relationships with the academic staff members. Encouraging involvement within the university environment was imperative for successful integration and success for first-year college students (Holles, 2016; Richardson et al., 2012; Sutton, 2016). Sparkman et al. (2012) reiterated this need in their study *Non-Cognitive Predictors of Student Success in College*. They used information from a student-retention model (Tinto, 1993) that stated the level of integration in college is inversely associated to student dropout rates. The level of involvement of students in their university setting, both academically and socially, were predictive indicators of student persistence in challenging tasks (Sparkman et al., 2012; Sutton, 2016; Tinto, 1993). Seeking help when needed to perform successfully on tasks is instrumental in dealing with academic demands and anxiety (Balduf, 2009; Heller & Cassady, 2015; Kistsantas et al., 2008; Tuckman, 2003;).

***Familial influence.*** It is important to add that student motivation is not based solely on intrapersonal factors and characteristics but on the culture in which students develop their

aptitudes (Guay, 2016). A student's beliefs and values are shaped by the culture and demographics in which they are raised (Barefoot, 2004; Guay, 2016). For example, the priority students place on their education versus their need to play is invariably entwined to cultural specificity (Li, 2016).

Students from families where both parents graduated from a four-year university are more likely to graduate college with either an associate or bachelor's degree (Barefoot, 2004 ; Guay, 2016; Seidman, 2005; Sparkman et al., 2012). Self-efficacy also can be enhanced through the strong influence and modeling of parents (Ahn, Usher, Butz, & Bong, 2016). First-generation college students may experience a lack of familial support due to lack the lack of understanding of the cost and demands of college (Sparkman et al., 2012). The lack of resources to pay for college may force students to work, which causes additional obstacles to academic success (Sutton, 2016).

### **Review of Methodological Issues**

Student achievement in college-level courses involves dynamic as well as static variables. These numerous variables pose limitations to researchers who strive to predict whether students will be successful in college and which student characteristics attribute to collegial success (Heikkila, Niemivirta, & Nieminen, 2010; Worthley et al., 2016). Most of the methods used to measure predictors for student motivation and learning strategies relied on self-report surveys and interviews. In self-report questionnaires, such as the MSLQ, the items asked participants to generalize their propensity for action across various learning experiences rather than a specific learning event (Heikkila et al., 2010). The validity of the MSLQ survey data comes into question because the participants may not accurately remember what strategies they applied to a task and report what they perceived rather than what they performed (Schellings & Van Hout-

Wolters, 2011). Thus, additional data such as interviews and observations, are essential to portray an accurate analysis of the phenomenon studied (Schellings & Van Hout-Wolters, 2011).

Dinsmore, Alexander, and Loughlin (2008) examined 255 studies which focused on student self-regulated learning strategies but found neither quantitative nor qualitative methodology could present definitive findings as to its prediction towards collegial success. Thus, a triangulation of data is needed to obtain a full spectrum and insight into participants' perceptions as to their motivation and application of learning strategies (Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2004; Perry & Winne, 2006; Schellings & Van Hout-Wolters, 2011).

### **Synthesis of Research Findings**

Findings from peer-reviewed literature show relevant connections between the interplay of student motivation and the application of cognitive/metacognitive learning strategies (Pintrich et al., 1991). Motivation is comprised of students' attitudes and behaviors regarding learning (Howey, 2008; Pintrich et al., 1991; Sutton, 2016). Cognitive and metacognitive learning strategies encompass skills such as critical thinking and resource management (Kikas & Jõgi, 2016; Pintrich et al., 1991). At the college level, lack of achievement is due to either unprepared students or students who do not perform to the standard needed to succeed (Balduf, 2009). Thus, there is a critical need to research predictors of student performance and methods to help students master the standards and skills needed for college.

According to research findings, a gap exists between the knowledge and skills taught in high school and those other skills vital for success in higher education courses (Sparkman et al., 2012). Skills vital for success encircle student beliefs in their academic acuity as well as using a learning strategy that employs a deep approach to learning, such as elaboration (Pintrich et al., 1991). The development of self-efficacy is internal; however, whenever learners believe their

identity and goals are congruent, they will expend vast amounts of effort and persistence to achieve such goals (Komarraju & Dial, 2013). Pintrich et al. (1991) called these beliefs value and expectancy components. The negative component that may accompany academic behavior is anxiety, which creates self-handicapping actions such as test anxiety, procrastination, and surface approach study strategies (Tuckman & Kennedy, 2011).

Learning strategies can be taught. Constructivist theorists describe students as active participants in the processing of information (Kikas & Jõgi, 2015). Realizing the necessity of teaching critical thinking skills, states' departments of education have improved the implementation of state standards for career and college readiness that interweave cognitive skills throughout the school curriculum (SREB, 2010). These standards are taught throughout a student's initial education. However, the need for remedial college courses, student retention, and college student drop-out rates indicate additional skills required for higher education endeavors (Sparks & Malkus, 2013; Tuckman & Kennedy, 2011).

Lastly, environmental variables can impede a student's pursuit of successful degree completion. Demographics can either encourage or create obstacles according to cultural values and socio-economic status (Ahn et al., 2016; Guay, 2016; Liam, 2016; Sutton, 2016). The transition from secondary education to the college environment can be an adjustment not only for the student but also for family, friends, and employers.

### **Critique of Previous Research**

There is an agreement among researchers that student cognitive and metacognitive behaviors are predictors for collegiate success (Balduf, 2009; Kikas & Jõgi, 2015; Lynch, 2016; Pintrich et al., 1991). Themes that weave throughout the research regarding student performance in college center around student motivation and the application of learning strategies. However,

researchers disagree on whether cognitive behaviors alone account for academic success in college-level courses (Ahn et al., 2016; Guay, 2016; Liam, 2016; Sutton, 2016). Other variables are noted, such as cultural influences, demographics, and college environment. Addressed in the next chapter is the discussion of the case study approach used for this study.

Students need assistance to reach their maximum potential in their higher-education pursuits. Three major obstacles high-achieving first-year college students face are lack of preparation for the rigors of college, poor time-management skills, and motivation. Furthermore, the students reported exaggerated perceptions of college readiness due to the ease of earning good grades in high school with relatively little effort. Recommendations for future studies include conducting phenomenological studies with high-school students that study the effects of transitional classes that teach skills and learning strategies, such as critical thinking and self-regulation (Balduf, 2009).

Lynch (2006) conducted a quantitative study using the MSLQ to measure motivational factors, learning strategies, and resource management as predictors of course grades. The MSLQ was administered at an interim halfway through the semester course to both freshmen and upper-level college students. The over-arching finding of the study was that self-efficacy was the most powerful predictor of performance for freshmen and upper-level college students. However, Lynch stated that differences were most apparent for first-year collegiate students. Freshmen performance exhibited self-efficacy and extrinsic goal orientation whereas upper-classmen performance exhibited self-efficacy and effort. The conclusion Lynch drew from this study was that incoming freshman were not aware of their strengths and weaknesses regarding the skills needed to be successful in college courses. Thus, it is prudent for secondary education as well as college faculty members to help students assess both their academic beliefs and cognitive skills.

Worthley, et al. (2016) pursued an explanatory sequential mixed-methods approach to understand the failure rate for college freshmen calculus students. Their instrumentation included the MSLQ, student interviews, and statistical analysis of the data. The highest correlation of failing grades was attributed to test anxiety. Worthley et al. (2016) connected test anxiety to surface learning approaches and procrastination. The researchers were not able to find a good model to predict whether students would be successful in calculus or not. However, they discovered a trend among the students using a large amount of time towards course tasks. The researchers suggested that even though time was given toward the course, students may not know how to use the time wisely. Worthley et al. (2016) implied that help-seeking would benefit the calculus students if they asked for feedback, and meeting with their instructor before the course began might benefit performance.

There is an abundance of research seeking to find answers to student underachievement in college-level courses. Studies to ascertain college predictors of success used a wide range of methodologies and different approaches to address the phenomenon of collegial performance. The MSLQ developed by Pintrich et al. (1991) is the most-used tool to measure self-reported perceptions of students' motivation and learning strategies towards academic courses (Duncan & McKeachie, 2005).

## **Summary**

Chapter 2 represented the literature on the predictors of student college success. Themes that weave throughout the research regarding student performance in postsecondary education center around student motivation and the application of learning strategies. However, other variables are noted, such as cultural influences, demographics, and the type of college environment. Addressed in the next chapter is the discussion of the case study approach used for

this study. The data collection, analysis, and procedures are described. Multiple data sources were used for this case study to triangulate the data. The triangulation of data served to broaden understanding of the participant experience and insights and to provide further validation for the findings.

### **Chapter 3: Methodology**

The transition from secondary education to college-level courses is a dynamic experience for students. Essential for the success of first-year students is the mastery of skills needed for college-level courses as well as the emotional maturity to thrive in the college environment (Balduff, 2009; Sutton, 2010; Worthy et al, 2016). Therefore, a multiple case study approach was used to explore the perceptions and experiences of first-year college students regarding their preparation for undergraduate studies (Creswell, 2013). According to Creswell (2013), a case study is a form of inquiry in which the researcher explores in-depth an event, process, or activities of one or more participants. Researchers thus collect information using a variety of data sources and collection procedures. In this multiple case study, data was collected according to the conceptual framework which encompassed high-school and college academic preparation, college emotional readiness, cognitive and metacognitive learning strategies, and the navigation of independence in the college environment. This chapter provides detailed information about the research design, instrumentation, ethical issues, and procedures utilized for data collection and analysis.

#### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this qualitative multiple case study was to explore the experiences of high-achieving students who entered college regarding their high-school academic preparation, college academic preparation, emotional readiness, and their navigation of independence. Exploring the experiences of high-school graduates entering college can provide a means to understand the academic problems and successes encountered by students and how these experiences lead to continued enrollment decisions (Balduff, 2009; Sutton, 2010; Worthy et al., 2016). The data from this study allowed insight into the experience students encounter when

they begin their first year of college. The findings of this research study can help both secondary and higher-education institutions align expectations and mastery of skills, both cognitive and metacognitive, to improve student collegial success (Balduff, 2009; Sutton, 2010; Worthy et al., 2016).

### **Research Questions**

1. What high school experiences do high-achieving high-school students believe helped them prepare for college course work?
2. What are the academic experiences of high-achieving high-school students during their first year of college?
3. What are the social and emotional experiences of high-achieving high-school students during their first year of college?
4. What experiences do former high-achieving high-school students attribute to their first-year college retention?

### **Research Design**

A qualitative multiple case study design was selected for this study. Creswell (2013) established that a case study method is used to explore experiences and perceptions of the study participants and Yin (2014) asserts that case study design is used when a researcher seeks to explain a phenomenon in real life; this study did both. Furthermore, a case study design is used when the research is bound over time or place (Yin, 2014). In this study, all participants graduated from the same high school, in the same year, and completed the MSLQ; this represents a bound case (Yin, 2014). The data collection involved multiple sources of information (Creswell, 2013). Ultimately, this approach was used to find themes concerning an experience and to uncover new directions to address them (Creswell, 2013; Hughes & McDonagh, 2017).

Case studies are also used when engaging in research that is exploratory (Gerring, 2004; Hughes & McDonagh, 2017). I chose the case study method due to the dynamic factors that effect a student's experience when transitioning from secondary education to college-level courses. Each participant's story is their own and completely isolated from the other participants' experiences. Thus, the researcher has the opportunity to explore emerging themes for future action and study (Creswell, 2013).

Case studies are becoming popular among researchers who analyze thematic data using a triangulation of data resources (Hoon, 2013). Multiple forms of qualitative data were collected for this study for triangulation purposes. Using a variance of data sources provided a deeper understanding of student expectations for college and their ensuing experiences. The data was analyzed independently, procuring autonomous sets of results. Findings from the data sets were then compared for emerging patterns and conclusions, providing a closer understanding of the results (Creswell, 2013). Data collection included participant archival data from the administration of the MSLQ in their final semester in high school, subsequent interviews after the students' first year of college, and college course in-class observations that provided a deeper understanding of student perceptions of college readiness and the experiences they later incurred.

### **Research Population and Sampling Method**

All participants in this study attended the same public high school in their senior year. The school is an urban public high school in a large school district. The school has a large mobile population, some coming to school from as far away as fifty miles. Therefore, there is a diverse mixture of student backgrounds and ethnicities. There are 1,463 students in 9th through 12th grade. The school study site only employs highly qualified teachers and currently is rated as a C school, according to the school report card released by the XXX Department of Education

(2017). Table 3 delineates the demographics of the student population of the participants high school they attended in 2017.

Table 3

*Research Design Study Site Student Demographics (XXX, 2017)*

Gender	%	Ethnicity/ Race	%	Special Programs	%	Other Student Information	%
Male	52	Hispanic	5.6	504 Designation	5.9	Targeted Achievement Gap Group	46.3
Female	48	American Indian	0.5	Gifted/Talented	15.6	English Learner	2.6
		African American	43.4	Special Education	12.5	Homeless	1.9
		White	46.4	Title 1 Participation	1.9	Retained	4.2

I was an instructional coach at the high school the participants attended. The students participated in a class project about class readiness and took the MSLQ. Just before the students graduated, I shared the case study intent with the students. Students who were interested and met the criteria for the study were contacted after IRB approval for the study was obtained.

Purposive sampling was used as the sampling method (Dudovskiy, 2019; Palinkas et al., 2013). This type of sampling is used in qualitative research to identify and select participants who have experiences and are related to the phenomenon being studied (Creswell, 2013). Although there are several different purposive sampling strategies, sampling based on certain attributes is the most commonly used (Dudovskiy, 2019; Palinkas et al., 2013). The attributes chosen for the study were that the students attended the urban high school in which the I participated as an instructional facilitator, took the MSLQ survey in May 2017, and enrolled in either a community college or four-year college in August 2017.

The small sample size, which is used in this study, is practicable for accessibility to the population during interviews, member checking, and follow-up questions (Dudovskiy, 2019). The following table lists the demographic information, type of college attended, and academic performance as reported from the interview protocol. Table 4 delineates the participants' demographics.

Table 4

*Research Population Demographics*

Student	Age	Gender	Race/Ethnicity	Type College Attended	High School GPA	ACT Score
David	18	Male	White	4 Year	3.8	24
Wendy	18	Female	White	4 Year	3.9	27
Hannah	18	Female	White	4 Year	4.1	29
Sarah	18	Female	White	Seminary	4.2	28
Marcus	18	Male	Black	4 Year	2.7	21
Ben	18	Male	White	4 Year	3.3	26
John	18	Male	White	4 Year	2.8	30
Tracy	18	Female	White	2 Year	3.7	23

**Instrumentation**

The Motivational Strategies for Learning Questionnaire (MSLQ) was used for this case study research design. This survey is an open access survey (Pintrich et al, 1991) for researchers and educators. For student perceptions, scores from the MSLQ (Pintrich et al., 1991) taken in the students' high-school senior year were analyzed and coded for college readiness perception in motivation, learning strategies, and emotional maturity. The purpose of the MSLQ is to assess

student learning strategies used in college courses. The self-report survey contains two sections based on the participants' views of the motivation and learning strategies utilized in throughout their course work. Students rate themselves on a seven-point Likert scale where the highest-ranking score is seven (very true of me) and the lowest score is one (not at all true of me). The MSLQ contains two sections comprising of 15 subscales. The value component section contains questions concerning goal readiness, extrinsic goal orientation, task value, learning belief, self-efficacy, and test anxiety. The cognitive and metacognitive strategies section contains questions regarding rehearsal, elaboration, organization, critical thinking, self-regulation, time management, study environment, peer learning, and help seeking.

The MSLQ survey data collected was important to the study because the data derived from the MSLQ can be compared to student perceptions for their readiness for college based on the factors identified in the MSLQ. The MSLQ includes 81 items, which can be completed in 30 minutes. The items pertain to participant perceptions according to their perception of the propensity to utilize motivational and learning strategies in their course work. The MSLQ has been a work in progress since 1986. Early administration of the first questionnaires varied from 50 to 140 items. According to Pintrich et al. (1991), the early instruments were tested with statistical and psychometric analyses, which included a reliability coefficient computation, factor analysis, and correlations between performance and aptitude measures. Thus, through the National Center for Research to Improve Postsecondary Teaching and Learning at the University of Michigan, Pintrich et al. (1991) provided prior research establishing reliability and validity of the MSLQ (Lynch, 2006). Still used by numerous researchers, the MSLQ has demonstrated sound structure and claims factor validity for the MSLQ scales (Duncan & McKeachie, 2005). Table 5 provides a descriptive narrative for each subscale.

Table 5

*Descriptive Narrative of MSLQ Subscales*

Cognitive and Metacognitive Strategies		Motivation	
Rehearsal	Surface approach to learning that involves memorization of information.	Intrinsic Motivation	Participation in the course for mastery, challenge, and learning.
Elaboration	Deeper approach to learning which includes making connections and using prior knowledge to store information into long-term memory.	Extrinsic Motivation	Participation in the course for outside factors such as grades, degree completion.
Organization	Learning strategies where students organize information such as clustering, outlining, categorization.	Task Value	Students' evaluation of how important the course or assignment is to them.
Critical Thinking	Students' approach to learning using analysis of information and drawing conclusions	Control Beliefs	Students' belief that their participation in the course will lead to high levels of learning.
Self-Regulation	Students plan their goals, monitors their progress, and self-regulates to achieve their goals.	Self-Efficacy	Students expect to experience success and takes measures to do so.

Table 5 (continued).

Cognitive and Metacognitive Strategies		Motivation	
Time and Study Environment	Students plan their time in accordance to tasks, which includes studying in a quiet environment.	Test Anxiety	A self-defeating behavior during course assessment usually due to surface approaches to learning.
Peer Learning	Students seek other students to study with and discuss course assignments.		
Help Seeking	Students seek out help from college services and their professors.		

Retrieval of data with approval from the IRB was collected from the MSLQ (Pintrich et al., 1991) completed by the participants their senior year of high school. The MSLQ is an open access survey and is allowed to be used without permission (Pintrich et al, 1991). This archival data provided student perceptions in high school as to their propensity for collegial success characteristics and learning strategies such as rehearsal, elaboration, organization, critical thinking, self-regulation, time and study environment, effort regulation, peer learning, and help seeking. The archival data from the MSLQ allowed the incorporation of the students' early perceptions of college readiness for college and current perceptions of college readiness through one-to-one interviews.

### **Data Collection**

Data on the experiences of eight first-year college students and their transition from secondary education to college-level courses was collected using various means. To initiate

contact, an email was sent to the students who participated in the MSLQ survey during their Teacher of Tomorrow class, if they wished to participate in this study. When each participant agreed, a consent form that included descriptions of the purpose of the study, the interview process, benefits of the study, confidentiality, and withdrawal rights was sent to them. Data collected for the study included the participants' MSLQ responses from May 2017, document collection of college entrance requirements and syllabi, interviews with the participants after their first year of college-level courses, and observations of courses at a four-year college as well as a community college.

**Semi-structured interviews.** Semi-structured interviews were conducted for this study. Interviews with the participants elicited the story behind the experience in question. However, the questions were carefully chosen. The interviews conducted averaged an hour in duration. Creswell (2013) advised that the questioning should include two focus questions that lead to a description of the experiences, thus providing an understanding of common experiences the participants may have had. According to Creswell (2013), the essential questions to collect relevant data for analysis are what the participants experience regarding to the phenomenon and what situations influenced or affected the experience. Open-ended questions were used to explore the experiences of first-semester college students and their experience with the transition from secondary education to college. The open-ended questions were created to address the research questions of the study (see Appendix A).

The questions were structured around the four research questions as well as the scales and subscales of the MSLQ survey to derive the fullest understanding of the participants' transitional experience from high school to college courses. Even though the interview questions were prepared in advance, other open-ended questions were asked to clarify points in the students'

reflections. The interview was conversational and informal. This allowed for the students to express their experiences, views, and ideas without constraint. The interviews were the primary source of data used for this study.

Interviews were held at a location chosen by the participant and which ensured privacy as well as anonymity. Participants consented to the interview by signing a Concordia University–Portland consent form with the provision that they could end the interview any time without recourse. To ensure protection of the integrity of the data, as well as the safety of the participants, interviews were recorded with student permission in a password-protected program. The recording was transcribed verbatim by me onto a Microsoft document. Once member checking was completed, the recording was erased.

**Document review.** Documents from the colleges the students attended were collected for this study. A document review is used in many different fields of research as either a primary method of data collection or as a complement to other methods (O'Leary, 2014). The documents acquired for review provided data which aided in contextualizing the research. The documents reviewed were course syllabi and services offered to incoming freshmen to help with the transition from secondary education. College websites were also accessed to acquire data on college entrance requirements, housing opportunities, work study, and extracurricular activities, which can be essential for preparing students for the college environment (CDC, 2009; SREB, 2010).

**Observations.** Another data source was college course observations. As the researcher, I audited freshman-level classes at university and community colleges within selected classrooms. Three of the colleges audited were attended by three of the participants. Permission to observe classes was obtained by the institutions' administration and the instructors of the audited courses. To ensure observation data was being gathered objectively, I created an

observation review form in Google Forms for consistent field notes (see Appendix B). The data collected concerned the rigor of the course, instructional strategies utilized, and class expectations according to student behavior and conduct (Hora & Ferrare, 2013).

### **Data Analysis**

The qualitative data analysis method employed in this multiple case study was thematic content analysis. Thematic content analysis emphasizes analyzing, exploring, and recording patterns (or "themes") within data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Using qualitative data as a research methodology, it is important that the researcher analyzing the data allows the natural development of themes so as not to impose a predetermined set of themes on the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The qualitative data was analyzed for emerging themes first; then once themes were identified, they were applied to answer the research questions that drove this study.

**Coding techniques.** The primary process for developing themes within the data is the use of coding to recognize occurring phenomena among the participants and analyzing it prior to interpretation (Burnard, Gill, Stewart, Treasure, & Chadwick, 2008). Coding for collegial expectations and course requirements was used for the document review. The rigor of the course was then aligned to the propensity of the student to use the learning strategies necessary to meet performance expectations evidenced in the scoring of the MSLQ. Additionally, entrance requirements for the college was compared to the course syllabus to ascertain if entrance requirements are adequate to determine whether a student can meet course performance requirements.

The method used to analyze data from the observations of audited college classes was the "definition of the situation" coding (Bogdean & Biklen, 2003). Definition of situation codes cover concepts and/or categories, which address the rigor, tasks, and class expectations of the

observed class. Field notes were taken on the Google form and broken down into two categories: instructional norms and classroom environment. The data was compared to high school Common Core Curriculum Standards (SREB, 2010) to perceive if any incongruities are apparent between secondary education skill set expectations and collegiate.

**MSLQ Survey.** The MSLQ was scored using a scoring guide provided for the survey (see Appendix C). The responses by the participants were reported on a Likert scale from 1 “not at all true of me” to 7 “very true of me.” The questions answered on the survey show the extent in which the participants perceive they apply strategies or resources towards the constructs that make up a subscale. The constructs represent characteristics of successful motivational and learning strategies that students apply in their education (Duncan & McKeachie, 2005; Lynch, 2006; Pintrich et al, 1991; Worthey et al, 2016). The participant scores were placed in a table according to the correlating motivational and learning strategy subscales. During the analysis of data, the participants’ archived scores from the MSLQ were compared to their responses in the interviews to determine if there was an alignment of student perceptions of their readiness for college and the MSLQ scores.

### **Identification of Attributes**

High-achieving high school students' experiences during the transition from secondary education to college were the principal attributes used to outline this study. According to Holles (2016), there is a disconnect between high achieving student perceptions of college readiness and reality. The normal predictors for college success rely on standardized college entrance exams and high school grade point averages but these scores do not adequately represent college preparation (College Atlas, 2017). Thus, this study was designed to understand the type of college preparation students received in high school compared to how prepared the students

believed they were during their first year of college. This led to identifying the skills necessary for first-year college students to be successful. One of the characteristics for successful transition from secondary education to college consists of extrinsic motivation which includes the need to achieve high grades, familial expectations for academic achievement, and support from friends and study groups. Adjusting to the high-performance demands from the expectations in high school to the rigor of college level courses is also essential due to time constraints related to the increased work-load required in college courses. Thus, efficient study skills are another characteristic successful college students exhibit. Lastly, emotional maturity allows students to navigate the changes the college environment entails and enables them seek help when needed both academically and socially (Holles, 2016; Pintrich, 1991; Sutton, 2010).

### **Limitations of the Research Design**

Limitations to a study are any situational or conditional circumstances that may affect the results and/or findings. A small sample size is common in qualitative research and the sample size in this study is a small population of students of attended the same high school. This design aims to transfer the knowledge gained to other contexts within this study. However, the sample is limited due to a lack of racial and ethnic diversity among the participants for they are predominantly Caucasian and were the same age.

Another limitation is the method of using a survey that relies on the self-reporting of attributes and/or weaknesses. The MSLQ is a self-report survey administered online to the participants. The overall validity of self-report questionnaires has been questioned in both qualitative and quantitative data collection and analysis. However, self-report with Likert-type instruments are regular research methods used to measure learning strategies (Fenman, 2011; Schelling & Van Hout-Wolters, 2009).

## **Validation**

The importance of validity in research is to ensure that the findings of the study can be used to further other research, propose changes or additions to theory, or promote change in the constructs of the phenomenon studied. Thus, to carry forth the study into other domains with consistency in its procedures and findings, the validation of the research is essential. Qualitative research poses a conundrum to the measures of validation due to its dynamic and interpretative nature. To solve the dilemma of the validation, measurement qualitative researchers have developed measurement concepts in line with the qualitative studies (Thomson, 2011). The main categories to ensure validation in qualitative research involve credibility, reliability and transferability, trustworthiness, credibility, and confirmability (Cohen et al., 2007).

Insuring validation of the study includes taking steps to assure the accuracy and correctness of the findings and accurateness of the data (Thomson, 2011). This lends to credibility of the study as well. Credibility is essential in that the data accurately depicts what participants disclose in self-report surveys and interviews. The data must be in alignment with the findings (Dereshiwsky, 1999). Thomson (2011) called this “theoretical validity” where the themes the researcher reports must reflect the constructs that forms the findings of the phenomenon. A detailed description of the data collection and analysis methods lends credibility to a study. Furthermore, member checking was conducted after the interviews were transcribed for correctness of the portrayal of the participant’s experience.

Triangulation established credibility of the study by checking the consistency of findings through different data collection methods (Cohen & Crabtree, 2006). Several different types of data were collected including interviews, document reviews, observations and survey data. This

helped to provide a deeper insight into the experiences of the participants along with any operational variables that may affect their perceptions.

Reliability lends validity to the study when the study can be repeated multiple times and the same results can be achieved. Reliability is accomplished through transferability, which is documentation of all aspects of the study so the study can be replicated (Dereshiwsky, 1999). I provided validation through rich descriptions of the specific setting, circumstances, subjects, and procedures (Cohen & Crabtree, 2006). Thick description is used to achieve external validity (Thomson, 2011). It therefore is possible for conclusions to become transferable to other times, settings, situations, and people when the phenomenon is described in sufficient detail. Thick descriptions are the researcher's detailed accounts of the context in which the themes of study occur (Holloway, 1997). Reliability and transferability were provided in this study due to meticulous attention to detail, thorough documentation of the procedures in the administering and scoring of the survey (Pintich et al., 1991), transcription and coding of the one-to-one interviews, and graphing of correlations between the archival MSLQ scores and reflections of the students during their interviews.

To achieve confirmability, the data for the study were objectively analyzed, and the data collected provided the evidence for the findings. In other words, data analysis was conducted through the lens of the participants and not through researcher bias (Dereshiwsky, 1999). To remove researcher bias, bracketing occurred throughout the process of data collection (Moutakas, 1994). A journal to record additional insights or thoughts before and after the one-to-one interviews was utilized, thus keeping the participants' experiences in focus. Member checking aided in establishing confirmability. The participants were provided a copy of the

transcribed recordings from the one-to-one interviews, the scores from the MSLQ survey, and a copy of the researcher's findings for collaboration purposes and additional insights.

### **Ethical Issues**

**Conflict of interest.** As a literacy coach at the high school in which the participants of this study attended, I was not in a position of authority, administratively or within the classroom. Thus, the participants of the study did not perceive they would incur rewards if they were involved in the study or consequences if they chose not to contribute. I am not associated with any of the colleges I observed. I also did not have previous contact with the professors whose courses I observed, other than prearrangement of the time and class to audit. Therefore, the data from the classroom observations was completely unprejudiced.

**Researcher's position.** In the 2017-2018 school year, I was a secondary literacy coach at the high school in which the participants of this study attended. My role was to provide modeling of best instructional strategies and educational resources to the teachers at the school. As a resource, a career and technical education teacher asked if I would come talk to the students about preparation for career and college endeavors. In order to recognize their strengths and weaknesses in successful characteristics identified for college achievement, I administered the MSLQ survey. This classroom activity birthed the premise for this study, and subsequently I asked the students who took the survey if they would participate in the process.

**Ethical standards.** The adherence to ethical standards is crucial to provide integrity, reliability and validity to research findings (Resnick, 2015). The privacy of the participants is of utmost importance, so consent forms were offered and signed by the participants explaining the scope and steps of the case study. The names of the participants were omitted from any documentation, and a number was assigned to the individual's data. The importance to faithfully

follow the ethical norms in research helps support the knowledge gained from the study as truth with avoidance of error (Resnik, 2015). Such ethical norms prohibit misrepresentation of data in quantitative research and the protection of research participants from any harm in qualitative research. Researchers are also held accountable to federal policies, which protect conflicts of interest, the participants being studied, and other factors such as consent and privacy (Resnik, 2015).

Concordia University–Portland developed an Institutional Review Board (IRB), which guides the permissions for this research study. The responsibility of the IRB is to protect the rights and safety of the students who participated in this exploration of their transitional experiences. Numerous steps and forms were required and submitted to the panel for review and approval, which helps to protect Concordia University and the researcher against potential unethical implications or legal actions taken due to infringement upon federal policies (Resnik, 2015).

Following the process of Concordia University’s Institutional Review Board, a letter of assurance was signed by both the researcher and dissertation chair. Consent letters were signed by the participants at the beginning of the study. Further processes provided a description and purpose of the study, methodology, and ethical considerations that were submitted and returned for guidelines, which dictated the next phase of the research: the quantitative and qualitative data collection.

### **Expected Results**

In keeping with the statistical findings on student remedial needs at 60% of incoming college freshman, I expected the data for this case study to show a discrepancy in student perceptions between student preparation for college and college course skill requirements.

Another expectation was that this discrepancy would involve a difference in performance expectations between secondary education and undergraduate courses. Lastly, this study expected the data to demonstrate that intrinsic and extrinsic motivation is a significant factor in college retention.

### **Summary**

The research design for this study was a case study approach that allowed for triangulation of data regarding the participants' experiences in the transition from high school to college-level courses. The participants who volunteered for this study were first-semester college freshmen diverse in gender, race/ethnicity, socioeconomic backgrounds, and academic acuity. Data collected in this study were both qualitative (interviews and observations) and quantitative (survey and document review).

Chapter 4 contains a full description of the participants, thick descriptions of the ensuing research methodology and analysis, and a summary of the findings. A full presentation of the data and results, which utilized charts and graphs are presented that showed emerging themes revealed through data analysis.

## Chapter 4: Data Analysis and Results

The successful transition from secondary education to a college institution involves numerous variables that traditional college entrance exams cannot measure. Many high achieving students meet enrollment requirements via high GPA scores and ACT scores but do not excel their first year of college (College Atlas, 2017; SREB, 2010). Thus, college retention rates have been an important discussion within federal government programs and college institutions who seek to find the gap between high-school academic preparation and college readiness (U.S. Department of Education, 2010). High-achieving students in high school tend to take college preparatory classes (College Board, 2018). However, a lack of alignment between college preparatory classes and undergraduate college courses exists. This disconnect involves more than academic acuity, for the high school to college environment is a transition emotionally as well. By understanding students' experiences as they navigate their first year of college, both secondary schools and college institutions can better prepare students to meet the demands of higher education. Exploratory in nature (Creswell, 2013), the following research questions guided this study about the transition from secondary education to undergraduate studies experienced by first year postsecondary students.

1. What high school experiences do high-achieving high-school students believe helped them prepare for college course work?
2. What are the academic experiences of high-achieving high-school students during their first year of college?
3. What are the social and emotional experiences of high-achieving high-school students during their first year of college?

4. What experiences do former high-achieving high school students attribute to their first-year college retention?

This study followed a multiple case study design to gain a broad and full understanding of the variables high-achieving students' encounter as they transition from secondary education to a college institution. This qualitative method allowed me to pursue different forms of data, which provided a detailed insight into each participant's experience (Creswell, 2013). In this chapter, I provide a description of the students who participated in this research. I also discuss the research methodology and thematic analysis of the data I collected through archival MSLQ scores, semi structured interviews, college course class observations, and document review. Lastly, this chapter includes a presentation of the results this study has yielded.

### **Description of the Sample**

The participants of this study attended a highly diverse large southern urban school. I used purposive sampling to select the participants to be interviewed based on preset characteristics that fit the criterion for this study (Dudovskiy, 2019; Palinkas et al., 2013). This study was delimited to eight high-achieving students, 18 years old, who participated in a teacher preparation class and took the MSLQ the last semester of their senior year in 2017 for a class project. Once I secured Concordia University Institutional Review Board approval, I sent 15 invitations requesting student participation in this study to help me gather data about the experiences first-year postsecondary student experience as they transition from high school to a college institution. The invitation requested the use of their MSLQ scores and an interview to be conducted after their first year of college. Eight students responded and agreed to participate in this study. An approved and stamped consent form by the CU Institutional Review Board was signed by the participants.

Four females and four males participated; seven were Caucasian and one was African American. Among the eight participants, seven attended four-year universities and one a Bible seminary college. Six students stayed in their home state for college. Each student received multiple scholarships based on their GPA and ACT scores. I assigned each participant an alias name and they are referred throughout this chapter as David, Wendy, Hannah, Sarah, Marcus, Ben, John, and Tracy.

**Participant 1.** (David) was an 18-year-old Caucasian male. He graduated high school tenth in his class and with honors. As a high-achieving student, he took all core Advanced Placement classes. He was actively involved in the National Honors Society, Beta Club, and the Science Club. He lived in the freshman dorm at an in-state four-year university. Focusing on his studies, he was not employed and only participated in campus ministry. In his first year of college, he achieved almost all A's with one B. He was honored on the Dean's list for high-achieving students.

**Participant 2.** (Wendy) was an 18-year-old Caucasian female. She graduated high school with honors. As a high achieving student, she took every Advanced Placement class offered. She was actively involved in band and served in band leadership. She was also a member of the National Honors Society, Beta Club, Teachers of Tomorrow, and Fellowship of Christian Athletes. She lived in the freshman dorm at an in-state four-year university. Because of her involvement in band, she was not otherwise employed. She achieved a 4.0 her first year of college.

**Participant 3.** (Hannah) was an 18-year-old Caucasian female. She graduated high school with a 4.0 and honors. She is a first-generation high-school student, the only one to graduate high school in her family. As a high-achieving student, she took all core Advanced

Placement classes. Due to her AP math classes, she tested out of all math in college. Actively involved in clubs, she was a member of the National Honors Society, Beta Club, Teachers of Tomorrow, and the Principal's Council. She lived at home and attended an in-state university. She did not participate in any college activities due to work and study demands. She achieved a 4.0 her first year of college and was honored on the Dean's and Chancellor's list.

**Participant 4.** (Sarah) was an 18-year-old Caucasian female. She graduated high school as the Salutatorian. As a high-achieving student, she took all offered Advanced Placement classes. She was actively involved in sports, art, and ministry in high school. She chose to attend a one-year Bible seminary college out-of-state. She lived in a cabin with 13 of her female classmates. She came from a legacy of high-achieving family members who all were seminarians. She plans to continue her ministry as a staff member at her Bible seminary college in 2018-2019 then transfer to a four-year college in Fall 2019.

**Participant 5.** (Marcus) was an 18-year-old African American male. He graduated high school with a 2.9 GPA after a tough start when he transferred to public school in the ninth grade. As a high-achieving student, he took all core Advanced Placement classes. His primary focus, however, was basketball. He was actively involved in Delta Presents and interned at the Department of Human Services. He lived in the freshman dorm at an out-of-state, historically black, four-year university for African American males. After taking a placement test for his college, he was required to take remedial classes in math and English. Focusing on his studies, he was not employed but participated in student leadership. During his first year of college, he achieved a 3.0 GPA.

**Participant 6.** (Ben) was an 18-year-old Caucasian male. He graduated high school with a 3.3 GPA after a difficult first two years due to his mother having cancer. As a high-

achieving student, he took all core Advanced Placement classes. He was actively involved in band and went to an in-state four-year university on a band scholarship. He was actively involved in the high-school theater, JROTC, Chemistry Club, and the Thespian Honors Society. He lived in the band dorm at his university. He was not employed due to the high demands of belonging to the college marching band. He became sick during his first year and withdrew from a few courses, which he will retake. He did not know his GPA.

**Participant 7.** (John) was an 18-year-old Caucasian male. He graduated high school with a 2.8 GPA. As a high-achieving student, he took all core Advanced Placement classes. However, football was his focus, and he went to an in-state four-year university on a football scholarship in addition to an academic scholarship, which he received due to a score of 30 on his ACT. He lived in the football dorm at his university. Focusing on football, he did not work or participate in any college activities. In his first year of college, he achieved a 3.5 GPA.

**Participant 8.** (Tracy) was an 18-year-old Caucasian female. She graduated high school with a 3.7 GPA and with honors. She is a first-generation college student. As a high-achieving student, she took all core Advanced Placement classes. She was a cheerleader and was actively involved with journalism. She lived in the freshman dorm at an in-state four-year university. Due to her studies, she did not have time to be involved in college activities. After the first semester, she transferred to a two-year community college where she made a 4.0 GPA and lived at home.

### **Research Methodology and Analysis**

In this qualitative study, I used a multiple case design to attain a deep understanding of the experiences that students had as they navigated the transition from secondary education to a college institution. By using a case study methodology, I was able to use multiple forms of data

to identify themes related to participant's experiences and to uncover new directions to address the obstacles they encountered (Creswell, 2013; Hughes & McDonagh, 2017). This multiple case method consisted of the collection and analysis of archival data from the MSLQ, audio-transcribed interviews, field notes from college course observations, and a review of documents, which provided a triangulation of data for this study (Cohen & Crabtree, 2006). In this multiple case study, numerous sources of data were collected to compare and contrast perceptions and experiences the participants encountered during their transition from secondary education to college. Using a triangulation of various data sources provided an in-depth analysis through comparison of the data, which lent a comprehensive understanding to the participants' responses to the MSLQ survey and interview questions

**MSLQ scoring.** The MSLQ was scored using a scoring guide provided for the survey (see Appendix C). The responses by the participants were reported on a Likert scale from 1 "not at all true of me" to 7 "very true of me." The questions answered on the survey show the extent in which a participant perceives they apply strategies or resources towards the constructs that make up a subscale. The MSLQ archival data provided student perceptions in high school as to their propensity for successful collegial student characteristics and learning strategies. The MSLQ subscales were rehearsal, elaboration, organization, critical thinking, self-regulation, time and study environment, effort regulation, peer learning, and help seeking. For a narrative description of the MSLQ subscales refer to Table 5. The archival data from the MSLQ allowed me to incorporate early perceptions of college readiness for college and current perceptions of college readiness through one-to-one interviews.

**Coding.** Cormack, Postăvaru and Basten (2018) refer to coding as a way to refer to characteristics of data which have meaning and correlate to the research questions and the

conceptual framework. Partially following Braun and Clarke's (2013) approach to thematic analysis, I coded the data in three different phases, which allowed the themes to develop naturally. In the first phase, I created categories based on the participants' answers to each interview question. For example, interview question one asked the participant about their high-school academic performance. David answered that he graduated with honors; thus, the category assigned to his answer was "high-achieving." Likewise, when David was asked about the activities he was involved in during high school, he answered that he was involved in several leadership and academic clubs for students with a high-grade point average. Again, the category assigned to his answer was "high-achieving" as well as "actively involved in high school extracurricular." After all eight interviews were coded using this method, phase two began.

Phase two involved pulling out significant statements made by the participants per interview question. In order to determine the significant statements, I reduced and eliminated the data that did not have substantial meaning to the participants' transitional experiences. Then I extracted statements that reflected more than one participant's experiences. Member checking was conducted to ensure I did not remove any information that would alter a participant's perception of their experiences. The transcripts I sent for review to the participants were not returned with changes. I then used highlighting to identify categorical connections between the participants' significant statements, MSLQ subscales, reviewed documents, and the conceptual framework for this study (Cormack et al., 2018).

The third phase involved creating a thematic map (Figure 6) (Braun & Clarke, 2013). The research questions, as well as the interview questions, sought to understand a first-year college student's experiences during the transition from secondary education to a college-level institution. This included a student's high-school preparation for college-level courses, college

academic and emotional readiness to succeed in college-level courses, and their navigation of the independence that a college environment requires. The sections of the conceptual framework concerning cognitive and metacognitive skill sets, as well as navigating independence, became subthemes. Through the commonalities of the participants interview answers, 4 themes and 11 subthemes were generated.

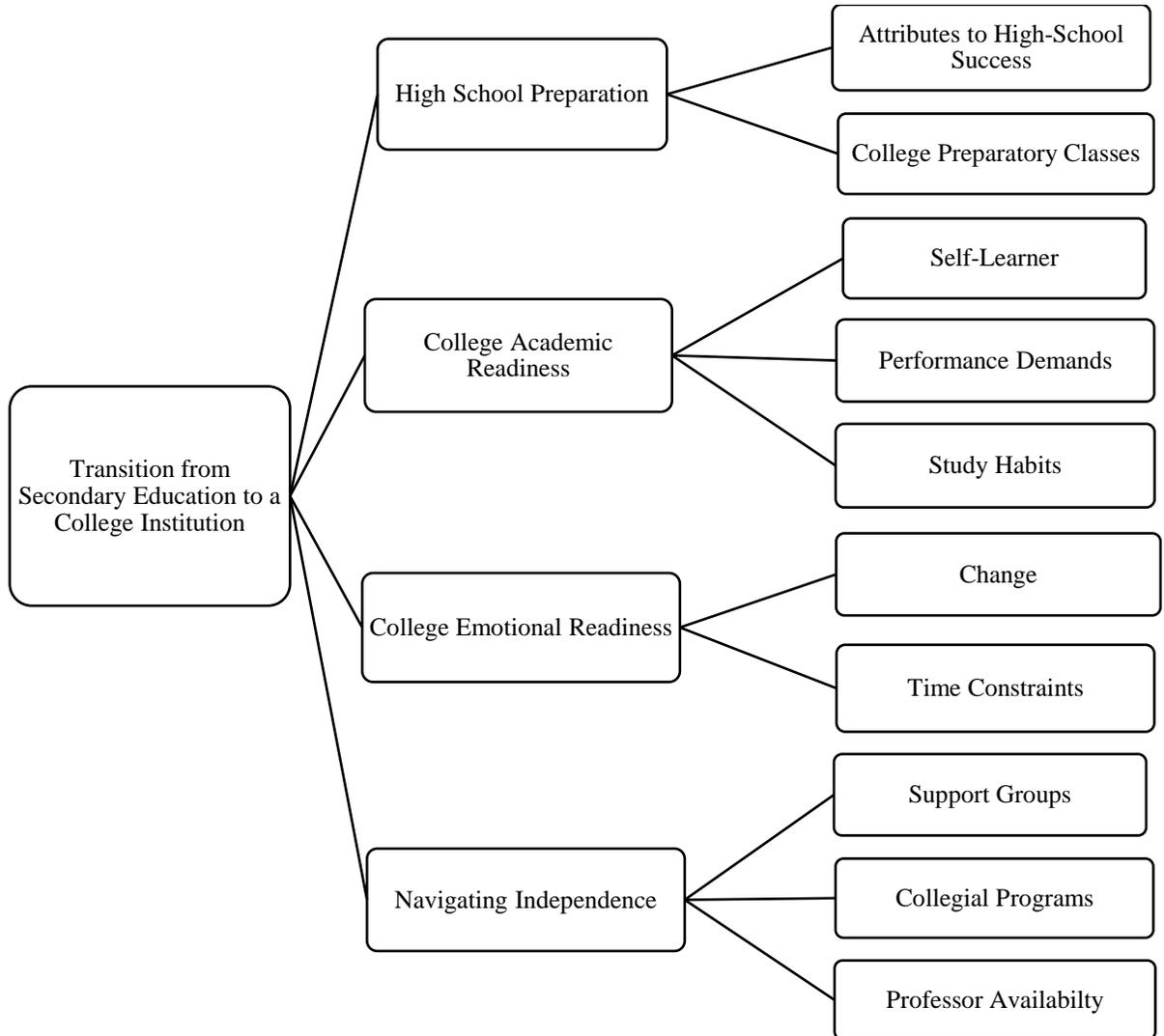


Figure 6. Relationships between the themes and subthemes.

### Data Analysis Procedures

I used a thematic analysis to analyze the data. After the thematic map was created, I used

descriptive narrative analysis to portray the experiences the participants encountered during their transition between secondary and postsecondary education. It was pertinent that I bracket my experiences or preconceived notions so as to not alter the stories the participants shared with me. During the data-analysis process, I kept a journal to record and reflect on preconceptions that might unconsciously influence what I construed the participants were saying in their interviews (Tufford & Newman, 2010). Journaling helped me to hear what the participants were saying rather than trying to fit their answers in preconceived categories; it helped the themes develop naturally. Lastly, bracketing helped me give equal weight to all participant responses to the interview questions instead of only concentrating on the answers that fit any biases I may have had (Creswell, 2013; Tufford & Newman, 2010). Reviewing other forms of data such as course syllabi, information on college websites, and course audits provided additional insight into the participants' experiences. The document review also reiterated the participants' comments regarding performance demands, collegial academic and social programs, and academic requirements.

### **Summary of the Findings**

In this multiple case study, the data collection and analysis methods were used to provide an in-depth understanding of how first-year college students experience the transition between secondary education and entrance into the postsecondary environment. After the participants' responses were analyzed and coded, a thematic map was generated. The themes that emerged provided a rich description of their perceptions as to high-school preparation for college, college academic and emotional readiness, and how participants navigated the independence the college environment requires. Ultimately, the research questions that guided this study were answered and transitional needs were revealed.

**Research question 1.** What high-school experiences do high-achieving high-school students believe helped them prepare for college course work? The purpose of this question was to gain insight into the participants' perceptions as to what helped them be successful in high school and what learning experiences helped them be ready for college-level courses. Many of the participants reported familial help as well as like-minded friends who took high-school success seriously. More importantly, they reported that participating in college-level preparatory classes in the form of Advanced Placement courses by the College Board was a significant opportunity for successful entry into postsecondary education.

**Research question 2.** What are the academic experiences of high-achieving high-school students during their first year of college? The purpose of this question was to determine the achievements and challenges the first year of postsecondary education presented the participants. Themes that emerged centered around high-performance demands and study habits, which differed greatly from their high-school experiences.

**Research question 3.** What are the social and emotional experiences of high-achieving high-school students during their first year of college? This question aimed to explore non-academic experiences. Themes generated through the participants' narratives were due to commentary about the difficulty of change from the strict structure of high school as well as home life to the self-reliance required to be successful in higher education. This included the introduction of time constraints as participants spent time studying to meet the demand of collegial expectations.

**Research question 4.** What do former high-achieving high-school students attribute to their first-year college retention? Most of the participants responded that when navigating the independence from secondary education to a college institution, they found support groups,

college programs, and professor availability the base of encouragement needed to succeed during their first year of college.

### **Presentation of the Data and Results**

The data analysis and results showed the participants' experiences as they transitioned from secondary school to postsecondary education. The stories the participants told through their interviews provided a deep understanding of the students' needs as well as support received through their first year of higher education. Subsequent document review and class observations helped further discernment of the demands of postsecondary education. The archival MSLQ scores of the participant's perceptions of college readiness compared to the post first-year college interviews offered additional insight into the success and struggles that occurred during the participant's transition. The triangulation of data allowed me to interpret the themes that emerged with a broader view (Cohen & Crabtree, 2006). The following themes and subthemes provided an in-depth analysis of the participants' transitional experiences from secondary education to college institutions.

**Theme 1: High-school preparation.** The participants reported that the support from family and friends, as well as college preparatory classes, contributed to their successful transition from secondary education to college.

*Subtheme 1: Attributes to high-school success.* Participants in the study attributed their achievement in high school to extrinsic motivation, task value, peer learning, and help-seeking. For instance, Tracy attributed her success to performance expectations and family support when she stated, "I have always cared about my grades; I am the oldest, and my siblings do not care. My mom supports me and wants me to do well. I am a first-generation college student, so education is very important to me." Sarah also echoed this sentiment saying, "I was very self-

motivated to become top in my class. I come from a long line of honor grads in my family. My parents taught me a good work ethic, and they supported me.”

The other participants reported that the support of family, friends, and teachers was an integral part of their high-school experience as well. David reported, “Family and friends kept me motivated. I got to know my teachers, and if I needed help, I could meet with them during lunch. My friends and I had study groups, and we prayed before tests.” Ben attributed his support to his mother, “If it wasn't for my mother and her support I would not be in college.”

Wendy also commented, “My parents expected good grades and were disappointed if I did not bring home A's. I had a lot of friends, and we would form study groups and pray before tests.” Marcus reiterated his peers' support when he stated:

Education is a big part of my life. My friends were all honor grads, and we were very competitive. I met successful people during a school internship. I went from not caring to succeeding. It was a big leap.

Through the interview process, the comments made by the participants correlated to the subscales on the MSLQ concerning extrinsic motivation, peer learning, and help seeking. According to the archival MSLQ scores from the questionnaire the participants took their senior year of high school. Extrinsic motivation was ranked the highest among all the subscales at an average of 6.75 out of a 7-point Likert scale (very true of me). However, even though peer learning and help seeking were prominently stated, these subscales only averaged 4.88 and 4.33 respectfully (somewhat true of me). Table 6 provides the participant MSLQ average Likert scores per the subscales: extrinsic motivation, peer learning, and help-seeking. Table 7 provides the questions asked on the survey that relate to each of Table 6 subscales.

Table 6

*Participant MSLQ Average Likert Scores per Subscale*

	Extrinsic Motivation	Peer Learning	Help- Seeking
David	7	4.33	5.5
Wendy	7	6	6.75
Hannah	7	4.67	5.25
Sarah	6	3	5.5
Marcus	6.75	4.33	4.5
Ben	6.5	5.67	5.75
John	6.75	2.33	1.75
Tracy	7	4.33	4
Average	6.75	4.88	4.33

Table 7

*MSLQ Questions per Subscale (Pintrich, 1999)*

MSLQ Subscale	Assessment Questions
Extrinsic Motivation	<p>7. Getting a good grade in class is the most satisfying thing for me right now.</p> <p>11. The most important thing for me right now is improving my overall grade point average, so my main concern in class is getting a good grade.</p> <p>13. If I can, I want to get better grades in this class than most of the other students.</p> <p>30. I want to do well in this class because it is important to show my ability to my family, friends, employer, or others.</p>

Table 7 (continued).

MSLQ Subscale	Assessment Questions
Peer Learning	<p>34. When studying for a course, I often try to explain the material to a classmate or a friend.</p> <p>45. I try to work with other students from class to complete the course assignments.</p> <p>50. When studying for a course, I often set aside time to discuss the course material with a group of students from the class.</p>
Help Seeking	<p>40. Even if I have trouble learning the material in a class, I try to do the work on my own, without help from anyone. (Reversed)</p> <p>58. I ask the instructor to clarify concepts I don't understand well.</p> <p>68. When I can't understand the material in a course, I ask another student in this class for help.</p> <p>75. I try to identify students in a class whom I can ask for help if necessary.</p>

*Subtheme 2: College preparatory classes.* Every participant in this study elected to take the school district's college preparatory classes by participating in the Advanced Placement Program (AP) governed by the College Board. The College Board is a non-profit organization which offers college-level curricula for high school students in the United States and Canada (College Board, 2018). The College Board requires schools to apply for their program courses and use the AP trademark on high-school transcripts if the teacher is AP certified for the course and the teacher's syllabus is College Board approved. Teachers become AP certified for five years by attending a College Board qualified Advanced Placement Institute for 30 hours of hands-on training. At the conclusion of an AP course, students take an exam, which, if scored

within college requirements, may grant them college credit for the aligned undergraduate course. There are currently 30 AP courses offered through the College Board.

The high school in which the participants were enrolled offered AP courses in English, history, math, science, and art. AP courses provided a weighted GPA of 5 points per class instead of the normal 4 points, which reflected a higher GPA average per year. Two out of the eight participants stated this was an incentive to take AP courses in order to meet college entrance requirements and receive scholarships based on high GPA scores. One student reported that through passing her AP math courses end-of-the-year exams, she was not required to take any undergraduate math courses.

When asked, “Did your college preparatory classes courses help prepare you for the courses you have selected in your first year of college?” all participants made common significant statements that their AP English Literature Class and AP Chemistry Class helped prepare them for aspects of undergraduate course work. Preparation included learning and requiring skills such as analyzing assigned readings, application of knowledge, and analytical writing. Six out of the eight participants commented that AP courses helped them prepare for college. For instance, Marcus stated, “AP prepared you for college due to the amount of work due every day. You read a lot in AP, which helped me prepare for the assigned readings in college.” John agreed, commenting that “AP is similar to college. The classes covered a lot of material, especially reading. There were a lot of class discussions and many types of essays.” David went further with his explanation of how AP courses helped him prepare for college:

My AP chemistry teacher would send home work during breaks, sometimes up to three chapters to read. This was due to not being enough time to cover all the information in class. This made me mad because I did not want to work over my break. But looking

back, it gave me the first taste of the ground work needed for college courses because in college you are on your own. AP courses definitely taught me how to learn on my own and how to study. It was spot on.

However, even though participants agree AP courses helped prepared them for college, they felt the difference in the challenge as they proceeded through post-secondary courses. Hannah said, “AP courses helped prepare for college, but in high school they broke everything down for us, and the teachers were more open.” Tracy reflected that her “AP classes in high school were just easier versions of college classes.” Likewise, Wendy stated, “AP courses in high school are not that demanding. My general education courses in college are a lot harder than my AP courses were.”

To summarize the theme, High School Preparation, participants reported that they attributed their high-school success (subtheme1) to outside support such as friends, family, and teachers. They felt that their college preparatory classes (subtheme 2) in the form of College Board Advance Placement Classes sufficiently prepared them for the academic challenges of postsecondary education.

**Theme 2: College academic readiness.** The difference in rigor between high-school classes and post-secondary courses became evident when the participants were asked, “What level of academic challenge did you experience in high school? How does it compare to the level of academic challenge you experienced in your first year of college?”

**Subtheme 1: Self-learner.** Several participants commented on the need to seek their own knowledge through class readings and assignments. Marcus reported that “in college the professors do not really explain things; you have to teach yourself. Everything I do is on me. I cannot blame anyone else.” Likewise, Wendy stated, “College expects you to do everything on

your own.” Hannah added that “in high school they broke everything down; teachers were more open.” David commented:

You must start teaching yourself in college; you cannot rely on professors or friends to teach you. You are your own teacher. The professors will not go over textbook like they did in high school. Basically, there are not any study guides in college.

Two of the course observations I conducted in four-year universities expected their students to have read the class material and completed various assignments before class. The class discussions involved what the students learned through analysis and evaluation of the material. Participation was expected, as evidenced by both instructors, through question-and-answer techniques to include all students in the discussion. In one course syllabi, as discovered in the document review, one professor expressed:

There are too many of you to expect you all to speak during each class, but I do expect to hear from each of you throughout the semester. You cannot escape from this class without letting me hear your voice on a regular basis. Trust me when I tell you that you each have an important contribution to make in this class, and I demand that you make it.

According to the MSLQ, being a self-learner includes the subscales task value, self-efficacy for learning and performance, control beliefs, metacognitive self-regulation, and effort regulation. Six out of the eight participants scored their perceptions of resource management high (very true of me). Resource management is a student’s ability to find the means necessary to complete their course work successfully. Table 8 displays the MSLQ scores the participants perceived to be their strengths necessary for self-learning in high school. Table 9 provides the questions related to the subscales in Table 8.

Table 8

*Participant MSLQ Average Liker Scored per Subscale*

	Task Value	Self-Efficacy	Control Beliefs	Self-Regulation	Effort Regulation
David	6.83	6.25	7	4.58	4.75
Wendy	6.33	5.88	5	5.91	5.5
Hannah	5.5	5.25	4.5	3.08	3.75
Sarah	5.33	5.88	7	5	6.75
Marcus	5.17	5.63	5.5	4.67	5
Ben	6.67	5.88	5.75	5.16	6.75
John	4.83	5.88	4.75	2.83	6.25
Tracy	4.16	4.25	4.5	2.08	4.25
Average	5.6	5.61	5.5	5.16	5.38

Table 9

*MSLQ Questions per Subscale (Pintrich, 1999)*

MSLQ Subscale	Assessment Questions
Task Value	<p>4. I think I will be able to use what I learn in a course in other courses.</p> <p>10. It is important for me to learn the course material assigned in class.</p> <p>17. I am very interested in the content area of a course.</p> <p>23. I think the course material in a class is useful for me to learn.</p> <p>26. It is important I like the subject matter of a course.</p> <p>27. Understanding the subject matter of a course is very important to me.</p>

Table 9 (continued)

MSLQ Subscales	Assessment Questions
Self-Efficacy	<p>5. I believe I will receive an excellent grade in my classes.</p> <p>6. I'm certain I can understand the most difficult material presented in the readings for a course.</p> <p>12. I'm confident I can understand the basic concepts taught in a course.</p> <p>15. I'm confident I can understand the most complex material presented by the instructor in a course.</p> <p>20. I'm confident I can do an excellent job on the assignments and tests in a course.</p> <p>21. I expect to do well in my classes.</p> <p>29. I'm certain I can master the skills being taught in a class.</p> <p>31. Considering the difficulty of this course, the teacher, and my skills, I think I will do well in a class.</p>
Control Beliefs	<p>2. If I study in appropriate ways, then I will be able to learn the material in a course.</p> <p>9. It is my own fault if I don't learn the material in a course.</p> <p>18. If I try hard enough, then I will understand the course material.</p> <p>25. If I don't understand the course material, it is because I did not try hard enough.</p>

Table 9 (continued).

MSLQ Subscale	Assessment Questions
Self-Regulation	<p>33. During class time I often miss important points because I'm thinking of other things. (Reversed)</p> <p>36. When reading for a course, I make up questions to help focus my reading.</p> <p>41. When I become confused about something I'm reading for this class, I go back and try to figure it out.</p> <p>44. If course materials are difficult to understand, I change the way I read the material.</p> <p>54. Before I study new course material thoroughly, I often skim it to see how it is organized.</p> <p>55. I ask myself questions to make sure I understand the material I have been studying in this class.</p> <p>56. I try to change the way I study in order to fit the course requirements and instructor's teaching style.</p> <p>57. I often find that I have been reading for class but don't know what it was all about. (Reversed)</p> <p>61. I try to think through a topic and decide what I am supposed to learn from it rather than just reading it over when studying.</p> <p>76. When studying for a course I try to determine which concepts I don't understand well.</p> <p>78. When I study for a class, I set goals for myself in order to direct my activities in each study period.</p> <p>79. If I get confused taking notes in class, I make sure I sort it out afterwards.</p>

Table 9 (continued).

MSLQ Subscale	Assessment Questions
Peer Learning	<p>34. When studying for a course, I often try to explain the material to a classmate or a friend.</p> <p>45. I try to work with other students from class to complete the course assignments.</p> <p>50. When studying for a course, I often set aside time to discuss the course material with a group of students from the class.</p>

***Subtheme 2: Performance demands.*** All the participants made significant statements about the work load involved in college-level courses. The most difficult transition from high school to postsecondary courses was the amount of analytical reading and writing required.

Tracy expanded on this as she said:

You cannot procrastinate in college. There is [*sic*] a lot of reading assignments. If you do not do your reading, you get behind. A typical reading assignment is 20 pages, then you discuss it the next day. There is a lot more writing in college as well. I was not necessarily prepared for writing because in high school I didn't have to. The only class we wrote essays in was AP English. In college history, we have readings to do, then we have to write about it. I did not have experience writing that way in history and science.

Other participants agreed with Tracy as they commented upon the high-performance demand in reading and writing. Marcus stated that "in high school you were given busy work five days a week. I do not want to do a worksheet that is not relevant. However, college professors assign four- to five-page papers due in three days." Hannah commented, "In high school the only challenge I had was AP Chemistry. The challenge I have in college is the

amount of work; it is continuous.” Ben exclaimed, “College is a crazy experience! Tons of assigned readings, then you are expected to know and participate in a discussion the next class

David reported:

First day in college, I go into classes and my professors are already assigning reading and writing assignments. In high school, we had enrichment time where we were supposed to read for 30 minutes. At the time I thought it was dumb. Looking back, I can see it taught me to read effectively in a short period of time. In college you are constantly reading.

Indeed, the class syllabi reviewed during data collection emphasized the need for reading and completing assignments. According to one professor’s syllabus:

In order to participate productively in class, you need to have done the assigned reading/viewing. If I suspect that you haven’t been doing the readings, I’ll be forced to administer annoying quizzes at the beginning of each class. Don’t make me administer annoying quizzes—do the readings.

In the assignment section of this professor’s syllabus, there was a reading packet assigned every day and a short writing assignment every other day. This course was a summer course and met daily for 90 minutes. Another professor proclaimed in his course syllabus that students must “learn to form interpretive readings of cultural works and support those interpretations with evidence and illustrations drawn from the works; this skill includes learning to express those interpretations in clear and organized writing.” He concluded by stating, “Writing will be an important part of this class, and the ability to write well in Standard Academic English is vital to success in the course.”

According to the MSLQ, the subscales that relate to analytical reading and writing encompass metacognitive and cognitive strategies. These include elaboration, critical thinking,

and organization. Table 10 displays the participants' scores for these sections of the questionnaire as perceived skills they had in high school. Table 11 provides the questions for the subscales in Table 10.

Table 10

*Participant MSLQ Average Likert Scores per Subscale*

	Elaboration	Critical Thinking	Organization
David	3	4.2	2.5
Wendy	6.5	5.6	6.5
Hannah	3.83	3	2.25
Sarah	3.33	3.8	5.5
Marcus	5.83	5	5
Ben	5.5	5	6.25
John	1.83	1.8	3
Tracy	3	3.8	1
Average	4.1	4.03	4

Table 11

*MSLQ Questions per Subscale (Pintrich, 1999)*

MSLQ Subscale	Assessment Questions
Elaboration	<p>53. When I study for a class, I pull together information from different sources, such as lectures, readings, and discussions.</p> <p>62. I try to relate ideas in a subject to those in other courses whenever possible.</p> <p>64. When reading for a class, I try to relate the material to what I already know.</p>

Table 11 (continued).

MSLQ Subscale	Assessment Questions
Organization	67. When I study for this course, I write brief summaries of the main ideas from the readings and the concepts from the lectures.
	69. I try to understand the material in a class by making connections between the readings and the concepts from the lectures.
	81. I try to apply ideas from course readings in other class activities such as lecture and discussion.
	32. When I study the readings for a course, I outline the material to help me organize my thoughts.  42. When I study for a course, I go through the readings and my class notes and try to find the most important ideas.  49. I make simple charts, diagrams, or tables to help me organize course material.  63. When I study for this course, I go over my class notes and make an outline of important concepts.
Critical Thinking	38. I often find myself questioning things I hear or read in a course to decide if I find them convincing.
	47. When a theory, interpretation, or conclusion is presented in class or in the readings, I try to decide if there is good supporting evidence.
	51. I treat the course material as a starting point and try to develop my own ideas about it.
	66. I try to play around with ideas of my own related to what I am learning in a course.  71. Whenever I read or hear an assertion or conclusion in a class, I think about possible alternatives.

*Subtheme 3: Study habits.* All the participants stated they did not study in high school, and if they did, they waited until the night before. The typical application for assessment was memorization. Students relied on rehearsal strategies to absorb the material in class. This is evidenced in Tracy's comment:

College is very different. Everything I learned in high school did not help me for college. In high school you took tests, but you didn't have to learn it. You just reviewed and memorized it. In college, you have to know it. The transition from memorizing to learning was a hard transition for me. The way high school is set up, I am good at. I did not study at all in high school and aced every test. In college I studied for weeks, but at the four-year college I was at, it was never enough. When I transferred to my two-year college, I do not have to study as much; it is more like high school.

The same commonality was reflected in the other participants' statements. Marcus commented, "In high school I did not study at all. I now set a time to study and do not go anywhere until I am finished. I learned to study in college." Hannah concurred when she said, "In high school I used the class before to get my assignments done or to study. I never studied for tests. In college, I have to actually do my homework, read, and make time for it." David stated:

I rarely studied in high school. I felt confident in everything I was doing. College was a different ballgame. I was studying every single night whether I had a test or not so I could understand what was going on in class. In high school I did everything on the fly. In high school I procrastinated.

Another change in study habits for some participants was how and where they studied. For instance, John remarked that "the football dorm is distracting, so I go find places to study

when I need to. I can gauge when I need help or need to study, so I study more than I used to (John). Ben commented that dorm life changed his study habits as well:

In high school I studied alone. But in college I have study groups in my dorm. There are three of us, and we do our homework in the living room of our dorm. We make sure we are focused and have peer accountability without distractions. In groups, we are able to interpret things in different ways, which helps.

According to the MSLQ the participants completed their senior year, study habits reflect resource management. These subscales include time and study environment, effort regulation, rehearsal, test anxiety, and help seeking. Table 12 displays the participants' perceived study skills and resource management their senior year in high school. Table 13 provides the questions for the subscales in Table 12.

Table 12

*Participant MSLQ Average Likert Scores per Subscale*

	Study Environment	Effort Regulation	Peer Learning	Rehearsal
David	5.13	4.75	4.33	5.5
Wendy	5.13	5.5	6	6.75
Hannah	4	3.75	4.67	5.25
Sarah	5.88	6.75	3	6.25
Marcus	4.5	5	4.33	4.75
Ben	6.25	6.75	5.67	4.5
John	3.37	6.25	2.33	1.25
Tracy	3.25	4.25	4.33	6
Average	4.69	5.38	4.88	5.03

Table 13

*MSLQ Questions per Subscale (Pintrich, 1999)*

MSLQ Subscale	Assessment Questions
Effort Regulation	<p>37. I often feel so lazy or bored when I study for a class that I quit before I finish what I planned to do. (Reversed)</p> <p>48. I work hard to do well in a class even if I don't like what we are doing.</p> <p>60. When course work is difficult, I give up or only study the easy parts. (Reversed)</p> <p>74. Even when course materials are dull and uninteresting, I manage to keep working until I finish.</p>
Peer Learning	<p>34. When studying for a course, I often try to explain the material to a classmate or a friend.</p> <p>45. I try to work with other students from class to complete the course assignments.</p> <p>50. When studying for a course, I often set aside time to discuss the course material with a group of students from the class.</p>

To summarize the theme, College Academic Readiness, the participants reported that the academic rigor in high school verses the academic rigor in college was substantially different. In college, they were required to be self-learners (subtheme 1), finish a larger work load (subtheme 2), and study consistently (subtheme 3).

**Theme 3: College emotional readiness.** When given the prompt “Describe your current academic performance”, the participants reported their grades but only after commenting on the

experiences that made their first transition to college difficult. Surprisingly, the majority of their responses were not academic in nature but regarded emotional readiness to attend a postsecondary institution.

***Subtheme 1: Change.*** All participants but two attended college more than two hours from their childhood homes. They reported leaving family and friends behind was a difficult transition. The most potent comment came from Tracy:

I am used to being home, so it was a lot of change to live in the dorms away from my family. There were just too many changes. I changed jobs, left my friends, and family. It had a great impact on me, so I went back and forth so much between the dorm and home that I did not work like I should have. I kept up with my work, but I was not excelling. I was making straight B's. Going from straight A's in high school to straight B's in college was just another change that was hard on me. I thought I wasn't as smart as I thought I was, but now I understand I just was not focused. So, I transferred to a community college so I can be at home.

Likewise, Wendy commented on the effect leaving family and friends behind had on her: In high school I had a large group of friends, which [*sic*] in college I do not know many people. If you have a support group, that helps. So, I find that I mostly have to push myself. My parents still encourage me, but they are not here. I have to count on myself to get to class on time. I also find that I have to focus on myself and make myself do the work because no one else can do it for me.

John also reported that he had never been away from his mother for more than one week, and his college was located three hours away. He stated that he never really dated in high school and change came when he met a girl:

I did not know anyone at my university, so when I met her, I went a little crazy. There was a lot of drama, and I was naïve. In the end, campus parties and drinking interfered with the relationship. It added so much stress my first semester! Eventually, everything was so overwhelming I shut down and missed so much. I became sick and missed a lot of my classes. I am still retaking classes. However, I did switch degrees after my freshman year, so I think it will help.

Ben had the same feeling about the need to switch his degree focus, for he did not know what course of study he wanted to pursue when he entered college. He stated, “Because I was undecided, I was put into a lot of advance courses I was not ready for. Now I am pursuing business, and the courses I take are relevant, so I am making all A’s.”

***Subtheme 2: Time constraints.*** When asked “What activities did you participate in high school?” all the participants reported they were involved in numerous extracurricular activities such as sports, band, specialty clubs, and academic leadership societies. When asked the question “What activities are you involved in college?” participants said their involvement dropped significantly.

Tracy stated, “I have to work. The amount of time needed to study at my four-year university did not allow me time to do any activities.” David began college focusing on his academics and learning. He said, “Once I got a feel for what college was like, I planned on joining clubs. I am involved in campus ministry now.” Hannah exclaimed, “The only time I am on campus is when I am in class. Then I leave.” David reiterated, “I play football, and I took 17 hours of college classes. There was no time to do anything else.”

To summarize the theme, College Emotional Readiness, participants reported the transition from high school to postsecondary education was the hardest their first semester. The

major issues were leaving family and friends behind while going to an institution (dorm living and classes) where they did not know very many people (subtheme1). Lastly, the participants were heavily involved in extracurricular activities in high school but felt time constraints upon entering college (subtheme 2).

**Theme 4: Navigating independence.** The participants were high-achieving high-school students, who, even though they struggled with transitional changes such as independence, asserted that supports were in place to help them succeed. When asked, “What do you attribute your current academic performance to?”, the participants reported support groups, collegial programs, and professor availability were integral factors to their successful transition.

*Subtheme 1: Support groups.* As with high school, participants reported that they attributed their current academic performance to the support of friends and family. Tracy moved home to be with her family during her higher-education endeavors. David commented:

Friends and family kept me motivated. My family helps me feel better; my girlfriend helps me feel more confident. It gets stressful before tests. My new college friends and I sit down the night before tests, and what we don’t understand, we talk about it.

Marcus commented that the college he attends requires them to wear suit and ties, what he called “dress for success.” His inspiration came from historic black famous personages who attended his college of choice. His support group is a scholar society based on the principles and accomplishments of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Sarah, however, proclaimed that her support group was the other women in her cabin at a seminary school in a remote area. She stated,

My support group helps me to work on acquiring more discipline in my life. There are so many temptations in wanting to be accepted, which is a pitfall. I understand that young

people do whatever they can to be cool and go to parties. However, you need to keep focus, and it is a daily struggle with sexuality, relationships, and facing opposition.

***Subtheme 2: Collegial programs.*** All the participants were required to spend the first year living in the freshman dorms at their four-year university. They reported that their colleges offered numerous programs to help students transition from secondary education to a college institution. These programs were both academic and social in nature. The similarities of the participants' responses indicated the importance of collegial programs during their transition. David reported:

My college provides a ton of activities for students. Currently, I am involved in campus ministry. In my dorm, there are ice cream socials, cakes, costume contests, and the dorm hosts put on different activities in freshman dorms. There are also free tutoring programs all over campus.

Marcus proclaimed, "College is like a club for up-and coming-leaders. They expect us to wear ties and suits to school and work on our professional speech and mannerisms." Grace commented on the fun she had when her college offered "outings and volleyball with our classmates when we are not studying." Ben said, "We have supplemental instruction we can participate in for classes that were considered historically difficult. Past students help the current students pass the class. It has been really helpful." Tracy reiterated this kind of support when she reported, "College offered a college seminar my first semester of school. The seminar helped to orient us to how college worked."

A review of the college websites where the participants attended college revealed a plethora of college programs to help freshman transition to college life both academically and socially. All the colleges that were reviewed offered freshman orientation opportunities

beginning in the summer before the fall term began. During document review, college websites attended by the participants provided a list of activities offered.

*College 1.* College 1 is a public four-year for-profit university that has an enrollment of over 15,000 students. It offers over 150 majors. There are numerous opportunities under its program called “student life,” which offers involvement in “learning, leadership, community building, creative expression, volunteerism, mentoring, and recreational activities.” This college currently lists 200 student organizations and clubs, which help students get involved and engage in campus life. Currently, some of its student-registered organizations include the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, Student Council for Exceptional Children, Business and Information Technology, Computer Science Club, Young Democrats, College Libertarians, College Republicans, Pre-Med Society, Pre-Pharmacy club, The Society of Physics Students, Collegiate Ministries, Ultimate Frisbee, Minority Membership, Students for the Propagation of Black Culture, and Black Men United. Most notably, the outreach for entering college freshman begins the summer before the Fall term. There are social activities such as concerts, movie nights, pep rallies, tailgate activities, and family-involvement activities.

*College 2.* College 2 is a public for-profit four-year university, which enrolls an average of 30,000 students. It offers over 200 academic programs. In order to support incoming freshman, this college offers a plethora of programs. This includes new student and family pre-registration camp, welcome weeks, family “reunions,” the Parent Partnership Association, the Diversity Leadership Institute, and Alcohol Education. In addition to freshman orientation, the college offers a Student Success Center where a university mentor works with the students. The mentorship is paired with a University Perspective course, which helps students connect and meet the expectations for student success and retention. Currently, the college reports 350

registered student organizations, including special-interest clubs, campus ministry, international and cultural organizations, honor societies, and professional service groups.

*College 3.* College 3 is a two-year technical college, which enrolls an average of 8,000 students. Known as a commuter college, it provides no living arrangements on campus. However, it does offer academic and social programs to help incoming freshman become involved in campus life. The Learning Assistance Center provides students free tutoring services. These services are given by peer tutors as well as professional tutors who hold bachelor's and master's degrees. The Learning Assistance Center offers a computer lab for enrolled students, giving them access to Microsoft-based software and the Internet. Experiences outside of the classroom include social activities, cultural and academic clubs, and 20 other registered student organizations.

During a course audit at the two-year college, I had the opportunity to observe a freshman college seminar class. The instructor was going over the previous assignment, which involved students taking an aptitude test then individually writing two goals for their futures. After she checked that assignments were completed, she had them sign onto Blackboard and start charting the progression of courses they wanted to take over the next two years and what certificate they hoped to achieve. The instructor's syllabus was broken into sections: academic success, academic planning, and future goals.

***Subtheme 3: Professor availability.*** Professors at the participants' college institutions were open and available during office hours. Several of the students commented that this helped them succeed their first year of postsecondary education. John said that his "professors were available to meet with me face-to-face. This helped because I was sick a lot and missed class. They were very approachable." Hannah commented, "I had two professors I really connected

with. They knew it helped with the transition from high school. Even the second semester, she [one of the two professors] kept up with me and kept me motivated.” Ben reported,

It is important I kept good grades for my scholarships. The professors really helped and wanted everyone to succeed. It is a small school, so professor availability was not a problem. You were able to go to a professor’s office during hours and get help on an essay or something.

Wendy stated she introduced herself to her professors the first day of class and she “talks to them during office hours if I have problems.” David appreciated that his “professors send out weekly emails to keep us updated and motivated. If you have problems, professors make it a known fact what their office hours are, and they are there to help.”

To summarize the theme, Navigating Independence, participants found that they had a support network that helped them navigate the independence experienced in a college environment. The students found support groups to keep them motivated and on track during their transitional time from secondary education to a college institution (subtheme 1). Colleges offer numerous programs from social activities to help students meet friends with similar interests to academic tutoring for collegiate success (subtheme 2). Lastly, professors are available and open for students to seek additional support (subtheme3).

## **Summary**

Chapter 4 discussed the research findings regarding eight students’ transition from secondary education to a postsecondary institution. Four themes and 11 subthemes emerged from this study. Open-ended interviews created a rich description of their experiences as they navigated their first year of college-level courses and the college environment. As a result, thematic analysis along with a descriptive narrative of the participants’ experiences provided

deep insight into the needs they discovered when they entered college. Chapter 5 gives a summary of the results, a discussion of the results relative to the literature, implications of the results, and recommendations for future research to help students transition successfully from high school to a college institution.

## **Chapter 5: Discussion and Conclusion**

The purpose of this qualitative multiple case study was to explore the experiences of high-achieving students who entered college regarding their high-school academic preparation, college academic preparation, emotional readiness, and their navigation of independence. Thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2013) was used to code the triangulation of data that included participant archival MSLQ scores, semi-structured interviews, document review, and college-course observations. There were eight participants in this study who were high-achieving high-school students enrolled in a postsecondary institution. The participants in this study shared their perceptions and experiences of the preparation for college they received in high school, college academic readiness, college emotional readiness, and their navigation of the independence a college environment requires. These four areas became the emergent themes with 11 subthemes, providing a deeper understanding of their experience. This study was important because there is a disconnect between high-school preparation and college readiness that results in lower college retention rates, especially in four-year universities and two-year community colleges (Cooper, 2017). The data collected and analyzed provided a deep understanding of the needs as well as the types of supports first-year college students require in order to successfully transition from secondary education to postsecondary institutions. This chapter presents a summary of the results; discussion of the results in relation to literature; the study's limitations; implications of the results for practice, theory, and policy; recommendations for further research; and a conclusion.

### **Summary of the Results**

The semi-structured interviews with the participants in this study revealed that participants did not anticipate the challenges encountered when they transitioned from secondary

education to a college-level institution. The participants were high-achieving students who did benefit academically from their college preparatory classes regarding college entrance, scholarships, and less-rigorous college curriculum. However, they were not prepared for the high-performance demand college-level courses require in reading, writing, and self-learning. Another challenge they faced was navigating change as they left their families and friends to attend colleges away from home. Even so, most of the participants had high resource management skills and sought out study groups as well as their professors to help them navigate their collegiate course work. Lastly, the most difficult transitions for all the participants were the need to study and time management. Data collected from college websites, college course syllabi, and college-course observations reiterated the high-performance demand the participants encountered in their first year of postsecondary education. The following research questions guided the exploration into the experiences that students encountered as they transitioned from secondary education to a college institution:

1. What high school experiences do high-achieving high-school students believe helped them prepare for college course work?
2. What are the academic experiences of high-achieving high-school students during their first year of college?
3. What are the social and emotional experiences of high-achieving high-school students during their first year of college?
4. What experiences do former high-achieving high-school students attribute to their first-year college retention?

## **Discussion of the Results**

The purpose of this qualitative multiple case study was to explore the experiences of high-achieving students who entered college regarding their high-school academic preparation, college academic preparation, emotional readiness, and their navigation of independence. This conceptual framework generated the main themes used to code the data collected throughout this study. Even though these themes seem distinct, subsequent data analysis revealed that they are all interconnected. Subthemes emerged that provided the answers to the research questions for this study. The following sections discuss the results in response to the thematic analysis conducted using the participants' archival MSLQ scores, semi-structured interviews, document review, and college-course observations:

**High-School preparation.** For students to be equipped with the academic and emotional skills necessary for higher education, high schools offer college preparatory classes. The school district in which the participants attended high school used the College Board Advanced Placement Program (College Board, 2018) to provide an academic foundation for college readiness. Indeed, the participants were high-achieving, and all took AP courses. Even though AP classes are required to have an approved rigorous syllabus that reflects a college curriculum, the participants reported a disconnect between the performance demands of high-school classes and college-level courses. The students also reported that they were unprepared for the changes that college brought, which had an emotional impact on how successful their transitional experience is.

**Attributes to high-school success.** Participants in the study attributed their achievement in high school to extrinsic motivation, task value, peer learning, and help-seeking. Indeed, the need for a high-grade point average was the first and foremost motivator for the students to do

well in high school. Their grades were integral in achieving college scholarships, for each of the participants were pursuing higher education. Thus, extrinsic motivation was a key factor for the success they experienced in high school. In order to attain high grades, students relied on their friends and families for support. The participants formed study groups and were even competitive about their academic standing in high school. The MSLQ scores for the participants' perception of the importance of extrinsic motivation on academic success was indeed high on the Likert scale. Most of the participants scored an average of 6.75 on a scale from 1 to 7 (very true of me).

Even though peer learning and help seeking were prominently reported by the participants as a contributing factor to their high-school success, these subscales only averaged 4.88 and 4.33 respectively (somewhat true of me). Such middle-average scores for peer learning and help seeking might be indicative that high-school friendships and teacher availability are part of the overall learning environment in high school. At the time the MSLQ was taken, the participants were seniors in high school, and the interviews were conducted after their first year of college. Thus, I present the interpretation that answers the interview question, "To what did you attribute your academic performance in high school?" may be reminiscent. This would explain the differences between the participants' perceptions while in high school verses their perceptions after their first year of college. This subtheme is interconnected to the theme "college emotional readiness" where each participant commented on the difficulties of leaving friends and family behind. For future research, I would suggest administering the MSLQ after the participants' first year of college for comparison to alleviate these unforeseen variables.

**College preparatory classes.** The most common assessment of high-school classes that adequately prepare students for higher education are those which provide rigorous academic

coursework that prepares students for the demands of college-level work (Johnston, 2010; Venezia & Jaeger, 2013). Most of the participants said their college preparatory classes helped to prepare them for college, but subsequent interview questions revealed that the performance demands were significantly lower than what they experienced during their first year of college. Thus, the students struggled with a difficult collegiate course load without the skills to navigate the new complexities college courses presented.

**College academic readiness.** Due to the success the participants experienced in high school, it was not surprising their competency perceptions were skewed as they entered postsecondary education (Holles, 2016; Sutton, 2016). The high-school setting does not nourish the critical thinking and self-learning skills that higher education requires. Most participants commented that they were given the information to be learned and assessed through class time and study guides. They were accustomed to teacher-led instruction. However, when the students entered college, they were unprepared for the level of knowledge seeking and analysis their college courses expected.

**Self-Learner.** According to the participants and the college syllabi I acquired during data collection, class time was used to explore the assigned reading and writing from the previous class. The students had to be prepared beforehand with the content under discussion. Participation in the discussion was required, and if students did not complete the preparatory work, they fell behind, and their performance suffered. Procrastination was reported by the participants as their biggest weakness entering postsecondary education.

Skills required for this level of work include the MSLQ subscales for task value, self-efficacy, control beliefs, and self-regulation. Six out of eight of the participants average scores were high (5 to 7) on their perceptions of task value, their self-efficacy, and the control beliefs

that they could do the work assigned in college. Only two out of the eight participants' average scores were high in self-regulation (5.16 and 5.91) and effort regulation (6.75) in completing the college work assigned. This substantiates the competency deficit incoming freshman have towards college work. They believe in the necessity of being a self-learner but do not have the self-regulation and effort regulation to take on the responsibility of learning the knowledge themselves.

**Performance demands.** All the participants made significant statements about the work load involved in college-level courses. The most difficult transition from high school to postsecondary courses was the amount of analytical reading and writing required.

According to the MSLQ, the subscales that relate to analytical reading and writing encompass metacognitive and cognitive strategies. These include elaboration, critical thinking, and organization. Alarming, participant perceptions of the mastery of these skills was low. The perceptions the participants held in high school, according to metacognitive and cognitive skills, echoed their comments about the low performance demand they experienced in high school. They commented on rote memorization and low levels of engagement as typical for high-school courses. Students relied on rehearsal strategies to absorb the material in class. Coupled with the need to be a self-learner in postsecondary education, the lack of higher-order thinking skills became an obstacle for the participants as they navigated their college-level course work.

**Study habits.** All the participants stated they rarely studied in high school, but if they did, they waited until the night before the test. According to the MSLQ the participants completed their senior year, study habits reflected their beliefs in ability to apply resource management. These subscales include time and study environment, effort regulation, peer

learning, and rehearsal. The students' perceptions were average in their ability to regulate how they study. This is not surprising due to the numerous comments made by the participants that they did not study in high school. If they did study, they employed rote memorization, which they relegated to the night before, and sometimes even the class before, a test. With these study skills, they were still able to "ace" tests and graduate with high grade point averages. During their interviews, they reported their study habits changed dramatically once they entered postsecondary education. Due to the lack of familiarity with other students, most of the participants either studied alone or were able to find dorm mates to study with. This is dramatically different than the natural study groups formed among high-school friends taking the same classes. The students also reported that they still struggled with procrastination, which lent to high anxiety and time constraints.

**College emotional readiness.** ACT scores can only assess the mental acuity of students regarding academics. Their scores are based on their skills in English, math, and science. What standardized tests cannot measure is the emotional maturity of students before they pursue higher education endeavors. GPA scores come closer to representing whether a student has the necessary metacognitive and resource management skills, but high-school GPA scores can skew perceptions of college readiness. As I have already presented in this chapter, high school is a different setting where students are surrounded by a network of support which includes family and friends. High school also has different performance demands. It is true a student's high-school GPA might reflect on high self-efficacy and academic skills; however, it can also be indicative of control beliefs and low performance demands.

College emotional readiness encompasses task value, performance goals, and motivation. A student whose purpose is to learn, and master information will have different motivation

strategies than the student whose purpose is to achieve the highest course grade or the student who is taking the course to appease parents (Conley, 2011; Heller & Cassady, 2016). Likewise, student satisfaction becomes strained if the course is too rigorous or difficult to comprehend (Simsek & Balaban, 2010). College emotional readiness helps students manage obstacles and determines the amount of effort they are willing to put forth to surmount obstacles. The two biggest obstacles the participants reported were change and time constraints.

**Change.** All participants but two attended college more than two hours from their childhood homes. They reported leaving family and friends behind as a difficult transition. It is common for four-year universities to require students to live in the dorms their first year of college. The rationale behind first-year student dorms is to help transition students to the demands and responsibilities of the college environment (Grove, 2018). However, the participants reported that the abrupt change from the strict high-school structure and the nurturing aspect of home life to the freedom and independence of college was disconcerting. Most of the participants reported that it was the first time they had been away from home for an extended time. Thus, traversing the changes that necessitated leaving their homes, as well as the different structure of college-level courses, was challenging and negatively impacted academic performance during their first semester of postsecondary education.

**Time constraints.** The participants of this study were high-achieving students who were actively involved in numerous high-school academic, leadership, and interest clubs. These societies and memberships in high school helped the students develop outside interests and meet people who shared the same interests. When they entered college, most of the participants stated they did not join any clubs or societies because their intent was to focus on their coursework. Other time constraints included time away from family and friends due to the need to study and

complete assignments. The overall obstacle was the issue of time management. The majority of the participants admitted they procrastinated and fell behind in their coursework. This, in turn, created stress and time constraints so they could “catch up,” which ostensibly led to all-night study or work sessions.

**Navigating independence.** As stated in the section above, there is a dramatic difference between the structure of secondary education and postsecondary institutions. Many high schools offer parents access to information on their children’s daily grades along with attendance and discipline information. Parents also may receive daily phone calls, texts, or emails concerning grade alerts and unexcused absences. Likewise, teachers are required to be available for parents’ concerns, and parent conferences are conducted quarterly to encourage such communication.

The college environment does not support parental engagement in daily progress reports. However, it does support family activities to involve them in their children’s higher education pursuits. These involvements occur in the form of family days and website communication. It is pertinent to realize that when entering college, students are accountable unto themselves. Parents are not apprised of daily performance expectations or whether their children have met the criteria. Students themselves become the assessors of their college performance and success. The participants for this study were high-achieving high-school students, and even with the obstacles the new college environment brought, they sought solutions to help them be successful in their first year of college.

**Support groups.** As with high school, participants reported that they attribute their current academic performance to the support of friends and family. In the freshman dorms, participants commented that study groups formed as most students were taking the same classes in general education. One of the participants moved home to be with her family during her

higher education endeavors. She chose to attend a community college instead of the four-year university in which she initially enrolled. Lastly, many of the participants reported they became actively involved in campus ministry, which provided support and inspiration as they navigated the independence a college environment necessitates.

**Collegial programs.** Both the four-year and two-year colleges that the participants attended offered a plethora of clubs, societies, and activities. An intense focus was placed on freshman orientation before the school year began. Most of the colleges offered camps during the summer to acquaint incoming students with the college campus and environment. They also offered a college seminar to help students plan their scheduling as well as knowledge of the expectations that postsecondary education demands. The college websites where the participants went to school advertised supplemental instruction programs as well as voluntary tutoring available for students. Four of the eight participants commented they took advantage of these resources. However, other than campus ministry, all the participants but one reported they did not join any clubs or societies due to time constraints. The student who did join an organization said he did so to further his involvement in leadership.

**Professor availability.** Professors at the participants' college institutions were open and available during office hours. Several of the students commented that this helped them succeed in their first year of postsecondary education. As high-achieving high-school students, the participants took it upon themselves to introduce themselves to their professors and ask about the course. Several commented that they had a professor who became their mentor and encouraged them throughout their first year of college. All the students said they met with their professors during office hours when they had questions or were struggling. One participant reported he felt that professor availability was higher than teacher availability on the high-school level. He

commented that secondary education teachers were only able to see students during their preparation period or after school. This conflicted with student schedules as well as after-school activities. Professors, on the other hand, had set office hours and were available by appointment after office hours to meet student demand.

### **Discussion of the Results in Relation to the Literature**

This multiple case study focused on the transition from secondary education to a college-level institution. The conceptual framework comprised five components that affect the experiences first-year college students encounter. The components are high-school preparation, college academic readiness, college emotional readiness, metacognitive and cognitive strategies, and navigating independence. These sections encompass the subscales of the MSLQ, which is used in studies as a college attributes for success (Lynch, 2006; Pintrich, 1999; Sparkman et al., 2012; Sutton, 2016; Tuckman & Kennedy, 2011; Worthley et al., 2016).

**High-school preparation.** The most common assessment of high-school classes that adequately educates students for higher education are those that provide rigorous academic coursework that prepares students for the demands of college-level work (Johnston, 2010; Venezia & Jaeger, 2013). According to a study conducted by Venezia & Jaeger (2013), the reason why secondary-school graduates are not prepared for college include factors that are academic and non-academic. Academically, studies have shown there is a disconnect between what students learn in high school and the academic levels to which postsecondary instructors expect their students to rise (Ross, Kena, Rathbun, Kewall-Ramani, Zhang, J., Kristapovich, & Manning, 2012). High-school courses across the disciplines fall short in teaching higher-order thinking skills, such as elaboration and critical thinking (Venezia & Jaeger, 2013). Thus, when students enter college, they are unprepared for the self-learning expected in their undergraduate

courses. College preparatory classes, such as the College Board's Advance Placement Program, aim to provide students with experience in college curricula. However, even though most high schools offer at least one Advanced Placement course, only 30% of high school students participate and less than 20% pass the end-of-course exam (College Board, 2018).

Research on the transition from secondary education to college-level courses for high-achieving students found that high-school courses did not provide the rigor needed to help students master motivational and strategic skills in learning (Balduf, 2009; Sutton, 2016). Participants in these studies said they were able to maintain high GPA scores without much effort or the need to study. When the students attended college, they were not prepared to rely on their own internal and external resources (Sutton, 2016; Tuckman & Kennedy, 2011). Indeed, the findings in my study showed that high-achieving high-school students do not attribute their college success to their high-school curriculum. Instead, they attribute their high-school and first-year-college achievements to external supports. Extrinsic motivation was reported by the participants as the component that compelled high performance. The study by Venezia & Jaeger (2013) reported that families do play a vital role in their children's education. Parents set high expectations, monitor performance, and encourage their children to engage in learning opportunities outside of high school.

In my study, participants attributed their focus on academics to family expectations as well as the need to obtain a high GPA for scholarships. They also attributed high performance to strong friendships with classmates because high-achieving high-school students are usually in the same classes with each other due to the Advanced Placement Program. The participants commented that they were competitive toward each other and formed study groups when needed. Lastly, external support came from the participants' high-school teachers, not the course itself.

The participants commented that their AP English and AP Chemistry teachers motivated them to succeed and helped them to start thinking about their futures.

**College academic readiness.** The college-readiness gap exposes the disparity between the skills and knowledge students acquire in high school versus the skills and knowledge that colleges and universities require for successful navigation through college-level courses (Sparkman et al., 2012). Studies show that students could not rely on academic intelligence alone to navigate the complexities of college-level course work (Balduff, 2009; SREB, 2010; Sutton, 2016). Indeed, traditional predictors for college readiness, such as standardized performance tests, do not accurately gauge college success (College Atlas, 2017; SREB, 2010; Venezia & Jaeger, 2013). It is pertinent to equip incoming college students with the knowledge, skills, and attitudes that are required for successful transition to the college environment (Appleby, 2014; Sparkman et al., 2012). These include equipping students with to become self-learners, negotiate high performance demands, and employ higher-order thinking skills. Appleby (2014) found students were not aware that their college courses as well as their professors would be markedly different from what they experienced in secondary education. Incoming freshman were ill-prepared for the level of challenge their college classes expected, the amount of reading involved, and the shorter time to complete their assignments. Furthermore, students did not expect that readings and coursework were to be completed outside of class time.

Participants in my study concurred with previous research that they did not know how to be a self-learner. Their professors expected assignments to be completed before class since the next class would be discussing the components they learned from the coursework. This required metacognitive and cognitive skills they had yet to master. Keller and Cassidy (2017) called this a deeper approach to learning as students attempt to understand the information instead of using

rote memorization strategies to absorb information. Students in postsecondary education needed to analyze and evaluate readings, respond to constructs in writing, and participate in class discussions. In this study, the participants struggled with the high-performance demands but especially with their propensity to procrastinate. Not only did this put additional stress on their learning outcomes, but it forced them to rely on rehearsal strategies to pass assessments. The need to study was new to the participants. They reported frequently during the interview process that they did not study while they attended high school and usually completed assignments the night or the class before the work was due. Appleby (2017) asserted that time management was indeed an issue for many new college students, especially high-achieving students. He purported that students expect the learning process to end when the school day ends, for that was what they experienced in high school. However, in college, students find that most of their learning occurred after class.

**College emotional readiness.** According to a study by Akers & Porter (2018), emotional intelligence can be more important than academic intelligence. Being emotional intelligent includes self-awareness and self-regulation. Self-awareness allows people to manage their emotions as well as secure a strong sense of self-worth. As students enter postsecondary education, the change can be overwhelming. The difference in performance demands as well as leaving behind their support systems can cause anxiety for students. According to Sutton (2016), if students believe that they can learn, they will strategically apply their skills to be successful and effective in college. Likewise, students who demonstrate high levels of control beliefs experience less worry of failure because they are confident that they will be able to succeed in their academic pursuits (Holles, 2016; Pintrich et al., 1991; Sutton, 2016).

Akers and Porter (2018) reported that self-regulation promotes managing change with flexibility. When entering postsecondary education, students encounter the difference between the strict structure of high school and the least restrictive environment of a college institution. It is essential that incoming freshman demonstrate self-control, adaptability, and innovation. In my study, the participants reported that the extreme change they encountered hindered the transition to a college institution. They reported that it was difficult going from an environment with family and friends to an environment where they did not know people. Managing these emotions as well as the need to adjust to time constraints caused anxiety to most of the participants. Three of the eight participants reported they missed numerous classes due to the need be with family or because of feeling sick. Both anxiety and “homesickness” can lead to depression which skews performance goals and focus (Holles, 2016).

**Navigating independence.** According to Holles (2016), high-achieving high-school students have a higher misconception of the preparation for college. Holles (2016) revealed that students must learn study skills and time management. His participants reported that the difficulty in undergraduate core classes presented a hurdle for them academically and emotionally. Lastly, his study concluded that students turned to support systems to help them during times of struggle. In a study conducted by Richardson et al. (2012), thriving college students indicated that new friendships in college were satisfying and revolved around studying with each other. This collaboration created learning communities outside of the classroom. In my study, the participants all reported seeking academic support groups. Most of the participants reported forming study groups with dorm mates. Others attended group tutoring sessions or supplemental instruction seminars. All the participants commented that these study groups attributed to their successful academic performance during their first year of college.

According to Sparkman et al. (2012), students who successfully transitioned from secondary education to college were actively in contact with their professors or other campus organizations. In my study, all the participants reported they introduced themselves to their professors before the course began. They also took advantage of the professors' office hours if they had questions or were struggling in class. Help seeking was an important aspect of the participants' success during the transition from secondary education to college undergraduate courses.

### **Limitations**

Limitations to a study are any situational or conditional circumstances that may affect the results and findings (Creswell, 2013). There were three notable limitations to this study. The first limitation was the lack of diversity among the participants in this study. Fifteen students who met the criterion of the study were asked to participate. However, the eight participants who contributed to this study were predominantly Caucasian. All the students attended the same high school and took Advanced Placement courses together. Transferability of the results is thus limited to students who share the same demographics composition and similar contexts. Diversity was represented in gender. If this study had been expanded to multiple high schools, the results would have negated the limitation that results may be based on conditional circumstances. Furthermore, six out of the eight participants attended four-year universities. A larger sample population would have included a larger number of students who attended community colleges. This would have allowed a better understanding of any differences the participants may have encountered that were based on attending four-year universities versus two-year community colleges.

The second limitation was using a survey that relied on self-reporting participants' perceptions of their attributes and weaknesses. The overall validity of self-report questionnaires has been questioned in the collection of data. However, self-report surveys with Likert-type scales are normally used to measure perceptions and experiences of the participants (Fenman, 2011; Schelling & Van Hout-Wolters, 2009).

The third limitation may have been the participants' accuracy of their perceptions. In high school, the students had high competency beliefs and support systems. This limitation could have been negated if I had re-administered the survey once the participants experienced their first year of postsecondary education. The findings of this study alluded that the participants' perceptions of their motivation and learning strategies while in high school might be skewed due to the lack of rigor they experienced in secondary courses. Likewise, the study's findings suggest that the experience in high school seamlessly included supports such as friends and family that might not stand out as a factor for academic success until after the fact. Indeed, it was a limitation to this study that there was not MSLQ scores after the participants' first year of college to use as comparison. Likewise, there were questions asked during the semi-structured interviews asking the participants about their high school experiences. Perceptions might have changed in the time between their last semester of their senior year and after their first year of college.

### **Implication of the Results for Practice**

In this study, participants reported that their high-school experiences did not adequately prepare them for the complexities of college. The participants were high-achieving high-school students who took college preparatory classes. However, they reported the classes were teacher-led and had low performance demands. For students to successfully transition from high school

to postsecondary courses, the high school curriculum needs to be aligned to college expectations. This includes requiring students to seek their own knowledge; providing multiple resources from which students analyze, draw conclusions, and communicate what they learned through discussion and writing; and supporting student accountability.

According to Briggs (2015), self-directed learning involves a process where students evaluate their learning and motivation strategies, plan their learning goals, identify resources for learning, and monitor their learning outcomes. The most successful learning occurs when students experience and interact with their learning by researching, asking questions, and participating in discussions about a certain topic. Briggs (2015) lamented that most states have adopted a federal education program that demands the homogeneity of teaching. Teachers are required to instruct according to a generic curriculum, using the same texts and the same pacing. This design lends toward teacher-led learning and school or district-mandated pacing guides. Thus, deeper levels of learning are restricted. It is essential that the high-school strict learning environment change to allow teacher creativity and capitalize on student interest. Crossland (2011) reiterated that memories are formed from learning experiences in which students build their own meaning. It is pertinent that students learn metacognitive and cognitive skills during their initial education. Indeed, the United States Department of Education published a study in 2017 citing the need for reform in developmental education. This included student support programs, contextualized instruction, accelerated academic programs for college preparation, enhanced and early-alert advising, mainstreaming of developmental education, and practices to teach metacognition, productive persistence, and college-success skills (Schak, Metzger, Bass, McCann, & English, 2017).

Student accountability is essential to encourage students to master the metacognitive and cognitive skills necessary for future postsecondary education as well as the work place. The participants of this study reported that due to low performance demands, they never learned to study and still battled time-management issues in college. They especially stated high schools should teach students not to procrastinate. Most of the participants stated that their high-school teachers accepted late work and did not hold students to high expectations. They did just enough to make a high GPA, which they reported did not demand much effort. College, on the other hand, presented these students a new learning environment, which required them to rely on their own internal and external resources (Sutton, 2016; Tuckman & Kennedy, 2011). The students found when they encountered college course work that academic intelligence alone was not enough for them to meet or exceed course expectations (Balduff, 2009; SREB, 2010; Sutton, 2016).

Participants of this study also suggested high schools focus on the integration of reading and writing across the curriculum. In college, the students were required to read a multitude of different texts from which they analyzed and drew conclusions about a certain topic. The participants commented that they were proficient in their English undergraduate courses because this was typical assignments in the English curriculum. However, they were not equipped to read and write in their other general-education classes. In high school, reading is required in all subjects including math. However, secondary teachers may rely heavily on school-approved textbooks. Adopting multiple resources for students to compare and contrast is important to teach secondary students analytical techniques required in higher education. One strategy that works is teaching students to annotate as they read. The Writers' Center at Eastern Washington University (2018) stated that annotating interacts with the text and enhances the reader's

understanding of the topic. Writing is another area which high-school curriculum needs to include across the disciplines. In communicating what they know in writing, students clarify their learning and learn to formulate their ideas through organization and elaboration. According to Marquette University (2017), writing promotes a student's ability to explain complex thoughts.

Colleges need to examine pedagogy in undergraduate courses. Differentiation does not only belong in secondary education. College instructors should not assume incoming students are ready to be self-learners. It is a recommendation that college faculty survey their students to assess their learning needs and use instruction that meets those needs. The most common requisite for students is engagement in their learning. Providing training for college faculty in best instructional strategies can be an important step in bridging the disconnect between high school classes and postsecondary courses.

Lastly, earning a college degree provides specialization in a chosen career field. Today's employers and industry demands are driving factors that influence the content, instruction, and assessment in university courses. Another implication for practice is to involve all stakeholders to participate in the discussion of meeting the needs of the students as well as the employers. Advisory boards consisting of college faculty, industry leaders, and students can help forge a bridge between the classroom and career readiness.

### **Implication of the Results for Policy**

A primary goal of the United States Department of Education's Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) is to increase college readiness of secondary school students (U.S. Department of Education, 2015). Along with this initiative, most states adopted the Common Core State Standards. According to the Common Core State Standards Initiative (2019), the standards are

“designed to prepare for today’s entry-level careers, freshman-level college courses, and workforce training programs.” Indeed, the standards focuses on a deeper approach to learning including critical thinking, problem solving, and analytical skills (ASCD, 2017). The Common Core Standards include increasing skills in text complexity, vocabulary, and writing. However, it is up to the states and school districts to implement reading lists, instructional strategies, and expectations. Essentially, it falls upon the school itself to ensure the standards are met.

The high-achieving students in this study reported that high school did not prepare them for college due to the lack of complexity and accountability in their high-school courses. In regard to policy, the findings in this study encourage individual school districts, as well as individual schools, to create policy through their school boards to address the expectations for student performance and growth. There are several areas for accountability this policy should include, such as accountability for students, parents, teachers, and administration.

According to Tyner and Petrilli (2018), the United States is lagging behind other developed countries who hold students accountable and give real-world consequences to those who do not show academic growth and achievement. They further stated that secondary students are focused on the present, such as friends and sports, rather than the future high academic achievement provides. By giving students a stake in their learning and school performance, student accountability policies could help increase effort, thus foster academic achievement. Tyner and Petrilli (2018) also firmly stated that schools were the gatekeepers for student credentials for graduation and high school transcripts. Schools should increase the expectations for graduation by scores on end-of-course exams, grade requirements, and reporting EOC scores on high-school transcripts. This transparency for future postsecondary endeavors and career pursuits may be the incentive to propel high-school students to invest in their future.

Levinson and Finefter (2008) stated their concerns with a culture of grade inflation due to parental pressure and administration pressure on teachers to have few-to-no “bad” grades. If a student is failing, an abundance of documentation is required to “prove” the teacher has called parents, differentiated instruction, assigned intervention, and employed other strategies to help the student pass the course. Grade inflation is a serious issue because it does not adequately represent if a student has learned the skills and knowledge for successful transition from secondary education to postsecondary institutions. The necessity for schools to communicate with parents as partners in their children’s education is extremely important. However, communication needs to go beyond contacting parents about low or high achievement. Parents should be involved in what and how their children are learning as well as the expectations for grade achievement. Policy can shift the focus from the entitlement mindset of a passing grade to the accomplishments passing grades require. Such policy could raise the requirements for graduation as well as redefining the traditional grading system.

Teachers can be unwilling participants of grade inflation and district-mandated programs. However, teachers are the closest promoter for learning because they control what occurs in the classroom. Ultimately, it is the teacher’s responsibility to implement student-led learning and expectations in the classroom. Teacher evaluation differs greatly per state (U.S. Department of Education, 2018). A realistic and reliable teacher evaluation system should be established based on lesson plans, mentorship, classroom observations, student portfolios, and documented student growth. However, to consistently uphold expectations for teachers to implement best instructional strategies and differentiation for students, there must be a designated building specialist responsible for teacher accountability, professional development, teacher recruitment, and retention.

Administration must establish a policy of accountability at the district level and the school-building level. With the increasing pressure on standardized testing every year to prove student growth, school leadership is faced with the constant stress of finding ways to increase student achievement. This seems to be in the guise of the “next new program” that promises change (Reeves, 2017). Not only is this expensive, but these initiatives do not last long enough to show fruition. Teachers are trained, and the program is implemented then discarded as new administration bring in their own “next new program.” Instead of spending hours on professional development and programs that are not implemented long enough to show measurable change, administrations would benefit realistically if they attended or even taught classes in the school building. Scores on paper do not show the full picture of how students are learning. As with teachers, administration is inundated with an abundance of paperwork, meetings, and mandates. However, until administration involves themselves with day-to-day instruction, superintendents and principals cannot perform as instructional leaders. Thus, district and building leaders need to create policy where time is significantly allotted to observe and participate in the development and learning of the students. Only then can a true assessment of student needs for college readiness be gathered and acted upon.

College faculty are responsible for student learning in their courses. However, most college professors are specialists in their field, not in pedagogy. In order to bridge the learning gap that exists between secondary education and undergraduate courses, it is pertinent for undergraduate college instructors to receive professional development in best instructional strategies. As with secondary education, colleges must have curriculum and instructional specialists that are responsible in overseeing departmental content, syllabi, teaching practices, and assessments.

Lastly, this research supports the need to continue offering and improving incoming student programs to assist students in the transition from secondary education to college courses and environment. Orientation programs for students and parents are vital to set expectations for parents and students. Likewise, faculty and staff involvement throughout the students' first year of college provides additional support aimed at improving student retention. Other programs on campus such as supplemental instruction and tutoring are initiatives that target both classroom and non-classroom aspects of learning.

### **Implications of the Results for Theory**

There are four research-based theories of learning that reflect the findings of this study: self-determination, information processing, self-efficacy, and emotional intelligence. Each of these theoretical foundations have been used throughout a plethora of studies concerning student achievement (Balduf, 2009; Cerisoli & Ford, 2014; Kikas & Jõgi, 2016; Pintrich et al., 1991; Sutton, 2016; Tuckman et al., 2011; Ünlü & Deitweller, 2015). Regarding my study, the implications for theory builds upon already proven college predictors for success.

**Self-determination theory.** The self-determination theory is attributed to Deci and Ryan (1985). The premise behind the self-determination theory is that student motivation is experienced by students in varying degrees (Cerisoli & Ford, 2014; Gunnell & Gaudreau, 2015; Howard, 2016; Ünlü & Deitweller, 2015). The self-determination theory is based on the assertion that motivation is multi-faceted, and its conceptualization can predict performance outcomes (Cagne & Deci, 2005, 2015; Deci & Ryan, 1985; Howard, 2016). Using the self-determination theory, Ryan and Deci (2000) asserted that students pursue activities based upon quality, not quantity (Gunnell & Gaudreau, 2015). Extrinsic and intrinsic motivation become predictors to student success in higher-education pursuits as students seek satisfaction among the

rigors of college course work (Cerasoli & Ford, 2014; Ünlü & Deitweller, 2015). What motivates one student might not inspire another. Student motivation is composed of performance goals, self-regulation, and task values, which fall under the Self-Determination Theory (Cerasoli et al., 2014; Pintrich et al., 1991; Sutton, 2016).

The participants in this study reported extrinsic motivation attributed to their achievement after their first year of college. The most influential motivation that drove their accomplishments was acquiring high grades in order to keep their scholarships. However, being unprepared for the high-performance demand in postsecondary education, student satisfaction was replaced by levels of stress. Self-determination can be taught in secondary education by teaching students to be self-learners. As students engage in their learning and produce results, they become the arbiter of their own performance goals and task values.

**Cognitive and metacognitive theory.** Learning strategies describes the activities a student employs to process the material in a course (Kikas & Jõgi, 2016). Examples of cognitive learning strategies include looking for relationships within the information, identifying the main idea and contributing key details, chunking, thinking of examples, summarizing, and note taking (Ferla et al., 2009; Kikas & Jõgi, 2016; Tuckman & Kennedy, 2011). These processing strategies help to transfer information from one memory stage to the next (Pappas, 2014). To explore the cognitive domain of learning strategies used by college students, it is essential to interchange the above aspects and categorize them as deep approach to learning (the pursuit to understand the information) and surface approach to learning (recall and reproduction) (Heller & Cassady, 2016).

The cognitive information processing theory (CIP) focuses on how students encode the information they receive and connect it to prior knowledge as well as how they store knowledge

in memory and retrieval (Heller & Cassady, 2016; Kikas & Jõgi, 2016; Pappas, 2014). Pappas (2014) addressed an important cognitive factor called selective attention. Correlational to critical thinking, selective attention refers to the student's selection and processing of chosen information while ignoring other information seen as irrelevant to the task at hand (Ferla et al., 2009; Kikas & Jõgi, 2016; Pappas, 2014; Tuckman & Kennedy, 2011). Several skills are involved in selective attention, which involves information gathering such as critical thinking, organization and elaboration of the information presented.

The participants in this study reported they relied on memorization and rehearsal strategies in high school and still achieved a high-grade point average. Ferla et al. (2009) characterized students who rely on rote memorization as helpless students. The basic skills to successfully perform in the course are lacking, so the students feel disconnected from their learning and therefore rely on the teacher to provide the knowledge they need to learn. These students have not developed the deeper learning skills necessary to acquire information independently, which is a requirement in higher education courses (Ferla et al., 2009).

It is pertinent that students become aware of how they learn and consciously apply learning strategies to their work. Using annotating while reading various text to analyze and evaluate a certain topic is a self-instructive learning strategy for students. Developing a deep approach to learning can be a scaffolding process during initial education, eliminating the reliance on surface approaches to learning.

**Self-efficacy theory.** Individuals who have high self-efficacy will exert effort to achieve successful outcomes, whereas those with low self-efficacy are likely to fail (Aydin et al., 2011; Stajkovic & Luthans, 1998; Sutton, 2016). A strong sense of self-efficacy encourages students to take on more challenging tasks, use more effort to accomplish the tasks, persist when

obstacles occur, self-regulate the learning process, and apply both cognitive and metacognitive learning strategies to increase performance (Aydin et al., 2011; Bandura, 1982; Ferla et al., 2009; Komarraju & Dial, 2014; Pintrich et al., 1991). Students with self-efficacy exhibit an expectancy for successful performance of a task as well as confidence in their abilities to master the task. Students who show self-efficacy seek to understand and feel responsible for their learning outcomes (Komarrajua & Dial, 2014; Ng & Lucianetti, 2016; Sutton, 2016).

Self-efficacy is critical to a students' feelings towards their capabilities to operate in various situations (Bandura, 1982). Expectations of self-efficacy govern whether individuals can manage obstacles and the amount of effort they are willing to put forth to surmount those obstacles. The participants of my study had high competency beliefs due to their successful accomplishments in high school. However, this became problematic as they entered postsecondary education unequipped for the high-performance demands college requires. The participants were high-achieving students who sought help to learn to study, navigate a heavily increased workload, seek their own knowledge, and apply what they learned.

**Emotional intelligence theory.** The theory of emotional intelligence attributed to Payne (1985) declared there is a difference between emotional intelligence as an attribute and emotional intelligence as an ability (List & Alexander, 2017; Yang, 2011). The emotional intelligence theory is based on the premise that students who exhibit emotional maturity know their strengths, weaknesses, values, and goals. Students also can use this self-awareness to manage emotions and impulses as well as adapt to changing circumstances. More importantly, recent research in education and neuroscience theory have intertwined learning with emotions, one affecting the other either positively or negatively (Yang, 2011). Affective behaviors linked with emotional intelligence include student engagement, test anxiety, and conflict management

(List & Alexander, 2017). According to emotional intelligence (EQ) is more important than one's academic acuity for high performance in college. The emotional intelligence theory attributed to Payne (1985) stated that students who exhibit EQ understand and utilize their strengths, values, and goals. Students with emotional maturity can maintain control of their impulses as well as adapt to different environments (Cerasoli et al., 2014; Immordino-Yang, 2011; List & Alexander, 2017).

The participants of this study commented that the extreme change from the high-school setting to a college environment was the hardest transition they had to make. Leaving behind their support systems of family and friends hindered their adaptation to college-level course work. Thus, emotional maturity also builds on independence and a strong sense of self-reliance to navigate new and challenging situations. Emotional intelligence (EQ) can be taught at home and in school as parents and teachers demand students to perform tasks that further their care and interests. Teachers help strengthen EQ by promoting a student-led classroom. Parents create independent young adults by requiring them to contribute to the running of the household as well as ingraining a work ethic in their children to perform these tasks well. In today's millennial mindset, the sense of entitlement thwarts the development of high emotional maturity as students exhibit incivility, intimidation, and entitlement in academia (Holdcroft, 2014).

### **Recommendations for Further Research**

For this study, archival MSLQ scores from the participants' senior year and semi-structured interviews after their first year of college were used to gain understanding of the experiences that students encounter as they transition from secondary education to a college-level institution. However, it is recommended for future research that students be interviewed their senior year as well and the MSLQ be administered after their first year of college. Doing so

can bridge the perceptions participants reported in regards of their preparation for postsecondary education. For instance, the participants reported they were high-achieving students who accomplished honor graduate status with very little effort in high school. The archival MSLQ scores reflected the students' perceptions of their motivation and learning strategies while in high school. Even though they scored high in their perception of using metacognitive and cognitive strategies, their subsequent interviews revealed they only used rehearsal and memorization throughout high school. Likewise, the students scored low in their perceptions of resource management, such as peer learning and help seeking. Again, subsequent interviews revealed that they relied heavily on friends and study groups in their college-preparatory classes. Conducting interviews while the participants were in high school would have clarified their high-school experiences and why they felt they were prepared for college. Administering the MSLQ after the participants' first year of college would have given this researcher data to further explore any discrepancies.

Other recommendations for future research include expanding this study in two different areas. This study focused on high-achieving high-school students. Providing a diversity of students who have different levels of academic achievement may deepen the understanding of student transitional experiences to community colleges as well. The entrance to community colleges are open enrollment and based on placement tests instead of ACT scores. The second area this study could be expanded upon is the effect of technology, global information access, dependence, and entitlement that millennials grew up with to attaining the skills necessary to navigate the complexities of postsecondary education.

Lastly, future research can help supply the data needed to create a developmental curriculum to ensure high-school students are equipped to successfully transition to a college

institution. This curriculum could include the motivation and learning strategies predicted in this study for success in their postsecondary education. The curriculum could also include a college seminar conducted by university advisors that could help students acquire the knowledge to choose and plan their college pathway. Likewise, involving industry leaders in the discussion of developmental education can provide input to help students understand the skills necessary for career readiness. This can be a motivator for student success and retention in both high school and college.

### **Conclusion**

The purpose of this multiple case study was to understand the experiences students encounter as they transition from secondary education to a college institution. Data was collected in the form of archival MSLQ scores, semi-structured interviews, document review, and college-course observations. Commonalities among the participants' responses revealed that they were not prepared for postsecondary education due to lack of high-school preparation. Even though the participants were high-achieving students, they reported they lacked study skills, deep approaches to learning, self-efficacy, and independence from previous support systems. Therefore, this research has shown that there is a disconnect between what students need to learn in high school and postsecondary expectations.

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## **Appendix A: Open-Ended Interview Questions**

1. Describe your previous academic performance in high school.
2. To what did you attribute your academic performance while in high school?
3. Describe your current academic performance.
4. To what do you attribute your current academic performance in your first semester of undergraduate courses?
5. Did you take college preparatory courses in high school? What courses did you select in high school?
6. Did your college preparatory classes help prepare you for the courses you have selected in your first year of college?"
7. What level of academic challenge did you experience in high school? How does that compare to the level of academic challenge you experience in your undergraduate courses?
8. Describe the similarities and/or differences in your study habits from those you used while in high school.
9. To what extent were you involved in activities outside of high school?
10. To what extent are currently involved in activities outside of classes?
11. Do you feel you are achieving your fullest potential? Why or why not?
12. What interventions or remediation do you feel would help raise your academic performance?

## **Appendix B: Observation Review Form**

### **Instructional Norms Observed:**

*Check all that apply:*

Wait Time/Extended Wait Time

Check for Understanding Questions

Meet and Greet

Proximity

Reflection

Higher Order Thinking Strategies

Student Engagement

### **Instructional Norms Field Notes:**

#### **The Classroom Environment:**

*Check all that apply:*

Creating an Environment of Respect and Rapport

Establishing a Culture for Learning (Expectations)

Managing Classroom Procedures (Transitions, Instructional Groups, Materials)

Managing Student Behavior (Response to misbehavior)

#### **The Classroom Environment Field Notes:**

#### **Instruction:**

*Check all that apply:*

Communicating with Students (Expectations, directions, explanations, coaching)

Using Questioning and Discussion Techniques (Quality, techniques, student participation)

Engaging Students in Learning (Activities, student groups, resources, structure and pacing)

Using Assessment in Instruction (Assessment criteria, monitoring student learning, feedback)

Demonstrating Flexibility and Responsiveness (Lesson adjustment, response to students, persistence)

**Instruction Field Notes:**

**Student Observation (Activity, Skills, Engagement) Field Notes:**

## **Appendix C: Scoring Guide for the MLSQ**

Pintrich (1991) instructed, "Students rate themselves on a seven-point Likert scale from "not at all true of me" to "very true of me." Scales are constructed by taking the mean of the items that make up that scale. For example, intrinsic goal orientation (see page 7) has four items. An individual's score for intrinsic goal orientation would be computed by summing the four items and taking the average.

Items marked as "reversed" are reverse coded items and must be reflected before scale construction. These negatively worded items and the ratings have to be reversed before an individual's score can be computed. If an item has to be reversed, a person who has circled 1 for that item now receives a score of 7 and soon.

The simplest way to reflect a reverse coded item is to subtract the original score from 8. For example, if the original score was 2 to the negatively worded item, one would compute  $8 - 2 = 6$ ; 6 being the score for the positively worded version of that question. The statistics reported in this manual all represent the positively worded versions of the items" (p7).

## **Appendix D: Statement of Original Work**

The Concordia University Doctorate of Education Program is a collaborative community of scholar-practitioners, who seek to transform society by pursuing ethically-informed, rigorously- researched, inquiry-based projects that benefit professional, institutional, and local educational contexts. Each member of the community affirms throughout their program of study, adherence to the principles and standards outlined in the Concordia University Academic Integrity Policy. This policy states the following:

### **Statement of academic integrity.**

As a member of the Concordia University community, I will neither engage in fraudulent or unauthorized behaviors in the presentation and completion of my work, nor will I provide unauthorized assistance to others.

### **Explanations:**

#### **What does “fraudulent” mean?**

“Fraudulent” work is any material submitted for evaluation that is falsely or improperly presented as one’s own. This includes, but is not limited to texts, graphics and other multi-media files appropriated from any source, including another individual, that are intentionally presented as all or part of a candidate’s final work without full and complete documentation.

#### **What is “unauthorized” assistance?**

“Unauthorized assistance” refers to any support candidates solicit in the completion of their work, that has not been either explicitly specified as appropriate by the instructor, or any assistance that is understood in the class context as inappropriate.

This can include, but is not limited to:

- Use of unauthorized notes or another's work during an online test
- Use of unauthorized notes or personal assistance in an online exam setting
- Inappropriate collaboration in preparation and/or completion of a project
- Unauthorized solicitation of professional resources for the completion of the work.

**Statement of Original Work (continued)**

I attest that:

1. I have read, understood, and complied with all aspects of the Concordia University-Portland Academic Integrity Policy during the development and writing of this dissertation.
2. Where information and/or materials from outside sources has been used in the production of this dissertation, all information and/or materials from outside sources has been properly referenced and all permissions required for use of the information and/or materials have been obtained, in accordance with research standards outlined in the Publication Manual of The American Psychological Association



Digital Signature

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*Lori Christine Lachowsky*

Name (Typed)

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*Date: 02/05/2019*