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## How African American College Graduates Who Attended An Early College Describe The Benefits

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HOW AFRICAN AMERICAN COLLEGE GRADUATES WHO ATTENDED AN  
EARLY COLLEGE DESCRIBE THE BENEFITS

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April 11, 2021  
Educational Leadership

## HOW AFRICAN AMERICAN COLLEGE GRADUATES WHO ATTENDED AN EARLY COLLEGE DESCRIBE THE BENEFITS

### ABSTRACT

The study documented how first-generation African American college graduates who attended an Early College program in North Carolina describe the benefits of this educational experience. There are many different types and structures of the Early College Program concept, that is, programs where high school students earn college credits. Students taking courses at a community college may leave with an associate's degree while students attending a college or university will graduate from high school with transferable college credit. Students that attend high schools with Early College programs may finish their last two years of high school on a college campus and earn college credits that may be transferred to a community college or a four-year university (U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, What Works Clearinghouse 2014).

This researcher sought to discern how first-generation African American college graduates who attended an Early College program in North Carolina describe the benefits. Previous research has shown many successes of Early College programs throughout the southern region of the United States. Previous research indicated that students who attend an Early College Program graduate from high school at higher rates than students from traditional high schools as well as enroll into and graduate from college at higher rates. This research contributes to the knowledge on effectiveness of Early College Programs and provided additional findings

that serves as valuable information to stakeholders, such as school districts, local, state and federal governments, and private foundations.

This researcher used theories of Human Capital Theory (HCT), Critical Race Theory (CRT), and Individual Agency to interpret the experiences of the ten first generation African American college graduates who attended an Early College program in North Carolina. The data suggest graduates recognized the importance of earning their college degree. Participants described the role of the Early College program in preparing them for college and the workforce. Being a marginalized person because of the color of their skin, the participants' responses were also viewed through the lens of CRT. Participants believed the Program prepared them to rise above their social position and persist to earn their college degree. Individual Agency was evident in the support of the family which played a major role in the participant's ability to complete a college degree, but it was more so the individual's fortitude and their inner strength or their agency that made obtaining their college degree possible.

First generation, minority, and low-income students are the target populations for programs to help them realize their dream of graduating from high school, gaining admission to college, and earning their college degree. For this to happen, bridge type programs such as TRIO, Upward Bound, GEAR UP, and the Early College program can be offered as opportunities to this population with enhanced marketing and awareness. In addition, stakeholders such as school districts, government agencies, and philanthropists can use the data collected from this research study to make informed decisions to continue to invest in bridge programs such as Early College programs.

Keywords: Early College, Bridge programs, first generation college students

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## CHAPTER ONE

### INTRODUCTION

In 1974, Dr. Janet Lieberman, along with school officials in a New York City School District recognized that the graduation rate for minority and low-income students in high school was unacceptable. These students were struggling academically and there was a growing need to provide alternatives to the current situation of social and academic despair. The school system partnered with LaGuardia Community College and offered an alternative opportunity (Roberts, 2019). The opportunity was known as the “middle college”. This idea morphed into the concept of a “middle college” program that started with 100 students and ultimately had 500 students enrolled into the program (LaGuardia Community College, 2009). Dr. Janet Lieberman published "The Early College High School Concept: Requisites for Success" in which she wrote of the growth of the concept which evolved to its present form of Early College programs. This document also highlighted the framework for an Early College program along with the evidence of program effectiveness. The program reflected a 27% improvement in retention rates of students in early college programs in comparison to student retention rates in traditional high schools. The Early College rate of retention was 97% compared to the 70% of students in traditional high schools. Lieberman also posited that the graduation rate of a student in Early College programs reached 87% of which 90% of those continued their education by enrolling into a college or university (Lieberman 2004).

The Early College program experienced much success as was documented by the U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences (2017a). What Works Clearinghouse (2014) reviewed a study conducted by the American Institute for Research American Institutes for Research & SRI. (2013). This document discussed the successes of the early college and

early success. One study (Berger, Tuck-Bicakci, Garet, Knudson, Zeiser, Hoshen, & Ford, 2013) concluded that in three areas, high school graduation, college enrollment, and college degree attainment students that attended dual enrollment type programs such as Early College programs showed significant rates of success. The study comparison was made between two groups, the intervention group, and the comparison group. The intervention group was comprised of high school students who attended a dual enrollment type program such as the Early College programs. Students attending this type of high school program were offered the opportunity to obtain college credit in addition to an array of academic resources such as regular advising sessions and tutoring as part of the program. The comparison group was comprised of high school students who did not attend dual enrollment programs and had fewer academic resources as offered to the intervention group. The data showed that of the eight areas tested, student attending dual enrollment program or Early College type programs improved in the intervention group compared to the comparison in three areas. The research, U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, What Works Clearinghouse (2014, p. 6), provides data that indicates that high school students in the intervention group attained their high school degree at the rate of 87% compared to the comparison group with the rate of 81%. The percentage of high school students in the intervention group who enrolled into a college or university was 80% compared to 71% of student enrolled in a traditional high school. The research data also indicates that 22.2% of students attending Early College programs graduated with a postsecondary degree in contrast to the 1.9% rate of graduation for student from traditional high schools (Berger, Tuck-Bicakci, L., Garet, Song, Knudson, Haxton, Zeiser, Hoshen, & Ford, Stephen 2013).

These studies indicate that in comparison, high school students in dual enrollment programs, such as Early College Programs, outpaced traditional high school students in attaining

high school diplomas, enrolling in a college or university, and obtaining postsecondary degrees from a college or university. However, this research study addresses how first-generation African American college graduates who attended an Early College program in North Carolina describe the benefits. Given the past lack of research in this area, the researcher focused on this group's experience as Early College program graduates.

The focus of the study was students in the Early College program who were dually enrolled at a community college or a four-year institution where they continue to take the required classes to graduate from high school and were also enrolled in college courses simultaneously. The tuition for the college courses may have been funded by either governmental support or private foundations such as the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, the Carnegie Corporation of New York, the Ford Foundation, or the W. K. Kellogg Foundation (Berger, Tuck-Bicakci, Garet, Knudson, Zeiser, Hoshen, & Ford, 2013). These philanthropists may have provided the funds to pay the tuition cost at institutions that partnered with school systems at no cost to the students or their families.

The intent of the overall concept of the Early College program is to offer first-generation, minorities, or students of low-income families the opportunity to finish their last two high school years by being dually enrolled on a community college campus and earn an associate degree or transfer those credits into a four-year institution to earn a bachelor's degree. An example of an Early College student with dual enrollment status would be the Wake STEM Early College Program where the students are enrolled in the Wake County Public School System and North Carolina State University. Dual enrollment allows the university to track their academic progress as a high school student and college student should the student decide to attend North Carolina State University (Early College Undergraduate Admissions NC State University, 2018).



### Statement of the Problem

Many of the Early College programs started in the early 2000's and the idea has grown in popularity as the success of the program has offered students an opportunity to combine a high school education with a college education to acquire either an associate degree or transferable college credit (Edmunds, Unlu, Furey, Glennie, & Arshavsky, 2020).

The process of combining the two entities, both high school and higher education, into one program is a unique and daunting task. Early College programs provided opportunities for those students who formerly may not have had a chance to finish high school and attend college a way to fulfill a dream of graduating from high school and going to college. Such groups as first-generation, minority, or students of low-income families now have an opportunity to further their education at a community college or at a four-year college or university. High school students who are dually enrolled into high school and attend a community college can earn an associate degree or attend a four-year university and use the earned credit hours toward a bachelor's degree.

Funding to financially support the Early College programs comes from federal or state governments or from private organizations like the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, the Carnegie Corporation of New York, the Ford Foundation, and the W. K. Kellogg Foundation (Berger et al., 2013). Depending on the college or university, the earned credits can be used to assist in the payment of the tuition cost and reduce the number of credit hours needed to graduate. Of all the positive impacts of the Early College program for first-generation students, this research was conducted to explore how first-generation African American college graduates who attended an Early College program in North Carolina describe the benefits.

Programs like the Early College program are financially supported either federally or by state governments or school systems. As these types of programs have been analyzed, reviewed, and evaluated, many have lived up to the expected outcomes. How those enrolled in such programs experience the benefits was the focus of this research study.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The intent of the study was to document the ways early college alumni recall, characterize, and describe their experiences and discern how those experiences influenced their decisions, and access to potential career opportunities. Discovering or revealing this information has enormous potential. This data can be valuable to market the program and provide stakeholders such as state or federal governments and foundations with data that can lead to continued funding for more Early College programs. Research does exist related to other positive impacts on Early College students such as the number of students graduating from college (Lieberman, 2004; U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, What Works Clearinghouse (2017), and contributing to society in comparison to students attending traditional high schools. This recent research study found evidence to show the benefits for college graduates who attended an Early College program in North Carolina who are first-generation and African American. This research study provided this valuable information that presented data that describes how first-generation African American college graduates who attended an Early College program describe the benefits.

Early college programs have thrived and existed since the early 2000's with positive outcomes (U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, What Works Clearinghouse. 2017a). This research study was conducted to document how first-generation

African American college graduates who attended an Early College program describe the benefits.

The research study was conducted using interviews administered to first-generation African American college graduates who attended an Early College program in North Carolina. Interview questions using qualitative research methods were designed to discern how first-generation African American college graduates who attended an Early College program describe the benefits.

This research study documented how first-generation African American college graduates who attended an Early College program describe the benefits where formally there limited research. Until this new research, no studies were found that explored the perceived benefits by the targeted research study group.

The research study built upon and provided expanded knowledge on the current limited research on the topic of how first-generation African American college graduates who attended an Early College program in North Carolina describe the benefits. This research is significant to the stakeholders who have financially supported the concept of Early Colleges from its inception in the early 2000's. The funds were appropriated as an opportunity to break new ground on a new concept in education reform to increase the number of students from families where no one has ever attended college or a family of low wealth who financially may not be able to attend college (Lieberman, 2004). Research has been conducted to evaluate the success of the Early College program as far as the participants showing marked improvement in their graduation rate. Early College students in high school graduate at a higher rate than the national rate of traditional high school students (DeSantis, 2013). DeSantis' (2013) findings show the positive impact for the first-year generation and students of low wealth compared to traditional students. No research

was located that discerns how first-generation African American college graduates who attended an Early College program in North Carolina describe the benefits. Along with the other successes of the program, realizing any perceived benefit that can be communicated to the stakeholders to show evidence of a positive return on their investment into the Early College program is a plus and lives up to the focus of the Early College program of potentially reducing the total cost of higher education by attending an Early College program. The study focused discovering such information from the data analyzed from the research participants.

### **Research Question**

The research question for the study was: How do first-generation African American college graduates who attended an Early College program in North Carolina describe the benefits.

### **Conceptual Framework**

Three theories were selected to inform the conceptual framework for the research study. Human Capital Theory (HCT), Critical Race Theory (CRT), and Individual Agency served as the lens to shape and support the research.

#### **Human Capital Theory**

It was Theodore Schultz's theory that the investment in human capital (people) through schooling or education influences national income and benefits society (1971). In 1964, Gary S. Becker advanced the Theory of Human Capital in his book *Human Capital* (1975). Through his analysis of census data, he provided empirical rate of return data demonstrating that an investment in training and education to increase one's human capital was as significant (and measurable) as an investment in other forms of capital. As it related to this study, development of human capital) should serve as a goal or a potential mindset for first-generation students who

take advantage of an opportunity that may not be afforded to them if Early Colleges did not exist. College graduates who attended an Early College program in North Carolina who are first-generation and African American, according to the HCT, are better positioned to become a contributing citizen to a national economy. Those students who successfully attend and graduate from an Early College program can use the earned credit hours to enroll into a college or university and persist until graduation. The education obtained from a college or university should put students who are first-generation, minority, or from low-income families on a path to become contributors to their community as well as the economy of their country. The question asked was what individual or personal benefit was realized by a college graduate who attended an Early College program in North Carolina, who are first-generation and African American.

The HCT suggests education leads to greater societal contribution on an economic level but what was not known was if the HCT was extended to all people and if there was any research to support or refute if the HCT also applies to first-generation students, minorities or families of low income. As it related to the Human Capital Theory it was the intent of this research study to discern how or does the HCT apply to the research study participants of this study which in part was the reason for the study. This research study offered insight into what impact existed on first generation African American college graduates who attended an Early College program in North Carolina and to see if the HCT applied.

### **Critical Race Theory**

Whereas the HCT speaks to how people can be contributing citizens in the overall society, the Critical Race Theory (CRTs) (Creswell 2007) speaks to how society itself may have an impact on the ability of people who have been disenfranchised, because of the color of their skin, to become contributing citizens to society. The barriers that exist are systemic and are

evident within the judicial system and in relation to the research study conducted also in education (Billings 1998). The CRT provides an opportunity to realize the historical implications that exist within systems like the educational system and how marginalized people are treated within the HCT dream when the system is not and has not been equal with intent. The CRT provides a lens that becomes clearer, and the focus was more defined and realistic.

### **Individual Agency Theory**

Individual agency theory seems to be the modern-day version of the HCT. Cole (2019) contends that agency as “thoughts and actions taken by people that express their individual power” or “the power people have to think for themselves and act in ways that shape their experiences and life trajectories”. Cole also describes individual agency as present in the lives of a group of people who may not be able to possess such power as oppressed or marginalized people, minority people or people of low income but are displayed in varying ways. Such populations may exert their individual power in negative ways to earn the respect of authoritative figures to survive. Whereas Cole argues that, despite the circumstances, these same people can exert and express their individual power by defying the structural odds against them by being a minority or low income and take advantage of opportunities that shape their futures (2019).

Although Individual Agency evolved from HCT, they differ. They both involve individuals taking advantage of opportunities to improve their lives. These opportunities could be in the form of education by using it to improve their quality of life to the point that they become a contributing citizen in the community, paying taxes, and voting. Whereas Individual Agency Theory contends that disenfranchised people can take action to improve their lives by using their individual power to bring about a desired result.

## **Significance**

This study focused on how first-generation African American college graduates, who attended an Early College program in North Carolina describe the benefits. The discoveries of the study provided information to further the discussion of Early College Programs along with adding to the existing knowledge. This study has filled the gap between existing research as it related to any perceived benefits for the target research study participants. In addition, the research offered new knowledge about impact, and overall achieved outcomes to policymakers as they make decisions about continued funding.

## **Definition of Terms**

Specific terms are used that pertain to the study. These terms were defined to provide clarity and understanding.

**Dual Enrollment.** Lewis and Overman (2008) define dual enrollment as programs that allow students to acquire college credit while also taking high school classes. This also allows a student the opportunity to lessen the time spent in in college and the reduction in cost.

**Early College Program.** According to Tynan-Wood (2016) Early Colleges was an answer to school reform with a creative opportunity for high school students to be dually enrolled and attend both high school and college classes to earn credit towards an associate's or bachelor's degree while saving money and reducing the amount of time in college.

**First-generation.** The University of Washington (2018) defines a first-generation student as one whose parent attended a four-year college or attempted to go to college but were not able to finish.

**Bridge Programs.** (2020) Bridge programs are summer programs designed to provide a period of transition for a student from the time of graduation from high school to their

“postsecondary” or college education. The bridge programs provide a variety of resources and support measures to increase the probability of success.

TRIO Program. A federal program for high school and college students who are first generation, low-income or disenfranchised individuals. TRIO programs are offered through institutions of higher education or community-based organizations (2020b).

GEAR UP Program. A grant program with a target population of low-income students in the seventh through twelfth grades to increase the opportunity and equip these students to attend and flourish in college (2020a).

### **Conclusion**

Chapter one of the study provided the statement of the problem, the purpose of the problem, and presented existing research as it pertains to the study and introduced the research question.

The three theories selected served as the conceptual framework are Human Capital Theory, Critical Race Theory and Individual Agency that provided the structure of the study. Next was the significance of the study, the definition of key terms used throughout the study and finally a conclusion of chapter one that served as a summary. The research question that was presented to the research study participants was how first-generation African American college graduates who attended an Early College program in North Carolina describe the benefits.

Chapter two was the Literature Review which presented existing literature on the topic, and identified what knowledge was lacking and some approaches to new knowledge about what makes post-secondary programs successful.



## CHAPTER TWO

### LITERATURE REVIEW

There seems to be a knowledge gap or the absence of attention in the research regarding benefits to marginalized populations who have attended some type of bridge program in the North Carolina region of the US. Existing research does suggest that bridge programs have had a positive effect on first-generation, minority and students from low-income families. Whereas the current knowledge as it relates to these populations are primarily institutional data, there was still the need to explore further how individuals recall their experiences in these types of programs. The objective of this study was to document how first-generation African American college graduates who attended an Early College program in North Carolina program describe the benefits.

The performance gap between students who graduated from Early College programs and students who did not has been reported in several studies (DeSantis 2013). The advantages or benefits of Early College programs were described in a report in *The Chronicle of Higher Education* (2013). The research study focused on the perceived benefit to college graduates who attended an Early College program in North Carolina who are first generation and African American.

The literature review is organized into four sections with background information provided on the origin of bridge programs, characteristics of such programs, funding sources to support bridge type programs, and finally pertinent information regarding Early College programs. The conceptual framework that guided the study was presented at the end of the chapter.

### **Origins of high school to college transition programs**

The late 1800's was a time for tremendous growth and opportunity for a people who had been disenfranchised by the institution of slavery. The Emancipation Proclamation of 1865 opened the door for a new institution for a people who sought higher education (Kezar, 2000). Kezar (2000) also posits that reemergence of higher education opportunities was evident during the Civil Rights movement of the 1960's and ushered in more opportunities to people who formerly were not afforded an opportunity to further their education. There were more educational opportunities for minorities during this period as an array of resources emerged to support a new population of students on college campus across the country (2000). In the next section, bridge programs that support student success in higher education settings will be explored.

Higher education leaders realized varying and diverse populations were not enrolling in programs at both community colleges and traditional four-year institutions. During this period programs were developed to serve different types of students. The Higher Education Act of 1965, as an initiative of President Lyndon B. Johnson when his administration sought to address the postsecondary education gap for disenfranchised populations to include families of lower or mid-range incomes. One of the first programs birthed from the Higher Education Act (HEA) was the TRIO program that will be introduced later (2020d). As part of the of the HEA of 1965, Upward Bound served as the initial program in TRIO which provided "Special Services for Disadvantaged Students" (History of the Federal TRIO Programs. 2020). Much like bridge programs, TRIO's intent is to provide services to disadvantage students starting in their high schools and into their college years. Other programs include GEAR UP, Summer Bridge programs and Early College programs were created to serve similar target populations.

In the early in the 1970's, civil rights in education moved into a new phase but not without some continued issues. In 2013, Richard Rothstein conducted a study into the educational achievement of African American students compared to white students. Martin Luther King, Jr's March on Washington in 1963 for jobs and freedom and presented the desire for a new outlook on education. During this time, public school were segregated and to affect the change that MLK suggested the idea of integration was proposed. The mindset of integration was not readily accepted by all and the effort took at least to the early 70's before many states desegregated their public schools. Once integrated, the achievement gap between black students and white students began to be quite evident...but why? What was not considered was the socioeconomics of the issue. Not only was there an achievement gap but there also existed gap in where black students lived, a gap in the availability of food, a gap in the crime rate, or a gap of parental support. All of which had an adverse effect of the black students who were integrated into an environment that was more conducive to their fellow white students. Despite being bused to a school for the reasons of integration, black students found themselves still performing below white students regarding overall academic achievement especially in subjects such as math and reading. The study found that despite integration of schools, black students found it hard to focus on academics when they come from a poor housing situation or from a situation with a high rate of eviction. Black students under these circumstances were found to be absent more than their white classmates and not able to benefit from the intended enhanced level of instruction. Black students living in high crime neighborhoods were found to experience high level of stress and had difficulty in focusing on school. The parents also added to the level of stress and anxiety experienced by the black students because if the parents were unemployed or even underemployed, they experienced a level of insecurity that affected their children. The parents

were less likely to assist with homework perhaps because of their level of education and less likely to attend PTA meetings or even attend parent teacher conferences. Integration seemingly provided an enhanced educational opportunity for black children but the cultural aspect that significantly determined the achievement of many students was not considered as an important part of the equation. This issue has persisted from the 70's until the present. According to the study, black students have lagged behind their white classmates in math and reading every decade from 1973 until 2011. The college graduation rate of black women 25-29 was below that of white women the same age during the same period. It was the suggestion of the study that in order for African American students to improve academically the following aspects will need to be considered:

- High quality early childcare with well qualified and professional staff
- Expose black children to sophisticated intellectual environments
- High quality after-school and summer programs
- Stable communities
- Taking into consideration family on children achievement
- Foreclosures
- Rental evictions
- Food security
- Lack of healthcare

("For Public Schools, Segregation Then, Segregation Since: Education and the Unfinished March", 2020)

### **Characteristics and types of transition programs**

The transition programs include Bridge programs, Early College programs, as well as the TRIO and GEAR UP programs. Each of these programs have similar characteristics which stem from the desire to provide services to a specific group of students. Such programs use an array of words to describe their target populations. Words such as “disadvantaged”, “first-generation”, “low income” or “high poverty” (“The History of Summer Bridge | Student Learning Center”, 2020, History of the Federal TRIO Programs. 2020; Gaining Early Awareness and Readiness for Undergraduate Programs (GEAR UP, 2020). Although similar in who they serve, each program provides its services differently.

#### **TRIO and GEAR UP**

Congress approved The Higher Education Act (HEA) that served as a program to provide services and programs. Programs such as TRIO and the Gaining Early Awareness and Readiness for Undergraduate Programs (GEAR UP) emerged to provide such an opportunity (Hegji, 2018).

#### **Federal TRIO Programs**

Bridge programs or transition type programs by designed provided an opportunity for the marginalized population of first generation, minority, and low-income individuals to take of advantage of educational opportunities offered by TRIO and GEAR UP. In addition, TRIO and GEAR UP also served as a resource for those students who were identified as having disabilities along with students who struggled academically. These bridge and transition type programs furthered their outreach to military veterans, minority youth populations who found themselves to homeless or in foster programs. Transitional programs such as TRIO and GEAR UP partnered with college and universities, local non-profit organizations or agencies who serve as a resource

based on their history and experience in providing services to the disenfranchised populations. (Hegji, 2018)

### **Talent Search (TS)**

As TRIO and GEAR UP offered an early realization that education is important to a population of people who before the opportunity were not afforded the option were now positioned to not only graduate from high school and the help and assistance from the bridge and transition programs but now have an opportunity to attend a colleges or university. TS Search provided the resources to make TRIO and GEAR UP students college ready. Resources offered included academic coaching, SAT and ACT prep sessions or college applications and financial aid assistance (Hegji, 2018).

### **Upward Bound**

There are many similarities in TRIO and GEAR UP with the Upward Bound program. All fit into the bridge and transition type program by the virtue of providing services and resources to first generation and low-income students. They also offer academic coaching the tutoring opportunities but one feature unique to Upward Bound is the monthly stipend the program participants receive (Hegji, 2018).

### **Early College Program**

Early College programs offer students who are first-generation, minority or from low-income families the opportunity to be dually enrolled in high school and college. These students are simultaneously earning high school credit and college credit hours at a community college or a four-year institution (Edmunds, et. al., 2020).

## Bridge Programs

Summer Bridge programs were started in 1973 for incoming freshman. The program was held for eight months during the summer that served as orientation to the academic gravity or rigor of college courses. During this period, students were also introduced to the many services and support resources that were provided to students (The History of Summer Bridge | Student Learning Center. 2020).

In addition to programs such as Early College programs, there are other programs that have been created that serve as a transitional opportunity. Venezia and Jaeger (2013) assert “that an important leverage point for increasing college access and readiness is the transition from high school to college” (p. 132). The transition from high school to college can be challenging for some and for that reason community colleges and university have offered summer bridge programs to provide the “academic momentum” to be persist in a higher educational environment (Washen, Pretlow, & Dixon, 2018).

The focus of summer bridge programs was to assist with the transition from being a high school student to a first- year college student (The History of Summer Bridge | Student Learning Center. 2020). Kezar (2000) also argues that bridge programs were started to support and retain the new population of students wanting to be in higher education and to ensure they persist. There are a wide range of summer bridge programs across the country. Some focus on math, reading and writing while others may focus on enhancing study skills, learning how to manage their time, or the consideration of learning styles in the classroom (2000). Kezar (2000) contends that summer bridge programs oftentimes cater to first-generation college students. It has been found that the involvement of the parents produces a higher rate of student success (Kezar, 2000, p. 2). A bridge program at Cal Poly Pomona encourages parent involvement to enhance the

chances of success once they are in college. The parents are asked to engage with their student by talking to them and asking questions about their academic encounter (2020). The Cal Poly Pomona (2020) summer bridge program asks the parent to “lighten up” and show more support and encouragement as opposed to “putting down” the experience or making negative comments. Also, the Cal Poly program leadership team want the parents to be just as informed about the resources available on campus as the students (2020).

Other benefits of bridge programs have been a connection to the community through community service or offering a mentorship opportunity with a faculty member or administrator on campus. Some programs also provide internships as part of the benefit of being in a bridge program. Much like the origin of Early College programs, bridge programs focused their efforts on first-generation, minority and low-income but gifted students from poor families (Kezar, 2000).

Numerous studies have been conducted to show the benefits and impact of bridge programs. Mentorship by a faculty member or peer mentor was rated high as a benefit as well as community involvement and building the self-confidence of the student (2000). Kezar (2000) also contends that students attending bridge programs perform better as they have the support resources as part of the program that result in a higher rate of retention and better GPAs compared the students who do not attend such programs. Such resources were mentoring, time management or study skills.

There are barriers or limitations for students who enroll in bridge programs in the pursuit of success and their transition to college. Grace-Odeleye and Santiago (2019) contend that many of the students in the programs suffer from a lack of self-confidence as it relates to college preparedness. Many of these are first-generation students and the expectations of students, in



some cases, are unrealistic as their knowledge of higher education is limited (2019). Many have not experienced any connection to a college campus therefore they are not fully able to experience the college culture. The parent or other family members themselves have no college experience and cannot pass along the knowledge needed by their children to be successful as they transition into college. Bridge programs were created to address the limitations experienced by first-generation, minorities, or students from low-income families where resources formerly unrealized are introduced to break down any barriers such students may encounter (2019).

The positive aspects of bridge programs are noted but there are some aspects that are not as positive. Kezar (2000) asserts that most bridge programs are held during the summer months which makes it difficult to assess the true academic progress of the participants in four to six weeks of a program (2000). It was found that, although bridge programs helped with transition from high school to college, there is no evidence of bridge programs showing any impact on retention. The array of bridge program makes it difficult to assess their impact on students. An example of universities with bridge programs are UC Berkley, Puente Project. Cornell University, Arizona State University, Morgan State University and Hampton University, just to name a few.

### **Funding for Programs**

Many funding opportunities have been made available to provide financial support to bridge programs such as TRIO and GEAR UP. Early College programs in its origin were financially supported by private foundations such as the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, the Carnegie Corporation of New York, the Ford Foundation, and the W. K. Kellogg Foundation (Berger et al., 2013). Summer bridge programs were initially developed with funding sources from the federal government through financial aid assistance, state government funding such as

the University of North Carolina Academic Summer Bridge (Pretlow & Dixon, 2016; UNC SB; Wachen Lycoming College awarded \$110k & College, 2020). Foundations such as the Booth Ferris Foundation provide summer bridge funding at Lycoming College (Lycoming College awarded \$110k & College, 2020). TRIO receives funds from The U.S. Department of Education competitive grant initiative. (History of the Federal TRIO Programs. 2020). GEAR UP is discretionary granted funded programs from the federal government (GEAR UP, 2020). The focus of this study is the Early College Program, so funding for that program is described next.

### **Funding for Early College Programs**

Funding to support Early College programs stems from two primary sources. The financial undergirding of Early College programs has been from either governmental support or private funds such as money donated from the Gates Foundation along with other benefactors who invested into the early college concept or other transitional type programs. This financial information informs the study because it describes the source of the financial investment to provide the Early College opportunity. In a report written by Ma, Pender, and Welch (2016), the individual and societal benefits of students who attended Early College programs could serve as foundational information as it relates to the intended study. Ndiaye and Wolfe (2016) exclaimed in a journal report that students who attended Early College programs were better equipped and prepared to be successful in college. This information lays the foundational and background information to support an enhanced opportunity to graduate from college. This study aims to explore how first-generation African American college graduates who attended an Early College program describe the benefits.

Information presented by Palaich, Augenblick, Foster, Berk Anderson, and Rose (2006) speaks more to the financial gain of attending an Early College program as opposed to any

benefits. This information lends itself to believe that little to no research has been done to discover how do first-generation African American college graduates who attended an Early College program describe the benefits. A study conducted in Indiana by Stephan, Davis, Lindsay, and Miller (2015), could be useful regarding the perception of success of students who attended an Early College program in Indiana and their success in college. In a recent report by the U.S. Department of Education (2017) the data offered rates of effectiveness in a student's transition from an Early College program to a college or university. These effectiveness rates are beneficial because they reflect a pool of study participants who have graduated from college and attended Early College programs while in high school.

The outcomes were:

1. Degree attainment (college)
2. College access and enrollment
3. Credit attainment
4. Completing high school
5. General academic achievement (high school)
6. Staying in school
7. College readiness
8. Attendance (high school)
9. General academic achievement in college

The data gathered showed that there was a positive effect in each domain. In this report, there was a positive effect found or the potential for a positive impact (2017). However, the only outcome where no rating of effectiveness was found was for the general academic achievement. To fully understand the overall rate of effectiveness of students attending an Early College

program and graduating from college, further study is needed to explore not only the academic achievement while in college but also to discern the perceived impact on the college graduate. The results could range from no effect and the student did not realize any benefit as a college graduate to the graduate who is a first generation and African American and did perceive a benefit by attending an Early College program.

### **Theories guiding early college programs**

Dr. Janet Lieberman conceived the idea that all students could learn and in 1974 she established the first high school college model for minority and underprivileged students (LaGuardia Community College, 2009). Lieberman (2004) authored an article "The Early College High School Concept: Requisites for Success" where she spoke of combining the traditional high school concept of education with the traditional college concept of education to create a paradigm shift in education. Lieberman is known for her origination of the concept of "middle college" and later to be known as "early college" that originated in New York (Lieberman, 2004). Lieberman (2004) also spoke of the growth of the concept to its present form and highlights the framework for an Early College program along with the improved retention rates of students in the Early College program compared to student retention rate in a traditional high school. Lieberman (2004) compared the graduates of the Early College program to that of traditional high schools. The percentage of Early College graduates enrolled and attended colleges and universities was also highlighted. Lieberman (2004) spoke to the structure of collaboration between the local public-school system and the local university which is necessary for the concept to be successful.

Another prominent author who has written and co-authored numerous articles on the Early College concept is Dr. Julie Edmunds who currently serves as the Program Director for

Secondary School Reform at SERVE Center at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro with a primary focus on high school reform programs where Dr. Edmonds has amassed over \$11 million dollars to support her research (School of Education, 2020). An article authored by Edmonds (2012), emphasized the Early College model and its influence on college readiness. At the time of the article there were 230 Early College programs in 28 states (Edmonds, 2012). The programs used in the article focused on five concentrations (Edmonds, 2012).

Recommendations to serve marginalized students in postsecondary education are the following:

1. Forge a relationship between school systems and area community colleges or four-year institutions.
2. Ensure that the academic offerings (classes and courses) provided an opportunity to earn their high school diploma as well as one to two years of earned college credit.
3. Provide academic as well as college preparedness support resources.
4. On the level of governance, seek policy support for Early College programs.

One such Early College model investigated by Edmonds were programs in North Carolina where over 3000 students in nineteen Early College programs were part of a research study to discern the impact of college preparedness or readiness programs (Edmonds, 2012). Among other emphases such as “high school achievement and course-taking, behaviors associated with graduating from high school, attendance, and continued enrollment in school”. the study also gathered data on the perspective of the students enrolled in Early College programs. Data showed that students attending Early College programs realized a more divergent experience or perspective than students attending a traditional high school. Perspectives such as a “more positive high school experience”, the teachers had higher expectations of the students, and the students experienced an enhanced relationship with the teachers. The rigor of instruction was

evident along with additional supplemental resources such as advising and tutoring opportunities (2012).

Two pioneers in the Early College movement, Dr. Janet Lieberman and Dr. Julie Edmunds have written extensively about the program. The program has grown throughout the country with positive impacts realized by the targeted population of first-generation, minority and students from low-income families. Millions of dollars have been invested to support ongoing research on the impact of Early College programs to include research studies on the impact on marginalized populations. Data from the research provides evidence that Early College student had higher rates of success than their peers attending traditional high schools. The Early College student's experience was more favorable than the counterparts in traditional high schools. In addition, research has detected evidence of instructional rigor accompanied by intentional support resources such as advising and tutoring.

### **Conceptual Framework**

The conceptual framework for this study drew upon three theories: Human Capital Theory (Schultz, 1971), Critical Race Theory (Creswell, 2007) and Individual Agency theory (Cole, 2019). Theodore Schultz's theory on Human Capital Investment known as the Human Capital Theory (HCT) (1971), served as the "lens" to analyze the data to support this research. Schultz's theory suggests that the investment in human capital (people) through schooling or education influences national income and benefits society (1971). In 1964, Gary S. Becker advanced the Theory of Human Capital in his book "Human Capital." (1975, 2nd ed.) Through his analysis of census data, he provided empirical "rate of return" data demonstrating that an investment in training and education to increase one's human capital was as significant (and measurable) as an investment in other forms of capital. In 2014, Emrullah Tan wrote a review of

HCT in the Review of Educational Research where he adds to existing knowledge about HCT and speaks to the notion that education serves as the core of economic development. The HCT suggest that education increases one's productivity and yield more earning potential. Education is an asset. Noted economist Alfred Marshall and author of "Principles of Economics" (1920) offers the following quote, "the most valuable of all capital is that invested in human beings".

Bringing the Human Capital Theory to the 21st century supports new research to further knowledge about human capital. Cultural capital is defined as one's assets, one's social mobility or status (Gragg, 2020). Gragg posits that there are three components of cultural capital that could determine social attainment...institutionalized, embodied, and objectified. Cultural capital considers education or one's level of education as the institutional component while the embodied component often describes aspects of one's personality or how they might speak, or one's dialect ("Cultural Capital | Social Theory Rewired", 2020). The last component of cultural capital of objectified speaks to the objects or material possessions one may have or have obtained.

Both human capital and cultural theories consider education as a determining factor as it relates to one's status or position in life. There are no guarantees, but education could be a major benefit to those first-generation students whose parents may not have had the opportunity to go to college. The opportunity to further one's education could open doors to students who have been marginalized because of their ethnic background, socio-economic status, or lack of exposure to educational pathways.

The Critical Race Theory (CRT) speaks to how race or marginalized populations interface with the HCT and the Cultural Theory. John Creswell (2007) offers the following definition of the CRT: "Critical Race Theory (CRT) This is a theoretical lens used in qualitative

research that focuses attention on race and how racism is deeply embedded within the framework of American society (Parker & Lynn, 2002; Creswell 2007). Jeff Gissing (2017) posits that the CRT could serve as an (appropriate lens) to better understand racism or oppression against people of color. The Critical Race Theory provides an opportunity to focus on the issue of how racism or race into an array of societal frameworks. Frameworks such as the legal system and as it relates to the proposed research study, education. (2007). The CRT presents three main goals 1) end discriminatory practices against people of color; 2) the attempt to make aware that race is an issue and that it is a societal issue; 3) to bring an awareness that other societal issues exist within the theory such as gender or class (2007). Regarding research, the CRT offers an opportunity to explore and focus on discriminatory practices and in relations to the study to present the experiences of a class of people, a gender, and/or a race that exist within a system (2007).

Laura Bestler (2008) offers an account of assumptions of the CRT. Bestler cited eight assumptions that undergird CRT.

1. Race is a socially constructed product of social thought and relations.
2. Racism is normal, ordinary, and ingrained into society, making it difficult to recognize
3. Traditional claims of neutrality, objectivity, and color-blindness must be contested to reveal the self-interest of dominant groups
4. Social justice platforms and practices are the only way to eliminate racism and other forms of oppression and injustice.



5. The experiential knowledge of communities of color or their “unique voice” is valid, legitimate, and critical toward understanding the persistence of racial inequity.
6. Communities of color are differentially racialized depending on the interests of the dominant group.
7. History and historical contexts must be taken into consideration in order to challenge policies and practices that affect people of color.
8. The ideological contestation, deconstruction, and reconstruction of race is often demonized through storytelling and counter-narratives.

Bestler (2008) contends that racism associated with the CRT is systematic and deep within the American society. She contends that racism is hard to detect because of its depth but efforts in social justice has merit in any efforts in the eradication of the issue of racism.

The limitations of the Critical Race Theory stem from what is described by Larson and Wright (1993) as the theory being difficult to detect in educational American system. Ladson-Billings (1998) posits that racism is systemic and deep within the American culture. Although CRT is the everyday experiences of people of color, yet the theory itself are difficult to deal with or control (1998). Larson-Billings and Tate (1995) contends that property plays in an important role in America’s justice and legal system and educational system. When Larson-Billings and Tate (1995) speak of property it starts with the claiming of land or property from the Indian (Native American) by driving them off their land. When Africans were brought to America and became not only slaves but also lawfully owned by the U. S. Constitution as property to slave owners. Property, be it land or slaves, provided a level of economic strength and power to the owner (p. 53).

The CRT relates to property and tensions about funding the educational system. Larson-Billings and Tate (1995) speak of a sense of resentment when those who live in communities with residents in a higher socio-economic status and higher tax assessments of their property pay taxes that support public schools in lower income communities as well as public schools in more affluent communities. In simpler terms, that if one is in a higher socio-economic community, they deserve the best school, the best curriculum along with the best equipment (p. 54). A curriculum is used to perpetuate the CRT when the curriculum offered in a school in a more affluent community would be different in a community with lower income residents (p. 54). Curriculum differences such as the more affluent school would offer more foreign language choices to include Spanish, French, German, Latin, Greek, Italian, Chinese, and Japanese where the only foreign languages offered in the lower-income schools was “Spanish and French” (p. 54). This was also seen in the math and sciences courses. Math and sciences offered in higher income communities included: algebra, geometry, trigonometry, calculus, statistics, general math and business math and a community of lower wealth would offer general math, business math and algebra (p. 54). Biology, chemistry, physics, geology, science in society, biochemistry and general science was part of the curriculum at school in communities with higher tax values and higher incomes where communities of lower wealth only offered their students biology, physical science, general science, and life science (p. 54). The lack of access and opportunity creates a systematic disadvantage in communities where the incomes are lower, or the curriculums are diluted but yet an expectation or a standard is created that all students should know the same thing but with different curriculums supports the theory of CRT (p. 55).

Whereas the HCT broadly speaks to how education can present an opportunity to be a contributing citizen to society and Cultural theory speaks to how one’s assets define one’s social

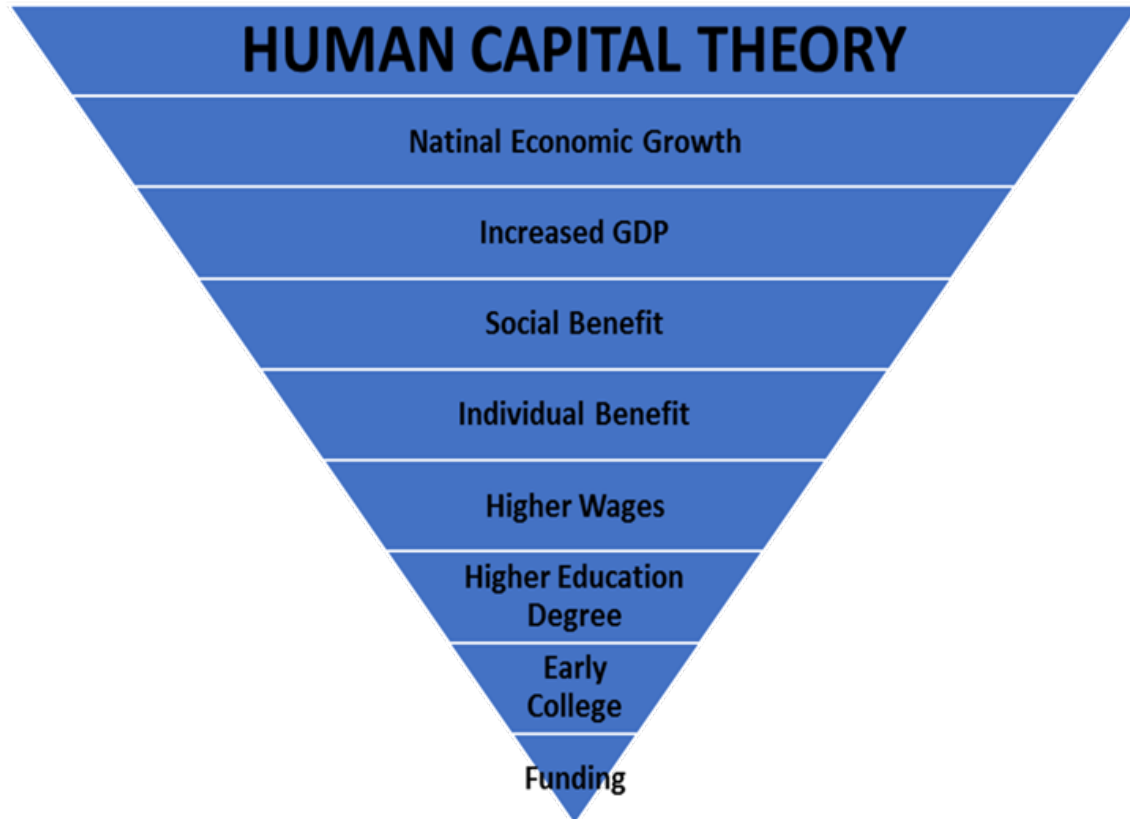
mobility or status (Gragg, 2020). All factors considered being equal both theories should apply to all people, but CT presents valid unconsidered factors. This is illustrated by the fact that black college graduates have a median income of 95 percent of the median income of white college graduates. Broken down by gender, black male college graduates' median income was 82 percent of white male college graduates. Black women made significant gains where it was found that the median income was 110% over the median incomes of white female college graduates. Bridge programs like TRIO, GEAR UP, Summer Bridge, and Early College programs provide an opportunity for marginalized people to level the playing field and use education as their vehicle to experience HCT and Cultural Theory ("Holding a Four-Year College Degree Brings Blacks Close to Economic Parity with Whites", 2020).

### **Strengths of the HCT Framework**

Netcoh (2016) suggested that the combination of educational research and economics commonly uses HCT. The author also posited that HCT indicated that more education offers a financial benefit to the economy and social system. Netcoh (2016) suggested that "increased amounts of schooling are associated with higher individual wages, GDP growth, higher rates of civic participation, lower crime rates, and better health outcomes". Additional research such as a study conducted by Dee (2004) claimed that the further acquirement of education impacts and enhances participation in voting and a heightened awareness for the support of freedom of speech which also spoke to a boost in the familiarity of civic issues. Lawmakers used such data to base funding decisions on programs and initiatives that offer the opportunity for the economic benefits that increased education can provide (Netcoh, 2016). Galor and Moay (2001) offered a comparable consideration for HCT with the following life analysis:

Individuals live for two periods. In the first period of their life individuals devote their entire time for the acquisition of human capital. The acquired level of human capital increases if their time investment is supplemented with capital investment in education. In the second period of their lives, individuals supply their efficiency units of labor and allocate the resulting wage income, along with the interest income, between consumption and transfers to their children (p. 14).

In addition, the HCT suggested that policymakers provide incentives for students to invest in themselves by seeking more education which in turn can lead to higher wages (Netcoh, 2016). Such programs would be the Early College program where students take college courses and high school classes simultaneously. One potential benefit that could be realized when the cost of the entire college education is reduced by the invested funds into programs like an Early College program. The invested funds are provided from sources such as the federal government or private investors such funds donated from the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation. In the early 1970s, Schultz (1971) suggested that the money invested results in a positive return on the investment with social and economic benefits that have a positive impact in the community and on the national economic level. Netcoh (2016), answers the question of what is HCT when he makes the argument that the quality of education along with the length of time invested in the educational process is an investment in oneself. The joining of the two aspects of HCT creates the opportunity for an individual to earn and increase their earning potential that translates into contributing to the Gross Domestic Product. This contribution serves as a benefit to not only the individual but also the overall population.



**Figure 2-1 Human Capital Theory (HCT) diagram (Schultz (1971))**

Figure 1 illustrates how funding provided by federal or state governments, or by private supporters such as the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation allow disadvantaged or low-income youth the opportunity to attend a program such as an Early College program ("Gates Foundation Launches \$40 Million Early College Initiative", 2002). As it relates to the diagram and in accordance with the HCT theory, an individual who takes advantage of the educational opportunity from the funding could earn higher wages and positions them to contribute to the local and national tax base and the overall society (Netcoh, 2016).

### **Weaknesses of the Human Capital Theory**

Conversely, there are limitations to HCT. HCT is a valuable tool and in theory has great potential, however, when policymakers consider productivity as it relates to wages it was found to be difficult to associate the two (Netcoh, 2016). Netcoh (2016) posits that although there are

positives or strengths to HCT it also has its weaknesses. There is value to earning associate's or bachelor's degree or beyond however it does not necessarily promise the student will earn higher wages (Netcoh, 2016).

### **Individual Agency Theory**

Cole (2019) defines individual agency as “thoughts and actions taken by people that express their individual power” or “the power people have to think for themselves and act in ways that shape their experiences and life trajectories”. Cole also describes individual agency as being present in the lives of a group of people who may not be able to possess such power, such as oppressed or marginalized people, minority people or people of low income but are displayed in varying ways. Such populations may exert their individual power in negative ways to earn the respect of authoritative figures, perhaps as a survival effort (2019). Whereas, despite the circumstances these same people can exert and express their individual power by defying the structural odds against them by being a minority or an individual from a low-income family and take advantage of opportunities that could re-shape their futures.

Lerch, Bromley, Ramirez & Meyer (2016) purport that individual agency evolves over time. Although society has been able to maintain its position as one that is inclusive of all types of people, individual agency has emerged and a theory that focuses on the individual who feels “empowered with rights”. The “party line” is that America is a meritocracy, whereas the reality is that individuals enter a highly stratified society at birth and therefore, do not have equal access to opportunities or resources.

There is a relationship between HCT and Individual Agency Theory. They both involve individuals taking advantage of opportunities to improve their lives. These opportunities could be in the form of education by using it to improve their quality of life to the point of becoming a

contributing citizen in the community, paying taxes, and voting. Individual Agency Theory contends that disenfranchised people can take action to improve their lives by using their individual power to affect a desired result. Bromley (2016) contends that individual agency morphed from the thought or theory that individuals through education are better positioned to contribute to society. Individual agency emerges into a more individualized mindset where concepts of human rights growing into human rights in the educational system. This concept creates a sense of empowerment as a 'process of enhancing an individual's or group's capacity to make effective choices, that is, to make choices and then to transform those choices into desired actions and outcomes (2016).

### **Conclusion**

Chapter Two, the Literature Review, offered existing research on the concept of Early College programs and summer bridge programs. Existing research on these two concepts provided insight into the program's origin and its structure, existing programs such as summer bridge programs and the varying types and characteristics of each along with the varying, funding sources and overall impact or outcomes of each program. Two prominent researchers (Dr. Janet Lieberman and Dr. Julie Edmunds) are introduced in this chapter as leading authorities or experts on the topic of Early College and summer bridge programs. The conceptual frameworks of Human Capital Theory along with the Critical Race Theory and Individual Agency Theory were introduced to provide the foundation of which the research study will be built upon. Schultz's HCT provided a clear vision for this study. One of the main aspects of the theory that supports this research is the cost/benefit component of the approach. This study looked to discern how do first-generation African American college graduates who attended an Early College program describe the benefits. This research aimed to provide new knowledge for

policymakers or decision makers regarding future investments in a program such as Early College programs. The investment not only provided an opportunity for first-generation or low wealth high school students to be dually enrolled by also taking college course but that the investment has also allowed them to enroll and graduate from college with a degree which in turn also benefits not only the individual but also the community and the economics of the country. Galor and Moay (2001) suggested that the HCT was based on the premise that as knowledge is acquired through education, there will also be an increase in their human capital. This heightened level of human capital transfers into more employed citizens, their ability to increase their wages, along with an increase in a person's productiveness (2001). The combination of education and economics represents the core of the Shultz (1971) theory. The cost and benefits of Early College students graduating from college with a degree speaks to Schultz's theory for first-generation families, minorities, or those from low wealth families. These students from these situations otherwise may not have had an opportunity to be contributing members of society had it not been for the Early College program which leveled the playing field and provided the opportunity. Critical Race Theory provides the realization of when race is considered the lens or the view changes from a holistic approach to one where people of color are viewed and treated differently. The Individual Agency Theory seems to have its roots from HCT. It is the premise of Individual Agency Theory that people possess the individual power to shape their lives but with consideration that there might exist the possibility that disparities between races may have a bearing on the capability to attain the opportunity to be a contributing citizen to society. Thus, programs like TRIO, GEAR UP, and Early College programs exist to offer disenfranchised populations an opportunity to realize the life as described according to HCT or at least a chance.



It can be concluded that with all the past and present research that already exist regarding Early College and Summer Bridge programs, there was still a need to explore more into these programs to see how first-generation African American college graduates who attended an Early College program in North Carolina describe the benefits.

## CHAPTER THREE

### METHODOLOGY

The current research suggested that the Early College Program and programs like it continued to provide first-generation, minority, and students of low wealth with an opportunity to take high school and college courses that better prepared them for college by being exposed to skills and resources necessary to be successful in college despite their past performance in high school (2016). This opportunity was provided from generous philanthropists such as the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, Walton Family Foundation, Lumina Foundation, Dell Foundation, the Carnegie Corporation of New York, the Ford Foundation, and the W. K. Kellogg Foundation (Berger et al., 2013). These investors made a national investment of more than \$130 million dollars to provide the funding to start and support the Early College Program.

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

While the financial support has made this opportunity for college access possible and some students have positioned themselves to take advantage of those programs, less was known about how these programs are perceived by college completers. Part of the rationale for funding high school to college transition programs was to ensure first generation college attenders are better prepared for the labor force upon graduation. In an article by Sarah Schwartz (2019), by 2019 2458 students graduated from Early College programs with many of the programs consisting of 150 or fewer students in each grade. Schwartz also found that within six years of graduating from an Early College program these students were more likely to enroll into college and graduate. In comparison to the traditional high school students, 20.7 percent of the students graduating from Early College programs earned college degrees compared to 10.9 percent of student attending traditional high schools.

There was still the need to explore how first-generation African American college graduates who attended an Early College program in North Carolina describe the benefits. As documented in past studies, Early College students have been positively impacted (Berger, et. al, 2013). Most current research indicated that students who participated in this program had higher attendance rates, higher rates of high school graduation, higher rates of college enrollment, and an improved chance of obtaining a degree. There was at least one aspect of the Early College program that has not been researched and this aspect was the crux of this research of exploring how first-generation African American college graduates who attended an Early College program in North Carolina describe the benefits.

This qualitative study explored how first-generation African American college graduates who attended an Early College program in North Carolina describe the benefits. Using this research method provided an in-depth look into this research question. This chapter presented the methodology of the study, the participants, the procedures that were used to collect and analyze the data, limitations of the study, as well as addressed any ethical concerns.

### **Research Questions & Design**

The purpose of this study was to determine how first-generation African American college graduates who attended an Early College program in North Carolina describe the benefits. The intent of this study was to document specific experiences or opportunities described by individuals who participated in this program of type of program. Findings added to the current knowledge regarding the impacts of such programs as Early College on students who are first generation, minority or from low-income families. The study targeted three aspects for which the program was designed. These aspects focused on students who would be first in their family to attend and graduate from a college or university, a group of people who have been marginalized

such as minorities or students from low-income families. In the case of this study, the focus was on first generation, African American college graduates.

### **Site Information & Population**

This section discussed on how the research study was conducted, how data was collected, and what analytic procedures were used for this qualitative research design. The purpose of the using the qualitative approach was to explore how first-generation African American college graduates who attended an Early College program in North Carolina describe the benefits. A sample of first-generation African American students who are college graduates and previously attended an Early College program were interviewed to gather data for analysis. All participants selected for this study were between the ages of 21 through 26. The participants were male and female, and the intended number of participants were restricted to no more than 12. Each participant was contacted using social media such as LinkedIn, fraternities or sororities, or Rotary Clubs requesting their participation in the study. The responding participants were asked to agree to a telephone interview using ZOOM, DUO, or Skype to gather the needed data for the study. The interview process was the primary method used to gather data. This sample of study participants was chosen based on convenience. The researcher also resided in the same geographic location as the research participants which was helpful, but not essential, for the researcher as well as the study participants, as the interviews were conducted online.

### **Implementation and Data Collection Procedures**

Each participant was asked open-ended questions and the researcher conducted each interview within a 30 to 45-minute time frame using one of the agreed upon platforms (ZOOM, DUO, or Skype). All interviews were performed using a pre-designed interview protocol (Appendix A). The protocol included instructions pertaining to the interview process and

research questions. The researcher requested geographical information of each participant to verify his or her attendance in an Early College program in North Carolina, the college or university from which they graduated, and their current location of residence. The interview protocol allowed notes to the responses of each participant which added to the researcher's data collection. All interviews and the data collected were used to explore how do first-generation African American college graduates who attended an Early College program describe the benefits.

### **Data Analysis**

Once all interviews were complete, the data collected from each participant was carefully transcribed from the recorded interview sessions. A narrative research approach was used to reflect the experience of the participant. This approach allowed for whatever the participant might verbally reflect in response to the open-ended research questions in addition to the researcher's notes taken during the interview process. Roberts (2010) offers insight in data analysis with a suggested method to analyze data. Each transcribed interview was meticulously read. The analysis process began by selecting one transcribed interview to discern what exactly is this participant saying. Once all the interviews were read, responses were assembled into similar topics using columns to represent themes. Analysis of the data led to affixing codes to each question response. The research then refined the codes into categories and looked for similarities that started the initial analysis (2010). Atlasti, a computer program, was used to assist in the analysis phase of the data. The selected program was useful in the storage of data, organizing the collected data, creating graphics and tables that were part of the overall analysis. Another useful feature of Atlasti was the assistance of the assigning codes from collected data (Creswell, 2008).

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

As do other research studies, this research study had limitations. The research objective was to explore how do first-generation African American college graduates who attended an Early College program in North Carolina described the benefits. Constraints regarding the design or methodology could have impacted the findings and be considered a limitation. How the researcher reacted to the participant's responses could influence the study and be considered a limitation of the study. The researcher was obligated to ensure the confidentiality of the participants and failure to ensure this aspect of the study would also serve as another limitation. Another possible limitation of the research study was the decision to conduct interviews with a smaller sample size of participants whereas a larger sample group would offer a larger pool of valuable and useful data.

### **Ethical Issues in the Research Study**

In addressing any ethical issues as part of the research study, the researcher took every precaution to curtail any risk of harm to the participant. The researcher secured informed consent from every research study participant. The researcher also took steps to maintain the confidentiality of every participant's information. In addition, each participant was made aware that their real names, the name of the Early College attended, and the name of the university attended was not used once the analysis process began or in the final product.

The researcher endeavored to avoid unethical practices during the research study. In addition to providing an informed consent document, the researcher explained to all research study participants that their participation was strictly voluntary and if at any time they felt uncomfortable and elected to discontinue their interview it was within their right to terminate their participation in the study.

### **Participants' Rights**

Using an informed consent form (Appendix B), all participants were notified that the interview would be recorded with their consent, that their participation in the study was strictly on a voluntary basis, and that all information and data collected was confidential and not to be used for any other purpose other than the study in which they have agreed to be a participant. Once the participants understood and agreed that the interview would be recorded, the interview began. The interview was recorded to ensure accurate responses to the interview questions which also allowed the researcher to concentrate on the interview itself. All participants were asked the same questions. The interview questions and the data collected from the interview were to discern whether any of the participants perceived there to be benefits to college graduates who attended an Early College program who are first-generation and African American.

### **Conclusion**

Chapter 3 of this research describes the methodology that was used in the study. This qualitative study explored how first-generation African American college graduates who attended an Early College program in North Carolina described the benefits of attending the Early College. The qualitative theory was selected to provide the opportunity to gather detailed and new information to add to existing knowledge and to further the discussion of the research topic. Chapter 3 also provided details that pertained to the active participation of the research study participants. This chapter also offered a description of how the collected data was analyzed using themes and codes from the participant's responses. A computer-based program, Atlasti was used to store data and assist with the creation of themes and codes in the analysis process of the research study.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### RESULTS AND FINDINGS

Chapter Four presents the results and findings from collected data from the study along with the data analysis. This chapter provides insight into the study through the analysis process and present themes that emerged were collected from face-to-face interviews with ten research study participants who attended bridge type program such as summer bridge and Early College programs in North Carolina. All participants could review the findings of the study and make additional contributions. The purpose of the research study was to collect data on the personal accounts, interactions and experiences of the ten research study participants who are first-generation African American college graduates who attended an Early College program in North Carolina where they were asked to describe the benefits.

#### **Methods and analysis of data**

The process to collect data involved using social media that included Facebook, and LinkedIn. The participants responded to the previously prepared script that was used to attractive participants. After each participant responded, they were contacted to arrange the interview to be conducted on ZOOM at a time and day convenient to the researcher and most importantly to the interviewee. Interviews were conducted in the evenings or over a weekend, with some having to be rescheduled more than once. Once a time and day was agreed upon, ZOOM invitations were sent to each participant. Technology was not kind in some instances and an alternate method was used. Many interviews were conducted as planned using ZOOM which were recorded. Whereas others had to resort to either ZOOM using a phone or just by using a phone, but recording was still possible. Each interview was initiated by thanking each participant for their willingness to participant in the interview. The reason and the intent of the research study was explained along



with the assurance of their confidentiality. All participants were reminded of the fact of their right to end the interview for any reason. Once demographic information was provided the interview began with the prepared interview questions (See Appendix C).

All participants provided the necessary information with enthusiasm, honesty, and openness. Some questions had to be repeated to provide clarity or a better understanding. There was an instance that I had to re-engage a participant for clarity to a question or more information. The interview times ranged from a 20-minute interview to 38 minutes. Regardless of the time of the interview the researcher collected the needed data for the research study.

Once the data was collected which took roughly a month to gather, the transcription process commenced. Otter.ai, a transcription software, was purchased to speed up the process but there was a need to review each transcription to discern if the transcribed interview captured the accounts of each participant accurately. If more information was needed the participant was contacted to gain a more accurate account of their experiences, thoughts, or impressions. Even with the use of Otter.ai, the process of transcribing the ten interviews was daunting but necessary as part of the overall process.

After transcribing the interviews, Atlas.ti was used for the analysis phase. Along with using Atlasti it still required the use of the long hand method to code. Each interview was read, and notes, phases, or words were assigned to each response to each question. This method started the coding process. The collected codes were entered into Atlasti which provided a list of common themes from all the participants. Useful information from Atlasti included a word count, and a word cloud.

The next step in the process was to use the information from the coding and discern what themes emerged from the discussion. The process involved associating what codes revealed and

what overall aspects of the codes related to the foundation of the research study theories of Human Capital Theory, Critical Race Theory, and Individual Agency.

After the coding process where over 100 codes emerged and with further analysis, three themes emerged from the codes: Importance of degree completion, Racial/Ethnicity impact in Pursuit of degree and finally Personal Will. As part of the analysis, words or phrases were used to develop the themes among the participants. The interview questions were also reviewed as part of the development of the themes. The themes represent a common view of the responses from the study participants.

### **Research Question**

The research question for the study was: how first-generation African American college graduates who attended an Early College program in North Carolina describe the benefits. The rationale for the study was to learn how young professionals characterized their experiences from the Early College or summer bridge program, and their experiences as they pursued their career path. The findings add to existing knowledge and provide recommendations to educators as a possible contribution to education reform with results of positive impacts. The findings have implications for the marginalized population of students that Early College programs and like programs were designed. The data represents the experiences of students who faced systemic barriers to educational and professional opportunities. The bridge programs provide an opportunity not afforded to them in traditional education settings.

### **Significance**

This study focused on how first-generation African American college graduates who attended an Early College program in North Carolina described the benefits. The discoveries of the study provided information that furthers the discussion of the importance of Early College

Programs, and Bridge Program along with adding to the existing knowledge base. This study has the potential to fill the gap between existing research as it relates to any perceived benefits for the target research study participants of Early College programs. In addition, the research offers new knowledge about impact of such programs, and overall achieved outcomes to policymakers as they make decisions about continued funding.

### **Participants**

This research study was conducted to discern the benefits of early college programs for first generation African American college graduates. In order for the research study participants to be eligible to participate in the study they had to be a first generation, minority, or from a low wealth family, and a college graduate. It did not matter what college or university they attended and graduate. Of the research study participants who agreed to participate in the interview process, all ten of the participants attended and graduated. It was also found that all attended and graduated from a college or university in North Carolina.

The figure below also offers the degrees each participant received. Three received degrees in the health field, two in Communications and Public Relations, and the remaining degrees included Computer Information Systems, Sports Management, Education, Political Science, and Sociology. The figure also shows that the majority (six) of the participants attended Early College program in North Carolina along with the remaining participants who attended summer bridge program also in North Carolina.

Participants	Bridge Program	Institution of Graduation	Major	Occupation
Linda	Early College	Pickle University	Computer Systems	IT Coordinator
Kevin	Early College	Walter University	Public Health	Contact Tracer
Donna	Early College	GRO University	Health Management	Healthcare Assistant
Betty	Early College	Marcel University	Elementary Education	Camp Director
Karl	Early College	West University	Political Science	Law School
Alice	Early College	West University	Health Management	OB Care Coordinator
Jack	Summer Bridge	Walter University	Communications	Broadcaster
Lucy	Summer Bridge	GHO University	Public Relations and Marketing	Public Relations
Anthony	Summer Bridge	Walter University	Sociology	Captain US Army
Marcus	Summer Bridge	Walter University	Sports Management	Real Estate

**Table 4-1 Participants' Demographics**

The diagram above represents the crux of the research study. The five sections present the ten research study participants who provided the valuable data for the research study. Two bridge type programs such as summer bridge programs and the Early College program served as the vehicle from which the research study participants attended prior to fully enrolling into college fully. The research study participants enrolled and graduated from five different colleges or universities. The research study participants earned bachelor's degrees where eight of the ten majored in eight different concentrations and two earned degrees in the same major. Lastly, the end result for the research study participants is employment. Eight of ten of the research study participants are currently employed in occupations for which they earned degrees in, while two of the research study participants are currently pursuing a career not related to their majors.

### **Participants**

All of the research study participants met the criteria to be eligible for the study. The study required that they be first generation students which means that they would be the first in their immediate family to enroll and graduate from college or university. The study required that the research study participants be African American. Another requirement in order to be eligible

for the research study was for the participants to attend either a bridge type program or an Early College program in North Carolina. The research study was comprised of five female participants and five males.

### **Bridge Programs**

The research study participants attended two types of bridge programs...summer bridge programs and Early College programs. Six of the ten research study participants attended an Early College program in North Carolina and the remaining four attended summer bridge programs.

### **College or University**

Per the requirement to be eligible for the research study all the participants are college graduates. Colleges and universities were well represented among the research study participants. Six of the ten graduated from an HBCU, two from a PWI private institution and two from a state supported PWI.

### **Majors**

The next portion of the diagram illustrates the varied degrees earned by the research study participants. The degrees earned represented an array of career paths set by the participants. Of the ten research study participants four graduated with similar degrees. The field of Healthcare had two graduates and Communications/Public Relations had two graduates, but the remaining career paths followed other interest.

### **Employment**

As it relates to the current occupations of the research study participants, all but two seemed to have found full time employment in the same or related field to their earned degree. One participant with an earned degree in Sports Management, decided to become an

entrepreneur and has established a successful real estate business in Michigan. The other participant is currently serving in the US Army as a Captain but credits his college degree with a major in Sociology as beneficial as he uses his degree to lead his troops.

The design of the bridge type programs such as summer bridge programs or Early College programs is designed to target first-generation minority students who would be the first in their family to graduate from college or a racial minority. The ten research study participants were all first-generation and minority. There were ten total participants, five were male and five were female.

Three of the interview questions were related to employment. Of the ten participants, all but one was gainfully employed. The one not employed recently moved to New York and is preparing to attend law school. There was one participant who was working but was not using her education degree although she was working full time for a summer camp at the time of the interview. There was one participant who earned a degree in Sports Management but was not working in that field because he moved to Michigan and started a real estate business. In addition, one research study participant earned a sociology degree and upon graduation was commissioned into the US Army with the current rank of Captain.

### **Participant Accounts**

In this section of Chapter Four, the research study participants offer their accounts and experiences that were encountered while attending either an Early College program or bridge program as they relate not only to the interview questions asked during interview but also their responses as they relate to the theoretical framework of Human Capital Theory, Critical Race Theory, and Individual Agency.

**Linda**

Linda willingly agreed to participate in the research study with the understanding that a series of questions will be asked to get her perception of attending a bridge type or transition type program such as summer bridge or Early College programs. Linda provided an in-depth account of her time as she attended the Leon County Early College Program along with her experience as she matriculated at the Pickleton University from which she graduated.

Linda knew that to follow the career path she wanted she needed to enroll into a college or university to complete her journey. Linda was persistent in her journey because to get into a field that was “male dominated” she would have a better chance working hard and graduating with her degree in IT.

When asked about any racial issues, she replied that it really was not about race it was more about who the person was and how hard they worked. She simply said, “some made it, and some didn’t!” She also credited her family for their unwavering support and motivation she was given by her family. Linda also had an inner drive that provided her with the opportunity that led her to pursue her dream of working in the IT field once she graduated from college. In summary, Linda provided an incredibly detailed account of how she was afforded the opportunity to work in the IT at the University of Mount Olive as a student in the Early College program at Lenior County Early College program. She believed that opportunity strengthened her skills in IT and helped her prepare for a job in that field after she graduated.

**Marcus**

Marcus is also a first-generation, African American male college graduate who was raised by his father and grandmother. He attended a summer bridge program where he realized that he “did not take high school seriously” which had a negative impact on his grades and his

GPA. His grandmother found the program he attended to increase his chances of improving his GPA as well as providing him with the skills or mindset that he did not acquire in high school. He knew if he could just get into college ‘the sky was the limit’.

Once he had earned his degree, Marcus moved to Michigan. He majored in Sports Management, but he took an interesting turn and became an entrepreneur and started a business flipping houses and his latest venture has positioned him to own two Airbnbs. Straying away from his earned degree, Marcus realized the importance of his degree while transacting business and making real estate deals. Using his words, “the whole conversation changes when they know you have a degree”. According to Marcus, a whole new level of respect is evident just knowing that he went to college. It was interesting to learn that although Marcus has a degree, he is not employed in any sports related job. In addition, to work in the real estate business does not require a degree but most realtor are licensed. However, Marcus is making real estate deals although he is not a licensed realtor and in a noticeably short time has proven himself to be a force in the industry.

Marcus did not encounter any racial issues while in college mainly because he attended a HBCU, but he did face a few racial issues in his real estate business. When he moved to Michigan and decided to get into the real estate business he experienced with racism in the industry when he sought advice from his peers. Marcus describes this experience by saying:

I think it was a combination of things. Being from another state. I didn’t know them; they didn’t know me. I talk different and I’m black. They really didn’t want to talk to me. To let me know stuff. Plus, I wasn’t in the industry. I am making real estate deals without a real estate license.



Marcus did reflect on how he felt when he interviewed for an internship at a soccer camp in an affluent community. He felt confident in his skills and abilities and was prepared for the interview. The committee asked him two or three questions and the interview was over. He said that encounter with the committee and the community was like a “punch in the gut” or perhaps a reality check. He was under the impression that since he was a former athlete, he had a good resume, and he was prepared for the interview that they would give him a call back. The call never came. He did learn from that experience but still had to face it when he moved to Michigan and made the decision to make real estate his career.

Marcus credits his grandmother who was a major factor in him attending college. Despite his lackluster academic attitude and performance, he was determined “not to let her down”. In addition to the encouragement and support of his grandmother and father, Marcus himself pulled from his days of playing college football to practice and hone his craft in his business that has yielded positive financial outcomes.

### **Kevin**

Kevin attended an Early College program at Danskin Community College in Hydesville, NC. Kevin took advantage of an opportunity afforded to him to attend an Early College program which was introduced to him by one of his teachers in middle school. Kevin comes from one of the poorest counties in North Carolina with an extremely high crime rate and he realized that attending the Early College program would provide him with the opportunity to pursue a degree in Public Health.

Kevin attended a small private HBCU where he earned his bachelor’s degree in Public Health. Kevin did not stop there and furthered his education by earning a master’s degree in Public Health from Liberty University in Lynchburg, Virginia. He remembers his time at Liberty

University as an opportunity to adapt. His comment regarding “adaptation” was related to a question in the interview that inquired about any race related issues he experienced while obtaining his degree. He felt he needed to adapt related to one specific issue regarding being isolated from study groups on campus. He saw that in his cohort study groups had been formed which consisted of only white students. He chose not to “press the issue” and would “study alone”.

Kevin is now employed by the Sleepy County Human Services Department as a Contact Tracer. As a Contact Tracer it did not require a degree for the position but by have a bachelor’s and a master’s degree, he is paid more along with having leadership responsibilities. Kevin mentioned that by attending an Early College program he felt better prepared for not only college but for life beyond college. Through his time in the Early College program and while earning his two degrees he had the full support of his family and a sense of pride within his family because he was the first to graduate from college and earn a master’s degree.

### **Jack**

Jack attended a summer bridge program and credits attending this program for his college experience. Jack explained that while in high school he had “not properly prepared for college”, he was more focused on being recruited as a track and field athlete, but he did not prepare academically. His mother called around looking for a school with a bridge program and he was excited to learn that she was successful. Jack took full advantage of the program and began to take academics seriously. There he excelled in subjects that he previously had not done well in which created the thought and idea that he could be successful and earn good grades if he concentrated and “worked hard”. Jack is currently working in the field of communications, the area in which he earned his degree of Communications degree. Jack feels his internships and

volunteer time helped him secure the broadcasting positions he has held and currently holds. When asked if race played any part of his employment experiences, Jack acknowledged that the broadcasting field is extremely competitive but that times have changed and although there may be some race related issues generally, he has never encountered any and he has been blessed that his works speaks for itself more than his race or the color of his skin.

Jack attributes his success to support and encouragement of mainly his mother. He comes from a single parent home and his mother has always been there for him with an encouraging word but also the expectation for him to earn his college degree. As for his personal contributions to his success in earning his college degree, he best described his mindset as one where he realized the bigger picture of earning his degree and securing full time employment to be self- sufficient.

### **Lucy**

Lucy attended a bridge program and described the program as one for students who were already making good grades, but it provided a head start and so students could earn college credit before they arrived on campus for their freshman year. She felt that by attending the summer program, it took her less time to transition from high school and she was better prepared for the rigors of college. This head start also positioned her to take advantage of other opportunities such as incorporating internships into her schedule. While attending college she had over ten internships. These not only looked good on her resume but, she credits the internships for her being prepared for the workforce. Lucy cited her interest in a certain lifestyle was in part the reason she works so hard to gain experience given the number of internships she had. Lucy's experience outside of the classroom were just as educational as the classroom itself. As it pertains to her degree, the soft skills, she learned by attending a summer bridge program better

prepared her for her chosen career. She feels that a communications and public relations job provides the opportunity to use her research skills, improved her ability to work with other people in teams, and developed her skills to manage her time. These outcomes all contribute to her focused and persistent mindset. Lucy attended an HBCU, so she did not experience any racial issues and it was not a factor in her matriculation. Lucy used the words “focused, flexible and nimble” as it relates to what kept her focused and moving towards her goal of obtaining her degree. Although Lucy was not the first in her family to graduate from college nor was, she from a low-wealth family she is a minority where the possibility of encountering systemic racism still exist. However, she did have parents who served as role models and provided encouragement, and it was an expectation that she would go to college and graduate.

### **Betty**

Betty is a graduate of Marcel University which is an all-women’s institution. Betty attended an Early College program and credits the program for not only preparing her for college but for employment as well. She recalls being introduced to resume writing, obtaining letters of recommendations, and undergoing mock interviews while attending the Early College program. Betty is currently serving as a summer camp director. Whereas the position did not require a college degree, she feels that her training as an elementary school teacher helped her secure that position. She also mentioned that the experience she is getting with the summer camp will help her when she gets her first full time teaching position at an elementary school.

Regarding her race or ethnicity being a factor in her college education, Betty graduated from a PWI and she did not feel she experienced any racial or incidence that she would consider to be racial. However, being a minority and the first to go to college from a low-wealth family had a positive factor in her college education. Being so, she was able to qualify for more

financial aid. She feels her experience was different than had been expected but it worked for her.

When asked about Betty's persistence she credits the level of success she has achieved by continuing to be "dedicated" to her goal of attaining her college degree, her "hard work", and her "perseverance". She wanted to make good grades and she worked hard to get them. She also attributed this mindset from the Early College program that provided resources to prepare her to be successful. By attending the Early College, she went to college and graduated feeling it was "all worth it".

Her major source of support while in the Early College program and while in college was her mother who was very influential in making sure Betty understood that she was there if she needed anything and always presented words of encouragement,

### **Alice**

Alice attended the Leon County Early College program along with Linda. Alice works full time and currently serves as an OB Care Coordinator. Although her degree is in Healthcare Management, she mentioned that she did not have any experience and wished she had done an internship in the field but having a degree positioned her to qualify for and be hired for the job. She felt that it was not a difficult transition because having the degree in the field made the transition much easier.

Alice realized the importance of having a degree when she did not get the first job she interviewed for and it "hurt my feelings" because she thought she qualified for the job and "why didn't I get the job"? But she loves the job she has now and feels that having a degree was an important factor and a good fit for her and her employer.

Alice did not realize the level of writing she would be required to do in her position but remembers soft skills like writing and teambuilding were vital in her position. She referenced the volumes of papers she had to write and the number of group work projects she completed in the Early College program and in college. She now sees the value of having those types of experiences as they prepared her for the current position where she writes reports and works with members of the medical team.

When asked if her current job required a college degree her own words provide the best response:

Yes, the job I currently hold did require a college degree and the job I have is related to the degree I have. I'm blessed! I followed my career path I wanted for myself and I'm here! My major at West University was healthcare management and that's what I do. So, it's perfect!

Alice spoke of being the first in her immediate family to go to college. She also mentioned that she really did not want to go to the Early College program but her grandparents who raised her convinced her it would be a great opportunity plus she said laughingly she "really didn't have a choice!" It was the main goal of her grandparents for her to attend the Early College program so that she could take college courses along with her high school classes which proved to be a major advantage when she finally went to college. While at YTTU, which is an HBCU, she felt extremely comfortable being around her friends and her people. She was incredibly involved in many clubs and activities and really enjoyed homecoming which is a "big thing" on an HBCU campus. Unfortunately, her level of involvement changed when she transferred to West University which is a predominately white institution. She mentioned how It was not a comfortable or inviting environment and she stopped participating in activities and

only hung out with other black students. As a result, she focused on graduating and getting a job. In addition, when race was a factor, she recalled “it was just different”. There were different clubs, different parties “it was just different.” As mentioned, she studied by herself and not with any study groups. She would go home a lot which was not far.

Alice’s self-confidence was obvious when asked what her personal characteristics for her success in college were. Her reply was “because I am smart”! She was always a good student and made good grades resulting in a high GPA. She was a member of the Honor Society while in the Early College program. She worked hard and managed her time well and took good notes in class.

Alice had the support of her family and they all were ready to help whenever she needed it. They made sure she would get a good meal when she would come home on the weekends if she were not working her part time job.

### **Karl**

Karl attended an Early College program and graduated from West University. He currently is preparing to go to law school in New York. When asked about his transition from completing his four-year degree and seeking his first full time job, Karl noted his first job after graduation was as a law clerk. Without a degree he would not have qualified for the job. He felt the transition was easy because while in college he prepared for a full-time job in law by taking advantage of the opportunity to intern at a black law firm while at West University.

One experience that Karl spoke of that related to the question of realizing the importance of having a college degree was the difference in pay. There were others who worked at the law firm without a college degree and the level of pay was different for those with a college degree. In our discussion about this he made the point of saying that:

“With a degree, individuals get paid 10 to 20 thousand dollars more in some cases”.

When Karl was asked about his college experiences in relations to his employment, he did mention that he was not working at the time in preparation for law school in the fall. One experience was that the law firm was looking to hire a law clerk and they wanted someone with a degree. It had been his dream to become a lawyer and his degree in Political Science and his experience as a law clerk has helped him in his pursuit of becoming an attorney.

When asked about his experience while attending an Early College program and what did he get from his experience that helped him in college and seeking employment he credits the program and was glad he attended. He did not want to go to a traditional high school because it was too big, and he did not want to deal with the fights and drugs. During his high school years, he felt being in a smaller environment would be better for him. Another factor that attracted him to the Early College program was the college credit hours that he could transfer to reduce the cost of his college education. He mentioned that he did not know what to expect and he was nervous about taking high school classes and college courses at the same time, but the college instructors helped with that transition. He spoke of one instructor, his Psychology instructor who would say it was his goal to not only provide instruction, but to get to know the student and Karl liked that approach.

Karl did encounter racial incidences when he described his time in college at WU and Gotsville as a very “racist place”. While off campus with friends they were stopped and asked where they were going “which happened a lot”. He and friends went to a frat party on campus but were stopped at the door and told they “couldn’t go in”! “We just turned around and left, shaking our heads!” Karl mentioned that he had not experienced that before and he “wasn’t use to that. It’s crazy!”



Going into college, Karl felt “really prepared”. He thinks going to the Early College program showed him what it would be like once he went to college full time. He also described himself as a “pretty determined person” despite being a relatively quiet person. As a result of going to an Early College program he felt he was able to enter college focused and not having to worry about the transition from high school to college because he had already experienced what college would be like and that was an advantage over other students coming straight from high school. Regarding Karl’s preparation for the job market, his words tell the story best:

As far as the job market, that’s why I’m back in New York. I was born here, and I chose NYU to get my law degree. My internship was at a black firm and they really helped me understand how it is and they mentored me. They would tell me how it is as a black lawyer and it gave me, I don’t know, it really helped me understand what I wanted to do.

Karl had and still does have support from his mother. Karl was raised in a single-family home and his mother has always been supportive. She would call to check on him and tell him how proud she was of him or send him a text telling him she loved him and to make sure he was not doing anything bad. As the encouragement focused on earning his degree, his mother wasn’t surprised when he told her he was going to law school because she knew he always wanted to be a lawyer. She was just worrying about him being in New York and COVID-19.

### **Donna**

This young lady, Donna, has graduated from GHO University and plans to go to school to become a registered nurse. Until she goes back, she is working part time as a medical assistant. When asked what she experienced that put her in a position to know how important it is to have a college degree, she realizes that the “more education you get you are afforded more opportunities and that taking advantage of your network gives you a greater advantage when

seeking a job.” Donna enthusiastically, credits her time attending an Early College program that introduced her to skills she will need in looking for employment. The program offered workshops on resume writing, what is considered professional attire and mock interviews. When she graduated from the Early College program she mentions how “unprofessional and ignorant” college students were regarding what is considered professional etiquette. She admits to herself that at first, she thought all the workshops offered at the Early College were “lame”, but they actually prepared her for when she had her “dream job”.

Donna has plans to return to college to earn a degree in nursing. As a part time employee at a doctor’s office, she does not need a college degree, but she does have a college degree and even as a part time worker she is paid at a higher wage. She does understand that once she returns for her degree in nursing, she will need a degree to be a registered nurse.

Donna attributes the Early college experience for the person she is today. The Early College program “molded me to become a confident, professional leader.” She claims that had she not attended an Early College and attended a traditional high school there would be fewer resources made available to her. She does not think she would have had the same opportunities or exposures.

I know that if I attended a traditional high school, I would not have picked up these skills. We went to interview workshops, resumé critiquing, business professionals came to our campus and gave seminars. I did not appreciate these things during the program, but when I stepped into the real world, I could not have been more thankful for this exposure.

When asked about race/ethnicity and its role in acquiring her college education, Donna feels that attending the Early College program which was located on the campus of an HBCU led

her to continue and finish her college education at an HBCU. She also credited her HBCU experience for preparing her was that she felt she had to work hard to “stand out as a black woman. Donna described a personal characteristic that led to her success in college was self-discipline and her inner drive to constantly push herself “to be great”. She uses the mindset to stay focused with the understanding that she may even need to sacrifice to stay on course with her vision for herself.

Donna lost her father at an early age and it has been just she and her mother who she says, “she’s all I have”. During the most difficult of times her mother always had an encouraging word. After graduating with her degree, Donna told her mother that she wanted to go back to school and her mother listened to her and gave Donna her full support on her decision She describes her mother’s support as “unconditionally”. During periods of time when I doubted myself, my path and couldn’t even muster up the confidence to get out of bed and go to class, my mom was there.

### **Anthony**

Anthony is currently a Captain in the US Army stationed in Fort Hood Virginia. He attended a summer bridge program and agreed to participate in this study to share his thoughts and experiences for this research study.

When asked about the transition from completing his college degree to his full-time job, Anthony’s transition was very quick. During the interview, Anthony had just been promoted to Captain which he was immensely proud of. But his transition was a quick one because while in college Anthony joined ROTC. Upon graduation he was also commissioned into the US Army as a 2<sup>nd</sup> Lieutenant, he explained that long before the moment of being commissioned he knew

where he would be stationed and was ready and fully prepared to take his command. Regarding his college degree, it was a prerequisite to be commissioned in the Army as a 2<sup>nd</sup> Lieutenant.

While in high school, Anthony did not take school seriously and had no intentions to attend college and graduation with a GPA of 1.9. His stepmother began reaching out to many programs looking for one to help Anthony get into a college. She found a summer bridge program for him to attend and that was where he realized that he was being given a second chance of which he took full advantage. Anthony worked hard, joined ROTC, became the president of the Student Christian Organization, and graduated with a GPA of 3.7. Anthony was a good example of a minority male struggling in high school, but an alternative was found to provide another chance at understanding the importance of earning a college degree and Anthony showed himself and his family that he could be successful.

Anthony mentioned many experiences that contributed to the success he enjoys today. Anthony remembered moments in school that he was only motivated by being an athlete, but his grades prevented him from competing and he “felt lost”. He credits the summer bridge program for giving him the opportunity to make a change. He mentioned that he knew he was no dummy he just did not study. While in the program, however, all of that changed and within the six-week program he went from having a 1.9 GPA to a 3.1 which got even higher by the time he graduated. As mentioned before, Anthony joined ROTC where he worked hard inside and outside of the classroom. Anthony studied hard for his courses, made time for extracurricular activities, and improved his leadership skills while in ROTC.

When asked if his current job required a college degree, Anthony responded laughingly with a “ABSOLUTELY”! Anthony mentions the fact that “in order to be a commissioned officer you must have a degree.” Austin has a degree in Social Work, and he feels that his degree helps

him know how to work with different people and he feels that in order to be an “effective leader” he should know how to work with “people of all races and genders.”

Anthony was asked if attending the summer bridge program influenced his decisions as a black male in completing high school or a first-generation college graduate and he mentioned again how he did not do well in high school. He said the summer bridge program changed all of that for him. He said he was able to see his worth and understand the importance of education. He realized that he was given a second chance and he took full advantage of it. He made education a priority and did not want to waste this parent’s financial investment in him when given an opportunity to change his life.

When Anthony was asked to reflect on any racial/ethnicity/social class examples he encountered while in college, he did not experience any of those issues while attending an HBCU, but he did speak about the percentage of minority officers in the military which is 27%. He sees that percentage rate as a motivator to go as far as he can as an officer.

Anthony described personal characteristics that have contributed to his success to entering college and the fact that he was given a second chance changed his whole mindset. He is a perfect example that success is possible when a person does not give up. Anthony simply did not give up. The cards in many ways were stacked against him but he had too many people to account to and he did not want to give up in the eyes of his grandmother, his parents and more importantly, himself.

As Anthony mentioned before, he credits his family for their support and not giving up on him. He cited that his family could have given up on him when he wasted so much time in high school but when he finished the summer bridge program with a 3.1 GPA and his GPA began to increase he feels that his family realized that he was serious about education and his

career and they jumped on the bandwagon they provided mounds of support, checked in with him a regular basis, they made sure he was balancing his school work and going out into the field on weekends for ROTC exercises. “They were all there every step of the way and still are!”

### **Themes and Theories**

The narrative approach analysis portion of this study required the researcher to continuously review and revise emerging themes. Once the relevant themes were identified, themes continued to emerge in an attempt to clarify the responses of the research study participants. The themes that emerged were consolidated to provide a more comprehensive determination of themes that aligned with the data. The data showed that the three themes which were: (a) Importance of degree completion (b) Racial influence in acquiring college degree; (c) Personal influence in obtaining college degree were also the three conceptual frameworks used as the foundation of the research study.

The Importance of degree completion speaks to the Human Capital Theory insofar as all research study participants realized the importance of obtaining their college degree to better position them for a “better quality of life”. Investing in their college education provided the research study participants with a better opportunity to contribute to their community by voting or volunteering their time to civic organizations. One participant spoke of the pride he felt his freshman year when the entire university marched to the polling site. He expressed how “proud” he was to vote for the very first time and now to serve his country in the US Army.

The second theme of Racial influence in acquiring their college did not seem to negatively impact the research study participants despite the understanding of systemic barriers presented in the Critical Race Theory that speak of the injustices within the educational system. Only two of the ten research study participants encountered anything racially related. Despite not being invited

to study groups and not being allowed to enter a frat party on campus, all ten participants looked beyond the prejudices of others and remained focused and determined to earn their degree.

The third theme of Personal Influence in obtaining college degree is paired with the third conceptual framework of Individual Agency. The support, encouragement, and positive thoughts were part of the role the participant's families provided but the overall influence came from within the participants. Faced with the systemic obstacles that exist solely because of the color of their skin, all ten research study participants also found it within themselves to use the negative factors that exist and used these factors as motivators to succeed. They used their inner strength and power to overcome the barriers set against them and continued to work hard until they earned their college degree.

In review, all ten research study participants willingly and openly provided insight into their experiences of either attending an Early College program or a bridge type program. The summer bridge programs currently being offered at some college, and universities provide and smoother transition from high school to college as well as offering an opportunity to marginalized populations to enroll into an institution of higher education.

All interview questions that were asked related to the three conceptual frameworks that were used and served as the foundation for the research study. In review of the responses provided all research study participants realized the importance of their college degrees. Attending or participating in a bridge type program such as a summer bridge program or an Early College program provided the participants with an opportunity to attend college and earn college credit prior to attending full time. Attending such programs offered the participants a level of comfort in knowing what to expect when they finally attended as a full-time student and experiencing college as a student attending classes and engaged in the social life on campus. Not

all the research participants were employed full time when the data was collected but those that were realized that the jobs, they currently hold are attributed to the college degrees that they held.

### **Human Capital Theory**

Four interview questions were used that focused on the attributes related to Human Capital Theory. According to Schultz (1971), the Human Capital Theory posits that those that invest in education for themselves better positions themselves to contribute to a community by voting, becoming a volunteer or a mentor. The Human Capital Theory argues that earning a college degree supports the possibility of earning higher wages which in turn supports the national economy. When the experiences and accounts are compared to the Human Capital Theory it seems that the participants who are currently working full time realized the importance of completing their college degree, seeking, and securing full time employment which was an investment in themselves that has manifested into the participants becoming contributing citizens in communities, and contribute to a nations GDP by paying taxes.

### **Degree Emphasis and Current Occupations**

One of the requirements for the participants to be involved in the research study was that they would be college graduates. Being college graduates meant that they earned and held college degrees. Of the ten-research study participants, all earned college degrees from various institutions located in North Carolina to include six participants who attended private institutions and four who attended state supported institutions. Of the six participants who attended private institutions one of the institutions was an HBCU.

The degrees earned varied to include Computer Science, Sports Management, Public Health, Communications, Education, Political Science, Health Management and Sociology. Of

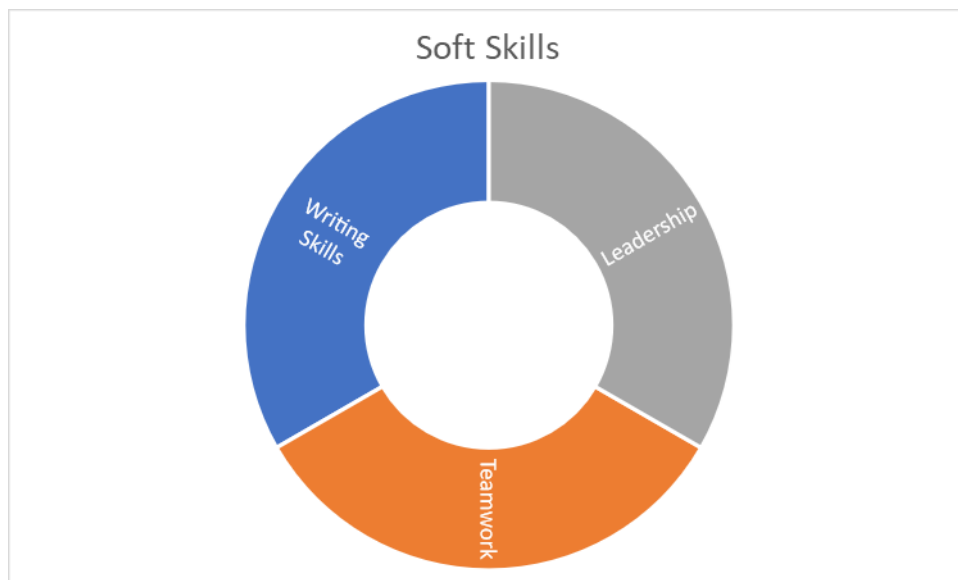


the ten research study participants eight are currently working or planning to secure employment in the job market that matches the degree they earned from the university they graduate from. Of the two remaining participants not currently employed in their field of study one participant with a degree in Sports Management chose to become an entrepreneur in the housing industry and the second participant is currently a Captain in the US Army. This military professional feels that his degree in Sociology helps him in his job by working with his troops and contributing to the overall economy (Schulz, 1971).

According to the responses, seven out of the ten research study participants realized that completing and earning their college degree had a positive influence as it relates to obtaining full time employment. The remaining three participants had indeed graduated but one participant was preparing to take the Praxis, one was preparing to return to school to get a degree to become a registered nurse, and the last participant was not working but preparing to enter law school.

Of the students who were employed full time, they felt ready, prepared, and proud of earning their degree.

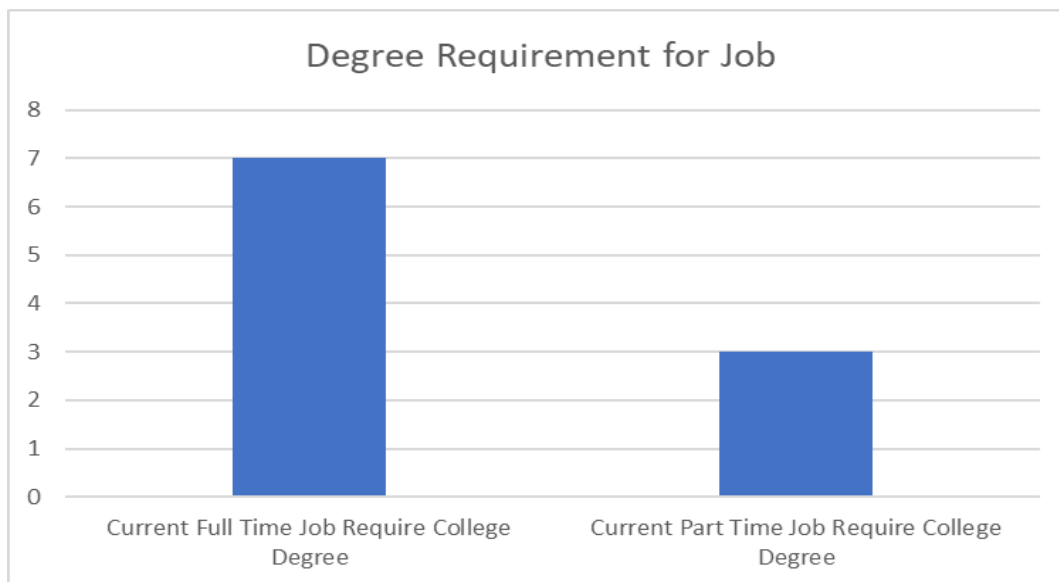
All study participants realized the importance of having a college degree in many ways. One of the ways was related to employment. Of the ten participants excluding the three currently not employed, they were able to acquire their current jobs because they had a college degree.



**Figure 4-1 Soft Skills**

Study participants referred to the soft skills they acquired while attending an Early College program or a summer bridge. Skills such as writing skills was the most mentioned skills because of the volume of paper they used in preparing for the level of writing that is required in their current jobs. Teamwork was also mentioned as a skill they all acquired which they see as a vital and necessary skill in their jobs. It is also noteworthy that study participants felt prepared to lead either group projects or in one case military troops. Other than the fact that a college degree was required for the jobs they had, the quality of life desired, certainly necessitated a college degree.

Regarding the degree being required, in all cases except one a college degree was a condition of employment. There was one participant who has a college degree, but he chose to go a different route and is currently not using his college degree for his career path of becoming a successful entrepreneur.



**Figure 4-2 Degree Requirements for Job**

### **Critical Race Theory**

However, as individuals continue to invest in themselves by furthering their education and becoming contributing citizens, there still exist systemic practices to prevent or deter disenfranchised populations from participating in the American Dream. The Critical Race Theory address such barriers and systemic practices.

Fifty percent (50%) of the research study participants experienced racial encounters that had a negative impact on them, however they used those encounters as motivators to finish their college education. They also drew on their own drive and fortitude to look beyond the systemic barriers erected by other students and colleagues in the workforce.

The concept of relying on one's own inner strength speaks to the theory of Individual Agency where despite the negatives, the student, families, and mentors provided the support and encouragement to not give in to the historical barriers that still exist.

Research (and the researcher's own life experiences) have shown the additional challenges young people of color, or those from low-income families or first-generation college

going groups, face completing high school, becoming college ready, attending, and completing four-year degree programs, and finding employment.

All the participants seemed to use their experiences while attending an Early College program or summer bridge program as positive and as a motivator in pursuit of their college education. There seemed to be a high level of pride and taking advantage of the opportunities afforded to them by being prepared for college and overall, their careers. They credit their growth and maturity by being exposed to opportunities they would not have had had they attended a traditional high school.

Four out of the ten participants referenced a racial encounter or experience while in college. The participant who became an entrepreneur after earning a college degree, his colleagues not sharing valuable information about the real estate industry where he was ignored and shut out. Two other participants who attended the same university had an experience that they considered racial one which involved being stopped and questioned and the other just felt left out and not asked to be a part of study groups. Another participant at another university encountered a similar experience that involved being excluded from study groups.

### **Individual Agency**

The Early College program was designed to provide an opportunity to a marginalized segment of the overall population. Even with additional resources, minority/first generation individuals must be persistent in their efforts to overcome the obstacles that continue to plague people of color. Obstacles such as systemic racism in housing, the justice system, and the education system.

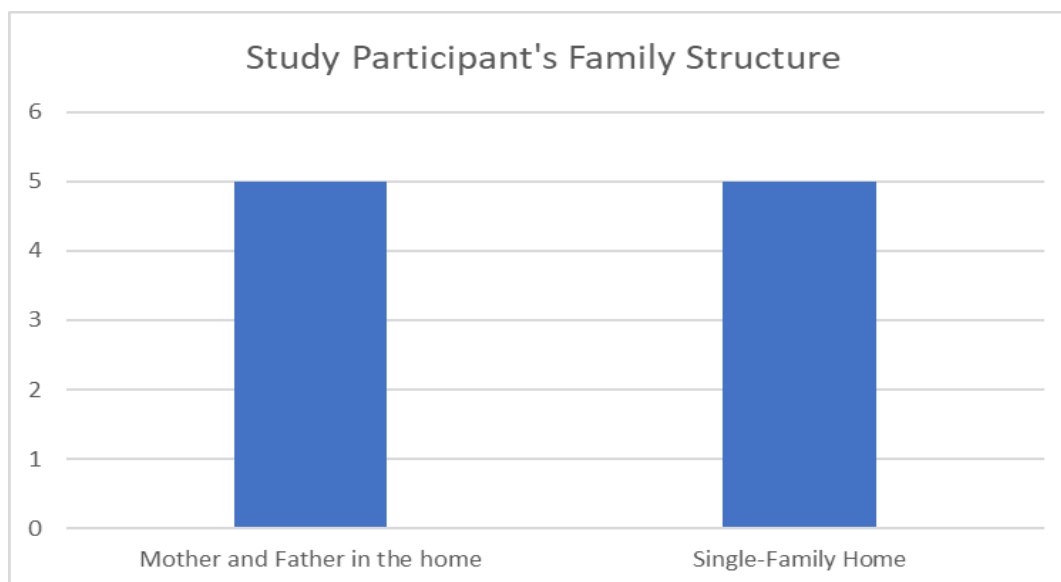
Words like “focused”, “determined”, “perseverance”, best describe the personal characteristics that they feel were integral to their success in going to college. All attribute to

getting a head start in bridge type programs that enabled them to be more focused and prepared that shorten the learning curve. Their experiences in an Early College program or summer bridge positioned them to be more successful than graduates from traditional high schools. They all were able to persevere because they knew what it would take to be successful in college.

Regarding the length of time, it took to persist and graduate, the length of time it took to graduate depended on the college or university they attended. Very few took all the earn credit hours and preferred they take their course as opposed to a similar course from another institution. Once the participants graduated and readied for the job market, they exhibited a “go-getter” mentality. They were equipped with the tools to be successful in the job market. They were skilled in writing resumes and they participated in mock interviews while in an Early College summer bridge program. Whether they got the job or not they were prepared and qualified.

#### **Role of family**

All ten participants were very appreciative with the level of support they received from their family. How family is defined covered the gambit. Five out of ten came from single-family homes. Grandparents were also instrumental in providing support for the participants. The support came financially, a good meal on a weekend trip home, a phone call, a text, or a voice message of support and encouragement.



**Figure 4-3 Study Participant’s Family Structure**

Of the many acts of encouragement, all participants had similar experiences. Other than financial, family members would simply check on them to see that they were on task. Some would offer their assistance if they needed it. They would send words of encouragement i.e., “don’t stop”, “stay focused”, “keep your eyes on the bigger picture”, “you got this”.

When you take the accounts and responses to each question asked of each participant, they all describe their attending an Early College program as beneficial and prepared them to graduate from the program and go on to graduate from college. They fully understand the importance of earning their college degree and seeking full time employment or in some case continuing their education. Attending the Early College afforded them the opportunity to be exposed to resources in preparation to continue and finish their college education and move in the direction of their career path.

As it relates to how race or ethnicity influenced their pursuits, many of the participants had positive experiences where in fact, they used their race and ethnicity as motivation to drive them to succeed. However, there were some who experienced prejudices because of their race or

ethnicity. Those that did experience adverse behavioral were not deterred and were able to dismiss negative views or actions of others and continue to pursue the goal of obtaining their college degree.

All participants credit their own personal fortitude and the full support of their families throughout their time at the Early College and at the institution of higher education from which they graduated from. They also offered their full support of their career choices.

### **Summary of Findings**

As the research study progressed the foundation or the conceptual framework that was used as the lens into the research study became evident. The three theories that the study was built upon were the Human Capital Theory, the Critical Race Theory, and the Individual Agency Theory. The Human Capital Theory suggest that if one chooses to invest in themselves through education it increases the opportunity for that person to become a contributing member of their community, to their county and its economy. The Critical Race Theory suggest that there exist systemic injustices and barriers in the judicial system, housing, and the educational system. The third theory of Individual Agency suggest that despite the barriers that exist every individual has the personal power from within to be successful despite the color of their skin.

Overall, when the question is asked how first-generation African American college graduates who attended an Early College program in North Carolina describe the benefits, it can be described in many ways and the best way is to offer what was said by the participants. Using the words of the actual participants in the research study, a summation of descriptive words is offered.

To accurately offer the descriptive words used by the research study participants, Donna used the word “blessed” to best define her experience. According to Lucy, she described her

summer bridge experience as a “head start” to college and how she used the word “prepared” as she secured her first job after graduating. Marcus put emphasis on his “earned college degree” in consideration to how hard he had to work to obtain it. Karl took great pride in discussing his goal to attend law school after earning his undergraduate degree in Political Science. The word “adaptation” represented Kevin’s description of what it took to succeed. Jack outlined his experience in obtaining his degree with the word “determined”. One word that summarizes the commonality of experiences of all ten research study participants was the “support” they received from teachers, friends and mostly importantly their families.

From how the research study participants describe their experiences and outcomes of attending an Early College or summer bridge program, it seems that these programs (human capital), the fortitude of the participants, the use of their race as a motivator (critical race), the fortitude of the participants and the support of their families (individual agency) all come to together.

The programs offered enhanced opportunities to develop human capital to take advantage of bridge type programs such summer bridge and Early College programs all provide and according to this research did provide the opportunity for these participants to go to college, graduate from college, to be gainfully employed, or business owner or to get advanced degree. The descriptions of the benefit provided by the research study participants came from their personal encounters and their experiences and their outcomes.

The last theory that this research study used to build the interview questions was Individual Agency that suggest that despite the systemic barriers that exist in the judicial system, in housing, employment, and education, marginalized or disenfranchised individuals still possess the strength ability, or agency to overcome such obstacles and rise above the fray and in the case



of this research study using not only the support and encouragement of their families but also their own inner strength and fortitude to obtain their college degree and secure full time employment. Those not yet employed are working part time in their fields of study with plans to become certified.

To infuse the accounts of the research study into the findings, research study participants not only spoke of their own strength and agency to work towards their college degree and secure employment, but they also spoke of the support from their families. These families were described as consisting of mothers and fathers or grandparents and some were described as single-family homes with only a mother. Donna credited the support and encouragement from her mother and proudly said “she’s all I have”. Marcus was raised by his father and grandmother who lived separately from he and his father but cited that they “she wasn’t having it” and that his father “expected” him to graduate. Conversely, there were more families with two parent household who, just as single-family households, provide a high level of support and encouragement. Kevin mentioned that he had two supportive parents although his mother or father did not have a college degree but were hard working people and provided a high level of support and encouragement. Lucy’s parents, who are both college educated and no longer married to one another was supportive and it was “expected” that she would go to college and earned her degree.

## CHAPTER 5

### CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Bridge type programs that include TRIO, GEAR UP, Summer Bridge and Early College programs have existed since the early 70's. The intent and focus of such programs from its origin target first-generation students who would be the first in their family to attend and graduate from college. They target minority students who have been marginalized because of the color of their skin. These programs also offer an opportunity to low income or low wealth families because of their economic status. The programs offer the beforementioned groups of people a chance where now there is an opportunity to go to college and graduate. An opportunity where the color of their skin is not a barrier but as a position of strength. An opportunity to break the cycle of poverty for a better lifestyle.

#### **Interpretation of Findings**

The research study was conducted to discern how first-generation African American college graduates who attended an Early College program in North Carolina describe the benefits? Ten African American college graduates volunteered to participate in an interview to offer their accounts, their experiences, their outcomes that serve as their answer to the research question. These ten participants were all asked the same questions that cover their experiences of obtaining their college degree and its importance considering the Human Capital Theory. They were all asked how did race play into their experience while obtaining their college degree which considers their experiences as it related to the Critical Race Theory. All were asked how they as individuals and their power relate to Individual Agency Theory.

### **Human Capital Theory Findings**

All participants contribute their awareness of the importance of earning a college degree while attending either an Early College program or a summer bridge program. One participant, Lucy, mentioned how attending a bridge program gave her a “head start” so that when she finally enrolled into college, she was “better prepared” and “knew what to expect”. Another participant experienced the worth and importance of his degree, but it was a much different experience. Marcus, a first-generation African American raised by his father and grandmother, also attended a summer bridge program where he enrolled into a university and graduated. Marcus graduated with a degree in Sports Management, moved to Michigan and is currently an entrepreneur in the real estate industry. He realized the importance of having his college degree when he earned the respect of those who considered him an “outsider” who was making housing deals without a real estate license. He showed them that he was an “educated black man” and he is sure that having a college degree positioned him to be a successful real estate mogul.

Kevin attended an Early College program and is a college graduate with a degree and master’s in Public Health. He realized his determination and his ability to adapt to earn his degree and break the cycle of poverty from within his family but also from where he was raised in a community known as a hotspot for crime and as one of the poorest counties in North Carolina.

### **Critical Race Theory Findings**

Four of the ten research study participants experienced a negative racially related experience while attending college. The experiences speak to how people of color still encounter levels of racism within the education system. However, the four participants were not deterred by the racist actions of others and continued their education and earned their degrees. The positive

results of obtaining their college degree won over the ever-present negative potential of racism for people of color. The decision and effort to succeed in college and become a college graduate was more important than the experiences they encountered and possibly served as motivation to persist, motivation to continue to strive for their future, and put the negative thoughts and actions of others aside as they moved forward.

### **Individual Agency Theory Findings**

Two words can sum up how the research study participants describe the benefit realized by the participants when you consider the theory on Individual Agency and that would be fortitude and support. When all the research study participants accounts were read and analyzed, the researcher found a common theme emerging from how they described how and who provided continuous support and encouragement throughout their time in college. That encouragement came in many forms. A text to “stay focused”, a phone call to “keep your eye on the bigger picture”, or a hearty Sunday dinner before they return to school from a weekend with family.

The words of comfort from family members or the one family member were all well received and certainly appreciated but the inner strength of the research study participants stands out equally as an important factor to the success, determination, and drive to complete their college education. Despite being a person of color who have experience generations of oppression in their daily lives but also when they are making every effort to improve themselves by continuing to work hard, make good grades, and ultimately earn their college degree. They understand the fact that they proudly represent a minority group of people who go to college and earn a degree that seemingly “levels the playing field” and does position them to earn a living wage, establish a career they trained for and now they have a chance to earn the respect of those who appreciate a college graduate who also happens to be a minority but now they have earned

the opportunity to be a contributing citizen and live their dream of earning a college degree which provides more opportunities for themselves and their future.

Overall, the consideration of the benefit of attending an Early College program or a summer bridge program was positive. Without a doubt, the research study participants did meet some not so pleasant situation, but the situation did not negatively impact any of the research study participants. In fact, the reaction was the opposite. They made lemonade out of lemons, they seized the opportunity and rose above.

### **Analysis**

Overall, in consideration of the research study question of how first generation African American college graduates who attended an Early College in North Carolina describe the benefits, it appears that overall, all participants had positive experiences and credit attending an Early College program for them being prepared and graduating from college and putting them on the path to their chosen careers.

As the research study further revealed the benefits of attending an Early College program or a bridge type program such as summer bridge programs, GEAR UP or TRIO and the importance of their college degree, the research study participants shared the appreciation for attending a bridge type program because it provided an opportunity for some who did not do well in high school but provided a second chance to improve their GPA and put themselves in the position to not only be admitted into a college or university but to persist and graduate. Those attending an Early College program were afforded the opportunity to earn college credit while finishing high school and to be considered dually enrolled in both high school and college. Earning college credit was not the only benefit to attending an Early College program, the research study participants not only benefitted from the credit hours but also gave them an

advantage in knowing what college was all about and having earned credit hours gave them the opportunity to enter college in some cases at least a year ahead of students attending traditional high schools. In some cases, attending an Early College program or a bridge type program potentially benefited research study participants by reducing the cost of their college education by earning credit hours before actually attending college.

According to the accounts of the research study participants as it relates to race, there were incidences where they felt the sting of racism. However, all participants seemed to use these racial incidences as motivation to succeed, to graduate from high school, to enroll into a college or university, to persist through college and to ultimately graduate from a college and to be either gainfully employed with a full-time job or preparing to return to school to re-enter college for an advanced degree or to become certified in their chosen profession.

Another benefit that emerged from the interviews was the personal motivation and inner drive despite the systemic racial barriers that may have existed. The participants all benefited from their own positive sense of self-worth and awareness to continue to accomplish their goal of obtaining a college degree. The sense of self-worth, focus and determination is magnified by the support and encouragement from the family of the participants. The participants have the full support of the families as they served as “cheerleaders” and were available if they needed anything.

From how the research study participants describe their experiences and outcomes of attending an Early College or summer bridge program, it seems that these programs, the fortitude of the participants, the use of their race as a motivator, and the support of their families all come together to offer an enhanced opportunity to take advantage of bridge type programs. According to this research, these educational opportunities enable these participants to go to college,

graduate from college, to be gainfully employed, a business owner, or to get an advanced degree. The descriptions of the benefits provided by the research study participants came from their personal encounters and their experiences and their outcomes.

### **Recommendations to Improve Early College and Bridge Type Programs**

The data from the sample of research study participants that indicated the benefits of participating in the Early College program were positive. They experienced positive benefit from attending an Early College program and realized the importance of obtaining their college degree. From the accounts of the research study participants, they benefited by obtaining their college degree by securing full time employment or being accepted into graduate or certification programs after receiving their college degree. Although some did have racial encounters, they used this negative and turned it into a positive or motivation to be successful and data shows that the inner strength of the research study participants was a factor that helped them to pursue and achieve the career path they established from themselves.

Other students who are first generation, minority, or from low-income families need to know about these programs. They need to hear the benefits from the experiences from former students and how it can be available and beneficial to them. Such students should be informed of opportunities such as TRIO, GEAR UP, Summer Bridge or Early College programs as an opportunity that levels the playing field and as a potential resource to answer the questions of education reform.

More students who are first generation, minority, and from low-income families should know about Early College programs or bridge type programs. These programs were designed for these populations of students who continue to face inequalities within the educational system and these programs can serve as an opportunity for those looking to do better and be better. The

families of these students also need to better understand what the problem is and the systemic issues that exist that may be having an impact on their child's success. They need to understand that there are other alternatives for education other than the traditional school system.

Internships should be part of the curriculum in an attempt to provide students a head start along their career path. Those students who know what they want their career to be should seek out people who are already working in that field to give them a look at what the career entails and the educational requirements in the field. This opportunity also helps to build a student's career network which could be helpful when it is time to apply for college and provide letters of recommendations.

In an intentional effort, providing the soft skills to students is important. As the curriculum is important soft skills such as teamwork, time management, communication skills, problem solving, and conflict resolution seem to have taken a backseat. However, these are the very skills that employers expect employees to have been exposed to prior to employment. The end result for the employer is a better and prepared workforce, a better employee, and better customer service.

### **Limitations of the Research Study**

There were limitations that exist with the research study that stemmed from the researcher not using the practice of member checking for accuracy, revisions, or additions to the recorded interviews.

There were challenges that existed in the research study. Scheduling the interviews became a challenge to accommodate the schedules of the research participants and the researcher. Four interviews had to be rescheduled more than once. The most challenging aspect of the interviews was technology. ZOOM was used to conduct all the interviews except when the researcher decided to conduct a telephone interview that were not recorded. Not having



recordings caused the researcher to contact the research study participant to clarify the notes taken and the transcription was without the use of Otter ai. Despite the challenges the whole process was enlightening.

### **Implications**

It is the hopes of the researcher that the research conducted will add to the current knowledge and research on bridge type programs and Early College programs. The researcher conducted the research to provide more insight into the success and benefits of programs like TRIO, GEAP UP, summer bridge programs, and Early College programs. Research exist that provides an analysis by revealing data regarding gender and race, but this research offers an opportunity to further provide results for the segment of the populations that these programs were designed for and provide services and resources.

There exists an opportunity to conduct more research along the lines of the research conducted but on a larger scale. This research study only provided data on ten participants but increasing the number of participants would improve the reliability of the results and conclusion. on a larger scale a more intensive study can be conducted with the results and data viewed as possibly more reliable and valid.

### **Recommendations for Action**

It can also be recommended that the research conducted is a call to action. Using the data and the accounts of the participants experiences can be offered to promote and market programs that are designed for this marginalized population. Use of the results and other research conclusions to highlight the successes and benefits of those educational programs.

Another recommendation to support more programs for more students would be to present the findings to local school district education boards. The intent would be research shows

that bridge programs and Early College programs have been successful in graduating high school students, enrolling, and graduating these students from college, and finding employment once graduated to realize their career path. The financial support of their type programs will also be necessary in order to make more programs available.

In order to make the programs available, partnering with local community colleges or universities. Such partnerships not only produce new revenue for the partners but overall serves as an answer to education reform for a population of people where the playing field for education is still not equal.

### **Recommendations for Further Study**

The possibility of using the data and findings of the research conducted could provide an opportunity for future research with the increase of research study participants or further dissect the populations of the focus group to concentrate on one gender, one race, or one age group. Further research could also be to address the limitations of the existing research study such as increasing the number of participants, studying other summer bridge programs or Early College programs independent of each other. The ultimate goal of the research study conducted is to contribute to the current body of knowledge that exist on bridge programs or Early College programs. New knowledge leads to new ideas, new studies, new programs that maintain the thought that programs that are created for minorities, first generation, or low-income families who in turn can take advantage of the opportunity to realize their dream of graduating from high school, attending college, graduating, and finding a job in their career field to become a contributing citizen to their community.

## Conclusion

Chapter Five is a summary of the findings of the research study. The summary re-emphasizes how the ten research study participants willingly and openly provide their honest thoughts, impressions, description of benefits regarding either attending an Early College program or a summer bridge program. The degrees that were earned as a result of graduating from a college or university provide an opportunity to be employed full time, working part time temporarily with plans to either become a certified teacher, earn another degree, or an advanced degree. In essence, all ten research study participants expressed the benefits they gained by going through the whole educational experience.

The Human Capital Theory was evident as the research study participants realized the importance of a college degree and described benefit of attending an Early College or summer bridge program with descriptive words such as “prepared”, “head start”, “teamwork”, and “internships”. The word “prepared” was used to describe the resources that were made available to them while a student in an Early College or summer bridge program. These resources were important because they were able to rely on these resources while in college and in their current profession. The research participants considered their opportunities to attend an Early College or Bridge program which allowed them an early glimpse of college life, the job market with internships in their potential careers as “head starts”. The research study participants who were met with racism rose above such oppression and defied such behaviors to forge ahead to earn their degrees to enable them to successfully be hired in their chosen careers. The support and encouragement of the families of the research study participants played an important role in their pursuit of a college degree. This support coupled with their own agency speaks to the of

Individual Agency theory that despite the systemic obstacles they possessed the fortitude and strength within themselves to succeed.

Chapter Five also offered an opportunity for the researcher to introduce a variety of suggestions to improve Early College programs. The data serves as evidence that Early College and summer type programs can result in high school completion, enrollment and graduation from college, and gainful employment along their career path. Chapter Five also offered limitations of the research study by not performing member checks to ensure accuracy during the interview process. Future research opportunities were also offered to open the door to conduct further research on the chosen population collectively to individually. The implications of this research study have the potential to continued funding and expansion of Early College programs or bridge type programs to first generation, minority, and low-income students. Further actions of this research study have the potential grow the program to allow qualified students an opportunity to experience the success as others have.

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## Appendix A: Consent Letter E-mailed to Research Study Participants

Dear Sir or Madam:

My name is Reginald L. Towns, and I am a doctoral candidate in the Higher Education Leadership program at the University of New England.

My dissertation research will explore the benefits to first-generation African American college graduates who attended Early College program in North Carolina. You are being asked to participate in an in-depth, semi-structured, audio-recorded interview between 60-90 minutes.

Please know that at any time during the interview process you have the right to refuse to answer any question in addition to the right to end the interview process at any time without penalty of prejudice. Again, with your permission, these interviews will be recorded. You may decline to be audio-recorded, but still consent to being interviewed. We expect no risks for participants in this study.

Taking part in this study is voluntary. I believe your experience as a first-generation African-American college graduate who formerly attended an Early College program in North Carolina would provide a wealth of knowledge and information for my research and it would be a pleasure to have the opportunity to interview you for my research.

If you have any questions regarding my research, please do not hesitate to ask. Please contact by either by email at [rtowns@une.edu](mailto:rtowns@une.edu) or by phone at 919 400-0905. Thank you for your time.

Sincerely,

Reginald L. Towns

Doctoral Candidate  
School of Education  
University of New England

## Appendix B: Consent Form

### UNIVERSITY OF NEW ENGLAND CONSENT FOR PARTICIPATION IN RESEARCH

Project Title: How do first-generation African American college graduates who attended an Early College program describe the benefits.

Principal Investigator(s): Reginald L. Towns

Introduction:

- Please read this form. You may also request that the form is read to you. The purpose of this form is to give you information about this research study, and if you choose to participate, document that choice.
- You are encouraged to ask any questions that you may have about this study, now, during or after the project is complete. You can take as much time as you need to decide whether you want to participate. Your participation is voluntary.

Why is this research study being done?

- This research study is being conducted to discern the benefits realized by first-generations African American college graduates who attended an Early College program in North Carolina.

Who will be in this study?

- A sample of first-generation African American students who are college graduates and previously attended an Early College program in Raleigh North Carolina will be interviewed to gather data for analysis. All participants selected for this study will be within the ages of 21 through 26. The participants can be male or female, and the intended number of participants will be restricted to no more than 10-12.

What will I be asked to do?

- Each participant will be contacted by mail, email, social media to request their participation in the study. The responding participants will be asked to agree to a telephone interview or complete a written survey to gather the needed data for the study

What are the possible risks of taking part in this study?

- There are no perceived risks by participating in this study.

What are the possible benefits of taking part in this study?

- By agreeing to participate in this research study your survey responses will be used as data instrumental in discerning valuable information that adds to existing research and useful as new knowledge.

What will it cost me?

- There is no cost to any of the research study participants.

How will my privacy be protected?

- Several measures will be taken to protect the rights of the participants and ensure their confidentiality. Each participant will be made aware that their participation is strictly voluntary, and they can refuse to answer any research question asked. Each participant will be made aware of their right to end the interview at any time. Each participant is also alerted to the fact that the interview will be recorded by using an electronic recording device for which the participant must provide their consent. In addition, each participant will be made aware that their real names, the name of the early college attended, and the name of the university will not be used throughout the interview or the analysis process.

How will my data be kept confidential?

- All recorded and transcribed interviews and consent forms will be safely secured in the home of the researcher.

What are my rights as a research participant?

- Your participation is voluntary. Your decision to participate will have no impact on your current or future relations with the University.
- Your decision to participate will not affect your relationship with the Principal Investigator.
- You may skip or refuse to answer any question for any reason.
- If you choose not to participate there is no penalty to you and you will not lose any benefits that you are otherwise entitled to receive.
- You are free to withdraw from this research study at any time, for any reason.
- If you choose to withdraw from the research there will be no penalty to you, and you will not lose any benefits that you are otherwise entitled to receive.
- You will be informed of any significant findings developed during the research that may affect your willingness to participate in the research.
- If you sustain an injury while participating in this study, your participation may be ended.

What other options do I have?

- Of your own free will, you may choose not to participate in the study.

Whom may I contact with questions?

- The researcher conducting this study is Reginald L. Towns
- For more information regarding this study, please contact Reginald L. Towns at [rtowns@une.edu](mailto:rtowns@une.edu) or at 919 400-0905.



- If you choose to participate in this research study and believe you may have suffered a research related injury, please contact my advisor, Michelle Collay, Ph. D at mcollay@une.edu or 207.602.2020
- If you have any questions or concerns about your rights as a research subject, you may call Mary Bachman DeSilva, Sc.D., Chair of the UNE Institutional Review Board at (207) 221-4567 or irb@une.edu.

Will I receive a copy of this consent form?

- You will be emailed a copy of this consent form.

---

#### Participant's Statement

I understand the above description of this research and the risks and benefits associated with my participation as a research subject. I agree to take part in the research and do so voluntarily.

---

Participant's signature or  
Legally authorized representative

---

Date

---

Printed name

#### Researcher's Statement

The participant named above had sufficient time to consider the information an opportunity to ask questions, and voluntarily agreed to be in this study.

---

Researcher's signature

---

Date

Reginald L. Towns  
Printed name

## Appendix C

### Interview questions

Research Question:

HOW DO FIRST-GENERATION AFRICAN AMERICAN COLLEGE GRADUATES WHO ATTENDED AN EARLY COLLEGE PROGRAM IN NORTH CAROLINA DESCRIBE THE BENEFITS?

“Thank you for agreeing to talk with me about your perceptions of Early College programming. As you know, researchers find that completing college is a major factor in preparation for paying professions . . . The first questions will relate to demographic then we will address your perceptions of being first generation, African American college graduate.

-If you would please state your name, where you currently reside, the name of the Early College program you attended and the institution that you graduated from.

-As you completed college and sought your first full time job, how did having completed the degree influence that transition?

-What kinds of exchanges, experiences informed your understanding of the importance of a college degree?

-Since finding fulltime employment (if they have), have you had experiences that indicate to you the importance of your college experiences? (for example, stronger writing skills, leadership development)

-Since finding fulltime employment (if they have), have you had experiences that indicate to you the importance of the degree completion?

-As you transitioned into a full or part time job, did the job require a college degree? Does the job you currently have relate to the degree you currently hold?

### Critical Race Theory

Research (and your own life experiences) have shown the additional challenges young people of color, or those from low income or first-generation college going groups, face greater challenges completing high school, becoming college ready, attending, and completing four-year degree programs, and finding employment . . .

-Did the EC program influence your decisions regarding the stages I just described?

-Can you give me examples of how your race/ethnicity/social class was a factor throughout your college education?

### Individual Agency

The EC program was designed to provide an opportunity to a marginalized segment of the overall population. Even with additional resources, minority/first general individuals must be persistent in their efforts to overcome...

-What personal characteristics do you credit for your success in entering college? Persisting through the four-year degree (how long did it take)? Moving into the job market?

### Role of family

-What role did your family play in you acquiring your college degree?

-How did members of your family (if they did) encourage you to persist and earn your degree?