EARLY ENTRANCE TO COLLEGE: UNDERSTANDING STUDENTS'

MOTIVATIONS, EXPERIENCES, AND SUPPORT

by

ALEXANDER ROBERT PAGNANI

(Under the Direction of Thomas P. Hébert)

ABSTRACT

Through an ethnographic research design, the author examined the lived experiences of gifted students who entered college between the ages of 14 and 16. Research questions investigated both the lived experiences of collegiate early entrants and the students' perceptions of institutional support factors specific to their program. Students' motivations for early entrance, their academic and social experiences, and the impact of background factors such as race, gender, parental relationships, and family wealth were examined as well. Data were collected through in-depth interviews, participant observation, and document analysis.

Findings indicated that participants were primarily motivated to enter college early due to high levels of dissatisfaction with prior schooling experiences, both academically and socially. Academically, participants were fully immersed in collegiate intellectual life, taking high credit loads, earning excellent grades, and helping professors with research. Several were also dealing with their first experiences with academic rigor, forcing them to develop improved study habits and confront perfectionistic attitudes. Socially, participants reported "finally fitting in" among the other early entrants while

"trying to pass" as older students when among the university's general population. Early entrance provided new social challenges as well, including those related to acclimation to college, personal development, and finding outlets for stress relief.

Common background factors for many participants included histories of frequent relocation and school switching, along with having parents who emphasized education and personal independence. Issues of race, gender, and religion experienced a dynamic juxtaposition of tolerance and tension, while family income mattered for little socially. Finally, students' perceptions of institutional support factors were generally very positive and all eight participants were highly satisfied with both their early entrance program and their decision to enter college early. They especially praised the program's supportive administrators, plentiful creative outlets, campus events, and residential staff. Common suggestions for improvement included the need for increased advertising, facilities concerns, and the need for help in fostering and maintaining healthy lifestyle choices in terms of nutrition, sleeping habits, and stress management.

INDEX WORDS: Gifted, acceleration, early college entrance, grade skipping, collegiate residential programs, ethnography

EARLY ENTRANCE TO COLLEGE: UNDERSTANDING STUDENTS'

MOTIVATIONS, EXPERIENCES, AND SUPPORT

by

ALEXANDER ROBERT PAGNANI

B.A., The University of Notre Dame, 2002

B.A., The Richard Stockton College of New Jersey, 2006

M.Ed., The University of Georgia, 2008

A Dissertation Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of The University of Georgia in Partial

Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

ATHENS, GEORGIA

2011

EARLY ENTRANCE TO COLLEGE: UNDERSTANDING STUDENTS'

MOTIVATIONS, EXPERIENCES, AND SUPPORT

by

ALEXANDER ROBERT PAGNANI

Major Professor: Thomas P. Hébert
Committee: Tarek C. Grantham
                    Kathryn J. Roulston
                    Stacey M. Neuharth-Pritchett

Electronic Version Approved:

Maureen Grasso
Dean of the Graduate School
The University of Georgia
May 2011

DEDICATION

To my parents, Alex and Patti Pagnani, who instilled in me the values of hard work, persistence, and dedication, while never wavering in their encouragement, love, and support. I am eternally grateful for all you have done and I promise to stop asking you for money so often now.

To my beautiful wife, Luisa, who has been my anchor and psychological safety net through comprehensive exams, data collection, and the writing of this document. I love you with all my heart and promise to be there for you through your own dissertation experience and all of our adventures to come, just as you have always been there for me.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I first and foremost would like to thank Dr. Thomas Hébert, my committee chair, for his never-ceasing advice and support over the past five years. Dr. Hébert has assisted me in every step of the graduate school process and has been kind enough to involve me in countless opportunities for professional, personal, and scholarly growth. His enthusiasm and excitement during my campus visit in 2006 were major reasons why I chose to attend UGA and his mentoring and guidance are major reasons why I am now about to actually graduate.

I would also like to thank Dr. Tarek Grantham, Dr. Kathryn Roulston, and Dr. Stacey Neuharth-Pritchett, both for agreeing to serve on my committee and for offering their invaluable insights and assistance throughout the dissertation process. Their contributions helped me to refine my basic assumptions and ideas, to shape and design this research study, and to see it through to a successful conclusion. Each of you has taught me so much and I cannot thank you enough.

Additionally, I cannot conclude this section without acknowledging those who truly made this ethnographic study possible: the administrators and students of "The Early Scholars Program." Your openness and trust in letting me share your home for four months was remarkable and I hope that the knowledge gained through this project may help your program, and others like it worldwide, to continue in your admirable mission with increased clarity and self-understanding. It was both a pleasure and a privilege to work with your staff and students alike.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF TABLES

LIST OF FIGURES

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Most Americans have never read a research study concerning the academic,

social, or emotional effects of acceleration on gifted adolescents. That is not to say,

however, that they have not already formed a strong opinion on the topic. Since the turn

of the twentieth century, acceleration, defined in this dissertation as the skipping of one

or more academic grade levels, has developed a host of negative connotations in the

minds of a majority of parents, educators, authors, and psychologists alike. Caricatures

of pushy, domineering parents and socially-inept child prodigies may even spring forth,

contradicting the more "common sense" notions that children develop at a similar rate,

get along best with similarly aged peers, and benefit from similar instruction at similar

times in their lives. While this cohort-mentality may seem anachronistic considering our

pedagogical era's emphasis on differentiation, it still very much describes the educational

status quo. Our culture frets about hurrying children through their youth or robbing them

of the "best years of their lives," using tabloid reports about child stars who "grew up too

fast" to support their claims. As a result, 75% of American teachers say that they are

opposed to grade-skipping for fear of students' social and emotional well-being *even

though they have not had personal experience with the issue* (Southern, Jones, & Fiscus,

1989). As VanTassel-Baska (1991) described:

> Basing their opinion on "common sense" and their admittedly limited personal
>
> experience, many practitioners report being philosophically opposed to the

practice… They hesitate to endorse acceleration because of traditional negative characterizations of its effects, two of the most notable being (1) The hurried child, and (2) The maladaptive child (p. 148).

In stark contrast to these modern fears, however, exists the fact that for most of our nation's history, students' pacing through school has depended more upon their academic ability than their chronological age (Kett, 1974). Students who quickly mastered concepts were ushered through at a faster speed, while students who needed additional time were provided that luxury. For example, Thomas Jefferson entered The College of William and Mary at 16 and graduated at 19, Ralph Waldo Emerson entered Harvard University at 14 and graduated at 18, and Jefferson Davis enrolled at Transylvania University at age 13, where he studied for three years before joining the army and transferring to West Point. As a result, no "standard age" of high school graduation existed prior to the early twentieth century, and colleges were accustomed to admitting and educating students from age 12 to age 20, without this practice being seen as dangerous or unnatural (Muratori, 2007). Throughout the final decades of the 1800's and first three decades of the 1900's, however, a series of major changes occurred in this nation which drastically altered our methods of education. According to Southern and Jones (1991), a surge in immigration, the emergence of developmental psychology, rising educational expectations, and new compulsory schooling laws all contributed to the practice of organizing students by their physical ages into grade levels.

While grouping children by age may seem superficially like a natural process, substantial research has actually demonstrated that for many children of advanced ability it is likely to cause boredom, frustration, and diminished motivation (Rimm, 1996).

Many gifted students arrive at school on the first day of each year already knowing almost half of the forthcoming curriculum (Reis et al., 1993), and keeping them with their chronological peers for the sake of development has been likened by some to asking them to "tread water" for the twelve years prior to college (Muratori, Colangelo, & Assouline, 2003). Finding themselves neither academically challenged nor socially stimulated, an increasing number of talented middle and high school students have chosen in the past three decades to cast aside the perceived primacy of age over ability, in order to radically accelerate their educational experience by skipping all or part of high school and seeking early entrance to college instead (Colangelo, Assouline, & Gross, 2004; Muratori, 2007). While some of these students choose to do so individually, matriculating as "normal" collegiate freshmen, a growing percentage are enrolling in one of the nation's 18 "early entrance programs" found on campuses across the country. These programs provide a sheltered, transitional experience for their atypically young charges, and while participants usually take a full course-load of regular college classes their programs often provide them with special dormitories, supervisory staff, tutors, activities, counselors, and other such support systems in order to help them succeed (Olszewski-Kubilius, 2002).

Statement of the Problem

Although numerous studies have examined issues of collegiate early entrance, the overall body of knowledge regarding the topic remains small, contains many gaps, and relies heavily upon research that was conducted before the popularization of modern early entrance programming models. The past two decades have seen the number of early entrance programs in the United States more than double, from 7 to at least 17

(Muratori, 2007), yet most research concerning early entrants' academic abilities and experiences was conducted before that time and with samples of students who had not entered through such a program. In contrast, the research concerning social and emotional issues pertinent to early entrance is much more recent, yet has focused almost entirely on comparisons to nonaccelerated gifted students rather than describing the actual social and emotional experiences of being an early entrant. As a result, we know that accelerated students do not fare any worse, either academically or socially, for having been accelerated, yet very few published descriptions of the actual lived experience exist anywhere in the literature. Moreover, very little is known as to how this experience differs for students of diverse demographic backgrounds, such as the effects that gender and race may have on accelerants' academic, social, and emotional development. Finally, considering the recent rate of growth within the early entrance program movement, it is vital that data be gathered and disseminated regarding the motivating needs of students who actively choose to attend these programs, along with their perceptions of how well these needs are actually being addressed. Examining this would not only further our understanding of the lived experience of early entrance to college and the students who pursue this path at the current time, but could also help to better prepare the early entrance programs of tomorrow to more adequately identify and meet the needs of future students.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this qualitative study was to address these gaps in the research literature through investigating the lived experiences of early entrants who are currently enrolled in a university-affiliated early entrance program. Specific concerns included the

students' motivations for seeking early entrance, their academic, social, and emotional experiences, the moderating influences of background factors such as gender, race, and income on their experiences, and the students' perceptions of institutional support factors as either helping or hindering their quest for success.

Research Questions

Two primary research questions guided this study, supported by three secondary research questions.

RQ #1: What are the lived experiences of early entrants to college?

- *What motivates early entrants to pursue college at an atypically young age?*

- *What are the academic, social, and emotional experiences common to early entrance?*

- *How do students' backgrounds affect their experiences with early entrance?*

RQ #2: How do students perceive the institutional support factors within their early entrance programs?

Significance of the Study

While the concept of entering college early may not be new historically, it is a practice that is currently undergoing both a revival in popularity and a series of changes in its methods and structures. While early matriculation has traditionally been an individual affair, following which the young student would join the general student body and live with and live like the other collegiate freshmen (Fluitt & Strickland, 1984), the past three decades have seen an alternate model of early entrance grow rapidly as a viable option for talented youth who wish for a more supported, gradual transition (Muratori, 2007). This new model, the "early entrance program," seeks to recruit students of high

ability and interest in early entrance, to provide a shared living space and supportive

environment, and to ease the adaptation to college life through offering age-appropriate

structure, guidance, social interaction, and counseling opportunities. Providing an exact

count of these programs is surprisingly difficult, however, as much depends on which

characteristics you deem to be necessary in determining whether a college offers

"support" to early entrants or indeed provides a functional "program." To illustrate,

some colleges offer special academic and emotional counseling opportunities, yet do not

offer a specialized dormitory. Others may provide as specialized dormitory, trained

residential staff, and offer educational and social programming – but not provide distinct

academic or psychological counselors from those employed by the university at large. As

a result, researchers have often arrived at different counts of how many "early entrance

programs" exist, depending on which criteria they personally deem to be "necessary" in

order to separate colleges with programs from colleges that offer younger students some

extra support. At a reliable minimum, however, Brody, Muratori, and Stanley (2004)

have claimed that gifted students now possess at least 17 options for full-scale programs

across the United States, most of which include specialized living arrangements, social

events, academic opportunities, and specially trained staff members and counselors.

Along with this dramatic shift in the manner that atypically young students enter

and experience college there has arisen a great need for increased research as a result.

This is because much of the prior work on acceleration and early entrance was based on a

now outdated model of individual matriculation and/or focused solely on comparisons of

social interaction and ability between early entrants and their traditionally-aged

classmates. New questions now exist as to how these bright students navigate and make

sense of their higher education experiences, and addressing these questions has the potential to help shape the futures of both these new programs and the students they will eventually educate.

The resulting significance of this study thus derives from four main contributions to the research literature: First, the study is explicitly focused on examining the academic and social experiences of students who have matriculated to college through a current-generation early entrance program that has been in operation for fewer than 20 years. This is to strengthen and modernize the body of literature on early entrance and to provide data based on current, rather than outdated, acceleration models. Second, the study explores the actual lived experiences of early entrance students through an ethnographic research design in order to fully describe the positive and negative experiences of program participation, thereby utilizing methods to study this population that have never before been used with an early entrance program in the United States. Third, while the extant literature on early entrance to college has made several assumptions regarding both the motivations of students who choose to seek college admission at a young age and the effects of various background factors such as gender, class, and race upon the eventual experiences, this study has expressly dedicated itself to pursuing these questions. Fourth, considering the current historical context of the rapid rise and proliferation of early entrance programs nationwide, this study's examination of student perceptions of institutional support factors and their ability to help or hinder participant success may be the most useful contribution for current and future program administrators who wish to better understand the effectiveness of their programs in meeting actual student needs.

Subjectivities and Assumptions

In any qualitative undertaking, continually taking the opportunity to reflect upon one's own subjectivities, assumptions, prior experiences, and preconceived notions is a vital part of the research process. Qualitative researchers recognize that human beings are, by their very nature, impressionable and subjective, and therefore work through introspection to openly and honestly identify the subjectivities and assumptions that may color their data collection, analysis, and interpretation (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). As the study progressed, I often reflected upon my own experiences and assumptions, working to better understand their potential impact. While no researcher can ever truly free themselves of subjectivities and assumptions that shade their work and become part of their research process and findings, I personally worked to recognize the following tendencies and to mitigate their influence:

1) While I have never personally skipped a grade and did not enter college early, I was identified for gifted and talented services at the age of six and spent my entire elementary, middle, and high school years in either partially accelerated gifted programs or fully accelerated honors and Advanced Placement (AP) courses. My experiences with these programs were very positive both academically and socially. I was often bored in my general-track courses and typically kept a book hidden under my desk to read before, after, and sometimes during work assignment periods throughout elementary school. My grade 1-8 gifted program provided a much more engaging and challenging environment though and gave me something to look forward to. It also allowed me to interact with peers in more creative and intellectual ways. Similarly, my general-track and college-prep high school courses provided little or no challenge, but my AP courses demanded a

great deal of effort and dedication. To this day I credit them with providing me with academic challenge for the first time as well as forcing me to learn good study habits.

2) When I was in high school, an acquaintance left one year early to attend an early entrance to college program at the University of Southern California. In retrospect, none of us truly understood exactly what he was doing, as he shared very little about his motivations or plans with us before departing. Perhaps he felt unsure of his decision, was not accepted until a late date, or did not make up his mind to attend until late that summer. Additionally, although he was known to be an intelligent young man, he did not earn exceptionally high grades or take many honors or AP courses. I now wonder whether his talent had caused boredom and disillusionment with his high school experience, and whether he possibly left because he did not feel motivated or challenged. Although he and I were not close and I have not spoken to him since, I later heard good things about his experiences through our mutual friends and I envied his initiative and willingness to pursue adventure. Still, I was very happy in my high school environment and would not have chosen to trade places with him.

3) I have worked for seven years in residential settings with students of high academic ability and I feel very comfortable in and knowledgeable of the collegiate residential environment. My first experiences (beyond being a college student) were working in a student affairs capacity running dormitories at both the University of Notre Dame and The Richard Stockton College of New Jersey. These experiences, and especially the disciplinary cases I worked on, led me to realize that high intelligence did not necessarily come packaged with high maturity or emotional development. They also led me to realize how important residential settings and involvement can be for students'

educational success, especially for those students who may not have a stable family life or social network in their home town.

Later I worked as both an academic instructor and administrative on-site director for the Duke TIP program, an acceleration-focused summer camp for highly gifted middle and high school students. I spent each of those four summers living on campus with highly gifted 13-17 year olds, teaching them college-level material and watching them excel. My notions of "age appropriate instruction" were forever changed when I had a rising-seventh-grader raise his hand in my psychology class one summer and ask whether I had ever considered the apparent contradictions between what I was teaching at that moment and the recent findings in the latest publications of Dr. Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, which he had read and written a critique of for a sixth grade "book report" project. At that moment I realized just how mismatched general education curriculum is for some students and wondered whether that child could ever receive appropriate instruction at any middle school in the nation.

4) I have studied the field of Gifted Education on the graduate level for five years now and have familiarized myself with prior research findings, prevalent theories, and established ideas concerning academic acceleration, the characteristics of gifted students, and the academic, social, and emotional needs of this population. Of course, this experience has been helpful to me in terms of leading me to a topic of inquiry, conducting a review of the literature, and formulating research questions that will benefit the field as a whole. It may also pose dangers of entrenchment, however, causing me to rely on common assumptions or interpret data in a way consistent with previous findings rather than considering possible alternatives.

5) Historically, I have had a tendency to see giftedness as a mix of biological blessings combined with a strong work ethic, while discounting the role that environmental factors such as parenting, wealth, social class, race, and even luck may play. My experiences in graduate school, however, specifically with the courses I have taken in multicultural gifted education and the sociology of gender, along with my research and teaching experiences concerning the effects of poverty and race on achievement have very much challenged and changed those ideas. I now appreciate environmental influences as being at least equally as important in the development of talent and high ability. At times, though, I still catch myself thinking of giftedness purely in terms of IQ scores or grades, rather than looking at the broader picture of power, privilege, fairness, opportunity, and accomplishment, even if this is something that I am actively working to change in my thinking.

6) When working or interacting with gifted students of very high ability, I often carry a preconceived notion that these students have dealt with some degree of social difficulties or peer group complications during their K-12 experience. I suspect that this stems from my own recollections of elementary, middle, and high school, where gifted students were typically among the least popular socially. I am also influenced, I believe, by the stories of poor social involvement and lack of peer acceptance that I often heard from students at the Duke TIP summer camp. Finally, I am also well versed in the research literature that demonstrates that peer acceptance declines dramatically as one progresses up the IQ curve (Gross, 2002), and that gifted African Americans and gifted girls are at particularly high risk for social rejection (Rimm, 2002).

7) I have often found myself assuming that early entrance to college students are of the "math and science" variety, possessing great talent in these areas while not necessarily being skilled in creative arts, leadership skills, or other less "schoolhouse" oriented pursuits. This preconceived notion is likely the result of my experiences working with and teaching students of high ability, which have typically occurred at colleges and summer programs that were specifically looking to recruit students with high levels of academic accomplishment.

8) Finally, as a result of my prior experiences as an administrator of an acceleration-focused summer camp for gifted students, I have encountered several gifted students who want to be seen as adults very badly, and as a result will try to speak and act above their age in order to be taken more seriously. For example, I have known students who have refused to use any slang terms, refused to wear blue jeans, or even adopted an artificial British accent because they believed it to be more dignified and adult. Observing these behaviors has perhaps colored my expectations and led me to believe that these students desperately want someone to take them and their ideas seriously – an event that may be unlikely when they are elementary, middle, or even high school students.

In order to lessen the effects of each of these subjectivities and assumptions, I periodically reflected upon their potential impacts on my data collection, analysis, and interpretation, and adjusted interview questions and analysis methods to provide greater rigor and ultimately establish the trustworthiness of my findings. For example, even greater care was taken to continually search for and identify negative cases and carefully

consider the challenges they offered to preliminary findings or interpretations which had echoed my initial expectations going into this study.

Scope and Limitations

The focus of this study included adolescent males and females between the ages of 16 and 18, who had matriculated to an early entrance to college program between the ages of 14 and 16. Four males and four females were included in the study, representing 20% of the program's male population and 9% of the program's female population. Five subjects were of European American descent, one was of Asian American descent, one was an Asian international student from South Korea, and one was of African American descent. Seven of the participants currently resided in-state, yet a majority had lived in more than two states and moved frequently through their childhoods.

While qualitative research does not claim the generalizability of any one particular study, it does suggest that meaningful, useful inferences may be drawn from the collected discoveries and shared findings of a body of literature examining the same topic. Even still, the application of this study's findings to other early entrance programs may be particularly limited by the sample size, the regional influence of being an institution located in the American Southeast, the relative youth of the program itself (established for less than 20 years), and the fact that data were collected through an ethnographic research design, which provides a "snapshot in time" field experience that is virtually impossible to functionally replicate.

CHAPTER II

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Acceleration, as classically defined by Pressey (1949), is "progress through an educational program at rates faster or ages younger than the conventional." Academic acceleration may be focused and specific in scope, such as attempts to accelerate a student in a single subject, or may be broader and more "radical" in its approach, such as grade-skipping or early entrance to college without the prior completion of high school (Sriraman & Steinthorsdottir, 2008). It may take place at a young age, with early admission to kindergarten or the first grade (Robinson & Weimer, 1991), or may be incorporated at a later stage, such as graduating from high school early or simultaneously pursuing a high school diploma and an associate's degree (Cox, Daniel, & Boston, 1985; Booth, Sethna, Stanley, & Colgate, 1999). In fact, according to Southern and Jones (1991) at least fifteen independent methods of accelerating the academic programs of gifted learners are possible, all of which are designed to better meet the academic and/or social needs of advanced students. Whether or not society believes that these attempts can succeed, however, is a much different question.

Acceleration, like gifted education as a whole, has been historically subject to swings in popularity, a trend which Lupkowski and Assouline (1992) have likened to the swaying of a pendulum. The practice has been common at times in American history, such as during the 1800's and major wartime eras of the 1900's, yet in recent decades the thought of radical grade skipping or early college entrance has often been viewed

suspiciously with a widespread assumption that social and emotional harm would be the likely outcome (Brody & Stanley, 1991). As a result modern schools are typically unwilling to consider bold acceleration for highly performing students, telling the parents and child instead that to accelerate would be to set the student up for academic failure and social isolation (Davidson, Davidson, and Vanderkam, 2004). Thus, as Colangelo, Assouline, and Gross (2004) wrote, "a nation is deceived" into holding back its brightest students.

Colangelo, Assouline, and Gross felt so strongly about this practice, labeling it a "deception," because the popular assumptions regarding acceleration's academic and socio-emotional effects are so strikingly different from what has actually been uncovered through four decades of scholarly research. From the 1970's to the present day many studies have been conducted regarding acceleration and its consequences, and whether qualitative or quantitative in method of approach, similar findings have been generally reported across the board. Academically, accelerated adolescents have been found to earn higher grades, hold higher career aspirations and graduate from college at an earlier age, and no reliably significant social or emotional consequences of a negative nature have yet been discovered (Gross & van Vliet, 2005; Olszewski-Kubilius, 2002; Rinn, 2008; Stanley, 1985a). As Borland (1989) so eloquently and emphatically stated:

> Acceleration is one of the most curious phenomena in the field of education. I can think of no other issue in which there is such a gulf between what research has revealed and what most practitioners believe. The research on acceleration is so uniformly positive, the benefits of appropriate acceleration so unequivocal, that it is difficult to see how an educator could oppose it" (p. 185).

Lack of knowledge regarding these findings, however, or failure to believe their assertions, has indeed led most educational practitioners to continue promoting enrichment or more modest acceleration approaches (such as AP courses) instead. This is almost certainly to the detriment of their brightest students though, as refusing to accelerate guarantees for many highly able learners another year of non-challenging academics and questionable peer relations and risks alienating the student through boredom and intellectual repetition (Muratori, Collangelo, & Assouline, 2003). The troubling ramifications of these cases have also been well documented in the research literature. One government report has argued that "most students, even the best, typically waste their senior year of high school" (Viadero, 2001, p. 12), and Davidson, Davidson, and Vanderkam (2004) claimed that refusing to provide challenging educational opportunities to bright students is tantamount to leaving their "genius denied." Worst of all, Rimm (1996) has highlighted that a shocking 15-20% of high school dropouts test in the top 3% of the IQ bell curve, many of whom left school due to boredom and general lack of challenge or interest. Before we examine the modern options for students who do manage to escape the mainstream and accelerate to college at an early age, let us first turn to the historical context of early entrance in the United States, both in terms of its prevalence and the typical methods of matriculation.

Historical Trends in Early Entrance

Similar to the trends of public opinion towards gifted education in general, popular support for collegiate early entrance has ebbed and flowed throughout American history (Colangelo, Assouline, & Gross, 2004; Muratori, 2007). The question probably mattered little prior to the twentieth century, as Kett (1974) has argued that public notions

of schooling throughout the 1800's were widely based on content mastery and not chronological age. As a result, it was seen as natural for a student to enter a higher grade or graduate upon learning the curriculum, regardless of their numerical age. This notion held true for college as well, and until even the late 1800's college classrooms were expected to contain a wide mix of student ages. Kett (1974) claimed that distributions from age 12 to 20 were common for first-year cohorts during this time and provoked no unease or concern (*as cited in* Muratori, 2007).

According to Southern and Jones (1991), four major factors converged in the early decades of the twentieth century which modified this practice and led to a more age-based notion of schooling promotion. First, states began to pass laws mandating school attendance for all children. Second, educational expectations for all children began to rise, a trend which has continued in the hundred years since. Third, the rise of psychology led to the first major theories of child and cognitive development, many of which were based on age-driven ideas and stages, such as those of Jean Piaget. Fourth, immigration and mandatory schooling led to a "huge increase in the number of students being educated," resulting in the adoption of more big-picture, organizational approaches to education rather than the traditional one-room schoolhouses of years past (p. 6). Flexible notions of grade advancement based on content mastery were able to hold on for the first two decades of the twentieth century in some places, especially in major cities and on the West Coast. In fact, Oden (1968) reported in his forty-year follow up of Terman's longitudinal study of giftedness that the average male participant had graduated from high school at age 16.9, while the average female had graduated high school at age

16.8, demonstrating that "early entrance" was actually still the norm in his region of California as late as the 1920's.

In addition to the four factors described above, another major cause of shifting attitudes nationwide against early entrance derived from the popular press's frenzy over the case of William James Sidis. Sidis was a remarkably bright young man who was accepted to Harvard in 1909 at the tender age of only eleven years old. He had a reputation as a mathematical genius, and "by age 10 he had completed the entire high school curriculum and knew algebra, trigonometry, geometry, and calculus" (Southern & Jones, 1991, p. 107). In addition to his mathematical prowess, however, Sidis also had a fragile emotional state and an overbearing father who pushed him for fame and celebrity. In a paparazzi-esque turn of events, the newly emergent national media latched on to Sidis as a human interest story at first, chronicling his accomplishments at Harvard with a positive spin. In time though, young William began to struggle with his fame and experience bouts of anxiety and depression and the media ultimately turned against him when he first dropped out of graduate school and then dropped out of law school. He became a figure of ridicule, and his name became slang to refer to people who never lived up to expectations. Sidis would later experience a nervous breakdown and die in poverty, having spent his 46 year life mainly working odd jobs for little pay. To the media, he was an example of the effects of academic acceleration on children – rather than the effects of pushy parenting, emotional disorders, and irresponsible media practices. Regardless, within two decades of Sidis' emotional collapse, early entrance to college had become rare and was viewed as a dangerous practice, rife with social and emotional pitfalls.

Early entrance had gone from being widespread and accepted in the 1800's to being unusual and suspicious by the 1930's. The 1940's saw a major reversal of opinion once again though, this time due to the increased economic and military needs caused by World War II. As the Selective Training and Service Act of 1940 began to put pressure on American businesses who were losing skilled employees to the military draft, the business sector started to pressure educational institutions to find quicker ways of educating young men in the hopes of providing speedy replacements in the workforce (Southern & Jones, 1991). Additionally, the military also pressured educators for speed and found ways to encourage early entrance, although their motives stemmed from desiring new officer candidates to replace those killed in the fighting (Muratori, 2007). By the time of America's entrance to the war in 1941, three universities had already established early-entrance programs and many more followed their lead after the attack on Pearl Harbor (Colangelo, Assouline, & Gross, 2004). In rare cases the military actually formed business partnerships with American universities and leased them for training purposes during the war - the University of Notre Dame for example was turned into an officer's training school and graduates were given two degrees upon completion, one from Notre Dame and one from the U.S. Naval Academy at Annapolis.

Following the war's conclusion public sentiment quickly turned against early-entrance, this time due to the (successful) effects of the "G.I. Bill," which provided low-interest loans to returning veterans for use in establishing businesses or attending college. A flood of servicemen thus entered the university system through the latter half of the 1940's and many parents and educators were uncomfortable with the notion of atypically-young early entrants sharing classrooms and dormitories with experienced men in their

twenties and thirties (Southern & Jones, 1991). As such, early entrance programs

dissipated until the early-1950's, when renewed military conflict in Korea once again

created a need for rapid education and workplace training.

Central to the efforts of the 1950's were the academic preparedness and

scholarship programs of the Ford Foundation, whose initiatives resulted in three major

changes for early entrance. First, in the hopes of encouraging bright students to enter

college early, the Ford Foundation began to offer scholarships to students who met

college admissions criteria yet were younger than 16.5 years of age (Southern & Jones,

1991). Second, to support the students and provide incentives for colleges to accept

nontraditionally young applicants, the foundation funded the establishment of twelve

early entrance programs at colleges around the nation (Colangelo, Assouline, & Gross,

2004). Third, to improve the college readiness of students who were not yet prepared to

fully matriculate to higher education, the foundation also established and funded the

College Board Advanced Placement (AP) Program, thus bringing college-level courses

within the halls of normal high schools around the nation (Muratori, 2007). Following

the eventual de-escalation of the Korean conflict the Ford Foundation ceased funding

these initiatives and early entrance once again became less common. Interestingly

enough, however, all twelve of the partner colleges who had received Ford Foundation

grants have continued to accept a high level of early applicants, even without continuing

their official programs (Colangelo, Assouline, & Gross, 2004).

While early entrance ebbed in overall popularity and frequency during the 1960's

and 1970's, the nation's first modern early entrance programs were actually established

during this time. In contrast to the temporary programs that had been supported by the

Ford Foundation, which were mainly used as recruiting tools and left students to their

own devices, these new commuter and residential programs were specifically entrusted

with the task of providing ongoing services and support for their young charges'

academic, social, and emotional well-being. The first of these institutions was Simon's

Rock College, which was founded in 1966 to cater entirely to young, gifted students. The

University of Washington then followed suit in 1977, founding their "Early Entrance

Program" (EEP) for students age 12-14, and in 1978 Clarkson University invited 17 year

olds to skip their final year of high school in favor of the Clarkson University "Bridging

Year Program." Each program developed a reputation as a success, remains in operation

today, and other institutions were quick to join the trend. The next three decades would

see tremendous growth for the early entrance programming model, and from 1980 to

2006 the number of residential and commuter programs nationwide rose from 3 to 17

(Muratori, 2007). According to Brody, Muratori, and Stanley (2004), gifted students

currently pondering early matriculation now possess at least 17 options for full-scale

programs (pp. 98-100), in addition to the 87% of colleges and universities which reported

admitting young, qualified applicants without a high school diploma even in the absence

of an official program (Fluitt & Strickland, 1984). Furthermore, one additional early

entrance program was founded in late 2007 after the aforementioned publications, being

the Carol Martin Gatton Academy of Mathematics and Science at Western Kentucky

University, which I have chosen to also include as it is based on the same model as the

well-established Texas Academy for Mathematics and Science. These 18 currently active

early entrance programs are listed in the table below, as adapted from Brody, Muratori,

and Stanley (2004) and Muratori (2007):

Table 1

Currently Active American Early Entrance Programs

Program Name	Host University	Student Age Range	Commuter or Residential?
The Early Entrance Program	Univ. of Washington	12 – 15	Commuter
UW Academy for Young Scholars	Univ. of Washington	16 - 17	Commuter
Early Entrance Program	California State Univ. of Los Angeles	11 - 17	Commuter
Boston Univ. Academy	Boston University	13 - 17	Commuter
Early College at Guilford	Guilford College	14 - 17	Commuter
Bard High School Early College	Bard College	14 - 17	Commuter
Early Honors Program	Alaska Pacific University	17 - 18	Commuter
Advanced Academy of Georgia	Univ. of West Georgia	16 - 18	Residential
Texas Academy of Math and Science	Univ. of North Texas	16 – 18	Residential
Georgia Acad. of Math, Engineering, and Science	Middle Georgia College	16 – 18	Residential
Texas Acad. of Leadership in the Humanities	Lamar University	16 – 18	Residential
Missouri Acad. of Sci., Math, and Computing	Northwest Missouri State University	16 – 18	Residential
Clarkson School Bridging Year Program	Clarkson University	17 – 18	Residential
Program for the Exceptionally Gifted	Mary Baldwin College	14 – 17	Residential
Simon's Rock College	Bard College	16 – 20	Residential
Resident Honors Program	U. of Southern Cal.	17 - 18	Residential
The Carol Martin Gatton Academy of Mathematics and Science	Western Kentucky University	16-18	Residential
National Acad. of Arts, Sciences, and Engineering	The Univ. of Iowa	17 - 18	Residential

Modern Early Entrance Programs

Admissions Requirements and Processes

The question of admission requirements depends largely on where a prospective early entrant has chosen to submit an application. For students who are interested in independent matriculation without a program and are seeking nothing more than the same treatment and status any other incoming freshman might receive, no special entrance requirements generally exist. Prospective early entrants need only to complete the regular application form and process in such a case and an overwhelming majority of colleges and universities are usually willing to accept them if they are as qualified as their typical entrant (Brody, Assouline, & Stanley, 1990). In fact, Fluitt and Strickland (1984) discovered that a whopping 87% of American colleges and universities regularly admit students who do not hold a high school diploma, that 15% actively recruit and advertise to this population in one manner or another, and that 16% are even willing to consider students below the traditional high school age range if their academic history presents them as strong and qualified applicants.

In contrast to the situation described above, students hoping to matriculate to an established early entrance program usually submit an application directly to that program and are screened through a separate process that bypasses the university admissions office. Admissions requirements vary from program to program and incorporate a wide range of assessments. The process, however, usually begins by asking whether the student's age corresponds to the educational mission of the program. Programs vary with regard to which age ranges they are willing to accept (Rinn, 2008), and while some such as the University of Washington's Early Entrance Program ("EEP") and Mary Baldwin

College's Program for the Exceptionally Gifted ("PEG") are known to cater to the exceptionally young, most early entrance programs only rarely accept students below the age of 15 or 16 unless they are sure that the student's maturity level and interpersonal skills will make them a good fit on campus.

The admission process at most early entrance programs incorporates several elements, including SAT/ACT scores, transcripts, high school grade point average (if high school was attended), class rank if applicable, personal statements, letters of recommendation, and usually an interview or series of interviews – often combined with a mandatory visit to campus (Olszewski-Kubilius, 2002; Rinn, 2008). The use of standardized tests, grades, essays, and recommendations is traditional to college admissions overall and applicants are generally held to admissions standards at least as high as those applied to the university's general admissions pool, if not the standards of the university's honors program or college (Booth, Sethna, Stanley, & Colgate, 1999). The one element that differs significantly for early entrance program applicants is the requirement that a school visit and interview series must be conducted, along with the fact that many programs additionally opt to interview both the student and their parents (Noble & Childers, 2008). The interviews are considered to be a critical component of the admissions process by most early entrance programs and are undertaken in the hopes of providing both information regarding the student's maturity level and social and emotional preparedness for collegiate life. Additionally, visits and interviews with both the applicant and their parents often highlight whether the student or the parents are actually the driving force behind the application, and whether the student is interested in making this move for mature, responsible reasons.

In terms of specifics, many early entrance programs have been tentative to publish "minimum criteria" for prospective applicants, claiming instead that students will be evaluated in their totality. Other programs have shared their minimum SAT scores and high school GPA cutoffs with researchers in the past (Booth, Sethna, Stanley, & Colgate, 1999; Muratori, 2007), yet due to recent changes in SAT scoring methods this data has become somewhat in need of revision. A review of published data, however, does show that roughly half of the residential early entrance programs openly expect applicants to possess a composite (math and verbal) score of at least 1100 on the SAT, in addition a high school grade point average of 3.5 or better (Booth, Sethna, Stanley, & Colgate, 1999). While every early entrance program looks for a history of high grades, a wide range of approaches exist towards standardized testing. Simon's Rock College no longer requires applicants to submit an SAT or ACT score at all (Admission FAQs, 2010), while the Texas Academy of Mathematics and Science (TAMS) places much heavier weight on an applicant's math ability versus their language section scores (Eligibility, 2010). It should be noted though that the actual SAT scores and high school GPA's of students eventually admitted to early entrance programs are often much higher than the minimum criteria which appear in research publications and promotional brochures alike. Consider, for example, that while the University of Southern California's Residential Honors Program advertises a minimum of 1370 on the SAT and 3.5 high school GPA (Booth, Sethna, Stanley, & Colgate, 1999), their admitted students typically average a 1470 on the SAT and a 4.0 in high school academics (Muratori, 2007).

One final consideration worth mentioning within the admissions context is the fact that early entrance sometimes contains a geographical component. Certain programs

have been established and maintained through state or municipal educational funding, for example, and only accept students who are residents of that state or city as a result. Both the Texas Academy of Math and Science and the Bard High School Early College program of New York City follow this approach. Additionally, while it is common at many early entrance programs for as many as half of the students to eventually transfer to more prestigious universities to complete their degree, some programs have taken steps to prevent this from occurring. One reason why universities are willing to host early entrance programs in the first place is because they want to attract exceptionally bright students, and schools such as the University of Iowa make clear to applicants that their acceptance is predicated on a goodwill assumption that they will not seek to transfer to another institution. Ultimately, however, admissions requirements for early entrants are mainly similar to those of traditionally-aged applicants. Whether in an early entrance program office or in a general admissions building, universities are looking for bright, mature students with a demonstrated track record of success.

Demographics of Early Entrance

Reviewing the extremely limited body of information regarding student demographics in early entrance programs may very well give one the feeling that a subtle game is being played. Most early entrance programs do not publish much descriptive information regarding student body makeup, and research studies either omit demographic data or report only selective, non-threatening slices. For example, while I personally located and read over thirty books and articles which directly discussed early entrance programs in the United States, only four of these sources included any semblance of data regarding racial representation and only one specifically quantified the

proportion of African American students attending the program (Caplan, Henderson, Henderson, & Fleming, 2002). Racial demographics, it appears, are being left out of most descriptive writings and research publications alike, or being obscured in a clever way. For example, the Boston University Academy merely posts in their online "Fact Card" that 25% of participants are "students of color," without specifying what is meant by that term or whether Asian Americans (who are historically overrepresented in both gifted education and early entrance) are included in that statistic (Boston University Academy, 2010).

The motives behind such a trend are unfortunately easy to guess – the little data that exists on racial representation within early entrance programs portrays the organizations as being numerically dominated by Caucasians and Asian Americans, with shockingly low participation among African American and Hispanic students. Consider, for example, that while 36% of Texans are Hispanic and nearly 12% are African American (U.S. Census Bureau, 2008), the state-funded Texas Academy for Mathematics and Science (TAMS) services a population that is only 14% Hispanic and 3% African American (Caplan, Henderson, Henderson, & Fleming, 2002). In contrast, Asian Americans, who comprise approximately 3.5% of the Texas population, are represented by 28% of the TAMS student body. This general trend has dogged early entrance programs since their inceptions – Stanley (1985b) noted in a review of former early entrants at Johns Hopkins that 24% of participants had been of either Chinese or Japanese ancestry, compared to only 1.5% of the American population, and a later study at the University of Washington reported survey participants as being fully 78% Caucasian and 22% Asian American (Noble & Smyth, 1995). Considering the state of

these inequalities, it is perhaps no wonder that most early entrance programs would prefer to gloss over or omit racial demographics data rather than admit the unfortunate truth.

Moving now to more widely reported demographic classifications concerning early entrants, we find that several studies have spoken to issues of gender representation, national background, geographic history, and parental education and income levels. According to a survey of residential early entrance programs conducted by Booth, Sethna, Stanley and Colgate (1999), gender distribution among early entrants is relatively evenly split overall, with the exception of Mary Baldwin College's Program for the Exceptionally Gifted which only accepts young women. Of the seven coeducational programs, three were reported as having a student population that was 50-60% male, three were 50-60% female, and one enjoyed an equal balance (p. 193). Further demographic data have been provided by Noble and Childers (2008), whose study of prior graduates of the University of Washington Early Entrance Program has identified 84% as being American nationals and 16% as being citizens of foreign nations (p. 250). Perhaps the most surprising geographic finding in Noble and Childers' study related to the students' rural or urban upbringings, though. According to their research, 38% of EEP students had come to the program from urban areas, 60% from suburban neighborhoods, and only 2% from rural environments (p. 250).

Three studies also examined the demographics of participants' parents and home lives, revealing that early entrance students typically come from wealthy or upper-middle class homes, with two parents, each of whom has experience in higher education. One study found that the parents of Caucasian or Asian American students at the Texas Academy for Mathematics and Science most commonly hailed from the highest fifth of

the SES range, based off parental education and occupational income, while parents of

African American or Hispanic early entrants averaged membership in the second-highest

fifth (Caplan, Henderson, Henderson, & Fleming, 2002). Of these households, in their

entirety, 75% featured married parents who shared a domicile and 40% of fathers and

27% of mothers possessed academic certifications beyond a bachelor's degree (p. 127).

Similar educational findings were reported by Noble and Smyth (1995), who reported

that fathers of Early Entrance Program students at the University of Washington averaged

a masters-level education, while mothers averaged completion of at least a bachelor's

degree (p. 250).

Institutional Support Practices

While almost nine out of ten American colleges and universities regularly accept

early entrants, a majority of parents, high school teachers, and guidance counselors

remain opposed to the notion. For many, these feelings are mainly due to worries that

social and emotional challenges will cause the student to struggle in a college world that

he or she is simply not yet mature enough to navigate on their own. According to

research conducted by Southern, Jones, and Fiscus (1989), educators and parents

regularly assume that radical acceleration to college would result in increased academic

pressures, decreased social opportunities, and limitations on emotional development,

when scholarly research actually shows each assumption to be patently false. Regardless

of the factual data, however, colleges and universities wishing to attract talented, bright

young scholars at an early age are cognizant of this public perception hurdle, and in

recent years a large number have shifted from an individual-acceleration model to the

establishment of cohort-based early entrance programs servicing a hundred or more

students. These programs recognize that "early entrance students have tremendous

academic potential, but they are young biologically and socially," thus necessitating a

different quality and quantity of institutional support services than might be provided for

students of traditional collegiate age (Booth, Sethna, Stanley, & Colgate, 1999, p. 198).

While individual early entrance programs vary significantly in the manners of academic,

social, and emotional support which they then provide to their students (Rinn, 2008),

their general approach is said to follow a theory of "optimal match," in that they work to

create a nurturing, supportive environment that meets the needs of their students on all

three of these developmental continua (Noble & Childers, 2008). We now turn to an

examination of the most common means of support these programs offer, beginning with

residential accommodations.

　　　While not every early entrance program is residential, at least ten colleges in the

United States maintain a separate dormitory to house young men and young women of

atypically early ages. The size and utility of these facilities differs greatly depending on

which institution one investigates, but most include standard living spaces, student

lounges, and facilities to be used for program events and activities (Rinn, 2008). These

dormitories usually enforce a higher level of social rules and expectations than general

university housing necessitates, such as maintaining curfew hours, separating the sexes,

and employing a specialized team of residential assistants who are hired and trained

specifically to work with students of a younger age range. The heightened strictness of

the rules occasionally frustrates participating students, who naturally want to think of

themselves as being "adult" college students, but Booth, Sethna, Stanley, and Colgate

(1999) echo the view of administrators that "parents give considerable thought before

allowing their children to leave home, and they require assurance that a safe and secure environment with appropriate supervision exists at all times" (p. 199). Program administrators and students alike often take great pride in their separate residential facilities, as well as the sense of cohesion and identity which it breeds among program participants and alumni (Muratori, 2007). Fostering this sense of belonging can be crucial to helping students to feel connected to their new educational surroundings and as a result several programs struggle with the question of whether or not to allow students to return home on the weekends. The Advanced Academy of Georgia sees many of its students leave each weekend for a relaxing break at home, while the Texas Academy of Mathematics and Sciences limits weekend holidays to no more than once a month (Booth, Sethna, Stanley, & Colgate, 1999).

Apart from residential facilities, perhaps the most important support factor commonly offered by early entrance programs is that of specialized guidance and counseling to meet the unique social and emotional needs of younger college students. Providing such support is a major departure from the traditional practice of treating early entrants as "normal" freshmen, as Fluitt and Strickland (1984) found that fewer than half of the colleges and universities that accept early entrance students without an official program offer any type of special counseling or guidance to these students at all. Established programs, in contrast, recognize that their population's unique situation presents them with unique challenges as well, and social and emotional counseling opportunities thus become an important piece of the "optimal match" puzzle (Caplan, Henderson, Henderson, & Fleming, 2002; Muratori, 2007). In addition to training the university's general mental health and counseling professionals on the needs of early

entrance students, programs typically employ at least one in-house counselor as well.

Some, such as the University of Washington's EEP program, employ two such

individuals full time, one to address academic needs and the other for socio-emotional

discussion (Noble & Childers, 2008). This permanent retention is seen as a valuable tool

in supporting students' development, as regular involvement between the counselors and

students ideally creates a more comfortable atmosphere, making it easier for students to

approach the counselors for guidance and/or conversation. Socio-emotional guidance is

certainly needed by many program participants as well, as Cornell (1994) found that a

majority of early entrance students reported the experience as being stressful and

emotionally challenging at times, and Noble and Smyth (1995) reported that many of the

14-16 year old girls enrolled at the University of Washington had come to the EEP

program with feelings of loneliness and isolation, rooted in the vivid sense of difference

they had experienced while schooled with same-age peers.

      In addition to counseling opportunities, an additional support structure that is

often found at early entrance programs which cater to the extremely young (13-15) is that

of a "transitional year," which blends the college and high school environment and

shelters students from full collegiate immersion until they have become comfortable with

their new surroundings over the course of nine months. Newcomers to the University of

Washington and Mary Baldwin College, for example, spend one year with a mix of

college and high school level coursework before enrolling in college full-time, during

which time they receive specialized counseling services and a heightened level of

attention as well (Davidson, Davidson, & Vanderkam, 2004). While both of these

programs view the transition year as an important element of meeting their youngest

students' needs, other early entrance programs actually incorporate the same ideals for use with the oldest students as well. The University of Southern California's Residential Honors Program, for example, touts within its promotional materials its renowned "Thematic Option Honors Program," in which students begin to take a full slate of college classes but are placed only within small, comfortable seminar-style courses and are assigned bi-weekly meetings with professors and guidance counselors to facilitate a successful transition to normal collegiate life once the program has ended (Muratori, 2007).

In addition to residential facilities, specialized RA's, counseling opportunities, and transitional programs, a host of other support factors can also be found at many early entrance programs. First, a select group of early entrance programs have negotiated the possibility for students to align their college schedules with state high school requirements, thus allowing program participants to take a full slate of college-level coursework while receiving both college credit and an eventual high school diploma (Stephens, 1998). In fact, both early entrance programs in Texas (The Texas Academy for Mathematics and Science and the Texas Academy for Leadership in the Humanities) are fully funded by the state government and have been given the authority to confer their own high school diplomas in addition to associate's degrees (Brody, Muratori, & Stanley, 2004). Second, early entrance programs nationwide regularly offer social, cultural, and recreational trips and experiences. The Program for the Exceptionally Gifted, located at Mary Baldwin College, actually hosts mandatory activities such as dances and museum trips every weekend during the academic year (Muratori, 2007). Third, early entrance students at most colleges are given nearly full access to the social, cultural, and athletic

life of college, with the only two exceptions being a ban on joining fraternities or sororities and the inability to play NCAA sanctioned, intercollegiate sports due to their national age requirements (Booth, Sethna, Stanley, & Colgate, 1999). Apart from those exceptions, students' personal lives and interests are well supported through participation in normal collegiate clubs, organizations, and intramural sports competitions. Fourth, several residential programs automatically enroll their students in the host campus's honors college, thereby providing increased academic support even after the student has entered the general student body and left the early entrance dorm behind (Brody, Muratori, & Stanley, 2004). Finally, while early entrance programs typically carry an annual tuition ranging from $3,105 to over $30,000, every residential program makes available a number of need-based scholarships in addition to any merit-based awards they may possess (Booth, Sethna, Stanley, & Colgate, 1999). Interestingly, early entrance programs sometimes argue that the high cost of attending these programs is actually more than offset by the additional year(s) of income which a graduate earns over the course of their extended career.

Early Entrance vs. Dual Enrollment

A final, but important, point regarding early entrance in the United States concerns its distinctness from another method of gaining college credit for gifted high school students: The highly popular practice of "dual enrollment." Dual enrollment programs, broadly speaking, include four main avenues for high school students to gain collegiate experience and credit, although the ultimate acceptance of that credit depends on the policies of the specific institution to which the student will eventually matriculate on a full-time basis (Hoffman, Vargas, & Santos, 2009; Kennedy, 2008). The first,

sometimes called traditional dual enrollment, joint enrollment, or concurrent enrollment, is when an active middle or high school student enrolls in one or more courses at a local university or community college either out of personal interest, a desire to accelerate or enrich their learning, or the hopes of transferring that credit to whatever college they attend after high school graduation. The second, known as "dual enrollment pathways," is the result of high schools negotiating with local colleges to allow qualified high school students to enroll in a pre-approved sequence of courses. This option can be very helpful to students who desire added challenge, as well as to students who are interested in subjects in which the high school does not normally offer courses. The third method of dual enrollment is a new trend, known as "early college high schools," and is an option that has only recently become popular due to the establishment of several such schools thanks to charitable donations and major grants (Hoffman, Vargas, & Santos, 2009). Early college high schools are high schools, usually in major metropolitan areas, that offer a high number of college-level classes within their building and have been authorized by the state to award graduates with both a high school diploma and an associate's degree. Lastly, the fourth method consists of traditional Advanced Placement coursework and testing, in which high school students take college-level courses in their own high schools and then must pass a nationwide examination in order to receive college credit from their eventual institutions. Regardless of what form of dual enrollment one considers, however, all four of these methods share an important characteristic that defines them as being separate from early entrance (Muratori, 2007). Dual enrollment students remain "high school students" first, as their primary identifier, even though they may be supplementing their experience with two or more college

classes each academic year. Early entrance students, meanwhile, are identified as being pure "college students" (with the exception of those in a transition-year program) and are fully enrolled in an institution of higher education.

While early entrance is currently experiencing a surge in popularity, government data suggest that dual enrollment is significantly more prevalent nationwide and growing even more rapidly (U.S. House of Representatives, 2009). In fact, over 800,000 students a year in the United States alone are currently estimated to be taking part in some form of dual enrollment (Kennedy, 2008), and an astounding 98% of community colleges and 77% of public four-year colleges currently allow high school students to take classes through high-school-negotiated dual enrollment programs (Kleiner & Lewis, 2005). Hoffman, Vargas, and Santos (2009) reported that students in Florida and Rhode Island lead the nation in dual enrollment credit production, with approximately 17% of high school students in each state graduating with college credit – an important factor, considering that possessing college credit at the time of enrollment is said to be a strong predictor of eventual college success (p. 44). While this rapid growth in dual enrollment nationwide is beneficial for students seeking greater challenge and academic rigor in their high school curriculum, some concern has been expressed by the U.S. Department of Education (Karp, Bailey, Hughes, & Fermin, 2004) over the lack of regulatory standards and inter-state differences in administration. In an attempt to answer these challenges and assure high quality in dual enrollment programming, thirty states have now banded together through an initiative known as the "American Diploma Project" to coordinate their dual enrollment approaches and collectively align their high school standards to national college readiness standards (Hoffman, Vargas, & Santos, 2009).

Another crucial difference between early entrance programs and dual enrollment programs is that many dual enrollment programs have shifted in recent years from a traditional focus on serving students who were already "college bound" to instead being used as a motivational tool and intervention method with those who may not otherwise be willing or able to attend college (Kennedy, 2008). Increasingly, they are being used to assist "at risk" students, prospective first-generation college students, students from traditionally economically disadvantaged populations, and even recent high-school dropouts by enriching their coursework, linking the students to courses of greater interest and relevance to their future goals, and demonstrating to the students that they are in fact capable of high-level, collegiate coursework. Consider, for example, the Advancement Via Individual Determination Program (AVID), a national organization that works with over 400,000 potential first-generation college students on issues of college readiness and academic accomplishment while operating from within the students' high schools. AVID counselors sometimes prepare their students for the rigors of college by enrolling them in Advanced Placement courses even if their grades in lower tracks were below average, and this method is reported to typically result in an increased GPA and heightened sense of academic potential (Hébert & Pagnani, 2008). Thus, another distinction between dual enrollment and early entrance may be this increased focus on promoting social justice.

Motivations for Early Entrance

While the potential benefits of acceleration and early college entrance have been the subject of many investigations, one important question that has received considerably less attention is that of the participants' motivations to attend such a program in the first place. Only a few studies have addressed this vital question directly, and much of our

scholarly understanding stems from assumptions, anecdotes, and supplementary discussions within studies addressing other components of the early entrance process. From what has been suggested via these tangential sources, it appears that factors spurring a child to make such a commitment may arise from three distinct categories, being academic motivations, social and emotional motivations, and practical motivations – with most students commonly professing to having considered aspects of all three. In addition, motivators of these types may be positive or negative in orientation, either offering the student a perceived benefit or helping to remove them from a hostile or unrewarding situation.

Positive Academic Motivators

Literature concerning early entrants has primarily focused on the intellectual benefits of accelerated matriculation and it should therefore be no surprise that the most commonly cited motivators are of a positive, academic nature. Program participants commonly report a desire for more active, thorough learning experiences, believing that college will provide an atmosphere of more intense and rigorous study than was found in their prior educational experiences (Noble & Drummond, 1992). As argued by Sayler and Lupkowski (1992), "The level and pace of many college courses match the characteristics of the early entrants in abstraction, conceptualization, and questioning ability" (p. 25), quenching their thirst for a wholly immersive and challenging intellectual life.

Early matriculation could also be seen by applicants as a way to provide "breathing room" to study additional subjects of interest alongside career-oriented courses, such as remaining in college for five years to earn multiple degrees or provide

the flexibility necessary to combine non-related majors such as music and pre-med (Brody & Stanley, 1991). Additionally, early entrants often report being motivated to attempt the transition by belief in their academic preparedness and talent, with four students in Noble and Drummond's (1992) study claiming to use the experience to prove to themselves that they were capable of successfully accomplishing the task. Finally, students attending early entrance programs in states that supported joint enrollment in both high school and college may be motivated by the lack of risk, as they are still earning high school credit and a diploma but merely in more advanced, challenging surroundings (Stephens, 1998). By and large, early enrollment students motivated by academic factors are not disappointed in what they encounter, with one young man going as far as to say "High school was the flat, black-and-white landscape of Dorothy Gale's Kansas. [My college] was the wonderful land of Oz, in color" (Olszewski-Kubilius, 1998, p. 231).

Negative Academic Motivators

Research literature has also highlighted a smaller number of "negative" motivators behind gifted students' decisions to enter college early, meaning causes that motivate a student to escape the traditional educational environment rather than initially attract them to a perceived benefit. Two such commonly identified negative motivations are academic in nature: boredom and a perceived lack of challenging options such as AP classes or a similarly enriched curriculum. Of these two related factors, boredom is most commonly cited by those who have made the decision to leave the high school environment and seek higher education; it is, in fact, one of the most commonly cited motivations overall (Noble & Childers, 2008). Early entrants commonly remember

wishing to escape the drudgery and "busy work" of their daily high school routines (Sayler & Lupkowski, 1992) and hold beliefs that, in the words of one young man, "high school was no longer a valuable contribution to my academic life" (Olszewski-Kubilius, 1998, p. 228). While this claim may seem like exaggeration, one recent study by Reis et al. (1993) does appear to lend credibility to the students' argument, having found that gifted students on average could miss as much as 50% of the school year without seeing any significant decrease in grades or post-test knowledge.

A second such motivational factor is that of a poorly enriched set of local curricular offerings at a student's home district, such as the lack of an honors program, AP track, or similar qualitative differentiation opportunities for students in need of additional challenge. Individuals are only likely to engage in a task if they recognize that the task possesses value, and students who are mindlessly "treading water" and never being given the tools for success are unlikely to perceive a benefit to continuing much longer (Muratori, Colangelo, & Assouline, 2003). According to several young students, escape to a collegiate acceleration program helped restore their faith in the educational process.

Positive Socio-Emotional Motivators

Three positively oriented socio-emotional motivations were also cited throughout the research literature on early entrance to college, being the desire for more positive social relationships with peers, the hope of findings others of similar interests and abilities, and a yearning for increased independence and self-reliance. Many of the students discussed came from impoverished social backgrounds and yearned to improve their social lot through mingling with intellectual peers. Research bears these desires out,

as gifted students have been found on average to benefit socially from acceleration

opportunities that put them in touch with students of a similar "mental age" (Janos,

Marwood, & Robinson, 1985; Tannenbaum, 1983). Similarly, students are also

motivated by the belief that participation in an early entrance program will put them in

touch with other gifted learners of similar age, experiences, and interests. As one young

woman elaborated:

> In high school, not submitting to peer pressure, not doing what everyone else is
>
> doing, refusing to act like a racist, or not becoming involved in any number of
>
> stupidities can make you an outcast. In college, everyone, even those of us with
>
> less social skills, can find good friends (Sayler, 1990, p. 83).

Independence provided a third commonly cited positive socio-emotional desire,

with students motivated to enroll in the residential collegiate experience in order to

become more self-reliant and develop an identity distinct from their parents and

upbringing. This longing for increased autonomy, common to adolescents everywhere,

had potential for actualization in the eyes of those considering early matriculation

(Olszewski-Kubilius, 1998).

Negative Socio-Emotional Motivators

Among the motivational factors pushing gifted students to leave traditional

settings are two socio-emotional factors as well, the first dealing with poor peer-relations

and the second with the challenges of paternal pressure. Although gifted students have

been found on average to possess social skills and relationships at least as strongly

developed as their non-gifted peers (Robinson & Noble, 1992), feelings of social

difference and strained peer relations are increasingly common among the highly gifted,

gifted females, and African American gifted students. Gross (2002) has argued that studies showing generally positive psychosocial development among gifted students are actually inappropriate to generalize to many such populations, as "The majority of the findings originate from studies of moderately gifted children, and the picture may be very different for children who are exceptionally gifted" (p. 19). Students who contemplate skipping multiple years of traditional schooling are undoubtedly of this latter, highly exceptional category, and studies of their social adjustment in normal high school settings do tend to reveal trends of peer difficulties and struggles for acceptance.

Noble and Drummond (1992) investigated this phenomenon through in-depth interviews with early entrants and found that "both males and females had felt isolated and lonely in previous classroom settings… two 15 year old girls recalled their embarrassment at being labeled a 'nerd' or 'brain'… and a 16 year old boy described how he had been physically assaulted in junior high school because of his intelligence" (p. 108). Negative experiences such as these, found among most of the early entrants interviewed, ultimately contributed to their motivations to leave the high school setting in search of a more accepting and tolerant social atmosphere. As many early matriculants to higher education have phrased it, the decision that they were ready for a college environment that encouraged their academics freed them to "be themselves" and build social relationships more in tune with their interests and abilities (Noble & Smyth, 1995).

Additionally, parental pressure has been occasionally cited in the research literature as a motivation for early entrance to college, yet few studies have been conducted to gauge its prevalence and purposes. One example of research to broach that topic is that of Robinson (1992), who studied accelerated children in the People's

Republic of China, finding that pressure from parents and grandparents did play a role in children's determination of their future plans. Investigations with American college students have not found this to be a significant factor for the great majority of students – a finding that exposes the irony of the popular media's traditional coverage of early entrance to college. Throughout the past century, media outlets in the United States have occasionally latched on to stories of highly precocious young boys and girls, treating their education as if it were a spectacle (Wallace, 1986). In many such cases, these stories raised questions regarding the students' parents and their supposed motivations for fame, such as in the previously mentioned case of William James Sidis.

Positive Practical Motivators

Accompanying the positive perceptions of academic motivators and socio-emotional motivators, accelerated students have also cited practical inspirations leading them to seek early entrance to college as well. Most common is the desire to ultimately attend graduate or professional school and ultimately begin one's career at an earlier age, allowing for both the extrinsic reward of increased income over the lifespan and the intrinsic reward of quickly immersing oneself in a field of interest. These goals are also seemingly realistic, as highlighted by Rinn (2008), as early entrants are more likely than traditional entrants to both profess a desire for further schooling (Noble, Robinson & Gunderson, 1993) and to actually follow through on their plans (Gross & van Vliet, 2005). The brightest of students may have an additional related factor motivating them to begin higher level work as well, being that students who have already previously benefited from acceleration through grade skipping or domain-based acceleration may

find themselves having already exhausted the most challenging offerings available in their local high school system (Brody & Stanley, 1991).

Three additional practical concerns may lure prospective applicants to early matriculation, being motivations related to competition, cost, and availability of resources. While American students have greater access to education and high paying jobs, research conducted in China has shown that in cultures where these factors are a more limited commodity early entrance to college may be seen as a desirable, practical method of gaining an advantage over social competitors and helping to secure a respected and financially lucrative future. As such, Robinson (1992) discovered that talented Chinese youths appear to receive significantly more encouragement and pressure from both parents and grandparents to progress through schooling as quickly as possible, in order to build status and reputation. Cost is likely to also play a role both in the United States and abroad, as early matriculation means fewer years of dependency on family finances (Gross & van Vliet, 2005). A final practical motivation to enroll may also take the form of desire to join what is perceived to be a stable, supportive, nurturing, and self-contained collegiate program. This motivation is widely recognized by those who administrate early entrance programs and is often used to argue for the building of specialized dorms, community structures, recreational areas, and residence life amenities distinct from the usual trappings of college life.

Negative Practical Motivators

The least discussed motivations leading a student to leave high school and pursue college matriculation tend to be those of negative practical factors. Having reviewed the existing literature on early entrance, only one was offered – being problems concerning

the appropriateness of traditional high school extracurricular activities for some students. Students who are heavily invested in the clubs and sports teams offered at their schools tend not to seek early college acceptance, mainly due to a desire to complete their participation in these groups and because of NCAA regulations against students of early ages playing intercollegiate sports. Gifted students who are not similarly invested, or feel that their local school district does not possess offerings related to their interests, are more apt to move on. This finding is especially true when concerning fields of academic or performance-art talent, as students advanced in disciplines such as violin or ballet may find that traditional schooling offers almost nothing to help them advance these talents while early entrance to college provides an opportunity to identify mentors, take classes, and continue to hone their craft.

Academic Effects of Acceleration and Early Entrance

Academic Effects of Acceleration in General

Many reviews of acceleration for gifted learners begin with a discussion on the contributions of Dr. Julian Stanley (1918-2005), formerly of Johns Hopkins University and founder of the Study of Mathematically Precocious Youth (SMPY). Dr. Stanley's SMPY program, begun in 1972, has identified thousands of highly gifted students across the United States and assisted them in the pursuit of rigorous curriculum and acceleration opportunities (Muratori, 2007), following his belief that if you want gifted students to perform you must challenge them on a level commensurate to their ability (Stanley, 1991). Most importantly, however, Dr. Stanley's SMPY program has resulted in over 250 scholarly papers documenting the academic benefits of acceleration for gifted children and adolescents (Sriraman & Steinthorsdottir, 2008). In their totality, these

works and others have demonstrated again and again that acceleration measures both in local schools and on college campuses can be an extremely positive force for ability-appropriate intellectual development in gifted students.

Studies examining the academic consequences of acceleration for gifted students have commonly taken a broad approach, asking whether or not the acceleration benefitted the students' intellectual development and performance. This can be a tricky variable to measure due to the low number of radically accelerated students available for research and the difficulty of finding comparative control groups, so a notable portion of the research has been anecdotal or focused only on presenting the performance statistics of a small sample of accelerants. For example, Terman (*as cited in* Gross, 2008) reported that 33% of his longitudinal study participants had skipped at least one grade and that they still averaged being in the top 10% of their high school classes, and Stanley (1985a) once published a one-page report on the career progress of six highly accelerated adults. This is not to say that quality empirical studies are lacking, though. Pollins (1983) utilized a matched-pairs design to compare accelerated students with nonaccelerated peers of similar aptitude and found accelerated students were likely to hold higher academic aspirations. Using a similar matched-pair design, Swiatek and Benbow (1991) later investigated academic accomplishments, finding that accelerated students held this crucial advantage as well.

The strongest evidence that acceleration brings intellectual development benefits is perhaps found in a pair of meta-analyses by Kulik and Kulik, the first of which compared 26 studies on acceleration and academic performance and found that in every study the accelerants had outperformed the nonaccelerants on academic measures with an

impressive effect size of .88 (1984). Kulik and Kulik's (1992) later review compared the effect sizes of acceleration and enrichment, finding that contrary to popular belief and degree of usage, acceleration was actually twice as powerful an academic intervention as enrichment. Summarizing their findings within *A Nation Deceived*, Kulik (2004) wrote that he had reviewed over 100 educational meta-analyses and that the findings regarding the academic benefits of acceleration were the strongest statistical results he had yet encountered. These benefits are present regardless of age group and acceleration method as well, with moderate to high effect sizes regardless of specifics (Rogers, 2002).

In addition to the studies cited above, which focused on academic achievement through grades, other researchers have also demonstrated further intellectual benefits of acceleration. For example, data from Stanley's SMPY have consistently shown that accelerants progress farther and faster through their schooling, as evidenced by one follow-up study which found that 25% of SMPY accelerants had earned a doctorate by their early 30's (Benbow, Lubinski, Shea, & Eftekhari-Sanjani, 2000). Similarly, accelerated students are said to benefit from extra time later for additional college majors or enrichment experiences such as studying abroad (Muratori, 2007), and Coleman (2007) even likened their joy at being accelerated and placed with intellectual peers to a sense of "intoxication." Two studies have examined this question from an alternate angle, by asking former accelerants and their parents if they would make the choice to accelerate again if they could. Both found a surprising 100% affirmative response rate (Gross, 2004; Rimm & Lovance, 1992).

While empirical literature almost universally supports acceleration, a number of theory-driven publications have raised important criticisms and proposed dangers as well.

According to Southern and Jones (1991, pp. 12-13), the most commonly raised objections have included:

- That accelerants will find new curriculum too demanding,

- Concern that their "giftedness" may have been only temporary,

- That accelerants will have gaps in their knowledge,

- Worries surrounding social and emotional growth,

- That career decisions will need to be made at an earlier age,

- That students will develop knowledge without having had experience,

- That students will miss out on the "invisible curriculum," those moments of growth and wisdom that occur through non-curricular interaction at school, and

- Concern that an overly-academic focus will cause them to lose creative abilities.

While some of these criticisms may have merit, such as worries regarding career decisions and the invisible curriculum, several others seem to have been disproved by later empirical research. Consider for example that most accelerants perform better in school than they might otherwise have (Swiatek & Benbow, 1991), discounting arguments that knowledge gaps and new curricular demands will make the odds of academic success too difficult. One final criticism, which I do believe could have great merit, emerges from the fact that most acceleration studies have relied on surveys given to program participants at the end of an experience, meaning that students who had great difficulty have likely already dropped out and thus may not be represented within the data (Southern & Jones, 1991).

Academic Effects of Early College Entrance

In addition to the literature regarding the intellectual development effects of acceleration in general, the last thirty years have seen a rise in studies examining the specific academic effects of one particular type of acceleration: Early entrance to college. Scholarly research conducted on the academic achievement of early entrants (as a whole) has consistently shown that they perform, on average, very well (Gross & van Vliet, 2005; Olszewski-Kubilius, 2002). Brody, Lupkowski, and Stanley (1988) reported that 18 out of the 24 early entrants they studied possessed a 3.5 GPA or better, and Stanley and McGill (1986) published findings that out of a pool of 25 early entrants that they had studied, 24 had completed their bachelor's degree within 4.5 years. According to Olszewski-Kubilius (2002), early entrants to college actually average higher GPA's than traditionally aged students and are more likely to earn honors. In sharp contrast to the criticisms expressed above that radical acceleration would lead to academic struggle, Stanley (1985b) discovered that students who took fuller, more challenging course loads actually generated higher grade point averages. Expressing the accelerants' thirst for knowledge through their credit hours amassed at the time of graduation, Stanley wrote "Number of semester-hour credits ranged from 120, the minimum needed in order to earn the B.A. degree, to 162. The more credits a student amassed, the higher the grades he or she tended to get" (p. 223).

A second intellectual benefit to collegiate early entrance is one of time, specifically in the amount of time it takes one to earn a bachelor's degree. For example, the University of Washington's Early Entrance Program, which typically accepts students between 12-14 years old, advertises that 95% complete their degrees within five years of

admission (Noble & Drummond, 1992), putting them at remarkably early ages for college completion. Early entrants even graduate more quickly than the older students they enter college with – One report found that atypically young matriculants average graduating 140 days sooner than their traditionally-aged classmates (Morrison, 2008). While a percentage certainly enter the labor force and enjoy extra years of earning potential, many pursue graduate school or professional school and may even complete their degree of choice by the time chronological peers have graduated from college (Muratori, 2007). Thus, radical acceleration enables these students to jump-start their careers with additional training and intellectual development, potentially leading to greater advancement opportunities and leadership roles.

Criticisms of the literature regarding academic performance among early entrants typically highlight three factors which may jeopardize scholars' abilities to draw strong inferences and conclusions. First, there is simply too little data regarding this topic that has been published and much of what has been published is rapidly aging (Rinn, 2008). This is not due to a lack of interest in early entrance acceleration, interestingly enough, but rather due to the fact that much more attention over the past two decades has been given to the social and emotional consequences thereof. Second, the studies that have been published tend to be poor in methodology, involving very small samples, poorly validated instruments, recent-program-participants, and typically lacking control groups (Janos, Robinson, & Lunneborg, 1989). Third, research conducted on collegiate programming for the gifted, such as honors colleges and early entrance programs, typically relies on surveys and thus suffers from issues of "selective mortality" as participants who leave the program lose their opportunity to contribute to the final data

unless researchers are able to track them down (Rinn, 2008). For example, the true effect sizes of acceleration methods are likely to be lower than are generally reported, because students who began the acceleration program yet struggled academically and dropped out are not present at the end of the year to fill out the survey. In addition to the three factors described above, an interesting twist to the selective mortality concept has been raised by Muratori, Colangelo, and Assouline (2003), who reported on how changes to the University of Iowa's early entrance program admissions procedures led to a meaningful drop in the program's attrition rate. Could it be that researchers who claim to study the academic success of early entrants are actually measuring how well a particular program is able to screen-out applicants likely to flounder?

Social and Emotional Effects of Acceleration and Early Entrance

Socio-Emotional Effects of Acceleration in General

As mentioned earlier, as many as 75% of American teachers have been found to oppose grade-skipping and acceleration as a matter of principle, largely out of fear that their students would not be socially and emotionally capable of handling the transition and forging a healthy social life with older students (Southern, Jones, & Fiscus, 1989). Their trepidation, and the hesitation of many parents as well, can certainly be understood as well-intentioned: They only want the child to fit in and enjoy their youth, well-adjusted among their peers. What they do not realize, however, is that the research has already shown this goal to be unlikely at best for many candidates of radical acceleration. The highly gifted, it seems, are simply different by their very nature and their social needs are different as well.

Hollingworth (1942), the renowned scholar of the highly gifted, once wrote that students with an IQ between 125 and 155 were within a zone of "socially optimal intelligence" but that students with an IQ above 155 were at risk for increased social rejection by their same-age peers. While highly advanced learners are typically accepted by other students during elementary school, by middle school their exceptionality "exacts a price," one whose cost is more burdensome the higher your IQ (Gross, 2004). These students are not unaware of their social standing and many begin to internalize the difference and blame themselves for their relational difficulties. As Davidson, Davidson, and Vanderkam (2004) aptly stated: "Gifted kids are acutely aware that they are different. The most confident ones shrug it off, but more wonder 'What's wrong with me?' This question rarely leads to a positive self-concept" (p. 95). By high school, exceptionally able students will often do anything to escape the "nerd" label, and Davis and Rimm (1998) have chronicled gifted students working to mask their abilities through humor, intentionally poor performance, and limited extracurricular activities. Fitting in with their same-age peers, it seems, may not be such a worthwhile pursuit.

When highly gifted adolescents do have a vibrant social life, it tends to be with students who are chronologically older than them (Gross, 2008; Janos, Marwood, & Robinson, 1985). This is due to the fact that friendships and positive social interactions are more easily predicted by individuals' mental ages rather than their chronological ages, as two people of similar mental ability are more likely to share experiences and interests in common (Tannenbaum, 1983). For example, consider the case of 8-year-old Anstasia, a highly gifted third grader who Gross (1992) described as being frustrated that none of

her peers had also read *Les Misérables*. For a child of that intellectual precocity, a stark

choice typically exists between choosing older friends or having no friends at all.

If gifted students are more likely to be socially accepted by older students than

their same-age peers, could it be possible that radical acceleration might actually be a

boon, rather than a detriment, to accelerants' affective lives? While plenty of anecdotal

evidence exists to this effect (Coleman, 2007; Olszewski-Kubilius, 1998), empirical

studies of accelerants' socialization abilities have shown the practice to be fairly neutral

in effect (Rogers, 2002). The Pollins (1983) matched-pairs study, for example, found

that accelerated students had no more (and no less) socio-emotional difficulties than their

nonaccelerated counterparts, and Gross (1998) also verified that highly gifted accelerants

experienced no more social difficulties than their nonaccelerated peers. This neutrality is

not a bad thing, however, as considering the public perceptions of acceleration, learning

that it does not cause even worse social interactions is itself perhaps a joyful result. More

so, while studies of acceleration have not shown net gains in accelerants' socialization

abilities, they have shined in another related area: Accelerants' self-esteem levels. Gifted

programming is often reported to cause an increase in participants' self-esteem and

acceleration has been found to have this effect even in moderate doses (Olszewski-

Kubilius, 2002; Rinn, 2006). To illustrate, Rinn (2006) examined the self-esteem of

gifted learners at an acceleration summer camp and found that even the short 3-week

experience caused both males and females to significantly increase their perceptions of

both their same-sex peer relation skills and their opposite-sex peer relation skills on

average. Perhaps to the pleasure of the students' parents, Gross (1992) has found a

similar result among year-long accelerants and noted that the gains are substantial yet

only "modest," meaning that the students will not "become conceited about their academic ability" either.

Regardless of the encouraging findings of scholarly research, many educators and parents remain skeptical of the notion and continue to counsel bright young men and women to remain with their chronological peers (Gubbins, 2008; Southern, Jones, & Fiscus, 1989). According to Southern and Jones (1991, pp. 13-14), the most common criticisms they offer to notions of acceleration concern: Elkind's (1981) hurried child concept, lost peer opportunities and events such as the prom, the risk of older children rejecting the accelerant, and the belief that older children will not respect the accelerant or let him develop leadership abilities. Additionally, arguments are also made that the student's chronological peers will not understand why the child wants to be accelerated (Olszewski-Kubilius, 1998), in addition to concerns for the emotional hardships that may result for the child's parents if their son or daughter is eventually shipped off to college at an earlier age (Noble, Childers, & Vaughan, 2008). As for more scholarly critiques of the literature, Southern and Jones (1991) additionally claimed that the majority of studies on the social and emotional effects of acceleration were nestled within the larger contexts of broad studies on acceleration, and that their socio-emotional-specific data often derives from only two or three questions on a survey instrument designed to capture a much wider swath of information. While this may have been true before their book's publication in 1991, I am hesitant to apply the argument to later studies, as the 1990's and 2000's ushered in a sizable wave of research specifically focused on the socio-emotional effects of one particular type of acceleration: Early entrance to college. As such, it is likely that our more recent data on acceleration do not suffer from this problem.

Socio-Emotional Effects of Early College Entrance

Researchers interested in collegiate early entrance have developed a sizable body of literature concerning its social and emotional effects, much of which has been conducted in the past twenty years. The great majority of these studies have focused on students enrolled in early entrance programs, in contrast to those who enter college independently. Overall, early entrants have been found to be well adjusted both socially and emotionally, with no additional challenges beyond those of traditionally-aged college freshmen (Gross & van Vliet, 2005; Olszewski-Kubilius, 2002; Rinn, 2008). While Lupkowski, Whitmore, and Ramsay (1992) did find that early entrants experience a slight, temporary decrease in self-esteem as they adjust to their new surroundings, this experience is actually typical of all college freshmen and is not statistically different from first year students of traditional ages. Perhaps most telling, "few early entrants express regrets about their decision," demonstrating that contrary to prevailing opinions, radical acceleration does not spell out a certain social doom (Olszewski-Kubilius, 2002, p. 154).

One rationale for why gifted children tend to adjust well to radical acceleration may lie in the notion that their social and emotional lives grow when they are surrounded by peers of a similar mental age, as discussed in the previous section. Gross (1989), for example, has found that accelerated students benefit from increased self-concepts and diminished self-criticism. Several researchers of early entrance programs and participants have found similar results, consistent with the argument that acceleration breeds socialization, rather than limiting it. Radically accelerated young women in Noble and Smyth's (1995) study entitled "*Keeping Their Talents Alive*," for example, communicated that middle and high school had been a place where they were stifled and

kept from being themselves, while the college environment allowed them to blossom among peers who understood, respected, and shared their talent. Similarly, Olszewski-Kubilius (1998) gave voice to a young graduate of the University of Washington who recollected that a major part of her adjustment to college was becoming accustomed to the fact that "I had a peer group that understood me and accepted me, which was something I had never experienced in my entire life."

Social and emotional studies of early entrance have also found students to benefit greatly from the supportive, sheltering environments that these programs and "transition years" are able to offer. Students have been found to use these experiences as a temporary "base," building an identity and social life around them before gradually branching into the general college population (Noble & Drummond, 1992). The most commonly cited example of this can be found within Janos et al.'s (1998) description of early entrants' friendship networks, which commonly include a high number of fellow early entrants during the student's first two years of college and then fade into a more natural distribution by the fourth or fifth semester.

While the majority of findings concerning early entrants' social and emotional adjustment are positive in nature, some discoveries have given cause for concern. First, several researchers have found that some accelerants, especially those who look young or have been accelerated 3+ years, may find certain social doors closed to them around the college environment as a function of their age (Noble et al., 2007). These opportunities, including fraternity and sorority membership and varsity athletic participation, help to account for the fact that radical accelerants are slightly less involved in extracurricular activities than college students of a typical age (Swiatek, 1993). Even when accepted,

however, there is danger of not being taken seriously or treated with respect, and Sayler (1992) has warned that some early entrants develop a reputation in their dorms as a "floor mascot" or similar object of curiosity. It is important to note though that these issues of peer acceptance and opportunities for full social participation are actually more likely to hamper accelerated males than females, as younger females are more likely to find older boyfriends who can provide access to the general university social network rather than the other way around (Janos et al., 1998).

Finally, three additional worries related to life apart from the early entrance programs are commonly reported in the research literature, each with social and emotional ramifications. First, gifted students who play sports may be torn over the decision to enter college at an early age, as NCAA age requirements would prohibit them from joining the intercollegiate team. As adolescents often bind their identities closely with their athletic prowess, this consideration is often an emotionally charged issue for many prospective accelerants. Second, certain high school events have come to hold places of social significance in popular culture, and many early entrants may feel a sense of loss at having skipped homecoming, the prom, and Friday night football games (Sayler & Lupkowski, 1992). Third, and most regretfully, successful early entrants who graduate from college at a very advanced age may experience discrimination during the job search or graduate/professional school application process, with potential employers viewing them as young "Doogie Howser's" rather than as serious applicants (Sayler, 1992).

Having discussed the commonly reported positive and negative socio-emotional effects of early acceleration, we now turn to critiques of the research literature on this topic. Chief among these is actually a danger related to the negative aspects of early

entrance: One study, by Cornell, Callahan, and Lloyd (1991) is widely treated as an

extreme outlier by other researchers yet found major stress-related downsides for

accelerated collegiate females. While no other study has encountered results anywhere

similar, Cornell, Callahan and Lloyd examined student files and notes on 44 young

women from an early entrance program and found that in a one-year time span, half of

the girls showed signs of depression, five had engaged in suicidal behaviors, and thirteen

had left the program (Olszewski-Kubilius, 1995). While these results are atypical, one

criticism of later reviews rests with their limited discussion of these findings, along with

the fact that no replication study using similar methods has yet been conducted.

A second criticism of the existing research on socio-emotional effects of early

entrance pertains to the small number of subjects in these studies, along with the wide

range of diversity among the accelerants themselves. As Southern and Jones (1991)

argued, is it truly possible to lump the social and emotional experiences of 12-year-old

accelerants in with those of 17-year-old accelerants? Surely their affective experiences

are naturally going to differ. A third criticism of the literature is also offered by Southern

and Jones, who have questioned the validity of assumptions based on early work in this

field. Prior to the 1970's, they claim, the little research that existed on early entrance was

primarily based on anecdotal stories and filled with unpublished references, in addition to

being funded in most cases by the Ford Foundation in the hopes of providing research

support for the programs they were already actively funding. As a result, future scholars

are advised to rely more extensively on later research, from the 1980's onward. Finally, a

fourth common criticism of socio-emotional research on early entrants once again derives

from the "selective mortality" arguments of Rinn (2008). Students who experience

significant social or emotional difficulties, she claimed, may drop out of their acceleration programs and return home, thus never participating in the research study's post-experience evaluation. As a result, data concerning the program's effects may be artificially improved, creating the illusion that students were universally happy and well-adjusted when the maladjusted students had instead abandoned the program.

Effects of Background and Diversity Factors

The experience of academic acceleration is surely not identical for each and every student. Gifted learners come from every walk of life, and any number of personal characteristics and cultural variables may impact how a participant feels about grade skipping or early college entrance and what benefits or detriments they may receive as a result. The majority of studies on acceleration, however, have tended to group all participants together and made no attempt to distinguish between their experiences, likely due to the problem of having small sample sizes to begin with. In contrast, some researchers have dug deeper and investigated the differences that certain groups of students may be more likely to experience (Sayler, 1996; Schofield & Francis, 1982). While the quantity of these studies is not particularly large, I will now review the literature on acceleration and diverse populations as it pertains to four specific issues: Race, gender, socioeconomic status (SES), and the urban/rural divide. It is crucial to note, though, that describing the different experiences of diverse groups is not meant to suggest any differences in their likelihood for success in an accelerated program. In fact, Sayler (1996) reports that neither race, gender, family income, or community location can be shown to exhibit any statistical impact on an accelerant's odds, and that only the

student's level of prior gifted education experiences and their parents' degree of school involvement can be demonstrated to have a significant effect.

Acceleration and Race

"Race affects one's social, emotional, and psychological health" (Ford, 2002). It may provide advantages or disadvantages at times as well, such as discriminatory treatment or privileged opportunities. Historically, gifted children of many diverse racial, linguistic, and cultural backgrounds have not received equal identification and services in the United States, a waste of talent and potential for both the students and the nation in general (Ford & Harris, 1999). Recent decades have seen a push to finally address these wrongs, however, and a growing body of literature has come to describe the unique experiences, success, and challenges of gifted students of many historically disadvantaged backgrounds.

Overall, the literature on multicultural gifted education does not present an admirable state of affairs. Gifted identification, the gateway to services, is clearly understood to result in the overrepresentation of Asian American and European American students while underrepresenting students of African American, Hispanic, and Native American backgrounds (Ford & Harris, 1999). While the 2000 census demonstrated that African Americans, Hispanics, and Native Americans comprised roughly 17%, 16%, and 1.2% of school children nationwide, these three groups were only represented in gifted programs at rates of 8%, 9%, and 0.9% (Gentry, Hu, & Thomas, 2008). Amazingly, this means that we are failing to identify almost half of these groups' brightest students and are thereby unable to provide services to those in need.

In addition to the denial of services, numerous scholars have documented that giftedness may often manifest differently among students of non-White backgrounds (Frasier et al., 1995) or carry with it increased risks for psychological or social pressures (Davis & Rimm, 1998; Ford 1992). High achieving African American students, for example, may feel less accepted socially by their peers as a result, often leading to hurtful teasing that they are "acting White" (Fordham & Ogbu, 1986). Radical acceleration or acceleration done through ability grouping (such as magnet schools, residential high schools, or early entrance programs) thus poses an interesting strategy to assist these students, as placing them with older students of more advanced ability may alleviate some of the social pressure while providing a greater degree of academic rigor as well.

While gifted education in general suffers from inequalities in identification, Wells, Lohman, and Marron (2009) have actually demonstrated that radical acceleration is utilized in an equitable manner among students of various backgrounds during the K-7 years. While the news that racial identity does not impact the likelihood of being accelerated is certainly joyous, these researchers have proposed a number of possible rationales which may or may not be as positive. On one hand, they argued, it may be that teachers and parents recognize the gravity of radical acceleration and therefore take care in identifying only those who really need it. On the other hand, it may be that radical acceleration is more commonly used at schools too impoverished to have a gifted education program – schools which are likely to instruct a higher percentage of African American, Hispanic, and Native American students. Additionally, while grade skipping is equally used for all races during these elementary and middle school years (Wells, Lohman, & Marron, 2009), no research has been conducted on whether or not this trend

continues in high school or with early college entrance. Some tangential evidence does exist to refute the notion though, as Green (1993) found that African Americans, Hispanics, and Native Americans were underrepresented at residential high schools for the gifted, many of which are heavily acceleration driven, and descriptive statistics of collegiate early entrance programs portray a general underrepresentation of traditionally marginalized groups (Caplan, Henderson, Henderson, & Fleming, 2002). In contrast, Asian American students are heavily overrepresented in both accelerative high schools and college early entrance programs, sometimes at rates 15 times higher than their percentage of the US population (Stanley, 1985b).

Why might students of these three backgrounds be unlikely to receive the services to which they are entitled? While identification difficulties and misconceptions are surely a major culprit, alternate sociocultural explanations exist as well. Scott, Perou, Urbano, Hogan, and Gold (1992) found that African American parents and Hispanic parents are significantly less likely to pressure schools to test their children or consider them for gifted services, for example. This fact might play a major role in the lack of later-grade acceleration, as grade skipping, early graduation, and early college entrance often require a great deal of parental effort due to the widespread opposition to these practices that is found among teachers, administrators, and guidance counselors (Southern, Jones, & Fiscus, 1989).

When students of African American, Hispanic, or Native American background do enter college at an earlier age, little is known about how their experiences differ from those of European American students. As no study has yet specifically examined this issue, the few inferences we can draw come instead from related studies and subsection

comments. To begin, we know that radically accelerated African Americans and

Hispanics are part of a numerically smaller crowd than their White or Asian American

peers and as such may experience feelings of loneness or social difference. Second, we

know that their overall academic and socio-emotional success is not affected by their

race, which has been shown to exert no significant effect (Sayler, 1996). Third, as their

race does not affect performance, and data on early entrants' academic and socio-

emotional adjustments is highly encouraging in nature, we can assume that by-and-large

these students achieve relatively equal levels of academic and social success. Fourth, as

Schofield and Francis (1982) have shown that accelerated classrooms feature an

increased level of cross-race interactions, 99% of which are positive in nature, we may

infer that the general environment of early entrance classrooms may be more welcoming

than many of these extremely talented young men and women have experienced in the

past. While these insights may be encouraging, they certainly highlight how little is truly

known about this crucial topic and just how ripe the field is for future research.

Acceleration and Gender

Gender follows odd patterns in gifted education, often revealing much about the

societal tensions between stereotypes and reality. Boys, for example, are more likely to

be nominated for a giftedness evaluation (Smutny, Walker, & Meckstroth, 2007), yet

girls are more likely to be accepted to gifted programs (Kitano, 2008). Parents

commonly want to protect their daughters from "growing up too fast" while pushing their

sons to bravely march onwards, yet it is their daughters who are more frequently

accelerated at a 1.3-to-1 ratio (Wells, Lohman, & Marron, 2009). Ultimately, both

genders experience unique challenges and issues related to acceleration and gifted

programming, and the research literature has uncovered some findings specific to the struggles of both bright young men and bright young women. That said, only a few studies have been conducted that specifically address the gender question – much of the information, as was true for the topic of race as well, is therefore inferred from studies of related questions or gleaned from tangential findings.

Gifted students of both genders have been found to exhibit heightened levels of emotional sensitivity and Silverman (1993) reflected that when she asks the parents of highly gifted children to describe their sons or daughters, "sensitive" is the adjective most commonly offered in response. Sensitivity is not a trait equally respected among the genders, however, and gifted males may find themselves the object of teasing and mockery in response to their emotional expressions. This social rejection, of course, is likely to stifle their gifts. As Hébert (2002) explained, "If a sensitive, intelligent young man grows up experiencing criticism and ridicule in a culture that does not value sensitivity within males, he may suppress his sensitivity and consequently withdraw emotionally from others around him" (p. 139). As a result, it is possible that gifted acceleration my prove uniquely beneficial to gifted males by providing an environment that is increasingly supportive of emotional sensitivity, especially if the acceleration occurs within the context of a program including other equally sensitive male peers. That said, early entrance has not always been found to be ideal for males' emotional needs. Specifically, Noble et al. (2007) found that accelerated males have a more difficult time with dating and romance than their accelerated female counterparts, at least until females their own age matriculate to the university.

Compared to the limited findings regarding accelerated adolescent males, a greater amount of research has been done involving accelerated females. This population is sometimes hypothesized to be at increased risk for socio-emotional maladjustment, although further research will be necessary to demonstrate this conclusively. Gifted girls, for example, are known to have a higher incidence rate of perfectionism than boys (Kramer, 1988), to experience a sharper decline in self-esteem over the teen years (Kline & Short, 1991), and even to be at increased risk for affective disorders such as depression and anxiety when compared to males (Formanek & Gurian, 1987). These dangers are highlighted by the "outlier" study of Cornell, Callahan, and Lloyd (1991), which found that 22 out of 44 accelerated females exhibited signs of depression and that 13 out of 44 eventually left the program due to the stress. It is important to note, though, that this study was irregular in its findings and methods, and that the other research concerning socio-emotional effects has almost uniformly found acceleration to be positive in nature (Olszewski-Kubilius, 1995).

Giftedness, for many teens, is a double-edged sword of academic achievement and social risk. Generally, that social risk is said to be more damaging for bright females than males (Noble & Smyth, 1995), and even more so for bright females of color (Ford, 1994). Luftig and Nichols (1990) evidenced this brilliantly in a study that cross-referenced the popularity of students with their academic aptitude – while gifted males were found to be among the most popular students in class due to their humorous masking, gifted girls were typically among the least popular students on average. As a result, gifted girls are sometimes stereotyped as being willing to "play dumb," both to increase their social standing and also to make themselves more attractive to young men

who may be intimidated by their intelligence (Callahan, 1980). Research conducted with

females who have entered college early has demonstrated, though, that acceleration may

offer a protective shield from these unfortunate social consequences. Several of the

young women featured in Noble and Smyth's (1995) study on accelerated females felt

that high school was a "dangerous" or "poisonous" environment, and that by

matriculating to college they had freed themselves to grow intellectually and be accepted

for who they really were in an environment that would support and nurture their

development. This portrayal lies in sharp contrast to a description by Lembke (1992) of

one nonaccelerated gifted girl she had taught:

> As I returned the papers, I commented on each child's error. When I called Sally's
>
> name, every head in the class popped up; all eyes and ears focused on Sally and
>
> me as we discussed the error. Sally looked at me and burst into a beautiful
>
> smile… To this day I am not sure whether that was a real error or whether Sally
>
> had made it on purpose. At recess the other girls invited Sally to play ball (*as*
>
> *cited in* Schwartz, 1994, p. 67).

Acceleration and SES

Discussions of socioeconomic status (SES) and gifted education are difficult, not

only due to the traditional denial of resources and lack of appropriate identification that

low-SES students have received, but also because SES in the United States is tightly and

perhaps inextricably bound with issues of race, gender, and other social classification

networks as well. According to census data, for example, the median income for

European American households in 2006 was about $50,600, while the median income for

African American and Hispanic households was $39,900 and $37,800 respectively (U.S.

Census Bureau, 2006). As a result, parsing the effects of SES from the effects of race and others such variables can be extremely difficult and low SES students may be said to suffer from the same risks as many students of diverse racial identity groups overall.

Low income does not, of course, preclude children from giftedness or exceptional talent though, even if it shapes the appearance and challenges of that manifestation. To explain, giftedness may present differently among students from lower SES classifications, making identification more difficult and unfortunately resulting in a lessened frequency of services. Gandara (2005) explored this relationship among Hispanic gifted students, for example, and found that their lower socioeconomic status as a group led many to know very little about opportunities for gifted education and acceleration that might be open to them. This was perhaps due, the researcher noted, to their parents' low education levels and general unfamiliarity with gifted education, which made effective advocacy more difficult.   Gifted students of low SES have also been shown to be at an increased risk for dropping out of high school (Renzulli & Park, 2000), and the unfortunate existence of differences in mean income among racial groups is thought to contribute heavily to resultant variations in SAT and ACT scores (Kerr, Colangelo, Maxey, & Christensen, 1992). Additionally, scholars have noted as well that well-intentioned but misguided educators may often hold lower expectations for students of low SES backgrounds due to feeling sorry for them (Schwartz, 1994), thus creating an atmosphere that works against the students' achievement and becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy.

While students of low SES may be likely candidates for acceleration during the K-7 years, as discussed in the previous section on race, demographic data from early

entrance programs does not suggest that this trend continues in the later years of schooling. Caplan, Henderson, Henderson, and Fleming (2002) found that students in early entrance programs tend to be overwhelmingly European American and Asian American, and that students of all racial backgrounds at one such program averaged membership in a high SES bracket. The Hollingshead four-factor index (Hollingshead, 1975), an instrument which measures SES from parental occupation and education level, was employed in this study and revealed that European American and Asian American early entrants tend to come from homes in the highest of the five Hollingshead SES classifications while African American and Hispanic students tend to come from the second-highest SES bracket. While the limited data that has been published on early entrance demographics makes verifying the generalizability of these findings from supporting literature impossible, it does appear to likely be a realistic assessment. That said, recent decades have seen an increase in dual enrollment acceleration programs targeting "at risk" and low SES students, so it may be that adolescent acceleration rates overall are slightly more equitable than the early entrance program data suggest. One would certainly hope so, especially due to the low cost (sometimes even nonexistent) of acceleration programs as an intervention for the gifted – a factor which makes it an ideal choice for schools in low SES districts that may not have the funding for other means of gifted programming such as enrichment courses or specialized faculty.

Acceleration and Rural Students

"For a number of reasons, rural schools may have difficulty in establishing and maintaining coherent programs for gifted students" (Howley, 2002). Budget limitations, difficulty in recruiting faculty and specialists, smaller student bodies, and populist,

equity-minded community politics are likely to each play a role. Adding to the difficulties of the rural gifted is the fact that they are also considered to be more at risk for socio-emotional adjustment complications, as the range of "acceptable behavior" is typically more narrow in conservative rural areas, especially for rural females, and gifted or creative children often may not fit the usual mold (Lawrence, 2009). In a similar vein, the rural gifted are also said to manifest their talents in different ways than most published identification instruments specifically target, much like the difficulties encountered by certain racial, ethnic, or linguistic cultural groups. As Spicker (1992) pointed out, IQ tests and standardized achievement instruments commonly assume that test-takers will possess a basic level of "city knowledge," yet no normed test ever asks about farm life or harvesting practices. As such, rural students begin these tests already at a disadvantage. Interestingly, as this plight is highly analogous to those of non-majority cultural groups, Schwartz (1994) has offered a solution similar to the Frasier et al. (1995) "TABs" assessment that is recommended for use with students of diverse heritage. Specifically, Schwartz proposed that a series of "rural behaviors and talents" be used to identify students of exceptional ability in tasks such as farming and machinery repair.

Another facet of the complicated relationship between rural schools and gifted education rests with the challenges of accelerating talented students in such an environment, as different methods of acceleration vary significantly in their feasibility. Subject-based acceleration, on one hand, is often a very poor fit for rural districts as they tend to lack the funding necessary to hire highly specialized teachers and Advanced Placement qualified instructors (Jimerson, 2003; Snyder, Tan, & Hoffman, 2006).

Whole-grade acceleration on the other hand may be a great fit due to its low cost, providing that the schools teachers and administrators appreciate the potential benefits of the notion rather than dismissing it offhand for "common sense" philosophical reasons. While I was unable to discover any studies that specifically addressed how common this practice may be in rural schools, one study was found which subtly suggested its frequency to likely be very low. Specifically, Noble and Childers (2008) were surprised to discover that only 2% of their early entrants at the University of Washington hailed from rural communities.

While we may not know firm numbers regarding rural acceleration, we do have some inkling of how the experience may differ for this specific population. Cross and Stewart (1995) investigated the phenomenological experiences of gifted rural students participating in an acceleration-based summer camp, finding that they were affected by their cultural identity in three main ways (*as cited in* Lawrence, 2009). First, the students were very likely to see their program in a familial, community-minded manner. Second, while other students fretted over having too many academic options, rural students tended to focus on the positives and appreciated having any options at all. Finally, the researchers believed that rural students approached time differently than urban students, perceiving its passage more slowly and becoming upset when they felt it was being wasted. While these findings may be specific only to summer acceleration experiences, the similar environments found at many early entrance programs may make these questions worth investigating among collegiate accelerants as well, to test whether or not the insights may be transferable.

One final issue regarding acceleration and rural students derives from a surprisingly common argument most typified in the writings of Howley (1999), who suggested that gifted education and acceleration programs which "help" students attend college are actually doing a disservice to the rural students and communities alike. According to this line of thinking, rural communities have their own culture and way of life – one which is perpetually threatened by the dangers of more children "moving to the big city" and abandoning the farms. In order for the culture to survive, Howley wrote, the schools must thus find ways to promote farming and rural life in order to persuade students to stay local following high school graduation. This does not mean that gifted education and acceleration cannot serve a purpose, he argued, but rather that their purpose should be to train able students more quickly to assume adult responsibilities on the farms. It is most likely an argument that many city-dwellers would find perplexing, yet considering the rapid graying of America's rural swaths it is also probably worth considering.

CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY

Theoretical Framework

In order to truly understand any research methodology, it is crucial to comprehend the epistemological and theoretical perspectives whose assumptions give meaning to the method's practices and approaches. As Crotty (1998) detailed, our beliefs about knowledge and meaning (our *epistemologies*) influence our philosophical stances towards the world (our *theoretical perspectives*), which in turn influence our general thinking and approaches to research (our *methodologies*), which in turn influence our specific actions during research (our *methods*). Although it can be tempting to think of research methods simply as detached tools to be used unquestioningly whenever we please, to separate methods from their epistemological and theoretical bases actually robs them of their purpose and strips away their power to answer the questions we hope to research. Experiments in the "hard sciences" can be said to "work" not because scientific experimentation is a method that can answer all questions (it's not) – rather they "work" because they are designed to find *objective, positivist* answers for a researcher who sees the world *objectively* and believes in *positivist* theories of knowledge. Objective, positivist experimentation methods would be of little value to a subjectivist, postmodern researcher, in the same way that subjectivist deconstruction would be of little value to an objective, positivist chemist. In research, as in carpentry, it is essential to select the right tool for the job.

Accordingly, one of the major reasons why I chose to adopt ethnography as my research method of choice derives from this rationale, in that ethnographic methods of data collection, analysis, and interpretation align naturally with the constructionist epistemology that I ascribe to. Constructionism is the belief that when describing the sensory world around us a purely objective truth cannot be said to definitively exist, and that reality and meaning are instead constructed out of the interplay between individuals and their external contexts (Berger & Luckmann, 1966). As Crotty (1998) argued:

> It is clear that different people may construct meaning in different ways, even in relation to the same phenomenon. Isn't this precisely what we find when we move from one era to another or from one culture to another? In this view of things, subject and object emerge as partners in the generation of meaning (p. 9).

Ethnographic research methods flow easily from a constructionist epistemological stance, as their focus on understanding culture and the relationships and meaning-making processes between the observed individuals and their surroundings dovetail precisely with this constructionist take on subject-object interactivity. To state it plainly, constructionism is the belief that people create transient truth and meaning through interacting with the world, and ethnography is a research design which sets out to observe them doing just that.

Before moving on to the topic of theoretical frameworks, I do wish to make clear that constructionism, ironically true to its own nature, is a term that has been used in different ways and with subtly different meanings over the years. In fact, it is actually more common to find qualitative theorists using the term "constructivism" in its place (Lincoln & Guba, 2000), although constructivism is sometimes presented as a "research

paradigm" rather than as an epistemology as Crotty (1998) chooses to do. The distinction

in that case is that Lincoln and Guba (2000) argue that one's epistemology is only a part

of their overall research paradigm, along with their ontological stance and other such

philosophical stances. I personally prefer Crotty's (1998) conception and word choice

for two reasons. First, I am partial to his proposed hierarchy of "epistemologies,

theoretical perspectives, methodologies, and methods" as a valuable and logical method

of structuring these complicated theoretical notions. Second, adopting the term

"constructionism" avoids another potential pitfall that sometimes arises when using the

term "constructivism," in that social learning theorists also use the latter term in a slightly

modified sense as well, and as a result it may unintentionally conjure up images of Jean

Piaget and Lev Vygotsky.

Theoretical perspectives stem from our epistemological viewpoints and serve as a

bridge between our most basic assumptions and our research practices. According to

Kelly (2000), five theoretical perspectives are commonly found framing ethnographic

research, being the classical, interpretive, feminist, postmodern, and critical approaches.

The most commonly found theoretical perspectives among ethnographers are interpretive

in nature, including both symbolic interactionism and phenomenology. Both approaches

are sometimes described as "microsociological," being concerned with the interactions of

particular individuals with the world around them, as they struggle to make meaning and

sense of the world they encounter as they live their daily lives (Pawluch, Shaffir & Miall,

2005). I personally find myself to be a member of this majority, in that I prefer to

approach my ethnographic work through a theoretical perspective of interpretive

symbolic interactionism, studying my participants in their natural environments and

meaning-making routines. As I previously mentioned, one of the main reasons I chose to do an ethnographic study was due to its strong fit with my own personal epistemological assumptions and symbolic interactionism provides the theoretical links that firmly tie one to the other. As such, the cohesion and natural goodness of fit between my epistemology, theoretical perspective, and methodology maximized the strength of my methods and provided the means by which my research questions could be most thoroughly investigated and answered.

Ethnography as a Research Design

According to Goetz and LeCompte (1984), research methodologies stake out identities based on where they fall along four continua, being "an inductive-deductive dimension, a subjective-objective dimension, a generative-verificative dimension, and a constructive-enumerative dimension" (p. 4). Ethnography, they argue, may be described as a generative, inductive, constructive, and subjective method of performing academic research. Historically, this methodology emerged from the field of anthropology during the late 1800's, as contemporary-minded researchers began to question the "armchair speculations" of their predecessors, arguing instead that those who professed expertise in a people and their culture should naturally have lived the experience of traveling to those people and observing their culture (Angrosino, 2007, p. 2). Thus, with the birth of "fieldwork," anthropology entered a more modern age.

Within two decades, "social anthropologists" in the UK and USA such as Radcliffe-Brown and Margaret Mead had begun to employ the techniques with ethnic populations on the margins of general society (such as colonized peoples or Native Americans), instead of with native/tribal groups living in geographical isolation, and by

the early 1920's this revised method had been adopted by the University of Chicago sociology department. This brand of "Chicago school" sociological fieldwork asked researchers to position themselves physically within the neighborhoods, experiences, and cultures of "groups on the margins of urban industrial society," believing that researchers must observe the lives and struggles of their subjects firsthand (Brewer, 2000, p. 12). As Chicago school co-founder and former American Sociological Association president Robert E. Park famously instructed his new graduate students:

> You have been told to go grubbing in the library thereby accumulating a mass of notes and a liberal coating of grime. You have been told to choose problems wherever you can find musty stacks of routine records. This is called "getting your hands dirty in real research." Those who counsel you thus are wise and honorable men. But one thing more is needful: First hand observation. Go sit in the lounges of luxury hotels and on the doorsteps of the flop-houses; sit on the Gold Coast settees and in the slum shakedowns; sit in the orchestra hall and in the Star and Garter Burlesque. In short, gentlemen, go get the seat of your pants dirty in real research (*as cited in* Brewer, 2000, p. 13).

As ethnographic practices spread over the half-century following, from anthropology and sociology to fields such as psychology and education, new researchers found themselves in a position of describing the methodological approach in terms other than the traditionally accepted "fieldwork" notion. The essence of "fieldwork," many argued, was its emphasis on culture. Others, however, focused more on the individuals within a culture and their meaning-making process or daily activities. Additional researchers argued instead that the true hallmark of fieldwork was the presence of the

researcher alongside the people being studied. All three of these major ideas have remained vital components of the research method, and most modern definitions of what has become known as *ethnography*. Several current definitions have been included below, to highlight both similarities and differences between the theorists:

- "Ethnography refers to the study of the culture(s) a given group of people more or less share…. When used to indicate a method, ethnography typically refers to fieldwork conducted by a single investigator… who "lives with and lives like" those who are studied for a lengthy period of time" (Van Maanen, 1995, p. 4).

- "Ethnography is the study of people in naturally occurring settings or "fields" by methods of data collection which capture their social meanings and ordinary activities, involving the researchers participating directly in the setting" (Brewer, 2000, p. 6).

- "The attempt to describe culture or aspects of culture is called ethnography…. Ethnomethodology refers to the study of how people create and understand their daily lives" (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007, pp. 30-32).

Regardless of their personal definition or schema of ethnography, each ethnographer undoubtedly has purposes for choosing some variety of the method for use in their research. Perhaps unsurprisingly, however, these purposes often differ wildly between researchers as well (Masemann, 2000). Bogdan and Biklen (2007) have highlighted that these differences may exist because ethnography is a helpful method towards many goals. Ethnographic fieldwork methods are commonly used to develop grounded theory, to sensitize the public to new concepts, to describe cultural events or multiple perceptions of realities, or to help develop or enrich our understanding of a topic

(pp. 42-45). Anthropologists and other culture-focused researchers may adopt another purpose, one of thick description and written preservation of a specific cultural event, ceremony, or people (Spradley & McCurdy, 1972), as ethnographic fieldwork has continually produced outstanding examples of rich, descriptive, and vibrantly written portrayals. Some ethnographers see this detailed retelling of witnessed events as so central to the purpose and function of the methodology that it has been said that ethnographic quality may be assessed according to the author's degree of success with this goal (Beals, Spindler & Spindler, 1973; Goetz & LeCompte, 1984).

With regards to this dissertation, my choice to utilize ethnographic methods was primarily driven by three main factors. First, as stated earlier, ethnographic methodology flows naturally from my epistemological stance and theoretical perspective, thus offering methods which I believed could best answer my research questions. Second, I have had prior work experiences that required me to live in residential educational settings and I vividly remembered how much I had learned about the students I lived with during those times. As a result, I was very attracted to the idea of fully re-immersing myself into that residential culture in order to examine it from a different, research-oriented, perspective. Finally, during my time in graduate school I had enjoyed reading several ethnographic studies that used these methods to examine American middle or high school cultures, including Ferguson's (2000) novel on African American males' elementary school experiences and Coleman's (2005) research at a boarding school for gifted high school students. I became enamored by the richness of these texts and was convinced that using ethnography to investigate an early entrance program could yield deep understandings

and meaningful insights into the program's culture and the participants' lived experiences as early entrance students.

Participant Recruitment and Selection

Although I spent my time in the field informally observing all of the program's students, staff, and administrators, eleven students were initially recruited for official participation. These eleven were the only students to be officially interviewed and I spent a greater amount of time attending their classes, following them to campus events, and observing them in their daily lives. I also collected from them academic and creative work, photographs, and other such artifacts pertinent to their experiences. Being a qualitative study, I worked to recruit a sample that had shared in the experiences I hoped to study, rather than relying on a random selection method. This method of "purposeful sampling," as described by Patton (1990), directs the researcher to locate, recruit, and include subjects whose stories and personal histories are "information rich" and will most aid the researcher in their quest to understand the topic at hand.

Although technically I was using a method of purposeful sampling commonly referred to as "criterion sampling" (Goetz & LeCompte, 1984), my criteria for inclusion were very broad, as I was looking to recruit any students who had matriculated to college at least two years earlier than the norm and were both willing to volunteer and able to secure parental consent. As nearly every student at my research location met the age criteria, my initial recruitment attempt took the form of a participant recruitment email (Appendix A), which I sent out to the entire program community via an email listserv. The initial response yielded a stark gender imbalance, with seven females and one male responding and successfully returning both the parental consent form (Appendix B) and

the participant assent form (Appendix C). I then took steps to recruit additional males, through both resending my initial recruitment email and also by asking participants to suggest the names of male friends who they thought might be interested in participating if asked. This method, known as "snowball sampling" (Goetz & LeCompte, 1984), succeeded in recruiting three additional males.

While eleven students were thus initially recruited, I made the decision (prior to analyzing my data) to limit the number of participants whose data would be included in this dissertation research to eight. This decision was made because my recruitment yielded such a skewed gender imbalance, with seven females and only four males, and I wished to maintain an equal number of each in my sample to adequately reflect early entrants' gender distribution nationwide. This goal of striving for proportional representation along gender, race, ethnicity, or other categorical groupings is known as "probabilistic sampling" (Goetz & LeCompte, 1984). The decision of which three females to leave out was made according to two factors. First, one of the females had completed all the major interview protocols but did not respond to my repeated requests for a third interview to discuss the photographs she had taken for the photo essay component of the research. As such, I had collected slightly fewer data from her and chose to set her interviews aside. The second factor contributing to my decision was a desire to be racially and ethnically inclusive in my probabilistic sampling as well. All four of my male subjects were of European American decent, and so I chose to balance this through selecting a sample of females for maximum racial and ethnic diversity, resulting in including one European American, one African American, one Asian American, and one Korean national who was studying abroad.

The study's eight participants, along with their relevant demographic profiles, are presented in the table below. Pseudonyms have been used to shield their identities.

Table 2

Research Participants and Their Demographic Profiles

Name	Gender	Race	Age at College Entrance	Current Age
Rose	F	Asian	16	18
Mark	M	European American	14	16
Jada	F	African American	16	17
John	M	European American	16	17
Lena	F	European American	15	16
Max	M	European American	16	17
Dakota	F	Asian American	16	17
Greg	M	European American	16	17

Data Collection

Data collection methods typical to ethnography are representative of qualitative research as a whole, leading some researchers to even use the terms synonymously (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). Ethnographic studies are typically built around three pillars of data collection methods, being participant observation, interviews, and the examination of documents, databases, and artifacts (Marshall & Rossman, 2006). Researchers regularly utilize all three methods in their studies and it is common to compare the data collected by each method to the data collected via the other methods in order to check for consistency and increase the credibility of your inferences (Miles & Huberman, 1994). This practice was once widely known as "triangulation," yet the term has fallen out of favor even if the technique is still highly recommended (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). All three methods were used in this research study and will now be described by type.

Participant Observation

Participant observation has traditionally formed the foundation of data collection in ethnographic fieldwork, with researchers observing and becoming increasingly familiar with the cultural group, their traditions and activities, their shared experiences, and their meaning-making interactions over a prolonged length of time. Both historically and currently, research emphasis has been placed on the "normal and mundane," observing the natural daily lives of the participants with as much significance as given to special effects or celebrations. As Wogan (2004) joked, ethnography may best be characterized as "deep hanging out."

My research setting, which will be described in chapter IV, provided an excellent environment for participant observation at all hours of the day and night. The early entrance program, home to 65 young men and women and located at a mid-sized regional university in the American Southeast, operated its own dormitory and provided me with a room for an entire semester. I lived on campus for 4-5 days a week, for roughly four months, sharing the early entrance students' living space, dining space, recreational areas, study zones, and library facilities. I attended their program events, joined them in class, participated in their social activities, accompanied them to university football games, helped with their community service fundraisers, sat with them at the dining hall, talked with them for hours in the dorm's lobby areas, and even temporarily "joined" the program's newspaper club to get an insider perspective on their creative activities. Throughout the experience I was always careful to keep detailed field notes, striving to capture and record the most salient details and experiences for future analysis. Most commonly this was done through jotting down notes in a small notebook that I carried

with me throughout the experience. At times when doing such would have broken the flow of the moment being observed, or made the students feel uncomfortable, I casually typed notes to myself on my cellphone's notepad application. In either case, at the end of each day I would return to my dorm room and transfer the notes to a personal journal, filling in the context and richly describing the events that had occurred. An example of my field notes, taken from a newspaper club meeting, can be found in the appendices (Appendix D).

The issue of most complexity and controversy within participant observation practices is that of researcher involvement or "membership," as some ethnographers advocate full involvement of the researcher in the culture being studied while others worry that increased involvement may magnify observer effects and poison the data. Angrosino (2007) has delineated the differing approaches of peripheral membership, active membership, and complete membership, depending on whether the researcher prefers to remain outside the culture, engage in activities of the culture, or study cultures of which they are in fact a member (pp. 55-56). While Angrosino additionally remarks that complete participation has been somewhat frowned upon (i.e. seen as "going native"), other researchers such as Erickson (2006) have advocated increased researcher participation as a natural method of answering ethnographic research questions more fully and richly. In order to truly understand what it is like for a native to build a canoe, Erickson has asked, doesn't the researcher need to help with the task? (p. 240).

My time observing early entrance students was usually spent in a relationship of peripheral membership, especially in the beginning of the semester, but as time went on I began to take on more and more of an active membership role. While I could never be an

"early entrant," in the true sense of the word, I did find myself falling increasingly into their rhythms and schedules, engaging them more often in social interactions, and becoming a more fully integrated and accepted member of the community. By the end of the semester I was living on the same diet of fast food and caffeine as they were, complaining about the same facilities issues, being complimented by students on "how well I fit in," and even my fiancée began to remark that my sense of humor was regressing and becoming more like that of a 16-year-old! Throughout the whole experience, however, I attempted to remain as grounded as possible in the advice of Maykut and Morehouse (1994), who advised prospective ethnographers to do their best to assume a "delicate balance" between observation and participation at all times.

Interviews

The second pillar of ethnographic research is the practice of in-depth interviewing, which involves directing conversations with one or more subjects in order to gather relevant data and learn about the subjects' lived experiences through their own words (Crang & Cook, 2007). Ethnographic interviews are typically lengthy, detailed, and open-ended in direction, asking subjects to guide the researcher through their experiences and culture, as if on a "grand tour" (Roulston, 2010; Spradley, 1979). The subject of ethnographic interviews has been written on extensively and while researchers have commented on everything from location selection (Crang & Cook, 2007) to question typology (Patton, 1980), Goetz and LeCompte (1984) advocate that the smartest path is simply to develop your interview plan with your project goals and purposes in mind. Researchers are also cautioned from many sources to keep themselves on the periphery of the conversations, allowing subjects to reside in the spotlight. Brewer

(2000), among others, has argued that one way of doing this is to engage in interview standardization, asking each participant similar questions and differing only in the follow-up probes, in order to let differences between responses stand out more fully. Such guidelines are not meant to minimize the importance of the researcher though, for as Prus (2005) reminded, "interviews are to be recognized as problematic, *collectively achieved* ventures" (p. 17), meaning that it is joint cooperation between the interviewer and the interviewee that enables the gained insights to spring forth.

With these insights in mind, I developed a plan to interview each research participant on three occasions, using standardized interview protocols but differing in follow-up probes as was suggested by Brewer (2000). I purposefully designed the interview questions to be broad and open ended in scope and followed Spradley's (1979) classic advice of asking participants to guide me through their culture and experiences as if on a grand tour. To illustrate how this was done, I dedicated a great deal of time in my initial interviews to asking participants to guide me through their memories of school, whatever they may be, from pre-school and kindergarten all the way up to high school, college, and the present day. "Grand tour" questions such as these took up a good deal of time, but were often well worth it in terms of the insights gained. My two interview protocols, which typically spanned the first two interviews, can be found in the appendices (Appendix E & Appendix F). The third interview with each participant was used to answer any remaining questions, clarify or probe issues from prior interviews, examine samples of students' academic or creative work, and hear their explanations of the photographs they took as part of the "photo essay" component of the data collection process. These photo essays were a creative means of eliciting students' thoughts

regarding the program's support structures and institutions, as I asked each participant to carry a disposable camera and take pictures of anything that "helped them or hindered them" in their quest to succeed as an early entrance college student. The developed photos then acted as a springboard to discussion during that final interview with each participant.

In addition to formal interviews with study participants, I also conducted informal interviews with program administrators and staff members. These informal interviews were meant to provide: Historical context regarding the program, basic information regarding its mission and demographics, alternative viewpoints regarding trends and events that the students may not have had full knowledge of, new ideas and interpretations regarding students' experiences that could be later raised with participants for verification or dispute, and the broadest possible understanding of the culture, daily life, and inner workings of the early entrance program through providing as many opinions, insights, and viewpoints as possible. I greatly enjoyed these informal interviews and was privileged to speak with each of the following individuals: The university president, the current director of the early entrance program, two previous directors of the program, the academic advisor/counselor, the psychological counselor, the program specialist/recruiter, the residential coordinator, and two residential assistants. In each case, the staff members were first presented with an informational letter outlining my research and their role if they chose to participate (Appendix G), and were then asked a series of standardized interview questions (Appendix H), with the exception of the university president who was asked broader, bigger-picture questions regarding the program and its future directions.

Document Review

The third main source of ethnographic data collection is that of document review, a category that includes the collection and interpretation of any examples of artifacts or records that express some element of the cultural system in which they were produced. Examples common to traditional ethnography include traditional jewelry or artwork, linguistic insights such as diaries or newspaper advertisements, or even formal documents such as voluminous kinship records or academic achievement files (Angrosino, 2007).

As I progressed through my semester at the early entrance program, I carefully collected a library of documents and artifacts related to the program and its mission, culture, and students. I would take each item back to my dorm room and examine it, taking notes on possible cultural significance or meaning, and comparing and contrasting it with the other relevant elements of life at the early entrance program. Among the artifacts and documents I collected and analyzed were the following:

- Examples of participants' academic work

- Examples of students' creative outlets and interests (poems, short stories, artistic photographs, etc.)

- Program advertisements and recruiting materials, in the form of brochures, mass mailings, information sheets, and promotional videos on CD-ROM

- A copy of the program's application and admissions materials

- Yearbooks from six different years of the program's history, through which I could glean information regarding student demographic trends over time

- Reports regarding the accomplishments of past program graduates, including information on which institutions graduates commonly transferred to following their time with the program

- The student handbook, which lists all program rules and behavioral expectations, along with the corresponding punishments for violating those policies

- Materials regarding student scholarships and the state's tuition assistance program, which covered a significant percentage of students' expenses

- Documents guiding students to various community service opportunities, both on campus and in the university's home city

- Guides on proper studying techniques and ways for students to better manage their time

- Information packets on career counseling appointments with the program counselor

- Copies of the program newspaper

- Statistical data from recruitment surveys sent both to program alumni and their parents

- Published academic journal articles by the university president and former program directors about the early years of the institution, and

- Recent newspaper clippings identifying the program (mistakenly) as a high school and congratulating its seniors for having the highest average SAT scores in the state.

Finally, it is critical to note that throughout the entire data collection process, the advice of Bogdan and Biklen (2007) and Brewer (2000) to collect data via multiple

methods and use it to check and challenge prior insights and understandings was followed closely. This process of using varied data sources to verify findings, once known as triangulation, was not only helpful in providing evidence for or against emerging concepts and themes, but also for helping to adjust data collection methods during the study to better test developing understandings. To illustrate with an example, in one case the examination of yearbooks from throughout the program's history (document review) led me to suspect that international students seemed to arrive in cohorts from certain countries or geographic regions that were oddly specific (i.e. the Spanish region of Catalonia). This led me to raise the issue in conversations with participants and administrators (interviews), and I learned that international boarding schools and/or faculty members at those schools sometimes develop good relationships with an American early entrance program and encourage their best students to apply each year. As a result, I began to pay more attention to these international students at program events (participant observation), in order to measure how well they were fitting in with the broader community or whether they were isolating themselves socially.

Data Analysis

According to Crabtree and Miller (1992), "nearly as many analysis strategies exist as qualitative researchers." In general, however, qualitative data analysis is about the discovery of themes, typically through some mixture of organizing, examining, sorting, coding, questioning, re-coding, comparing, and contrasting your transcribed interviews, field notes, and document analysis data until trends and commonalities become apparent. These themes are "abstract and often fuzzy constructs" (Ryan & Bernard, 2000), yet as a researcher patiently and methodically sifts through their data and searches for meaning in

the recorded words and observed actions of their participants, they have a tendency to emerge and refine slowly but steadily. Much of the process revolves around constant and continual "coding," the translation of data into labels and markers that reveal the heart of the concepts being discussed or observed and can be used to group similar statements or events for further analysis. Coding forces the researcher to read between the lines of their participants' statements, looking for trends, assumptions, and hidden threads throughout the data. As Miles and Huberman (1994) claimed, "coding *is* analysis." That said, six major coding traditions exist, each with its own methods, recommended practices, and even sub-traditions common to some members but not to others. These six traditions in coding methods include grounded theory, schema analysis, classic content analysis, content dictionaries, analytic induction, and ethnographic decision trees (Ryan & Bernard, 2000).

Grounded Theory Analysis

For my own data analysis procedures I chose to utilize grounded theory coding methods, specifically a blend of those advocated by Strauss and Corbin (1990) and Charmaz (2006). While this research is not a "grounded theory study," per se, in that it does not seek to generate "substantive and formal theories" (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), I decided to use this school of coding methods for several important reasons. First, as an ethnographic researcher I am primarily concerned with the individuals and culture of my research site and I felt that grounded theory's dual foci on "understanding people's experiences in as rigorous and detailed a manner as possible" and "developing increasingly richer concepts and models of how the phenomenon being studied actually works" was a great methodological fit for my research design (Ryan & Bernard, 2000, p.

782). Second, I had found several of the more common and well-known grounded theory

coding practices to be very helpful in my initial attempts at the coding of my interview

data and I felt that the process was contributing well to the power and effectiveness of my

analysis and was proving itself worthy of more complete adoption. Specifically, the early

practices that I found highly useful included 1) the "constant comparative method"

(Glaser & Strauss, 1967), whereby I continually compared and contrasted developing

themes and concepts as they emerged from the analysis, 2) the practice of "in vivo

coding" (Strauss & Corbin, 1990), adopting the participants' actual words as my initial

codes, 3) the writing of memos to organize and develop emerging codes and themes

(Strauss & Corbin, 1990), and 4) the use of gerunds when appropriate for coding labels as

well (Charmaz, 2006). A final reason why I chose to utilize grounded theory coding

methods related to the internal logic and consistency of the data analysis steps advocated

by Charmaz (2006), and how well suited they seemed for practical application. I had

collected thousands of pages of interview and observation data, and felt that her step-by-

step process of open coding, memo writing, focused coding, memo writing, axial coding,

and optional theoretical coding to fill in the broader context was a clear, focused roadmap

that would be beneficial for a novice researcher such as myself to follow.

Even though Strauss, Corbin, and Charmaz had provided an excellent pathway,

modifications and changes to their proposed methods were still necessary in order to

better analyze my data. In particular, I quickly learned that memo writing would be

difficult during the initial, open coding stages of the process, due to the sheer number of

initial codes that I had generated (795). As such, limited memos were written during the

open coding phase, describing trends and concepts that I believed to possibly be

emerging, and were then written with greater frequency following the focused coding layer of analysis after the codes had been refined to a more manageable number.

Early Stages and Open Coding

Ultimately, my data analysis procedures began as follows: First, I prepared my data for analysis by collecting and typing all of my field note observations and notes on the documents I had collected throughout the four months of data collection. All interviews were transcribed verbatim and sent back to the participant for member checking purposes and the verification of their accuracy (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Next, after having successfully transferred all data to an electronic word-processing file format, I assigned each file (such as each specific interview) a reference code and added continuous line numbers throughout each electronic document. Thus, I could easily keep track of specific quotes and portions of text through labeling their document code and location. For example, a quote that began on the 745th line of Max's third interview transcript would be coded as "Max3, 745." Once this process had been completed, I created an electronic spreadsheet for coding purposes (Appendix I), with the following columns: Location code, quote or textual excerpt, initial open code, focused code, axial code category (theme), and which research question the theme related to.

Following the creation of this spreadsheet, I spent a great deal of time going through every prepared document, transcript, and field note that I had recorded. Every time I encountered an interesting, relevant, or meaningful quote or textual passage I would transfer it to the coding spreadsheet, along with its location code, and assign an initial open code. Initial codes, whenever possible, were done through the in vivo method recommended by Strauss and Corbin (1990) and/or with the use of gerunds to

keep the codes "open and active" as advised by Charmaz (2006). By the time I had

finished the open coding process with each of my collected interviews and documents, I

had added a grand total of 997 quotes and textual excerpts to the spreadsheet, along with

each of their location codes for quick reference, and found that I had used 795 distinct

open codes during that first major phase of analysis. I then color-coded the spreadsheet,

using blue text for quotes by full-time program administrators, light purple text for quotes

by program residential staff (who were mainly older undergraduate students), and red text

for my personal field notes and observations. My eight participants' text remained black,

but I color-coded each participant by using a different background color for each. This

color-coding process made things much easier later in the analysis process, as I could

quickly glance at the quotes which comprised a particular refined code or proposed theme

and instantly know how many different participants had commented on that concept, as

well as whether or not the students' assertions had been supported by any administrators,

staff members, or my personal observations. The spreadsheet was also useful throughout

the entire data analysis process as it allowed me to continually manipulate and reorganize

the data as needed, fluctuating between grouping data by participant to grouping data by

initial code, refined code, or axial code category. It also provides a lasting record of my

chronological coding refinement, as it details which open codes were combined into

focused codes, and which focused codes were grouped together into axial code

categories, thus organizing the data in a clear and organized fashion.

Focused Coding

Following initial coding, which had yielded 795 distinct open codes (mainly due

to the frequent use of in vivo coding), I next set about with beginning to develop my

focused codes. This was done by following the guidance of Charmaz (2006), who advised that this layer of coding be more "directed, selective, and conceptual than word-by-word, line-by-line, and incident-by-incident coding." The first step in this process was to identify extremely similar open codes and collapse them into a single, early-stage, refined code. For example, initial codes such as "Challenged for the first time" and "Being challenged for the first time" would be collapsed and relabeled with the refined code "Challenged for the first time." The second stage involved finding initial codes that were about similar topics or ideas and grouping them into a refined code which could express all of their essences. For example, initial codes such as "High school didn't teach us anything," "High school was irrelevant to my life," and "School was just a waste of time" could be collapsed into a single focused code such as "School was pointless." As other codes became further refined they were continually checked against those already created, using the constant comparative method, to see whether they could be further collapsed and refined or whether they actually represented two distinct concepts or ideas. Ultimately, the focused coding stage concluded with the 795 initial codes having been collapsed to a more manageable 104 focused codes.

Reflexive Practices

Throughout the focused coding process, and increasingly as I proceeded to the later stages of analysis, I periodically reflected on my emerging codes and understandings through employing a number of important reflexive techniques. The first of these was the constant comparative method, as described above. The second of these was the writing of memos. Strauss and Corbin (1990) detailed that three types of memos may be helpful for qualitative researchers to create, being "code notes" about the codes you are

forming, "theory notes" about the relationships you see forming between the codes, and "operational notes" regarding your general procedures. Code notes and theory notes were most helpful to my work and an example of a memo on a refined code may be found in the appendices (Appendix J). The third major reflexive technique was the examination of "negative cases," which are quotes, observations, or other such data that seems to contradict your developing understandings, codes, or themes. Far from being a bad thing, the inclusion and consideration of negative cases is in fact something which ultimately strengthens a researcher's understanding and research findings, as "the researcher uses negative case analysis to identify problems and make appropriate revisions" to the concepts, themes, or theories that they see emerging from their data (Ryan & Bernard, 2000, p. 783).

Axial Coding

The third step in my coding process was that of axial coding, which is a means of connecting focused codes into categories or themes, rather than continuing to collapse them any further. At the point where I concluded my focused coding I was confident that each of my focused codes actually represented a distinct concept or idea from all the others, and axial coding was thus the way by which I grouped related codes together to express the common theme subtly uniting them. This action follows the standard practice and intent of Straussian grounded theory, as Charmaz (2006) described the procedure as being one of "connecting your open, initial codes into large categories" by first fracturing the data through open coding and then reforming it by means of axial coding. To illustrate with an example, the axial code category of "Troubled social history" is meant to connect and encapsulate the critical elements of the focused codes "Bullied in the

past," "Feeling different," "Had few friends," and "Wanting academically-oriented friends."

The creation of axial categories from refined codes was done through a gradual process of reflection and comparison that relied upon several methods. I began by conducting a "pile sort" of the focused codes, having written each on an index card and then grouping as many as initially possible by similarities in content and concept. Following the initial pile sort, I returned to memo writing on the groupings of codes, reflecting upon what connecting threads were common to each pile and what elements defined the codes as an emerging category. I then conducted a secondary pile sort with the yet unplaced index cards, returning once again to the constant comparative method to determine which should be added to the emerging piles, which should be grouped in new piles, and which represented "negative cases" to be considered against my emerging understanding of the axial categories/themes. I then continued to reflect on the categories through several more rounds of memo writing, pile sorting, negative case analysis, and rearranging of my developing conceptual model. Negative cases were particularly helpful to this step as well, for as Ryan and Bernard (2000) made clear:

> Once a model starts to take shape, the researcher looks for negative cases – cases that don't fit the model. Negative cases either disconfirm parts of the model or suggest new connections that need to be made. In either instance, negative cases must be accommodated (p. 782).

After several days of contemplating the model, altering the groupings, and further defining my emergent categorical themes, I reached a point where I was satisfied with the arrangement and believed it to accurately and honestly portray the lived experiences I had

witnessed during my ethnographic fieldwork experience. At that point, I began to work

on the creation of data displays to visually represent the discovered themes and the

relationships between them, as recommended by Miles and Huberman (1994). I also

began to consider at that point how well each individual slice of the conceptual model

portrayed in the data display responded to each of the broader research questions.

Finally, I planned how I would present my newly discovered themes as research findings

in Chapter VI, along with deciding which quotes, observations, and document review

samples would be most representative for use as supporting evidence of those themes.

Establishing Trustworthiness

While no two ethnographers are likely to practice their methods in the exact same

fashion, qualitative scholars have generally come to agree on some broad understandings

as to what constitutes a well done ethnographic research study, worthy of the readers'

trust. First, the positivist notions of validity and reliability have been nearly eliminated,

with "validity" being pushed aside as an objectivist value-term and "reliability" shifting

in meaning to the question of whether multiple researchers or theoretical perspectives

may agree on an analytically induced point (Angrosino, 2007). Second, quality

ethnography is generally assumed to be transparent ethnography, making the actions of

the participants and researcher alike clearly understood. Third, successful ethnography is

presented in a style of thick description, in a manner that replicates a former reality and

helps to transport readers to that very cultural mindset and event (Wolcott, 1990).

Fourth, quality ethnography should be reflexive, with the researcher questioning their

own actions, subjectivities, and mindsets as an important part of the process. Fifth, data

analysis procedures should be clearly explained, defensible, and internally consistent

throughout (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). Sixth, ethnography should always be culturally sensitive, ethical, and respectful of the participants who are sharing their lives.

While these six generally agreed upon principles are helpful to aspiring and practicing ethnographers alike, just as important may be the emerging theories of quality that are found within popular scholarly writing throughout the social science disciplines. Many of these assessment theories have been presented as fully explained systems, and currently vie for broader acceptance and utilization. One of the most well known is that of Lincoln and Guba (1985), who proposed an assessment of "trustworthiness" in qualitative research, broken down into four factors: Credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. For Lincoln and Guba (1985), credibility refers to how believable a research study and/or finding appears to its audience, transferability relates to how possible it is to use the study's findings in the greater world, dependability questions whether or not the researcher has been consistent in methods throughout the process, and confirmability asks whether or not the research appears as free from bias as can be realistically expected.

To put my own research process and methods under the microscope is to reveal, as is natural, areas of success and areas of challenge. Throughout the process of designing the study, collecting and analyzing the data, and presenting the findings I have worked to meet the six agreed upon indicators of quality via seeking transparency, thick description, reflective practice, consistent procedures, and sensitivity to my participants and their community. I have not, however, integrated multiple researchers or questioned whether alternate theoretical frameworks would arrive at similar conclusions, aside from member-checking my data with participants and comparing my findings to those of the

extant literature on early entrance, much of which is positivist in nature. As to Lincoln and Guba's (1985) test of trustworthiness, I would argue that my work is highly transferable by those who administrate early entrance programs nationwide, that I have been consistent in both my data collection and data analysis procedures, and that I have worked to make my subjectivities clear and prevent them from biasing my work to the best of my abilities. As to whether my work and findings are believable - that may be a question best left to others to decide.

CHAPTER IV

DESCRIPTION OF THE RESEARCH SETTING

For the purposes of protecting both my research site and providing further confidentiality to my participants who are below the age of 18, I have decided to employ a pseudonym for the program where I conducted this study. The program will be referred to as "The Early Scholars Program," (ESP) and certain geographical and demographic details will be left intentionally vague.

Program History

The Early Scholars Program is nestled on the campus of a mid-sized regional university in the American Southeast, and was founded during the 1990's at the behest of the university's president and with sizable support from the state government. While the initial class consisted of only 22 students and the highest enrollment thus far has been 103 (combining first and second-year students), the program's size has commonly ranged between 60 to 80 students at any given time. The Early Scholars Program has traditionally required applicants to have completed two years of high school and to possess both a 3.5 unweighted high school grade point average (GPA) and a combined SAT score of 1150 or an ACT score of 25 or higher. Younger candidates are considered for admission, however, if their SAT/ACT scores meet higher criteria and they demonstrate the maturity necessary for collegiate success. Following the two-year program, approximately 40% of Early Scholars will remain at the university, with others choosing to transfer to institutions ranging from other state schools to the Ivy Leagues.

According to the university president, the Early Scholars Program represents his personal vision for the university as a whole, in terms of the caliber of students it attracts, their high level of extracurricular and research involvement on campus, and the exceptional graduate institutions and careers that they later pursue. "My long term vision for this university is to become a true destination university with a high level of academics, a vibrant life and community, and good facilities and support systems," he told me. "That has already happened here with a few hundred students, and now that needs to become a few thousand."

Program Mission and Description

The mission statement of the Early Scholars Program expresses a desire to provide a full-time, residential early-entrance-to-college experience for high-ability students who hope to accelerate their academic careers. The ESP helps students to succeed in this endeavor by providing them with academic guidance, psychological counseling opportunities, study skills and career counseling, community-building programs and social events, a separate dormitory, and a specially trained residential staff. Students are strongly encouraged to take part in all that university life has to offer, with the only exceptions being Greek life and NCAA athletic participation (although intramural sports are encouraged). Additionally, the program works to provide a safe, structured environment for students who are younger than age 18 (the vast majority), through enforcing a curfew, keeping a strict zero-tolerance policy concerning alcohol and drugs, and barring students from entering other residence halls on campus.

Early Scholars Program students, on average, seem to integrate well into the community at large, both academically and socially. Academically, Early Scholars

usually carry a full college credit load (15 credits) or more, with some carrying as many as 21 or 22 credits per semester. The most recent data available concerning participants' academic performance indicated that the mean grade point average for the prior semester had been a 3.62, with 93% of students earning above a 3.0 and 17% earning a perfect 4.0. The few students who struggle academically (defined by the program as earning below a 3.2 GPA) are placed on "academic probation" and are required to meet weekly with a counselor, work with tutors or ESP staff members, and are prohibited from certain program extracurricular organizations and jobs until their grades improve. Students whose grades do not improve over the next semester may be dismissed at the director's discretion, but this is not a common occurrence. It is rare for a student to leave the program, with only 1-2 per year in recent years, and when this happens it is typically due to a disciplinary proceeding rather than an academic concern.

The Early Scholars are also active around campus, engaged in both program sponsored social activities and clubs and organizations at the university or local community level as well. Many participate in honor societies, bands or choirs, academic clubs, political organizations, religious groups, and/or intramural sports teams. Additionally, program students have a positive reputation among faculty members for their interest in assisting professors with their research, and it is common to hear these sixteen and 17 year-old students discussing the projects they are conducting with professors or talking about the manuscript portions that they are preparing for journal submission. Early Scholars are also highly active in community service, as they are required to complete a minimum of 10 hours per semester by the program. Many volunteer through such diverse organizations as the local adult-education literacy

program, the humane society, a nearby shelter for abused women and children, and with get-out-the-vote campaigns. Others start their own charitable endeavors and spend the year raising money for needy refugee groups or working to actively promote environmental practices or vegetarian eating habits.

Socially, the program's students are typically able to "pass" among the traditionally-aged undergraduates, with most of their classmates assuming that they are the same age as anybody else or simply just look young. Early Scholars reported that few in their classes ever realized that they were younger than the norm, and that when they did choose to share their ages with classmates or campus friends they were often met with surprise or disbelief. Most older students on campus are only marginally aware of the program's details, but some stigma is attached to program membership and stereotypes of Early Scholars do exist. This is especially true among traditionally-aged male undergraduates, who are sometimes warned by their Resident Assistants (RA's) to stay away from the program and its underage females or "risk going to jail." Ultimately, while most Early Scholars do form friendships with some older classmates or at least share cordial pleasantries with them, most choose to spend their social time with other students from the program, who can better understand their experiences and with whom they are more likely to share common interests.

While pursuing a high-school diploma concurrently while at the university is not a strictly mandatory activity for membership in the program, almost all Early Scholars choose to take courses that will earn them full college credit while also fulfilling state high school graduation requirements. Provided that they are successful academically, these students typically fulfill their requirements and earn their high school diplomas

after three or four semesters in the program. The exceptions to this rule come from four general categories, being: 1) International students, 2) students who enter the program prior to completing their second year of high school, 3) out-of-state students who elect not to "transfer" to a local high school, and 4) students who simply decide not to pursue a high school diploma, either because they plan to remain at a state college or university following the early entrance program or because they become too frustrated with problems negotiating the legal challenges of dual enrollment with their high school's guidance counselors and school board. In my time at the program, I personally encountered students from only the first two categories – concurrently pursuing a high school diploma is highly recommended by the Early Scholars Program and their academic counselor works to ensure that any qualified student is able to do so.

Program Demographics

Early Scholars are typically between the ages of 15-17 and chose to matriculate to college 1-2 years earlier than the norm. Some students are admitted at even younger ages, however, although the necessary thresholds for both prior academic performance and social maturity are heightened in considering whether to accept such an applicant. The youngest member of the program at the time of this study had matriculated at age 14, but the youngest student the Early Scholars Program has ever admitted was 13 years of age. According to program administrators, that student excelled in the collegiate academic environment, adjusted to social challenges reasonably well, and is now happy to be 20 years old and completing his third year of medical school.

Gender

The program's total enrollment, counting both first and second year students, has typically ranged from 60 to 80, and at the time of this study there were 65 Early Scholars on campus. While the national gender distribution among early entrants is relatively even (Booth, Sethna, Stanley, & Colgate, 1999), the Early Scholars Program has traditionally enrolled significantly more females than males. This pattern was exceptionally pronounced the year of this study, as the program was comprised of 45 females and only 20 males. While administrators did express a desire to achieve a more balanced distribution, this did not appear to be an area of great concern, especially considering that the university's general student body was also heavily skewed in favor of females. It did, however, have a meaningful impact on the social lives of the Early Scholars – particularly the boys – as females tended to aggressively and publicly pursue romantic interests and openly compete with each other over the males, in a stark reversal of traditional gender norms.

Race

In terms of racial demographics, the Early Scholars Program (over an average of five years of data) was comprised of 74% Caucasian students (both European American and European study-abroad students), 13% Asian students (both Asian American and Asian study-abroad students), and 10% African American students, with the remaining 3% representing other racial groups. Two trends in these figures surprised me, the first being the relatively "low overrepresentation" of Asian Americans when compared to early entrance statistics nationwide, and the second being the high degree of underrepresentation for African Americans and Hispanic students. While having a

student body that is 13% Asian American represents a greater than four-fold overrepresentation of that group according to state demographic data (U.S. Census Bureau, 2009), the figure is actually only half of the figure quoted by Stanley (1985b), who found that 24% of early entrants nationwide at that time were of Asian descent. African Americans, meanwhile, were being represented at a rate three times less than would be equitable in terms of state demographics (U.S. Census Bureau, 2009), and Hispanic students were hardly being represented at all.

Having spoken about the underrepresentation of historically disadvantaged populations with both the current director of the Early Scholars Program and the two prior directors, I can, however, report that the recruitment of students from all racial minority backgrounds is something that the ESP has been actively pursuing since the beginning with slow yet observable success. In general, the percentages of students from non-European backgrounds has been climbing, to a historic high of 33.7% in 2009-2010. That year, 13% of Early Scholars were African American and nearly 20% were Asian American. Complicating this trend, however, are the facts that: 1) Increases are largely coming from rises in the African American and Asian American student populations, with little to no growth in the percentage of Hispanic entrants, and 2) The rise in African American enrollment has been almost exclusively to the benefit of African American females. For example, at the time of this research study, there were eight African American females in the program, but only one African American male. This means that while 17.7% of the female Early Scholars were African American, this was true for only 5% of the male Early Scholars. While there is clearly still work to be done in terms of racial equity in representation, one administrator did point out that over the past two

years the admissions council has become more "flexible" with SAT requirements in an attempt to recruit a more diverse class. Monitoring during this time has also shown that the Early Scholars with slightly lower SAT scores than the advertised minimum do not fare any worse in terms of their college GPA's or overall success in the program.

International Students

International students make up a surprisingly large percentage (13%) of the ESP's student body and in recent years they have primarily come from two specific parts of the world: South Korea and the Spanish region of Catalonia. According to program administrators, these students tend to perform very well in the program academically, although there are sometimes social challenges or issues of social isolation due to cultural differences and the difficulties of adjusting to a new language and environment. Even still, administrators reported that these students are often very comfortable with early entrance from the start, as many were previously at foreign residential boarding schools and/or in comparatively high-pressure educational systems. As a result, these students usually arrive already accustomed to living on their own and being used to high levels of academic rigor.

As to the question of how international students come to learn about the Early Scholars Program, two common explanations exist. First, over time, the ESP has developed positive relationships with certain foreign boarding schools and faculty members at those boarding schools (especially in Catalonia), and "pipelines" have been established. From time to time, when that school or faculty member has a student who they think would be a good candidate, they recommend the Early Scholars Program to that student and their parents as the logical next step in the child's education. Second,

and this came as a surprise to program administrators when they learned about it, the Early Scholars Program was listed a number of years ago on a Korean-language webpage as an "educational best-buy" for Korean students hoping to study in America, and ever since then they have received several applications per year from that country. Interestingly enough, aside from pipelines and advertising, a third (albeit illegal) option exists for recruiting foreign students: The hiring of a "headhunter" to recruit qualified applicants from foreign countries. Although the ESP has never used these services, one former director told me that he would be routinely contacted by foreign agents proposing to "find" students for their program in exchange for a per-student fee. Supposedly, this type of "educational consulting" job can be quite lucrative in countries such as India or China, as the agents will charge both the child's parents and the institution once a match has been made.

A final issue regarding international students relates to two difficulties that the program has dealt with in the past: Integration issues and cross-cultural disciplinary problems. While many international students seem to blend in fairly well after they've become accustomed to the program, there has been some concern at times regarding certain groups of foreign students who bond closely with other students from their country and do not mix socially with the program at large. This has been particularly evident of late with South Korean males, something that has quite the effect considering that they comprise 15% (3 out of 20) of the entire male population. Additionally, I was told that cross-cultural differences in behavioral expectations have at times made disciplining international students more difficult, as behaviors that are considered "zero-tolerance" for 17 year olds here (such as smoking cigarettes or drinking wine) might be

legal and acceptable in the student's home culture. In one case, an administrator was laughed at and ignored by European parents when told that their son being a smoker was a "serious" issue. Still, these problems are relatively minor, and for the most part, international students add a great deal of cultural diversity to the Early Scholars Program.

Socio-Economic Status

In terms of diversity and equitable representation, the inclusion of students from families of all income brackets is one area where the Early Scholars Program truly shines. According to one former director, roughly 33% of the program's students come from "low income homes" the majority of students are from the middle class and very few are from truly wealthy families. Income is not considered much of a barrier to early entrance because of the presence of a state tuition-assistance program that covers public tuition, fees, and a small book allowance. Additionally, both merit and need-based scholarships exist to cover additional expenses for certain students, which are especially helpful due to the fact that early entrance students are ineligible for federal financial aid because they are not high school graduates.

My own observations lead me to suspect that the former director's assessment was correct, as I saw very few indicators of high parental income among the students, although in the words of one student, "It's hard to showcase your wealth in a dorm room." The one manner in which students did display some income differences was by the type of car that they drove. Early Scholars are permitted to bring cars to campus, and while some have personally owned new vehicles that they received as a gift, others have older models in need of repair or no car at all. Still, at no point did I ever see a student

make a "flashy display" of their vehicle, even if they must have been proud to have such a nice car.

To conclude this portion on socio-economic status, I wish to share a touching story related to me by the university's president when I asked him about the Early Scholars' attitudes towards wealth and status. He told me, occasionally pausing to apologize for becoming emotional, that a number of years back a student was accepted to the program who was homeless, and that the night before arriving her family was robbed of most of their remaining possessions. The girl travelled to the university regardless and arrived at the dorm with two small plastic grocery bags, containing all she had left. "At any normal high school," the president said, "that girl would have been ridiculed and ostracized for her poverty and situation." Instead, as word traveled around the dormitory about her plight, all the other girls banded together, cornered her in the hallway, took her to their rooms one by one, and made her try things on until they each found her an outfit that fit. By the end of that day, the girl had received an entirely new wardrobe.

Urban/Rural Representation

Among demographic factors, the urban/rural gap is perhaps the most inequitable in early entrance, with only 2% of early entrants coming from rural areas (Noble & Childers, 2008). While I was unable to discover any hard data concerning the percentage of Early Scholars from distinctly rural areas, I was informed by a current administrator that the great majority of American students at the program were from the greater metropolitan area of the largest major city nearby. Among my eight participants, I would only classify one as being from a truly rural background, which would certainly be consistent with the administrator's claim.

Traditions and Rituals

The Top Lobby

The Early Scholars Program is a place of traditions and rituals, many of which help to define the institution both academically and socially and which contribute to its overall sense of community. In describing these traditions, perhaps the best place to begin would be with the culture of the "top lobby," the dormitory's primary common area that all students and staff must walk through when entering the building. The "top lobby" is referred to as such because there is an additional lobby level one floor below, although that social space has only an exit but no swipe-card reader for entrance to the building. The top lobby is a spacious, well-lit room, surrounded on two sides by large glass windows. These windows are often covered with colorful advertisements for upcoming program events, usually made from vivid-hued construction paper and poster board. The interior wall of the "top lobby" displays a gigantic bulletin-board which is seasonally or thematically decorated by the program's residential staff, displaying slogans such as "Make Magical Memories at the Early Scholars Program!" for the semester's decorative Harry Potter theme or "Be Thankful for All You Have Received" upon a horn of plenty at Thanksgiving. The fourth wall is home to "The Box," which is actually a small office and information desk that operates between the hours of 8 a.m. and 11 p.m. Program students are hired to work in "The Box" for several shifts a week, where they answer phones, help students with questions about the campus or upcoming program events, and manage the administration of the infamous "Blue Book" each night. More on the Blue Book will be explained in the next section, but it is a blue binder that all students below the age of 18 are required to sign each night, stating that they have arrived in the dorm

before curfew and will be remaining in the dormitory until at least 6 a.m. the next morning. A trophy case rests in the far corner of the lobby, next to the Box, displaying various trophies and campus awards that the Early Scholars Program has won over the years, as well as several relics of program history from significant events and social programs.

In the middle of the top lobby are four large couches, three comfortable chairs, and a random assortment of ottomans and coffee tables. At the start of my semester at the program this furniture had a mauve, orange, and yellow "puzzle piece" type design, but early that winter the program reupholstered the furniture with deep tones of blue. The top lobby is in many ways the social heart of the program, and Early Scholars can be found there talking, studying, relaxing, and interacting at almost all times of the day. The lobby has fewer residents in the mornings, with an increase in the early afternoon, and a sharp rise once students' classes for the day are over. Typically, anywhere between 6-15 students can be found there at any point in the late afternoon, evening, or night, representing between 10-25% of the total program population. Top lobby conversations can be perplexing to behold, as their quick swings from lofty intellectual topics to juvenile, low-brow humor truly put on the display the tensions between the students' chronological and mental ages. One minute they are discussing philosophy and tutoring each other in theoretical physics, while the next minute they are telling risqué jokes and speaking in ways reminiscent of high school locker rooms and cafeterias.

The Blue and Green Books

Integral to the supervisory aspects of the Early Scholars Program are the usage of the "Blue Book" and the "Green Book." These books are in many ways tangible

reminders to the students of their young ages, and are popular targets for derision even if most students will privately admit that they understand why they are necessary. As explained above, the Blue Book is a large blue binder that sits at the Top Lobby Box, and each student below the age of 18 must sign-in at some point before curfew each night, stating that they will not be leaving the building again until 6 a.m. Curfew occurs at 11 p.m. on Sunday through Thursday nights and at 12 a.m. on Friday and Saturday nights. If a student does not sign the Blue Book by curfew, residential staff begin looking for that student to determine whether they are possibly missing or just forgot to sign in. Students who habitually forget to sign in are issued consequences, depending on the circumstances of the violations. Following curfew, students are expected not only to be in the dormitory but also on their specific residential floors, although exceptions to this rule, such as returning to the lobby to use the vending machines, do exist. Between the hours of 10 p.m. and 10 a.m. "quiet hours" are observed in the individual residential floors, although this simply means that students respect each other's need for sleep and keep their noise level low if requested to do so. No official bedtime or "lights out" hour exists at the Early Scholars Program, and many students even find it easier to begin studying after curfew, when there are fewer social distractions to lead them astray.

While the Blue Book serves as a nighttime reminder of the program's watchful eye over its young charges, the Green Book serves the same purpose during the day. Early Scholars are permitted to leave campus at any point and for any reason between the hours of 6 a.m. and curfew (with certain restrictions concerning entering other dormitories and fraternity/sorority houses), yet must "sign-out" in the green binder if they are leaving campus for any destinations other than the adjacent McDonalds, burrito

restaurant, or grocery store. Most significantly, students who leave to return home on the weekends must sign out in the Green Book as well, so that the staff knows not to worry about them if their signature is not in the Blue Book that night, or if there is an emergency or fire drill. Students are permitted to return home for the weekend as often as they would like and most do so on a nearly weekly basis. This, of course, has social effects both for those students who are regularly leaving and also for the students whose homes are farther away and cannot afford this luxury, as they tend to bond more closely due to being left behind each weekend. While the Blue Book is located at the top lobby student info desk, the Green Book sits on a small table right by the dormitory's front entrance – an ever present reminder that the students must keep the program informed.

Late Night Studying

All throughout the building, which is separated into a males' wing and a females' wing, are located both individual study carrels and group meeting rooms. Small computer lab facilities also exist, although most students rely on their own private laptops for internet access. While it was common for me to observe students studying in these areas during the day, it was almost guaranteed that most would be occupied between the hours of 10 p.m. and 1 a.m, and in some cases they remained full until much, much later. In the words of one administrator, who was surprised to find awake, studying students all over the building when she was called in to help with a private student matter at 3 a.m., "This place is like Vegas – no one sleeps!"

Students often told me that they preferred this late night studying routine because it both allowed them to take part more fully in the social activities of the day and also because they found fewer distractions existed once curfew hour was upon them. Even

still, however, friendly talks, movie viewings, and other social activities did provide outlets and/or interruptions for students who were attempting to study in the wee hours of the morning. Different students coped with these distractions in different ways, with some being quite humorous actually. Some students would welcome the intrusions, others would barricade themselves in private study carrel rooms and draw the blinds for privacy, and one former resident was still famous in the program for pioneering a tradition of wearing "study ears" any time she was studying and did not wish to be disturbed. She would sit at a table with her books and if her friends passing by saw that she was wearing a headband with a pair of fuzzy leopard-print cat ears coming off of them, they knew to quietly keep walking and leave her alone.

Thursday Night Dinner

Another time-honored ritual at the Early Scholars Program consists of the "Thursday Night Dinner" (TND), a mandatory gathering of all Early Scholars (unless they have classes at that time) to share a meal and hear either a guest lecture by a visiting presenter or an informative talk by a program administrator. During my semester with the program, Thursday Night Dinner speakers included: 1) the program's psychological counselor to lead ice-breakers and "get-to-know-you games" at the start of the year, 2) a married duo of "pop culture literacy" professors who taught the students to think critically about themes and topics in pop culture media, 3) the program's academic counselor to speak about the college applications process for the benefit of second year students who were thinking of transferring or applying to out-of-state institutions as freshmen, 4) The director of an adult literacy education program in the area who told students about the program and how they could volunteer, 5) A visiting professor who

had just written a book on "living in the postmodern South," and 6) the president of the university, who spoke about the "flattening world" and its implications for higher education and the world economy. In addition, Thursday Night Dinners were sometimes superseded by other large campus events that the Early Scholars would be required to go to instead, such as campus talks by well known novelists, cultural diversity fairs, and an honors banquet that celebrated students of particularly high achievement and allowed the Program to publicly recognize donors whose ongoing contributions helped the ESP to remain financially viable.

While students sometimes complained about being required to attend the Thursday Night Dinners, most looked forward to the event or at least viewed it in a neutral capacity. For some program alumni who had remained at the university to complete their degrees it was even a chance to keep their connection to the Early Scholars Program alive. One or two recent program graduates could be spotted at any Thursday Night Dinner, having come to join the community for an hour or two and say hello to old friends.

Community Service

Early Scholars are required to complete a minimum of 10 hours of community service per semester, for a total of at least 20 hours of community service per year. Failure to do so jeopardizes a first year student's opportunity to return to the program for a second year, and failure to do so for a second-year student jeopardizes that student's participation in the program's closing ceremony and the reception of their certificate of Early Scholars Program completion.

Ample opportunities to complete these requirements exist throughout the program, university, and local community, and the Early Scholars Program administrators and residential staff members work very hard to create opportunities, advertise others, and even arrange carpools or provide rides for interested students who lack transportation. In my time at the ESP, I observed students organizing and leading food drives, book drives, clothing drives, teaching English to foreign immigrants, leading adult literacy education classes, volunteering at the humane society, participating in church activities for the homeless or impoverished, joining 5K races to raise money for disease research, volunteering as unpaid babysitters for parents of low income, organizing vegetarianism and green-living campaigns, and donating their time to nonpartisan call centers aimed at encouraging people to vote.

Most students easily meet these requirements each semester, with a high percentage volunteering for many more than the ten hour minimum. Some, however, are known to put off the requirements until late in the semester and then scramble to complete them quickly. Several of the participants in this study had completed the required ten hours within the first three weeks of the semester, but 20 out of the program's 65 students were still working on their requirements by late November, with only two weeks left to turn in their verification forms. At its core, the Early Scholars Program considers community service to be at the heart of its mission to help these talented young people to grow into mature, responsible adults. In the (oft-quoted Biblical) words of one administrator, who spent a Thursday Night Dinner discussing and advertising local options for volunteering, "To whom much is given, much is expected."

Decathlon

From the students' perspective, perhaps the most important program tradition is

that of the "Decathlon," a three-day celebration of athletics, intellect, and creativity that

occurs each year over the weekend preceding the Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. holiday.

The Decathlon began over a decade ago as a student-led attempt to relieve the boredom

of that long weekend, with male residents deciding to develop a list of ten events and to

sponsor a competition between the two male floors of the dorm. The event proved to be

so much fun that it was adopted as a new program tradition, with females being included

the following year as well. Residential staff members are now officially in charge of

organizing and running the event, although a student "Decathlon Committee" is formed

each September in order to assist in the planning and administration of that weekend's

events. One of the primary jobs of the committee each year is to select five of the ten

activities that will be included in the competition that winter, as five of the events are

considered traditional while the other five change from year to year. The five core events

consist of basketball, ultimate frisbee, soccer, chess, and an engineering challenge which

requires students to design and construct an original contraption in order to solve a

creative problem such as cushioning a dropped egg or building a glider out of scrap

materials. As for the five additional events, recent years have usually seen a mixture of

the following: a relay race, Twister, human chess on the lawn, a scavenger hunt, video

game competitions, a dance-off, dodgeball, board games (most often "Risk"), billiards,

ping pong, and the collectible card game "Magic: The Gathering." Students have also

pushed for their own unique ideas to be included and this year two students were actively

working to generate support for the inclusion of "Quidditch," a modified version of the

fictional sport made famous by the Harry Potter series, and "competitive knitting," consisting of a race to create a scarf of a certain length and width.

Aside from being a fun weekend for the Early Scholars Program's current students, the weekend has also transformed into the program's unofficial "homecoming" event, with alumni from all over the country flying back to reconnect with the program and meet the newer classes of Early Scholars. While program administrators look forward to seeing their old students once again, the weekend can be quite the headache for the residential staff, who not only have to supervise each event but also worry that the presence of 21 year-olds in the dorm may expose current students to increased opportunities for underage drinking. To prevent this from happening, RA's spend the weekend on high alert and even conduct bed checks if the residential coordinator deems them necessary. It is important to note, however, that neither underage drinking nor illegal drugs have been much of a problem at the Early Scholars Program in recent years. Administrators and former administrators informed me that alcohol issues and other behavioral incidents were more common in the early years of the program, but that with experience and the further refinement of the rules and their enforcement, disciplinary issues in general have dropped steadily over the past decade. Students I spoke to confirmed these assertions, stating that drinking and drugs are not common problems at the current time. This is no doubt mainly due to the fact that both of these are "zero tolerance" offenses at the Early Scholars Program and that even attending parties where alcohol or drugs are present could result in dismissal from the program.

Life as an Early Entrant: Daily Vignettes

The Cookout Celebration

Two weeks into the fall semester, once the students had a chance to settle into their new routines, the Early Scholars Program and the university's Honors Program (which incorporated both the ESP and traditionally-aged undergraduates) held their traditional "Kick-off Cookout" to welcome new students and celebrate the start of the academic year. Few of the older Honors Program students attended but almost all of the Early Scholars were present. The sun was shining and the weather was well over 85 degrees, and students scrambled to claim seats in the shade. Most were able to find spots at large plastic picnic tables that had been arranged across the wooded lawn of the backyard of the Honors Program Building's backyard, but others preferred to lounge in the grass, sipping soda and talking to their friends.

Off to the side of the yard were two industrial-sized grills, loaded with charcoal and lighter fluid. Food service employees stoked the embers and began to lay out rows of hotdogs and hamburgers across the metal grating. "Hey everybody!" yelled the program's interim director, a casually-dressed man with a relaxed, yet commanding voice, "Write down on this legal pad whether you want a hotdog or a hamburger, and whether you want cheese!" Students raced over to form a line at the condiments table and sign the pad, with many taking an extra moment to dig through the coolers filled with bottled water and soda for another round of refreshments. A small black boombox sat on the Honors Program Building's porch, filling the air with catchy top-40 hits. While the students waited for their food to be ready, several tossed Frisbees or chatted about class. Edgar, an Early Scholars Program alumni who had just returned to campus for his junior

year as a "regular underclassman," chatted with newer students about how much the program has meant to him. "Going to the Early Scholars Program was the best decision I've ever made," he said, "The traditional events are so much fun - just wait until you guys get to do the Decathlon competition this coming January."

In contrast to Edgar and the older students, many of the first year Early Scholars seemed nervous and unsure of themselves. They sat in small groups, saying very little, and whenever one would make a comment the others would politely smile or giggle before returning to silence. From time to time, one would stand up and wander about the backyard, exploring this new part of campus or stopping at the "door prize table" to examine several jars filled with small objects (such as candy corn, marshmallows, and jelly beans) and recording their name and guesses as to how many of each object were present in each jar by writing down numbers on scratchpads next to each container.

After fifteen minutes, the voice of the program's interim director once again bellowed across the yard. After introducing the key administrators of the Early Scholars Program and Honors Program and thanking the food service employees for their work, he loudly said "Alright everybody! We're glad to have you all here and this is going to be a great year! Now come on up, form a line, and get your food!" The students walked past the large grills, held out their plates, and happily received their orders. As they returned to their seats and began to hungrily devour the food, the interim director called out the winners of the door prize competitions, awarding those whose guesses had come the closes a free university t-shirt, hat, or water thermos. Shortly thereafter, the crowd began to disperse as students wandered back to the dormitory to relax or study. The first few to leave were tentative, not sure if they were "allowed" to go. Once the trickle began,

however, many followed suit, and the remaining students and staff set to work on packing up the supplies and cleaning the tables and chairs from the program's backyard.

Constant Reminders

The social heart of the Early Scholars Program resides in its "top lobby," the large open room which students pass through as they enter or exit the dormitory. The lobby is wide and spacious, housing four couches, four lounge chairs, and several ottomans and coffee tables. The furniture is structurally old but has been reupholstered recently, and its deep blue hues look stylish and sharp in contrast with the room's off-white cinder block walls and dark-red carpeting. The room's walls are covered with student-made posters and construction-paper advertisements for upcoming program events and campus happenings. One poster read "Humans vs. Zombies game this week! Will YOU survive? Information meeting Monday, 8 p.m." Most afternoons and nights, between 8 and 15 students would sit and talk in this lobby while doing homework or simply socializing. On this particular evening, five young women and two young men lounged about the room, complaining about how reminders of their atypically young ages would intrude into their lives at the most inopportune moments.

"I can't believe what happened at the gym today!" griped Megan, a tall and thin first-year girl with black-rimmed glasses and straight black hair. "I lined up with all the other students to use the rock climbing wall, but when I showed the equipment person my student I.D. they forced me to wear a damn helmet because I'm under 18." Several other students groaned, as if they knew the feeling. "Think that's bad? I had a phone interview for a student job today and the woman interviewing me did *not* sound happy when I said I'm only 17," a blond girl named Michelle added with a dejected look. Not all students

felt disadvantaged by their age, however, and some added that being young on campus came with some perks as well. "It's not bad having it both ways though," a serious-looking Asian girl named November interjected. "We're here taking college classes while our friends are still stuck back in high school. Oh! Speaking of which, I've got to drive back there for my senior yearbook portrait tomorrow!"

Another group of girls giggled childishly at this point, and one short, blond girl who looked 16 at most said that she and her friends enjoyed using the age-issue to "mess with older college guys' heads." "On Tuesdays we like to get dressed up, as if we were sorority girls, and see how many guys we can get to hit on us," she explained, adding that "it's so much fun to casually mention to them that you're only 16 and then watch them bolt!" "Just be careful," added Kaitlyn, one of the second-year students who had already been through a year of the program, without even looking up from her textbook, "if you say you're only 16 and the guy doesn't seem to care, *that's* not a good thing either."

A Truth and Lie

Thursday Night Dinners (TND's) are a weekly obligation for the Early Scholars, during which time all students who do not have a prior class obligation must share a meal together in the university dining commons' meeting hall. The large room is separated from the general dining facilities and features dark wooden paneling, a vaulted ceiling and a large screen and projector for visiting speakers to use during presentations. Round wooden tables are arranged throughout the room, with each seating seven or eight students. At one nearby table sat four young men, engaged in awkward conversation. Three were first-year Early Scholars, and it was clear that they didn't know what to expect from this, their first Thursday Night Dinner experience. One fidgeted and pushed

the food around his plate, while the three others, who were all foreign students from South Korea, spoke rapidly in Korean, to the exclusion of others at the table. A few tables, especially those filled by second-year Early Scholars, featured loud conversations and laughter, however, and it was clear that many of these students had missed each other's company over the previous summer and were in a hurry to catch up on all the news and gossip.

Being the first TND of the year, Kelly, the program's psychological counselor served as the guest speaker and used the time to lead the group in icebreakers and other "get-to-know-you" activities to foster bonding and community building. Kelly was a youthful-looking woman in her early-middle age with a kind face and a soft, welcoming speaking voice. "I'm going to pass out some index cards and I'd like each of you to please write down two statements on your card," she told the students as she walked around the room. "One of the statements should be true, while the other should be false. Then, see if the people at your table can guess which is which."

The students began to share their statements with their tables, and the room began to fill with laugher. "It sounds like some of you have some interesting things to share!" Kelly commented. "Would anyone like to read their statements to the whole group?" As the exercise continued, it became obvious that students' stories were becoming funnier yet more eccentric, as if each student was trying to "one-up" the last. "I haven't lost all my baby teeth yet," admitted one young man. "For my 10th birthday present, I asked my parents for a 'Swiffer Wet-Jet' mop," said a young woman with short, cropped hair. At the encouragement of her table-mates, another young girl across the room shared a story that resulted in shocked gasps from the audience – To the horror of the crowd she

admitted that her father had cooked a stew out of her childhood pet rabbit without telling the family until after they'd eaten the meal! At this point, Kelly calmly shifted gears and introduced the students to a new activity entirely. The students, in contrast to the awkwardness at several tables in the beginning of the night, were now energetic and enthused, laughing and bonding. Kelly looked around the room and smiled.

Win-Win-Win-Win-Win

"Creating the Early Scholars Program was something I pushed for from the beginning," the university's president said from across an oak-colored table in his large office. "I even used it as a major component of my proposed agenda when I interviewed with the chancellor of the state's university system." The president was a warm and welcoming man with salt-and-pepper hair and a neatly trimmed beard, whose immense passion for his work was clearly evident in his speech and mannerisms.

"I pitched the Early Scholars Program, and still believe it to be, what I call a 'win-win-win-win-win' situation for this state" he said. "When you look at all the factors, there are *at least* five important populations in the state that clearly benefit from the work we do here in educating early entrance students." Cheerfully, he began to explain. "First, you have the attending students, who obviously receive a better education, a more targeted curriculum, and a supportive community with others of similar talent and ability" he said, pausing to take sips from a glass of ice water. "Second, the university itself benefits, in that it can recruit students of a higher caliber and enjoy their contributions in classroom discussions, research projects, and in helping us to generate more prestige for the school in the long run." He continued by saying with a laugh, "Third, the students' parents benefit, in that they will now have to financially support

their children for two years less than they had expected." Taking another sip of water, he paused before continuing. "Fourth, the state gets that same benefit – and then some – in that they have to pay for two fewer years of public education while getting two additional years of tax revenue following the students' employment." Finally, the president added "Fifth, students' high schools benefit, as they are guaranteed by law the same amount of funding even if the child isn't physically present that year and can continue to 'claim' the students' standardized test scores for their averages."

"See?" He asked, smiling broadly across the table, "Early entrance is a 'win-win-win-win-win!'"

"Who's Already Taken Calculus III?"

The classrooms in the brick physical science building were bare and old-fashioned, consisting of white cinder-block walls and featuring two chalkboards behind the teacher's wide metal desk. The students' plywood-and-aluminum desks were reminiscent of middle school and were organized in neat rows facing forwards. Sixteen students gradually trickled into the room and took their seats, three of whom were Early Scholars. There was little talk amongst the students and before long an aged professor entered the room, wearing a checkered short-sleeve dress shirt and khaki dress pants. "Good morning!" he said loudly as he strolled into the room, "are there any questions? Okay, I would like to continue then." I could vividly recall how he had praised the Early Scholars for their maturity and intellectual aptitude at a recent lunch, sharing that he greatly enjoyed teaching these young men and women physics and astronomy and that they were often amongst the brightest students he encountered each year.

Throughout the 75-minute lesson, the professor mainly lectured yet at several opportunities invited students to come to the front and help with short demonstrations with an assortment of metal and wooden objects in order to prove his points. The three Early Scholars, two females and one male, were quiet for much of class, but two of them quickly jumped at this opportunity to do hands-on activities with the manipulatives the professor had brought to class. As their peers looked on, they stood at the front of the room, following the professor's directions and swinging weighted rods to demonstrate various principles of physics and motion. They smiled as they contributed eagerly to the lesson.

The third early entrant in the classroom, a youthful-looking Asian female named November, did speak up on several occasions to make jokes and at one point she raised her hand and answered a difficult question that none of the older students had been able to solve. The professor grinned as she offered her answer, calmly remarking "Well done, November." As the class drew to a close, the professor wrote three complex formulas on the board and said "all of you should be able to do this first one for next time, and if you've already taken calculus III you should be able to do the following two as well." The Early Scholars calmly copied down the problems, placed their bags in their backpacks, and exited the room. Back in their home high schools, their same-age peers were taking geometry or algebra II, while these 16 and 17 year-olds were routinely the among the top performers in a course that required knowledge of calculus III.

"Ethnography? I Do That Too."

While watching television with students in the "bottom lobby," the recreational center of the ESP's dormitory one afternoon, I was approached by a young woman in a

navy-blue baggy sweatshirt and oversized jeans. Her wavy brown hair hung halfway down her back and she looked in a rush to get wherever she was going. "Hey!" she interjected, "are you that guy who is here studying the Early Scholars Program?" After introducing myself and shaking her hand, she smiled and announced that I was not "the only one here doing qualitative research." I asked what she meant and this former Early Scholar (now an 18 year-old college junior) shared that she was currently taking a course on qualitative research as part of her sociology major. As part of the course, she said, she had to design a study proposal and conduct a small research study. "When I started at the Early Scholars Program I fulfilled my mandatory community service hours by volunteering at a local shelter for battered women and abused children and I've continued to volunteer there ever since," she said. "I think that doing an ethnography of that place and letting the women share their stories might help them cope with their experiences and I'd like to be a part of that." With that she turned and walked out of the room, clearly in a rush to catch up with her friends down the hall.

Homecoming Preparations

Over the month leading up to homecoming weekend at the university, the Early Scholars Program was abuzz with preparatory activities. The university sponsored various contests among the dormitories each year, such as a banner contest, a sidewalk chalk artwork contest, and a contest to create the best float for the homecoming parade. The Early Scholars took great pride in their perennial status as frontrunners to win the major prizes, due to their history of exceptional showings. This year was no exception and the residence hall staff began to motivate the students and recruit volunteers for key events four weeks before the actual weekend. "Come on, everybody!" a popular RA

named Jared who was known for his dedication to the ESP and its social events called out to the Early Scholars who were seated in the top lobby. "Who's going to help us win some more titles this year?" "Jared is a special kind of person," an Early Scholar named Lena explained. "Now and then an older college student gets to know some of the ESP kids and realizes that they fit in really well with us. Jared liked us so much that he eventually applied to be an RA here."

Rose, a South Korean female quickly volunteered to lead fellow Early Scholars in creating a sidewalk chalk mural outside of the student union building. Over the next four hours they created a large, monopoly-themed mural with bright colors and beautiful caricatures of the school's mascot. As they worked to plan the mural, their conversation drifted to a discussion of the upcoming "end-of-course-tests" that they would have to take in order to receive their high school diplomas. "Why should we have to prove that we're can handle high school when we're already in college?" one young man asked. None were worried about the tests' eventual outcomes but many seemed visibly annoyed at having to go through the motions. "You could always just forget about dual enrollment and be a high school dropout like me," Rose added with a laugh. Interestingly enough, much of their annoyance regarding standardized testing dissipated as the conversation moved on to a discussion of the Preliminary Scholastic Aptitude Test (PSAT). Most Early Scholars take the PSAT in an attempt to earn a National Merit Scholarship, even though they have already earned high marks on the actual Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT) in order to enter the Early Scholars Program.

Halfway through the project, another Early Scholar named Aggie arrived cradling a half-finished two-liter of diet coke between her arms. Aggie was a short, bubbly female

who was known to be a very high achiever and was constantly running from one class or activity to the next, no matter what time of day or night. She slid between two fellow students and began to work while complaining that she had not been sleeping much lately and was running mainly on caffeine at this point. "Let's see… yesterday I had a large McDonalds coffee, a small McDonald's coffee, and a 2-liter of diet coke," she said, "but that's not too bad, I'm used to drinking around two 2-liters of diet coke a day." Several of the other students sympathized and shared stories of how they too worked long hours, but none offered specifics.

As the evening became night, the students finished the mural and began to joke about the how even after coming to college at 16, they were still the smartest students on campus. When one punkish Early Scholar named Summer, who had brightly-dyed pink and purple hair, openly referred to the regular student body as being "dumb" two other Early Scholars tried to defend the older students but they were quickly interrupted. "Please," Summer said, "This sidewalk chalk meeting is the most intellectual gathering happening on campus this week."

One week later, a sign hung in the ESP's top lobby congratulating the Early Scholars for being awarded first place in the university's sidewalk chalk, float building, homecoming banner, and "yell like hell" contests – in addition to the prize for finishing first overall amongst all campus dorms.

The Hall Newspaper Release Party

Following a Thursday Night Dinner that featured two visiting professors of pop culture studies presenting their recent research to the Early Scholars, the students returned to the dorm for the year's first hall newspaper release party. The hall newspaper

was created, along with the yearbook club and certain hall programs and sports, to fill the potential voids that some early entrants might experience in coming to college early if they happened to like these sorts of high school activities and did not want to join the university's newspaper or yearbook club for any reason. Additionally, the newspaper and yearbook help to build a sense of increased community among Early Scholars and provided them with meaningful outlets for publishing their creative writing, photography, and art. "I submit photographs to the hall newspaper all the time," a young woman named Dakota told me as she shared examples of her recent photo shoots. A resident assistant (RA) is selected each year to serve as editor-in-chief and run the publication, while Early Scholars work as section editors, reporters, and structure the paper's monthly layout.

In order to maximize the circulation of the hall newspaper, each monthly issue is released at a pizza and ice cream party, which all but guarantees a high attendance. The newspaper itself is of high quality, featuring stories such as campus events pieces, pro-and-con debate columns, short stories and poems, recipes, humorous pieces, essays on moral issues, interviews with professors and local celebrities, and cultural-exchange pieces that seek to clarify misconceptions about foreign societies. For example, the September issue included a short story about an Early Scholar's experiences volunteering that summer at a school in India, a debate about whether or not a church in Florida should be allowed to burn copies of the Koran on 9/11, an editorial advocating vegetarianism as a moral lifestyle choice, a review of a recently released CD, an interview with a popular chemistry professor, and an original poem rife with vivid imagery and metaphorical representations of freedom and truth, among other pieces.

In addition to being distributed in hard copy, the hall newspaper is also disseminated electronically to alumni of the Early Scholars Program, and from time to time the paper even receives article, literary, or photograph submissions from alumni for consideration. While students joke that the pizza and ice cream are responsible for the high attendance at the release parties, most students would remain in the bottom lobby long after the release party, carefully reading and discussing the articles in that month's issue. Editorials concerning controversial topics were usually the most heavily discussed, as well as students' poetry and artwork. Also popular were the horoscopes, which included wisdom such as the following: "This is not your month, Aries. I'm not saying it's going to be particularly bad, but it's not going to be fantastic. More like… mediocre."

Finals Week Stress

Around the corner from the top lobby stands a row of soda-pop vending machines, beckoning to students cramming for their finals like a caffeinated oasis. All throughout the building, students were working all night to prepare for their exams and relied on these machines to keep them awake and alert. The students were stressed, wired, and on-edge about their tests. "These kids are so stressed about finals that nobody better dare mess with them," said one RA as she walked by the lounge, "last semester we found a note taped to the Coca-Cola machine one morning during finals week, scrawled messily with a blue crayon. It read 'Dear soda machine restocker: May God have mercy on your soul for stocking Cherry Coke with Mr. Pibb during finals week.'"

CHAPTER V

PARTICIPANT PORTRAITS

Before presenting the findings of this study, I believe that it is crucial to introduce the eight participants in greater detail in order to provide readers with a richer contextual understanding of the students whose shared lived experiences became the focus of this research. It is my hope that in learning more about these eight highly gifted adolescents, readers will begin to appreciate both the diversity of experiences among students who pursue collegiate early entrance and come to foresee the broader commonalities which first emerged as I learned more about my participants. Attention will be focused on presenting the early backgrounds of the eight teenagers to illustrate their lives before entering the Early Scholars Program. Pseudonyms are used to protect the identity of the participants.

Rose: "School was just killing my inspiration."

Rose was an 18 year-old, second-year Early Scholar who seemed to wear a perpetual smile. Her appearance was always classy and conservative, yet relaxed as well. She often wore warmly-colored wool sweaters, designer jeans, and neat, tailored earrings. Although she was born in South Korea, Rose had moved back-and-forth between her native country and the United States several times during her childhood and her English was flawless even if she refused to admit it. "I learned English from watching Pokemon, the Powerpuff Girls, and SpongeBob SquarePants," she shared with me as we chatted about her pre-school years during our first interview. "Every day I would watch them

and try to figure it out. After a while, I just started to 'hear' them." Rose's parents, both

of whom had earned doctoral degrees from American universities were equally surprised

when their daughter began to read at around age five, considering that their busy careers

had precluded them from ever trying to teach her. "[When I learned to read] is a really

big question in my family and no one knows," she said, "They kind of assume that I

picked it up somewhere along the line." The real shock, however, came when she began

to present stylized poems and short stories to her parents at age five as well, including

pieces in both Korean and English. Rose's passion for the creative arts quickly revealed

itself to be coupled with a fierce independent streak when her parents tried to encourage

her writing by having her collected works bound and self-published. The more her

parents openly praised her talents and tried to become involved, the less Rose wrote. Her

father enjoyed her writing and took her places to provide her with inspiration. Although

she enjoyed the attention she explained, "Sometimes I felt it was too much."

Rose's parents did much to support her creative passions, but were always more

relaxed than her friends' parents when it came to pushing academic achievement. "I

can't even remember them ever telling me to study," Rose once told me. She found no

personal enjoyment in her Korean schooling experiences and from the earliest years she

struggled to maintain her independence and freedom in an educational system that

emphasized structure and rules. As she stated, "I hated preschool! It just made me hate

being in structured organizations. I just didn't like having a schedule to follow and

having to learn with all the other children." Rose complained often to her parents

through those first few years of schooling and her parents were willing to accommodate

her by arranging for her to switch schools as she desired. Additionally, her family moved

back to America for a semester when Rose was in the second and fifth grades, resulting in her attending three elementary and two middle schools.

While Rose enjoyed the American schools that she briefly attended slightly more due to the increased sense of student freedom she found there, she never felt comfortable in the Korean educational system. She loathed the rigid structure and emphasis on conformity and rules, and felt frustrated that she was being forced to do the same things and learn the same things as every other student. Recalling those days, Rose tersely remarked "It was killing the creative side of me!"

Additionally, while other children were beginning to get used to the routines and rhythms of the Korean educational system, Rose found the atmosphere of academic competition and pressure increasingly unbearable as she grew older. She was resentful that the rising academic load continually prevented her from engaging in creative outlets such as writing and ballet. To create some breathing room, she chose each year (with her parents' blessing) not to enroll in a "cram school," the after-school academic preparation centers that most South Korean students visit five times a week after school in order to improve their grades and prepare for their high school and/or college entrance exams. Cram schools are considered a normal element of the Korean educational system, and it was highly irregular for a child from such an educated family not to attend. "I really don't do well with pressure," Rose explained, telling me that she yearned for freedom and felt like the pressure of her regular school experiences was already more than she could handle. This feeling only intensified upon entering high school and reached a boiling point after Rose performed poorly on her first semester midterm exams:

There was already so much pressure on me and not wanting to do those

[academic] things led me into a depression for a while. That's when I decided to

drop out, because I was thinking 'There is no way that I can handle this – I'll

probably kill myself if I have to go through three more years of this when I can't

even handle the first quarter of a year.'

Rose, who was 15 at the time, informed her parents after the first semester that

she had decided to drop out and go live with her grandmother in America. While her

parents were supportive of the alternate idea of changing schools again (this would be

Rose's sixth time changing schools) and even encouraged her to consider

"homeschooling herself" to get the Korean version of a GED, Rose's mother did express

reservations about the young girl moving to another country on her own. As a result,

they asked Rose to investigate alternate options and she eventually decided to enroll in an

international school, hoping that the atmosphere would be more like the comparatively

relaxed environment she had found in her prior experiences in American elementary

schools. While the international school utilized an American curricular and pedagogical

model and was slightly better in terms of academic pressure, the tiny school had a

sophomore class of only 14 students, most of whom had known each other since

kindergarten. As a result, Rose found it extremely difficult to break into the preexisting

social cliques and remained unhappy. Throughout the following months she continued to

investigate other educational options, eventually discovered the Early Scholars Program

while conducting an internet search, and firmly raised the issue with her parents again at

the end of her sophomore year. "I just told them I was going to go," she said. "I showed

them the program, explained it and said it was great, and told them that I was going to

apply and go." As in the past, her parents encouraged her to follow through and told her that they certainly preferred this approach to her plan of dropping out.

Rose, now in her eighth different educational environment at the Early Scholars Program, finally felt like she had found a proper fit. "On a scale of 1-5, I would say that my current happiness level is a 4.5" she said. As one of the ESP students who is not actively pursuing a high school diploma along with her college credit, Rose is truly free to chart her own academic course and pick classes and activities that appeal to her interests rather than a prescribed curriculum. This self-proclaimed "proud middle school graduate" hopes to become a marine mammal researcher and is currently planning to major in biology or zoology, with a minor in linguistics and/or creative writing. She has enjoyed taking control of her own education and pushing herself to succeed, rather than being pressured externally, and is currently taking 3000 and 4000 level biology courses in addition to the usual freshman and sophomore level classes. Additionally, she reports that her social life is better than it's ever been and that the friends she has made at the ESP provide a support network that makes up for her parents and older sister being so far away. Finally, she has taken up poetry and creative writing again – submitting pieces regularly to the program's newspaper and even using multiple pen names in order to get more of them accepted for publication.

Mark: "I was engaged but never challenged."

Mark's emerging identity was evident in photos from his yearbook page from his first year with the program. Underneath the photo of his youthful, smiling face partially covered by his shoulder-length, dirty-blond hair were photographs of France and Germany, mathematical symbols, quotes by Albert Einstein in German, and two pictures

of the CERN Large Hadron Collider that had recently been constructed in Switzerland. It was clear that this young man was completely enamored by physics.

Even by ESP standards Mark was atypically young, having entered college at the age of 14 after only one year of high school. During that one year he had amassed a number of Advanced Placement (AP) credits and had maintained a high credit load upon entering the Early Scholars Program though. At age 16, he was technically a junior at the university. Like Rose, he was also not pursuing a high school diploma, but in his case it was due to the fact that he had matriculated to college three years early instead of the more manageable two years. He preferred the curricular freedom that this decision provided him, as he could select classes based on his own academic interests rather than in an attempt to meet state high school requirements. He chose not to seek a Certificate of General Educational Development (GED) to round out his résumé, explaining that while he has debated it in the past he is afraid that listing a GED might serve as a "turn-off to potential employers" who may otherwise be intrigued that he had entered college without any prior diploma. Regardless, the curricular freedom that not pursuing a high school degree offered Mark was very helpful, as this extremely bright young man had already declared a double major in mathematics and physics along with a double minor in German and French. These multiple areas of specialty were all aimed towards one goal: To eventually earn a Ph.D. in physics and perhaps even work at the Swiss CERN laboratory himself.

Mark was born in Mesa, Arizona, but his father's career in retail had necessitated moves to Tennessee when Mark was five years old and another to Georgia when Mark was ten. Mark had one sibling, a sister four years his senior who was attending the same

university that housed the Early Scholars Program, and his parents still live in Georgia. Three years prior to this study Mark's father was diagnosed with Multiple Sclerosis (MS), an inflammatory disease of the central nervous system, and it was clear that his well-being weighed heavily on Mark's thoughts at times.

When reflecting on his earliest memories of school he described the challenge of developmental asynchrony: "I started reading when I was four and I remember one time in kindergarten my teacher let me read a book to the class. Then afterwards she asked me to put the book down with the spine up," he told me, "but I couldn't figure out what she meant by that, so eventually another student had to come and help me. I could read to my class but couldn't figure out how to put a book down properly."

Mark's experiences with elementary school in Tennessee were generally positive, as he slowly built friendships with several students in his classes and had teachers who went out of their way to keep him occupied in the classroom – even if their methods were not necessarily directed at Mark's own academic needs. "I liked elementary school," he said, "I was engaged mainly because when I wasn't learning something I was helping the teacher teach… She would ask me sometimes to explain things to students or quietly help them out… I really liked helping the other students." A major change for the better occurred in third grade for Mark though, as he was identified as the class' only labeled gifted student and began to participate in the school's small, but dedicated, gifted education program. "I remember researching a lot about oceanography, and Egyptology, and one year we studied medieval history and built castles with cardboard and stuff. I actually still have one in my closet," he confessed. Recognizing his talent for

mathematics, his gifted education teacher even began to work with Mark on basic algebra concepts in the third grade!

Mark's school recommended to his parents that he be grade-skipped directly to the fifth grade following his third grade year, but concerns regarding his social development and the fact that he was already young for his class led his parents to turn down the offer. The school provided additional accommodations to help keep Mark engaged in the fourth grade as a result, including a three-month individualized project to study Greek and Roman mythology with a teacher's guidance. "I really enjoyed that. I forgot essentially everything I learned but it kept me busy, and that's what they were trying to do," he recalled. For Mark, experiences such as these were the highlights of his elementary and middle school years: "All I really remember is what we did in [gifted education]. I don't remember what we did in other classes just cause this was a lot more enjoyable." Still, he recognized that they were designed to keep him occupied rather than pushing him academically. As he stated, "There's a difference between being engaged and being challenged."

Socially, while Mark had friends during elementary school, the beginnings of a long history with bullying started to develop in the second grade. The bullying mainly centered on his academic ability and social awkwardness, and seemed to ebb and flow throughout elementary and middle school. "My mom would always tell me that they were jealous of me," Mark quietly reflected, "but I don't believe that… They never seemed jealous." Interestingly enough, the students doing the bulk of the bullying during his seventh grade year, his self-described "worst year" socially, were mainly the other students in his new school's gifted program. "I was kind of the socially awkward one,"

he told me, "and they saw that as an opportunity to say 'Oh, you're different!'" Much of this bullying took place in the presence of his teachers, who initially did very little to resolve the conflicts. Mark grew frustrated by this and eventually wrote an essay for his teachers describing the ways in which he was being bullied and asking why they would not intervene. A parent-teacher conference was quickly assembled, and the teachers began to involve themselves more directly, to the benefit and relief of Mark. Following seventh grade, Mark's middle school in Georgia, just as his elementary school in Tennessee had done, recommended to his parents that he be grade skipped and sent directly to high school – but once again his parents turned down the offer, out of concern for his social readiness. Academically, of course, no one questioned Mark's ability to succeed in either environment, as not only was he earning grades at the top of his class but he had also begun to seek out additional ways to challenge himself, such as teaching himself German each day after school.

Mark's lone year in high school was a very positive experience, as he was able to find a social niche more quickly than he had expected and could push himself academically through taking only honors and AP classes. Even at this point though, he felt "engaged" rather than "challenged." As a result, he approached his guidance counselor towards the end of the first semester with a new idea: He wanted permission to "skip" lunch each day in order to add an extra class, French, to his schedule. The guidance counselor informed him that the school was legally obligated to provide each student with an opportunity to eat and then surprised Mark by asking whether he had ever considered entering college early so that he could have absolute freedom over his schedule. Mark asked for more information, and she went on to tell him about the Early

Scholars Program and other opportunities that existed around the nation. Mark was not sure whether this type of program was right for him, but early the next semester a representative from the Early Scholars Program came to speak to his high school and Mark asked to attend. He took the SAT, earned a qualifying score for acceptance, but remained unsure and continued to deliberate. Later that spring, however, Mark's older sister (who was graduating high school) went to visit the university that houses the ESP and he decided to go along and investigate the program in person. After doing all the research and completing the application and interview process, Mark announced that he had decided that this was something he wanted to do and asked for his parents' permission. While their approval did not come for several days, Mark's mother and father eventually gave their blessing. He explained their change of heart and reflected on a conversation with his mother:

> From what I remember it was because they really did see me as more mature at that point… She told me that the main reason they liked the program was that I was the one researching it. I was the one pursuing it. And that showed that I was really interested in this and that it was something I really wanted to consider. And that mainly showed her that I was ready for this.

Throughout his two years at the Early Scholars Program, Mark has continued to succeed academically and has shown tremendous social growth as well. He has earned a perfect 4.0 in his coursework, which includes 3000 and 4000-level mathematics and physics courses, and has learned to value social interactions more as a function of meeting students of similar ability and interest. He reflected on his situation:

I think I wanted to find a place where other people were like me. I wanted to find a place with people who were just as studious and focused on their schoolwork as I am. To an extent, I found that. And I wanted to find an environment where I could be myself, kind of. And I think that to an extent, I found that as well.

Jada: "I couldn't wait to turn 16, so I could drop out."

I was genuinely surprised when Jada sent me an email volunteering to participate in this research study, as she was known throughout the Early Scholars Program as one of the quietest, shyest students. My interviews with Jada embodied this tension, quickly oscillating between stretches of short, vague responses and lengthy expositions that cut right to the heart of her feelings and experiences. In some ways, I believe that this pattern represented a greater struggle for identity that was occurring within this 17 year-old African American female. After all, she had earned very high grades for years, expressed vibrant interests in foreign cultures and films, and dreamed of one day becoming a linguist, while simultaneously doing minimal academic work from elementary school to college and generally seeing school as a waste of her time.

Jada was born in Oakland, CA, along with her identical-triplet sister, fraternal-triplet brother, and older sister, but the family moved to the Southeast when the triplets were only three years old. While her parents were both Yoruba priests (a faith Jada explained as being a mixture of West African, Caribbean, and Roman Catholic religious beliefs), Jada was quick to make clear that she self-identifies as an agnostic. Her parents were well-educated, maintained a large home library of books, encouraged the children to read voraciously, and made clear that pursuing higher education was expected. At the same time, however, the family had limited financial resources and Jada's school system

faced similar difficulties. "I live in a midsize town, in one of the most affluent counties

in the United States that has an African American majority, and the school I went to was

almost entirely Black," Jada explained. "Still, it's not very rich. We're either very lower

middle class or upper lower class."

Jada did catch her parents' passion for reading, though, and upon learning to read

at age 6 her literary ability and thirst for new material grew exponentially. Jada's reading

became in some ways a substitute for social peer relationships and the lack of rigor that

she experienced in her elementary school classrooms. "I remember not having any

friends. That's basically it," Jada told me, when I first asked her to recall her memories

of elementary school. When I pried for a little more detail she responded "It was all so

easy, so I usually just read during class. 'At least I was reading,' you know? They didn't

really care. I would just hide a book under my desk." Things became more interesting,

however, when I asked her to describe what exactly she had been reading during these

formative elementary school years. Describing her literary interests during the 2nd to 4th

grade, Jada offered:

> I read a lot of books that weren't exactly age appropriate. Like I read a collection
>
> of Sherlock Holmes. I also got really into Stephen King around this time. I got
>
> over that by middle school, thank God. Let's see, what else did I read?
>
> Wuthering Heights, but I didn't like it. I read a lot of classics during that time. I
>
> also read a lot of Shakespeare.

Understandably, it was difficult for this Shakespeare-reading third grader to make

quality connections with most of the peers in her classes and she responded by

withdrawing socially. "I would have friends but I wouldn't, like, eat lunch with anyone

and I wouldn't talk to people during class," she shared. "I wasn't an actively social individual." Additionally, the gap between Jada's academic ability and actual curricular materials was so large that she actively sought out opportunities for challenge, even if that meant "volunteering" to do her older sister's homework every day after school – for three years. At the time, Jada was in the 3rd through 5th grades, while her older sister was in the 6th through 8th grades. Unfortunately, Jada's teachers and school system did little to address these problems, and while they would occasionally track her with the highest-performing students, her lack of motivation to complete the work that she found too easy often resulted her in being grouped instead with the average or slightly above-average learners.

Jada's academic and social needs were clearly not being met and this bright young girl quickly grew to despise school. "School was pointless. I learned so much more from reading or from Wikipedia than I even learned in school," she explained. "And I didn't see the point, because I didn't need school to learn. I'm sure that other people do, but I don't." This attitude became engrained in Jada's thinking at a very early age and she vividly recalled looking forward to "dropping out" while still in grade school:

> I remember that when I was in elementary school I found out that you could drop out of school when you were 16, so I was planning on doing that. Even when I was getting A's and everybody was saying "Oh, you're going to get into a great college" I would say "No, I'm dropping out."

Along with the social difficulties and lack of academic rigor, a third complaint Jada expressed concerned the lack of "true learning" that she saw occurring in her K-10

environments. As she phrased it, "In the American public education system, you're not learning how to learn. You're learning how to answer A, B, or C on a test. That's not true learning. It's learning how to take a standardized test."

Jada's frustrations and struggles continued as she progressed through middle school, but her plan to eventually drop out changed radically when she received a pamphlet in the mail for the Early Scholars Program at age 12. Far from explicitly desiring a better academic environment or social interactions, however, Jada's response as to what drew her to the ESP was much more practical. "It kind of went with my prior plans," she said, "because I could still leave high school when I was 16, but this way I wouldn't have to deal with my parents being disappointed and kicking me out of the house or whatever." While Jada's identical-triplet sister had always been an outgoing high achiever and was also interested in the Early Scholars Program, her fraternal-triplet brother was much like Jada, in that he had a reputation as being smart but unmotivated, and he was not interested in pursuing early entrance. The girls agreed that when they were old enough this was what they would do and Jada recalled that upon turning 15 she made clear to her parents that this was her decision to make. "It wasn't even like 'Hey, Mom and Dad, I want to go to the Early Scholars Program.' It was more like 'Mom and Dad, I am going' and they were like, 'Yeah, cool.'"

Jada admitted that she did not apply herself and took pride in achieving decent grades regardless. She maintained a 3.1 GPA in college without doing much homework or studying and was angered when the program altered its cutoff for academic probation from 3.0 to 3.2 after her first year, retroactively placing her on probation. Still, she remained happy with her decision to matriculate to college at an early age and now saw

the Early Scholars Program as a valuable stepping stone that might enable her to transfer to a highly prestigious school for the remainder of college.

John: "It's given me two extra years to do whatever I want."

My first interaction with John took place in the dormitory's primary recreation lounge, as I listened in on him dispensing wisdom to several first year students while I enjoyed a dinner of microwavable noodles. "Don't like your roommates?," he asked them, "This happens every year. What you need to do is this…" As he calmly explained the step-by-step process for requesting room switches, I found myself wondering whether this young man was a student or staff member. He only looked 17 or 18, but spoke as if he had lived in the hall for years. The grateful first-year students thanked John after he concluded his explanation and scurried off to make their requests while I enjoyed my conversation with the other students.

John was a solidly-built Caucasian young man, with a down-to-earth, conservative, blue-collar attitude. He was the oldest of five, often brought up sports and girls in conversation, and his father was a plant manager and his mother was a teacher. John spoke with an air of determination and self-assuredness, and never shied away from expressing his political opinions. "Dining hall plans are a form of socialism," he told me once when I asked him why he didn't prefer to eat on campus. John was a focused young man and liked to keep his attention where he thought it was important. He liked to socialize and commit practical jokes with his friends, but indicated that his "most important interest" at the Early Scholars Program was getting good grades. This was the first step, he said, towards a hopeful career in biomedical engineering. "The thing is that there are a lot of health problems in the world, and people have been working so hard on

curing those problems," he said. "But they haven't been working on the tools to use in curing those problems once they find the cures. So I was thinking that maybe I could help develop the tools." When John shared this career goal with his parents, his father said that he was happy that this path would keep John in the private sector as he suspected that medical doctors may soon be government employees.

John's experiences with elementary school were largely positive, although much of his enjoyment stemmed from the fact that learning came so naturally to him and he was able to get high grades with minimal effort. "I loved it," he shared, "elementary school was really fun. It was easy! I just knew what to do." In fact, all of John's pre-college schools reported his grades via percentages rather than letter-grades, and John vividly remembered how proud he was in the third grade to finish the year with a cumulative average of 98.6% across all of his subjects. (He was less proud of the fact that another student in his class somehow managed a perfect 100%!) Still, John recognized from an early age that school was something that he could excel at, and the happiness from his success outweighed any desire for increased challenge or rigor. As he stated:

> I honestly didn't see why I couldn't get an A [in everything]. There were lots of times that I remember completing an assignment early and then probably sleeping. Some of it was boring, but it was more like I completed it and got to relax afterwards rather than be bored. I was still enjoying it – I just enjoyed coasting.

The only school activity that John did not enjoy was actually group reading, as he had to "stick with the class" and not move ahead in the story until the other kids had properly pronounced the words out loud.

While John remained academically successful through middle school, he began to experience a heightened degree of boredom during these years and slowly began to lose interest in some of his academic classes. "I honestly don't remember one of my classes in seventh grade at all," he reflected, "Just because I was always asleep. But I still had a 99%." He made a point of explaining that while he may have been bored, at no point did he ever lose faith in the importance of schooling. John acknowledged that he continued to enjoy school and maintained a vibrant social life. Not only was he friends with many of his own same-age peers, but he was also good friends with students of similar interests in other grades, both above and below his own, as well.

A major change occurred in John's life before the start of the eighth grade, when his parents made the decision to send him to an exclusive, expensive private school for grades 8-12. John's parents had always been openly and actively involved in his academic life and pursuits as the primary decision-makers when it came to questions of school switching and/or early entrance. John reported that he always found their involvement and interest in his academic life to be motivational and that he was very grateful for it. He also stressed that his parents did take his own desires into account when making decisions and emphasized that the usual decision making process typically involved the following:

My parents would suggest something and then they would say "We're not going to do this unless you want to do it. But even if you want to do it, you may not do it. But if you're the one who shows interest, we'll work with you on it."

When initially asked to describe his experiences in the private school where he spent 8th through 10th grade, John used one word: "Money." As he later explained, the small school required a yearly tuition of $14,000 and almost all of the students were from very privileged backgrounds. Additionally, the school actually educated students from age 3 (pre-school) to age 18 (12th grade), and so many of the students in his 20-person class had already been classmates for as many as 11 years. While John still enjoyed the experience at the time and earned a combination of A's and B's, his opinion of the school began to change when he became aware of the possibility of early entrance to college and found the school to be extremely unhelpful. Although the school was located geographically close to the Early Scholars Program they did not advertise the option to their students and he attributed this to their lack of desire to lose the students' substantial tuition money.

John only learned about early entrance when a different program mailed an advertisement to his home after he scored highly on the PSAT. His father showed him the advertisement and asked if he would be interested in exploring it further. John replied that he would like to know more and so they scheduled a visit, during which they were also made aware of the existence of the Early Scholars Program, which was located considerably closer to their home. John ultimately applied to both programs, was accepted by each, and his father then decided that going to the closer institution would be the smartest move for his son. When he contacted the expensive private school to discuss

dual enrollment options, however, he was told that the school did not support or allow dual enrollment of any sort and would not award high school credit for any college courses completed. As a result, John withdrew from the school and "enrolled" (with no intention of actually attending) at the local public school, whose guidance counselors were very familiar with early entrance and the Early Scholars Program and helped him to complete the necessary paperwork to receive both high school and college credit.

For John, the lived experience of early entrance to college was about three main means of individual growth. He was grateful to have an opportunity for a smoother transition to college, in that he saw the Early Scholars Program as a "half-step" between high school and college that would help him to be more successful once the program had concluded. In addition, he praised the ESP often for helping him to feel empowered as a young adult and citizen, illustrating this with examples of how he had participated in both political protests and discussions with the ESP's administrators regarding controversial rules during his time in the dorm and that in both cases changes occurred and he was made to feel as if his opinion was taken seriously and actually mattered. Moreover, John routinely referred to the early entrance experience as being given "two extra years to do whatever I want with," in that he felt liberated and as if he was now in control of his own destiny. His high school, he said, had limited his options and kept him on a short leash, while the Early Scholars Program had helped him to finally take control of his own education.

Lena: "This is either the 9th or 10th school that I've attended."

For Lena, the prospect of leaving high school early to attend another school was not daunting in the least. In fact, this shy but happy 16 year-old blue-eyed "military brat"

with light brown hair had a more difficult time comprehending the idea of staying in one place for too long. She was born to an army family when her father was stationed in Heidelberg, Germany, and over the course of the following fifteen years her family relocated to Kentucky, Georgia, New York, and Pennsylvania before moving back to Georgia when her father retired from the service. Local moves and school switches were also common during Lena's childhood and the net result was that she had lost count of exactly how many schools she had attended. Over the twelve years of education from kindergarten to freshman year of college, however, she was sure that either nine or ten different schools had been involved. "The other kids would tell stories about how they had lived in the same place since preschool," she reflected, "and I would ask 'How can you stand dealing with the same people from preschool on?' You'd run out of things to talk about!"

Lena's mother was a daycare teacher and administrator and her father was a career soldier who had spent a combined 32 months fighting in Iraq while Lena was in elementary and middle school. She was raised as an only-child, although she did have a half-sister from her father's previous marriage, and shortly before Lena left home for college her mother was surprised to learn that she was pregnant, meaning that 16 year-old Lena now had a 20 month-old brother at home. Lena's childhood and family life was happy, yet she struggled both as a result of missing her father during his tours of duty and also as a result of her parents' financial difficulties. "I wouldn't be in college if it weren't for scholarships," she told me. In fact, one of Lena's primary motivations for studying was her desire to earn grades high enough to qualify her for merit scholarships, both at the Early Scholars Program and also at her future college and medical school.

She hoped to be a doctor and was especially attracted to the "combined programs" that she had found at certain select institutions around the country, where admission to college as a pre-med major guarantees a spot in that university's medical school. Her initial contact with these programs had been difficult, however, as they have typically not understood exactly what the Early Scholars Program is and have insisted that she would need to begin their programs as a freshmen rather than as a third-year transfer student. As she explained:

> They usually tell me 'Well, you haven't graduated high school, so you'd enter as a freshman.' Then I mention that I already have two years of college credit. 'Oh, we take AP credit!' they say. But when I tell them that I haven't taken any AP exams, they go right back to saying that I can't possibly have college credit.

Lena's earlier school experience had involved acceleration as well, she pointed out. "I was reading when I was four, and when my mom put me into a pre-K class the teacher realized that I could already do everything," she explained. "So they decided to get me tested to see if I could go up to kindergarten instead, and I actually scored high enough to be placed in the first grade." Both Lena's mother and school had reservations about double grade-skipping the 4 year-old child, however, so ultimately she was placed one year higher, with the 5 year-old kindergarten students. That decision, Lena would later state, was the eventual reason why she "was always bored in class."

Indeed, Lena's memories of her first few years of schooling consisted almost entirely of recollections of intense boredom, hiding books under her desk to read while the teacher lectured, getting in trouble for not paying attention because she already knew the material, and having teachers who did nothing to differentiate the curriculum. She

vividly remembered her first-grade teacher in particular, who "cared more about pairing us up together and thinking the boy and girl couples were cute than actually teaching us." Lena badgered the teacher during reading practice, asking her "whether they could please go faster," but her requests were ignored. This situation was unexpectedly remedied after a first grade boy pulled her pigtails one day and Lena punched the student in response, resulting in a parent-teacher conference. As Lena recalled:

> At the parent-teacher conference, my teacher told my mom, "Lena's so popular! All the boys love her!" and my mom said "I don't care if all the boys love her, what is she learning?" The teacher didn't have an answer for that, she just said that I "already knew everything." So my mom asked what the teacher did for me as a result, like, did she give me extra worksheets or something? My teacher said "There's nothing really that I can do"… so they pulled me out of that school.

Lena's experiences at other elementary schools were not much different, however, whether they were in Kentucky, New York, or Pennsylvania. She remembers a complete lack of challenge and teachers that more often than not simply "ignored" her because she was "smart." She did have the opportunity to join a gifted program for the first time in the third grade, however, when she asked her teacher why certain children in her new Pennsylvania classroom were able to leave class every week for special classes. The teacher explained that those were the advanced students and that they were able to go do more challenging activities, and Lena quickly announced that she wanted to participate in that as well. The teacher arranged for an assessment to measure whether she would qualify and not only did Lena qualify for the gifted program but the school also contacted her parents and recommended that she be accelerated at the end of the year from the third

to the fifth grade. Lena's mother, knowing that her child had already skipped one grade and well-aware that her daughter was shy and already experienced social difficulties, accepted the invitation to enroll her daughter in gifted education services but declined the opportunity to place her in the fifth grade at age 8.

Lena's experiences in both elementary and middle school involved social difficulties. She considered herself a loner, remembered having few friends prior to the 10th grade, and suffered from intense shyness. She explained that what she lacked in childhood friends she made up for by losing herself in a world of literature. Lena was an avid fantasy fan from an early age and remembered reading her mother's copy of *The Lord of the Rings* when she was only 7 years-old. She laughed as she reported that her punishments for bad behavior during middle school usually involved her mother confiscating all of her novels rather than grounding her.

Shyness and difficulties in forming lasting friendships were not Lena's only middle school troubles, however, as she also struggled to interact appropriately with students who she felt were beneath her intellectual level and began to experience her first battles with academic perfectionism. Her experiences in elementary school had taught her to think of school as being easy and non-challenging and she struggled to maintain her patience with students who lagged behind. As Lena recalled:

> I was a horrible child. One time a girl in my class asked the teacher what a peninsula was and I said "What, are you really that stupid?" I got in trouble for that…. I just wish [middle school] never happened. That I could blot out that part of my life. Because I was just so pissed at the other kids.

When Lena was not dealing with issues of boredom or anger with other students in middle school though, she was beginning to get highly anxious about a disturbing new trend that she was experiencing. For the first time, she was encountering material that was "new" to her and that she did not already know. Up until that point, she had assumed that people were suppose to already know what they were "learning" in school, and as new challenges appeared Lena responded by panicking and worrying if something was "wrong" with her. She continued to maintain straight A's throughout her entire K-10 years, but even to this day she is haunted by the lasting effects of these perfectionistic tendencies. "When I took Spanish I still earned A's, but I was used to getting high A's, like 98's and 100's, and now I was getting low A's, like 92's," she recalled. "I was freaking out in class and everyone wanted to beat me up. But then I started to realize that other kids are making B's and they're ok. I must be ok too."

Lena first learned about the Early Scholars Program after taking the SAT in the 7th grade as part of the Duke Talent Identification Program's talent search. She was immediately curious and claimed to have been "stalking the ESP's website since 8th grade." That year, as a 12 year-old eighth grader, Lena showed her mother the information regarding the program and announced that she wanted to enter the program when she was old enough to apply. Her parents were willing to consider it but passed it off with a "let's wait and see" attitude. Lena's interest had not abated a year later, and she began 9th grade by reminding her parents that they would have to begin scheduling for her to take the SAT the following year and that they would have write parental letters of recommendation, assessing her readiness. When her 10th grade year finally arrived, Lena reiterated her intention to apply, asked for her parents' blessing, and submitted an

application. Knowing how much she wanted this, her parents finally gave their approval,

even if they still worried about her social challenges as much as they had back when she

could have skipped kindergarten and the fourth grade. Happily remembering the moment

she learned she had been accepted, Lena beamed as she shared the following story:

> I sent my stuff in. I had my interview. Two days later, my mom had my new
>
> little brother. And on the day that they induced labor, the Early Scholars
>
> Program's academic advisor called my cell phone and left a message right before
>
> my 6th period class. I was like, "Oh my God, Oh my God." Everyone asked
>
> what happened, and I told them that I'd been called back by the ESP. They asked
>
> what the message said, and I told them that I didn't know. So my friend helped
>
> me to stand up on a desk and I played the message on speakerphone. The
>
> message started with "Lena, we're glad to accept you to the Early Scholars
>
> Program…" and all the girls started jumping up and down and screaming and my
>
> teacher ran into the room because she thought someone had died.

Max: "There's no limit to what you can pursue here."

Max was enthusiastically trying to convince a crowd of fellow early entrants to

participate in a upcoming program that he would be managing. He had convinced the

Early Scholars Program to sponsor the event with a kick-off pizza party, but recruiting

for his program was proving to be a challenge, and for good reason. Max's special event,

after all, was a month-long novel writing competition, known as "NaNoWriMo"

(National Novel Writing Month), and he was trying to recruit his fellow Early Scholars to

join him in attempting to write 50,000 word novels in thirty days or less. His program

was only one of many NaNoWriMo competitions around the world, and if any of the

students were able to complete their novels in that time frame, they could submit them to www.nanowrimo.org and receive a free printed, bound copy of their work. Finding takers brave enough for this Herculean task was difficult but eventually a small crew did accept the challenge, and one of his recruits would eventually go on to successfully finish their novel.

Organizing novel-writing competitions wasn't Max's only campus involvement. This extremely bright young man with brown eyes, shaggy dark-brown hair, and stylish yet casual blue jeans and name-brand graphic t-shirts was also earning high grades, a member of the university's mock trial club, and in the process of starting his own "4 a.m. Tech Club" for fellow engineering students who were so in love with their individual engineering projects and prospective inventions that they regularly found themselves tinkering in the engineering labs well into the early morning hours. Max had planned on becoming an engineer since the fourth grade, although his recent experiences with mock trial were leading him to question that decision, and he was now considering earning his engineering degree and then going to law school to combine his loves and work as a patent lawyer. With these plans in mind he explained: "There's no limit to what you can accomplish here, and you can do it autonomously - entirely on your own terms."

Max was a self-described "suburban kid," born to an engineer father and a mother who holds a Ph.D. in psychology and maintains her own clinical practice. Max is a twin, although his fraternal twin brother is now three years behind him grade-wise due to Max having skipped the sixth, eleventh, and twelfth grades. He described his parents as being "very liberal" and always interested and involved in his academic life. Even now that he was a college student, his mother would still call regularly to remind him about his

upcoming tests and papers (which she would discover by checking the online calendar that Max maintained), something which Max found unnecessary but was willing to put up with.

He had been a "very shy" child when he was very young and his parents sought to shelter him by enrolling him in a nontraditional private school that emphasized self-confidence, social-interaction, and encouraging students' independence from an early age. "Even in second or third grade they would let us go off with our friends and eat lunch unsupervised," he recalled fondly. The school was expensive, however, and by the time Max's younger brother was ready to begin school his parents realized that financially it would be necessary to transfer Max and his twin brother to the local public school for fourth grade. This decision would turn Max's life upside-down, as he went from a supportive, progressive social environment to being almost immediately bullied and cast aside. He explained:

> So we went to public school in fourth grade. I did well but didn't really like it. The kids teased me a lot, because, well… I'm gay. So that got me ostracized. None of the other guys would sit with me at lunch, so I had to sit with all the girls. And that just reinforced the rumor. So it just kept getting worse.

As Max's victimization continued through his fifth grade year, he responded both by withdrawing further into his studies and dedicating himself to mathematics and science rather than social interaction and also by convincing his parents that grade skipping and/or school switches might help him to find a better environment. "I ended up skipping sixth grade and switching schools twice because of peer group problems," he said, "the kids were just uncivilized brutes." Max simply asked his mother if he could

skip the sixth grade and she immediately called the school and arranged for this to

happen. "She had the principal on speed dial!" Max joked. Finding seventh grade to be

much of the same in terms of bullying, even with the older students, Max then arranged

to transfer to another public school for the eighth grade. When that failed to alleviate the

problem, Max asked his parents to let him transfer to a chartered magnet school, and

when they arranged for a mid-year switch, Max finally found a place that was tolerant

and accepting of his identity for the first time since the third grade, even if he had not yet

officially "come out."

Max loved his experiences at the magnet school, where he discovered for the first

time how enjoyable it could be to shape your educational schedule according to your own

individual interests. "I went for the math/science magnet and the drama magnet track,"

Max said, "You could focus on what you wanted to!" While he eventually gave up

drama due to stage fright challenges, Max became increasingly involved in the school's

extracurricular life over his two-and-a-half years at the charter school:

> I got to focus on math and science, but I also did mock trial. I did student
>
> government. I was on the math team. And then sophomore year, I was the
>
> school's vice president! There wasn't a day that I wasn't going early or staying
>
> after and I loved it. It was so much fun.

Max explained that while he enjoyed many things about the magnet school, he

still had a sense that something "better" was out there, both academically and socially,

and that he wanted to find it. Having had a taste of increased curricular freedom and

social acceptance he now wanted more of each. Additionally, while Max enjoyed the

increased academic challenge provided by his sophomore-year schedule, which included

many AP and honors courses, he felt the corresponding workload to be excessive and wondered if all that homework was really necessary in order to help him to learn. "AP classes are supposed to be college-level content," he said, "But in college you don't go to each class every day for 45 minutes, 5 days a week. And you don't have 30 pages of reading each night for each class." He eventually asked his mother if there was a better, more effective way for him to learn and she suggested that he consider the Early Scholars Program, which they had first learned of three years earlier at an awards ceremony that Max was part of, but had never given much thought as a realistic option for his future.

Max was initially intrigued, but worried that the Early Scholars might be "child geniuses who could solve a Rubik's cube in ten seconds and had IQ's so high that they couldn't be measured without breaking the machine." Still, he liked the idea of early entrance and also saw this as an opportunity to gain some freedom and independence from his parents, so he asked if they could arrange a campus visit. He described that experience:

> We went and toured the campus and then came back later for an interview. My parents really didn't think too much of it at first… they didn't think it would be the right match or maybe they thought it was for a different kind of kid. But then we talked to some current students. They had similar interests as I did, and they did the same kinds of things that I did. And my parents started to notice these similarities. My interview went really well and we started to drive home, but as we left my parents pulled the car over into an Arby's parking lot not even a mile from campus. My mom started crying and said "He's going to college next year!" So I started crying and my dad started crying and my whole family just melted

down in the middle of this Arby's parking lot. It was a big scene, but after that we just positively embraced the idea.

In his second year at the Early Scholars Program, Max was about as happy as he could imagine. After years of being bullied and/or hiding his sexual orientation, he came out at the start of his first year and was wholeheartedly embraced by the other students. In fact, Max found that the male population at the ESP had a disproportionately high percentage of gay young men and that his honesty regarding his sexual orientation was viewed by the Early Scholars as something to be celebrated rather than mocked. Additionally, he has continued to excel in his academic studies and his passion for extracurricular involvement has enriched not only his life but those of the other Early Scholars who have joined his clubs and programs as well.

Dakota: "My dad's not really involved in my academic life."

Dakota was a fun-loving, eccentric young woman with a style all her own. Her hair was a mix of jet black and chestnut brown and occasionally held a lone streak of deep purple as well. As the weather grew colder she increasingly wore a bright green wool cap that featured two long red and green flaps which slid down from her ears to her shoulders. The shade of the bright green cap perfectly highlighted a neon-colored piercing below her lower lip. Dakota didn't appreciate being labeled as a "punk," a "goth," or an "emo-kid," however, she just wanted to be seen as creative and unique. Her tanned complexion had further contributed to her classmates' faulty assumptions about her personal identity and history. Her father was a Caucasian of Irish decent and her mother was from the Philippines, yet most of her classmates in middle school, high school, and even college wrongly assumed that she was of Mexican heritage.

Dakota was born to a military family and had frequently relocated depending on her father's current assignment. Her parents had met, married, and had their first two children (Dakota's older brothers) in the Philippines. Shortly after the 1991 Pinatubo volcano eruption the family moved to Oklahoma where Dakota was born a few years later. Within a year the family relocated again, this time to a military base in Washington state. Two years later they once again packed their bags and moved overseas, this time to an American base in Turkey. Dakota remembers little of these places, however, and considers New Jersey, where she lived from age 4 to 11 to be her "true home."

Much of this stems from the fact that her family's happiest years took place during that time, as Dakota's fifth grade year would unleash a streak of turbulent changes that changed everything for this young girl. In January of that year Dakota's father retired from the service and less than one month later her mother passed away unexpectedly as she slept, due to a blood clot in her leg. A few months later and still grieving, Dakota, her father, and her two older brothers left their friends and neighbors and moved to coastal Georgia, where she would enter a new middle school, a new culture, and experience for the first time racial discrimination as a result of her skin tone and mixed heritage. While these changes would be enough to rattle anyone, Dakota's new life in Georgia was further complicated by the challenges she encountered in her home life. As she described:

> My mom was kind of like the person keeping us all together and keeping us social. So when my mom died, my dad…. Well, he's a good provider and everything, but he doesn't know how to emotionally connect with any of us. So we're pretty much a bunch of strangers living in one household.

When I asked Dakota to tell me about her experiences with school as she grew up, I could hear the emotional ups-and-downs in her voice as she recalled each year in vivid detail. As she described her early school experiences she smiled brightly as she recalled how excited she was to attend kindergarten, even though her older brothers told her that she would "hate school" once she got used to it. "I didn't even go to preschool so I was home bored and was an awkward kid," she explained. "So I was just kind of excited to go to school and learn and meet other kids." Contrary to her brothers' predictions, Dakota did enjoy school very much, even if she quickly found that it was harder than she thought it would be. "I actually sucked at school," she said, describing her experiences making C's in kindergarten and first grade. Dakota performed well in most subjects though, and she attributed these early C's (mainly in spelling and reading) to her slow progress in learning to read.

While Dakota did not feel comfortable with her reading until she was 10 years old, she developed coping strategies on her own and improved her grades in those subjects by the end of second grade. For example, she knew that words that looked similar (such as chef and chief) would give her trouble, so she would memorize the stories by hearing other children read them out loud and then rely on repetition when it was her turn to "read" the passage out loud to the class. As a result, neither Dakota's parents or teachers ever knew how difficult she found reading and she was never tested for a learning disability or given any special modifications. "I've never really been the person to announce if I'm having issues or something," she told me, "When I was having issues reading in class I would just stumble over the word and keep moving on."

Dakota's elementary school was located on her father's military base, and while they did not have a formal gifted education program they did maintain a loose tracking structure in each subject, and Dakota was regularly placed with the highest group in most subjects. She felt challenged by the limited acceleration, and enjoyed being seen by her peers as an intelligent student. "I liked being smart, it was fun!" she said, laughing. She then became more quiet and serious as she went on to discuss her mother's unexpected death and the family's quick relocation. She indicated that with so many life-altering changes happening so quickly, and feeling unable to speak openly with her father or brothers regarding her feelings, she slipped into a depression as she grieved. She described sixth grade in Georgia as being "an emotional rollercoaster." In addition to the stresses previously mentioned, Dakota was also troubled by the racial separation she encountered in her new middle school, as compared to the more integrated environment on her father's previous military base in New Jersey. She recalled:

> I just remember people always saying things like "white girl" and "black girl" and all that other stuff. When I was younger, you didn't really define people by their color. You were "Dakota," not a "white girl" or a "black girl."… Socially, some people considered me either the "smart white girl" or the "smart mixed girl," but most thought that I was Mexican.

While Dakota continued to earn A's and B's in middle school, she continued to feel insecure and adrift through the sixth and seventh grades, and within two weeks of being identified for the school's gifted program she made the decision on her own not to participate. "It wasn't for me… I didn't like the students," she explained to her father, who was mainly annoyed about having to fill out two sets of paperwork within that two

week time span to get her in and then withdraw her from the program. Dakota did have some supportive emotional outlets though, and she looked forward to each summer when she was allowed to stay with her best friend from New Jersey for a month or two. This connection to her old life was critical for Dakota and she began to process her feelings regarding her mother's death through speaking with this friend and composing poetry and short stories about loss.

Her experience changed in eighth grade, which for her was a time for growth and beginning to recapture her prior confidence. She began to exercise regularly with a female friend, lost over 40 pounds, and started to feel more socially capable as she made more friends and began to attract boys' attention. Similar to her rocky transition to middle school, Dakota once again found herself shaken by the shift to high school. Unsure what to expect of her new surroundings, she withdrew socially and returned to her former, shy ways. To make matters worse, the other students misread her apprehension and teased her for acting as if she was better than everyone else.

Complicating her transition further, Dakota's boyfriend was 19 years old and had just enlisted in the army. Following basic training and special skills medical training he would likely be sent to Iraq. Dakota's father was aware that she was dating an older man but never brought it up in conversation and Dakota had few people in her life to speak to about her feelings. Still, throughout their 11-month relationship, she maintained a level head grounded in the military culture that she had grown up in. She explained:

> Well, because I was a military brat it wasn't that big of an issue. I've always been
>
> a firm believer that if you sign up for the military and you get sent to Iraq, well,
>
> you signed up for the military. No matter whether I love you to death or I don't

know you at all, it was your choice… So I just decided to support him whether he'd be here by my side or fighting in Iraq.

As Dakota grew more accustomed to high school she began to enjoy her classes, especially her honors and AP courses due to their increased challenge, and began to have better relationships with her peers as well. Her sophomore year continued to improve, especially socially, and she soon found herself feeling well-adjusted and reasonably popular. In January of that year, however, she broke up with her older boyfriend and began to focus more of her attention on developing and becoming more comfortable with her own identity as an independent, single female. A few weeks later, while cleaning her room, she discovered an advertisement for the Early Scholars Program in a pile of mail she had thrown on the floor. "I looked at it and thought 'Oh, this could actually be quite interesting,'" she recalled. She decided to apply, made arrangements to take the SAT, and told her father that there was an early entrance to college program that she was looking into.

In making her decision she felt little emotional attachment to her family and was not concerned about leaving home. While she was worried about losing her new high school friends, she believed that "if you're meant to be friends with someone, then you'll stay in touch with them and keep connected" no matter where you are geographically. Moreover, her recent relationship with the older military man had left her craving independence and growth and led her to see this as an opportunity for starting over with a clean slate. Most importantly, Dakota was already realizing that she likely wanted to go into medicine as a potential career and she saw early entrance as a means of shaving two years off of that lengthy academic process.

Upon being accepted to the Early Scholars Program, she excitedly called her father to tell him the good news and discovered that he had never actually understood what the program was to begin with. Dakota laughed as she said:

> He got confused what the program was and thought that it was something for a year later, not this year… Then he was really hesitant about paying for it…. He said "Dakota, why do you even want to do this?" He's never really gotten the whole idea of education I think, because he went to college for one year and then dropped out to join the military.

Regardless, Dakota's father took her to campus for a tour, in order to make sure she was committed and really wanted to do this before they would have to sign the final paperwork. "I don't want to send you away and then have you want to come back again a couple days later," he told her. Additionally, he wanted to make sure that she understood that early entrance was not unsupervised freedom and that she would be dealing with harsher rules and regulations at the hands of the ESP's administrators than she was accustomed to at home. As Dakota explained:

> At orientation, my dad actually said to me "You know this is a jail cell, right?" They told us about curfew, about signing in, and my dad is really relaxed and chill in comparison. Like at my house I leave when I want to and come back when I want to. There's no questioning or anything like that.

Dakota ultimately remained convinced that the Early Scholars Program would be a good career move and would allow her to advance at a quicker pace, however, and her father allowed her to accept the program's invitation. While she had greatly enjoyed her college experiences thus far and was glad that she made the decision to matriculate, she

did get frustrated from time to time that she "never gets a break" when it comes to accelerating her career. Having entered college at 16, she was now 17 and in the process of filling out transfer applications for once she's completed the ESP. After that, she would need to take the Medical College Admissions Test (MCAT) at age 18 and apply to medical schools at 19. While Dakota did not find the busy pace intimidating she did worry about the upcoming transition from the sheltered environment of the Early Scholars Program to the general college and medical school experiences: "No matter where I go, it's never going to be like the normal experience," she said, "because I'll always be so young compared to the rest of the students."

Greg: "I've read the whole healthcare bill three times."

Greg was considered by many of the Early Scholars Program's administrators to be an ideal candidate for early entrance to college. He was bright, socially mature, academically focused, career-minded, and had already compiled an impressive résumé of individual accomplishments before even arriving on campus. To illustrate, this 17 year-old, who looked and carried himself more like a young man of 20 or 21, played multiple musical instruments, was a black-belt in karate, had appeared as an extra in several movies and television programs, had recently earned the rank of Eagle Scout, and was thoroughly involved in both state and federal politics. He had just returned from a six-month stint as a congressional page in Washington, D.C. and was now volunteering for the state's Republican gubernatorial candidate as the "student leader" responsible for organizing and coordinating campus events and rallies in over 21 counties.

Greg was a tall, athletic young man with medium-length brown hair, long sideburns, and stylish black-rim glasses. Like Jada and Max, he was a twin, although

Greg and his fraternal twin brother, who also attended the Early Scholars Program, were not particularly close and did not share many interests in common. "We are exact opposites," Greg commented, "We don't look alike and our interests in music, sports, and everything else are completely opposite. I guess we're not too close, especially because I've been gone so much." Greg's family had deep roots in their community and had only relocated during his childhood once, moving a short 15 miles. His father had been a former Air Force pilot, but had retired before the children were born and taken a job with a commercial airline. His mother had worked for many years as a dental hygienist as well and the family lived comfortably.

Greg's interest in politics and public service was not at all new in his family's storied history, even if he was the sole Republican amongst at least three generations of Democrats. "My great-great-great-great grandfather was a general in the Revolutionary War," he told me, "There are over 100 cities in the United States named after him." Additionally, his grandmother had been a delegate for Ted Kennedy's 1980 campaign for the Democratic nomination and Greg himself had gotten involved in state politics at the age of 13. As he recalled:

> My entire family is Democrat and yet I'm a Republican. It started out really
>
> early…. When I was in Boy Scouts I was trying to earn all the merit badges and
>
> there was one for "writing a letter to your congressman" so I did it. I was really
>
> into the fair tax at the time so I sent my congressman a letter about it. He sent me
>
> back a reply saying that he was very impressed with my thoughts on the issue and
>
> he asked me to accompany him as a special guest to a town hall meeting that he

was hosting half-an-hour from my house about the fair tax. He actually brought me up there at one point and had me talk to the people… it was pretty cool.

As he reflected on his early school experiences he laughed and said "I've never gotten a B in a class before." From first through fourth grade both Greg had been bored and never felt as if he was being challenged whatsoever. Greg's parents had purchased a phonics program for Greg and his brother when they were only 3 or 4 years old and worked with the two boys on a daily basis until they were able to read within a year's time. Additionally, they later enrolled the boys in a Japanese math and reading program known as the Kumon Learning Method during latter elementary school, which focuses on improving students' speed, accuracy, and degree of content mastery. After coasting through his first four years of elementary school having earned an A grade on every single test and quiz he had taken, Greg announced to his parents that "School was pointless… and [he] didn't want to do this anymore" and asked to be either grade-skipped or home-schooled. His parents thought about it and decided to let him do both. They filed paperwork to let him skip the 5th grade and then pulled both twins out of school for two years of homeschooling.

Aside from the freedom to move at a quicker pace with more advanced material, another reason why Greg was excited by the prospect of homeschooling stemmed from his desire to take advantage of his father's "family-flies-free" benefits as a commercial airline pilot, as he wanted desperately to begin to travel the world and see what lay beyond the American southeast:

I've been reading *The New Yorker* since I was 12. And so I'd read about different things in there, like big events in Madrid… or festivals in Germany and I'd say

"Ok, I'm going to that!... I'd have to fly standby, so I could only go if there was

space available and sometimes I'd get stuck coming back.

Additionally, Greg was continually on the lookout for educational ways to spend his

summer vacations. He spent one summer with the Summer Institutes for the Gifted (SIG)

camp at Amherst College and volunteered another year to work for an archaeological

renovation business in Santa Fe, New Mexico, helping to renovate 200 year-old adobe

houses. His parents were usually supportive of these programs and experiences, but on

occasion Greg would have to struggle to make them happen:

I've always kind of made my own decisions. When my parents don't want me to

do something like that I usually fight them and they end up letting me do it,

because they realize in the end that the experience will help me to improve as a

person. My father was even against the congressional page job… We got in

horrible fights over it but I just stuck to my guns and said "I'm going." I'm really

glad that I did because it set me up for a lot of things. I don't regret that at all.

While Greg enjoyed his two years of homeschooling and loved having the

freedom to travel the world, he ultimately decided that he missed social interaction with

kids his own age and asked his parents to reenroll him in a local public school. His

parents obliged, but were angered when the district refused to honor his prior "grade

skip" and insisted on "decelerating" Greg and his brother to the seventh grade, even

though they had spent the past year studying that grade level's curriculum at home.

"From there, everything became really easy again. Even when we got to high school it

was easy and pointless," Greg complained. "The teacher would take something really

easy and make us make a film about it or something and we didn't end up learning anything. It was just work to do to consume our time."

Socially, Greg did indeed regain a vibrant social life, and by his sophomore year of high school he was popular, the vice president of his class, a member of various clubs and organizations, and was elected to the homecoming court. Rather than making friends with students his own age, however, most of his close friends were older than he was – a trend that had began when he was young and continued even to the present day. As a result, Greg was not looking forward to his junior year, as almost all of his friends had been 2-3 years his senior and were now all moving on to college. At this point, he started to wonder whether he might be ready for college as well.

Greg had learned about the Early Scholars Program when he was in the 7th grade, during a Duke Talent Identification Program presentation. He had been attracted to the idea but didn't decide to raise the possibility with his parents until early in his 10th grade year. His mother was excited by the prospect and encouraged him to pursue it, but his father was opposed and questioned why Greg would want to give up his high school popularity and extracurricular leadership posts to rush himself into college before it was time. Greg pushed the issue and explained that he was hoping to find greater academic challenge, better courses, and an even more improved social life, and eventually his father came around and told him to "go for it." Even though he was excited by the idea as he mailed in his application packet and went through the interview process, Greg was unsure what exactly to expect of the Early Scholars Program. "I didn't really have any expectations," he admitted, "I was just looking forward to being somewhere new and

being pushed to a higher level. That's all I really knew. It wasn't until I got here that I realized how great this place actually is."

For Greg, the ESP was an excellent fit for several vital reasons. For the first time in his life, he felt as if he is truly learning new material in every class and being taught by people who are primarily concerned with teaching cutting-edge content rather than designing creative classroom activities to reinforce stale concepts. As he happily exclaimed, "There aren't any pointless assignments like making videos that don't teach you anything. You go to lectures, take notes, and learn new material. It's less work, but you learn so much more." Greg has also integrated into the collegiate social-scene easier than even he expected and while he is friends with most Early Scholars his closest friends are actually traditionally aged students. Few initially realized that Greg was an Early Scholar and he did not go out of his way to advertise the fact. Greg also pointed out that the program has been extremely flexible with accommodating his political ambitions and even allowed and encouraged him to take a semester off in order to work as a congressional page with the U.S. House of Representatives.

This opportunity had been life-changing for him, as the page program is traditionally for high school students only and because he was the only page enrolled in college he was quickly promoted and eventually offered the most prestigious of all page jobs: To manage the "congressional cloakroom." While the idea of working in a "cloakroom" may not sound like much in a literal sense, the room is actually a large behind-the-scenes lounge and bar where members of the House meet to discuss upcoming bills and receive their marching orders from the leaders of their respective parties. His job there actually required him to read each and every piece of legislation going up for a

vote, to write a "cheat sheet" summarizing its major points, to speak daily to both ex-Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi and current Speaker of the House John Boehner to learn how they wished the members of their party to vote, and to then pass those messages along to the other representatives who would seek Greg out in order to learn what they should be doing next. "It was kind of ridiculous actually… I had to read the entire Obama healthcare bill three times," he said with a sigh. Now back at the Early Scholars Program, Greg was volunteering with the Republican gubernatorial candidate and had already lined up a summer internship with a right-wing campaign strategy committee in Washington D.C. As for his Democrat parents and grandparents, they supported his involvement but have made it clear that they don't want to debate politics with him any longer. As Greg told me, "They tell me to go do my own thing and that they're proud of me but that they don't want me bringing my work home."

CHAPTER VI

FINDINGS

The Lived Experiences of Early Entrance Students

The students of the Early Scholars Program were a diverse collection of bright

young men and women with different backgrounds and goals for the future. As I spent

months pouring over and analyzing my interview, observation, and document-based data,

however, I began to discover glimmers of common themes and threads that coursed

through many of their experiences as early entrants to college. As I continued to press

the data further through additional layers of coding and analysis, it became clear that

categorical themes were emerging that could speak to each of my primary and secondary

research questions. More so, these themes provided confirmable and trustworthy answers

that were solidly grounded in my participants' collective lived experiences. These

categorical themes, along with their critical representative properties, are presented in the

table below:

Table 3

Findings: Themes and Properties

Research Questions	Themes and Properties

Motivations for early entrance	• Dissatisfaction with prior schooling
	  o Lack of academic value
	  o Troubled social history
	• Being aware of better options
	• Feeling ready to move on

The academic experiences of early entrants	• Complete academic immersion • Being challenged for the first time • Cooperation and competition • Relationships with professors

The social and emotional experiences of early entrants	- Finally fitting in - Trying to "pass" - Overcoming new challenges - Acclimating to college life - Growth and development - Relieving stress
How personal background factors affect early entrance	- Frequent relocation - Parents emphasized education and independence - Tolerance and tension - Wealth matters little
Participants' perceptions of institutional support factors	- High overall satisfaction - Perceived program strengths - Program administrators - Creative outlets - Campus events - Program as a refuge - The residential staff - Perceived program weaknesses - Lack of awareness and understanding - Facility complaints - Unhealthy living habits

I will now present my findings for each of these research questions in turn, providing

evidence for the emergent themes in the form of data from interviews, participant

observations, and document analyses. In order to strengthen the trustworthiness of my

findings I will additionally strive to incorporate data for each assertion from across

multiple participants and data collection methods, as recommended by Bogdan & Biklen

(2007).

Motivations for Early Entrance

Three major categorical themes emerged from the data regarding the Early

Scholars' common lived experiences which motivated them to pursue early entrance to

college. These were dissatisfaction with their prior schooling experiences, being aware

that better educational options existed, and feeling ready to move on with their educations

and lives in general. Additionally, the students' dissatisfaction with their prior schooling experiences stemmed from a combination of two distinct factors, being both a perceived lack of academic value in the experience and a troubled social history that often incorporated both a history of being bullied and experiencing feelings of social difference/maladjustment. Represented graphically, students' motivations for early entrance to college appeared as presented below:

Figure 1

Motivations for Early Entrance
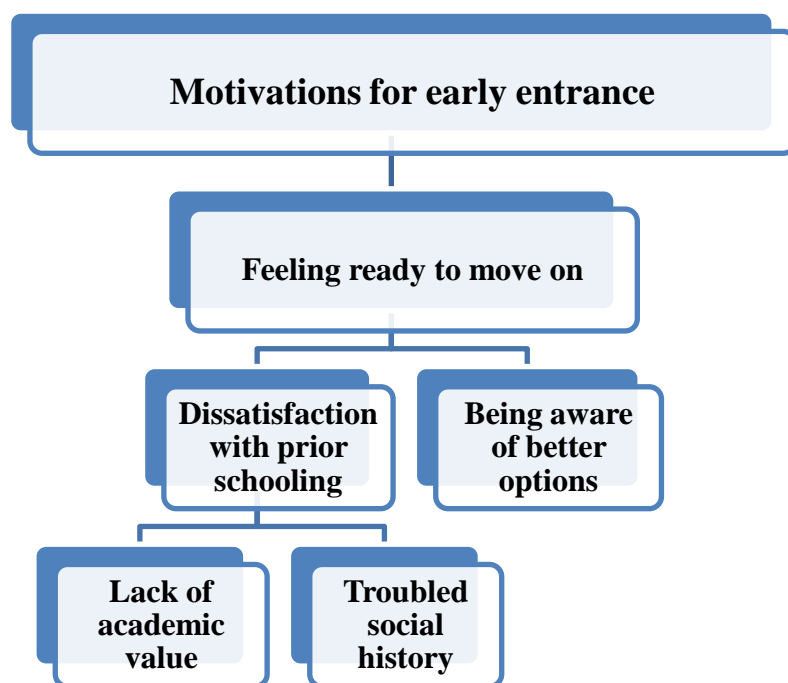
Dissatisfaction with Prior Schooling

All eight of the participants reported severe and prolonged dissatisfaction with their prior schooling experiences, including their time spent at the elementary, middle, and high school levels. While not every participant disliked each and every academic year or specific school that they attended, they collectively painted a picture of intense boredom and social maladjustment that pushed each to consider educational alternatives.

As Jada once commented, "What I like best about this place is that it isn't high school." Similarly, John considered dissatisfaction with his educational experiences at his private preparatory school to be a primary motivating factor behind his decision to seek early entrance, and Greg, Max, and Lena each reported a history of frustration with the lack of rigor they experienced and a craving for more personalized, focused curriculum. This topic arose regularly in top-lobby conversations as well, with students expressing a sensation of relief and freedom at having been unchained from a slow-moving, cumbersome educational track that seemed ill-equipped to handle their capabilities or needs. "I feel sorry for the people in high school now," I once heard a short, first-year brunette named Melissa comment to her friends as they sang the praises of the college academic life they were now enjoying. Three participants, Mark, Dakota, and Max, did occasionally specify that they came to enjoy high school, but both Mark and Dakota simultaneously reported being victims of continual patterns of bullying that occurred during this same time frame. Max, who authentically seemed to enjoy his experience at a magnet high school for academically and creatively gifted teens, had experienced a significant history of social victimization stemming from his sexual orientation in prior educational environments as well.

Interestingly, while both males and females were equally likely to report dissatisfaction with the academic aspects of their prior schooling, the four female participants were much more likely to complain about the social settings they encountered in middle and high school. "I was always a loner," said Lena, describing how she nearly gave up on ever having friends during her middle school years. Similarly, Rose, Jada, and Dakota each remarked how they "had friends" but were either

kept at a distance or kept these individuals at a distance, resulting instead in eating lunch

alone, never visiting other students' homes, or engaging peers in routine conversations

outside of class. "I had friends but they weren't, like, real friends," Rose once reflected,

thinking back on her experiences in the Korean international school. Echoing this

sentiment, Lena recalled talking to "three people throughout all of middle school, and

then five others who kind of cycled in and out" as time went on.

Two of the young women had even planned to drop out of high school before

discovering early entrance, in order to escape the academic and social pressures they

faced. "I was already having a hard time standing middle school," Rose highlighted,

explaining why she chose not to pursue entrance to a high-prestige Korean high school.

"I felt like I'd probably want to drop out if I went, which made me feel…less smart, even

thought that wasn't necessarily true." Eventually, Rose would ask her parents to let her

drop out of high school, even after trying two alternative locations that were considered

to be less intense academically. As she elaborated, "I was ready to drop out of Korean

high school and come to America… but my mom wanted me to stay because she is one

of those "family" people." Along the same vein, Jada had been preparing to drop out

since elementary school, and only chose early entrance because it allowed her to escape

the traditional K-12 structure without angering her parents as severely as dropping out

would likely have done. "Early entrance still went with my plans because I was planning

on leaving high school at 16 anyway," she admitted. Rose and Jada were not the only

Early Scholars to have contemplated dropping out of high school either, as I learned in

one conversation with a well-mannered and highly professional RA and Early Scholars

Program alumni named Christine one afternoon. "If I had stayed in high school, I

probably would have dropped out eventually or gotten into some really bad behaviors," she shared with me, "I was becoming so bored and disillusioned with education in general due to the lack of challenge."

Lack of academic value.

Participants reported feeling dissatisfied with their prior educational experiences due to two distinct factors, each of which was expressed by a majority of the students during their interviews. The first of these was a perceived lack of academic value overall, in that students recognized from an early age that their individual academic needs were not being adequately met. "I thought a lot of it was pointless," remarked Greg, summing up the comments I had heard over and over again throughout the interview process. Almost none of the participants had ever felt challenged, even when given additional assignments or included in gifted and talented programs. "I just thought it was all *way* too easy… I never even got a B on a test before coming to the ESP," continued Greg. Mark agreed very much with this notion, describing how he had "never felt challenged" in his early years of schooling, even when provided with extracurricular enrichment opportunities and individualized learning projects to keep him occupied. "I wasn't being academically challenged too much," he said, "I did take the most difficult classes but they were more to engage me rather than challenge me."

As a result of this lack of academic rigor, participants widely reported that they spent most of their early years of schooling either bored, asleep or reading in class with a book tucked under their desks. "I honestly don't remember one of my classes in seventh grade at all, just because I was always asleep," John told me during one interview, "but I still had a 99 in that class." Lena additionally recalled irking her teacher on a regular

basis, saying "I got in so much trouble for reading during class when I should have been paying attention… I would sit there and do random stuff because I was so entirely bored." Both of the Early Scholars Program's former directors that I interviewed emphasized these notions, with one saying that "Boredom is the single most common reason we hear from our students as to why they want to enter college early." "They saw school as a waste of their time," echoed the other, "because the experience has been so thoroughly boring and unchallenging for them."

Perhaps most disturbing is the lack of care that the students' perceived on the part of their school settings for finding new ways to adequately challenge them or increase the difficulty of the material. "Every year they would tell us that next year would be more difficult," John reminisced, "I heard these horror stories in elementary school about how much more difficult middle school would be, and then I got there and nothing was different." These predictions of future challenge never seemed to come true and these bright young men and women eventually found themselves in high school, still craving challenge or some form of intellectual stimulation. In fact, an Early Scholars Program survey conducted during the Fall 2010 semester found that 85.7% of the Early Scholars agreed with the statement "I wasn't being challenged enough by high school" as a motivator for why they considered early entrance.

Feeling as if school lacked academic value, interview data revealed that students responded to this challenge in one of three ways. The first group, comprised of Lena, Dakota, and John, simply tried to make the best of it, biding their time and focusing on personal interests or working to develop a social life. As Dakota told me while laughing, "Most of the stuff was really easy and really simple, and I wasn't complaining. I don't

want to do work. The AP classes were the only hard classes and even then I knew that I could handle them." The second group, Max, Greg, and Mark, vividly described feeling "held back" by their high schools and seeking out new ways to challenge themselves or push themselves further. "I don't understand why anyone wouldn't want to get the best education they could… I wanted to move on to bigger and better things," Max told me, bewildered that anyone in a poor educational environment wouldn't strive to find another. Similarly, Mark began to study foreign languages on his own at this time, in order to prepare himself for his hopeful career in Switzerland. Lastly, the third group, including Rose and Jada, actually lost academic motivation throughout their K-10 experiences, culminating in the desire to leave academics entirely. "I got B's because I just wouldn't do the work," Jada reflected, telling me how her test grades remained high even though she "never studied" but that her lack of turning in homework always cost her when it came time for teachers to calculate the grades. She was not worried by this, however, as she had been planning on leaving upon turning 16 and spent most of her time in high school "wandering the hallways" anyway.

Troubled social history.

The second factor which led to students' general dissatisfaction with their prior educational experiences was that of a history of troubled social relationships and/or general social maladjustment with their chronologically-aged peers. Three female participants spoke openly about feeling different from their classmates due to their intelligence and none found this to be to their social advantage. As Rose painfully described:

I tried my best not to be nerdy… I always tried not to be seen as a loner. There was a constant nagging feeling that if I did something wrong or people found out that I was weird I might get singled out. So I would try to be normal and conform to what other people were doing. But it was really hard for me cause I really don't like that. I've always been different… so it felt like I was hiding myself.

Instead of hiding herself, Lena reacted more violently to this tension, openly mocking and teasing the more socially-adept yet less-intelligent students in her class. Describing middle school, she labeled those years as a "nerds versus popular kids conflict," something which she now regretted after realizing that calling students "dumb" or "stupid" in class was inappropriate and hurtful. In Jada's opinion, this maladjustment was the primary factor that had driven a majority of the Early Scholars to apply to the program. As she offered, "I think a lot of people here didn't quite fit in at high school and that's why they sought a place here…. We're a community of misfits."

In addition to the students feeling as if they were different and out of place in their K-10 environments, half of the participants reported experiencing major difficulties in forging friendships with their same-age peers as well. As Dakota stated: "I was really shy and didn't really talk to anyone. I just had like a few friends. I didn't socialize with a bunch of people." Lena, like others, rationalized this by looking down on the other students in her classes and reacting defensively to their rejections. As she stated:

I felt like I didn't need a giant circle of friends. I just never had that… I was like "I don't care if you like me or you don't and if you're mean to me then I'm going to be mean right back," which never helped the situation.

While females were more likely to talk about general social difficulties, males and females alike (2 males and 3 females) spoke openly about experiences being the victims of bullying behaviors at the hands of their peers. These ranged from minor name-calling incidents such as Jada's experiences being called "smarty pants" in kindergarten to more severe cases, such as Max's years of victimization between the fourth and seventh grades as a result of other students suspecting that he was homosexual. "The kids were just uncivilized brutes," he snapped, recalling how he had arranged to skip an entire year of schooling mainly to escape from the venomous social environment of his fifth grade class, only to find that the seventh grade students were not much better. Mark also experienced significant difficulties with bullying during middle school, not only at the hands of students who picked on him for being especially intelligent but also by the other gifted students in his classes. Many of these students may have resented that he was scheduled for an entire schedule of advanced classes while they had only been picked for one or two periods of honors material a day. Mark, however, believes that it had less to do with jealousy and more to do with how different he was, even from the other gifted students. "I was made fun of by a lot of people in my gifted classes," he said while glancing down at the table, "it was just the fact that I was kind of socially awkward and still trying to get into the hang of things."

Struggling with their peer relationships, several participants reported actively desiring to find a way to escape to a more welcoming environment where they could interact with other students more similar to themselves. As Max recalled in his description of high school, "You are stuck with these mindless drones who aren't going to do anything with their lives… I wanted to be with kids like me…. Kids who were

motivated and driven." Nearly parallel to Max's comment, Mark stated that "I wanted to find a place where I could be with people who were as studious as I am, as focused on their schoolwork as I am, and as goal driven as I was." Luckily, each of these students later commented that they felt they had found such an environment at the ESP.

Being Aware of Better Options

The second categorical theme related to students' motivations for early entrance was that of being aware of the existence of better educational options. This theme emerged as my conversations with participants, administrators, staff members, and other Early Scholars led me to increasingly realize what a high percentage of these students had prior experiences with specialized programs for the gifted. For example, almost all students I encountered had participated in school-based gifted education programs, many had completed residential acceleration or enrichment camps such as the Governor's Honors Program (GHP) or the Duke Talent Identification Program (TIP), and a significant number had even previously skipped one or more grades prior to entering college early. Most importantly, however, was the fact that a majority had learned about the Early Scholars Program while still in middle school and had kept it in the back of their minds as they continued with their educations. In short, these students were not only dissatisfied with their prior experiences in school, but they additionally realized that better options than staying put did exist and were in fact realistic.

Students' recollections regarding their schools gifted offerings and Advanced Placement courses were a mixed bag – almost all participants had taken advantage of accelerated and/or enriched course offerings and enjoyed them more than their general-track classes, yet a majority still found them to be too easy and lacking in challenge.

Mark, for example, had been introduced to basic algebra concepts in the third grade by his gifted education teacher and caught on with no difficulty. Greg had filled his entire high school schedule with honors and AP courses, but was "still getting A's on every test." Instead of accepting this status quo for what it was, a majority of the participants were further motivated to seek out further challenge having enjoyed this small taste. As Lena described:

> I was taking AP world history and telling myself that I could handle it. That was at the very beginning of the year because I started to apply to the Early Scholars Program soon after. Then in October the first report card came out and I got an A… I was like 'OK, if I can handle AP world history then I can handle college.'

While the participants were hardly being challenged by their advanced school material, four of the eight did report having enjoyable, rigorous intellectual experiences through taking part in an extracurricular gifted education program such as the Governor's Honors Program or Duke TIP program. Rose, who hopes to be a marine mammal biologist in the future, spent three weeks one summer in North Carolina at the Duke University marine lab. Greg spent a month at Amherst College in Massachusetts, studying with the Summer Institutes for the Gifted. Max, who had been identified for his specific talents in math and science, was invited to participate one summer in a special program at Purdue University where he studied college-level chemistry and computer science. While all three of these students found their experiences to be invigorating, perhaps the most appreciative was Lena, who was only able to partake in an online college psychology course in the 9th grade because she earned a scholarship that paid for the Duke TIP tuition. As she recounted:

The tuition cost was so high and the line for financial aid was so close, so I thought I wasn't going to be eligible. But because my dad was over in Iraq our tax form showed that our family had no income for the year and so I ended up getting a scholarship! So I begged my mom to let me do it and I took an online college psychology course during 9th grade… It was the best class I've ever had.

Experiences such as these had the students who participated optimistic that the state of their educational surroundings would eventually improve, but they were not willing to sit back and be patient. This was especially true for Lena, Max, and Greg, each of whom had been accelerated in the past and realized that further grade-skipping was something that could realistically occur. Reflecting on his decision to skip the sixth grade, Max stated "I wanted to get ahead in my education… I was so done with grade school. I wanted to move on to bigger and better and more intelligent things." For these students, the idea of acceleration was not seen as being radical – it was seen as something that could allow them to fulfill their true potentials.

Additionally, the notion of accelerating further ahead was not thought of as a K-12 option exclusively, as three of the eight participants had learned about the Early Scholars Program while still in middle school and others such as Rose, John, and Mark came to find out about early entrance early in their high school careers. These students realized that a better educational environment was within their grasp and were willing to do whatever it took to convince their parents if need be. As one former program director phrased it, "These students have a sense that something bigger than high school is out there and they want to get at it right away." Greg, Jada, and Lena had each been told about the Early Scholars Program while in the seventh grade, as part of a Duke TIP

recognition ceremony that took place on the host-university's campus, and Lena described herself as an avid "stalker of the program's website" over the following years. Similarly, Greg and Jada each discussed the program with their twin and decided at that time that it would be something to pursue once they had reached the 10th grade. Seven of the eight participants reported being intrigued by the notion immediately upon learning about the program, especially by the thought of finding the rigor that they had not yet experienced in their local schools. "What an interesting idea, to skip two years of high school and go right into college!" Rose remembered thinking, "maybe I'll find some challenge for myself!"

Feeling Reading to Move On

The third categorical theme to emerge from the data regarding this research question was that of feeling ready to move on, and ultimately it is this theme which likely moderates whether or not a dissatisfied gifted student who is aware of other options ultimately selects to enter college early if given the choice. The refined codes encapsulated by this theme represented some of the most commonly shared feelings regarding early entrance by the participants, as I routinely found five, six, or seven of the eight Early Scholars telling an identical story as to how their decisions were reached. To illustrate, the most commonly cited factor in influencing the students to make the leap to college at an early age was that of having big dreams and wanting to get started on accomplishing them. "I like that starting college two years early will give me a jump on my Ph.D., because there's probably going to be so many years of schooling," Rose told me when asked why she had felt ready to move ahead. "I wanted to do a double-major in

mathematics and physics, with a double-minor in German and French," Mark added, "so even though it will take five years I'll still be 19 when I graduate."

Seven of the eight participants were definitively planning on pursuing post-graduate studies and wanted to reach those more quickly as well. Mark, Rose, and Jada were already planning Ph.D.'s, Greg and Max were hoping to go to law school, and Dakota and Lena were contemplating medical school among other options. Holding high ambitions and using early entrance as a means to reach for your goals was not uncommon among the other early entrants at the Early Scholars Program either, beyond the eight primary participants. As the program's Residential Coordinator, a quiet but approachable young man in his mid-20's, explained: "Most students around here want to get into a more prestigious school someday, like an Ivy League school, and they think that the Early Scholars Program can help them to get there." In contrast to certain early entrance programs around the nation, the Early Scholars Program takes pride in, and celebrates the accomplishments of, its graduates who choose to transfer to another institution following the two-year program. This philosophy of helping each student to reach as far as they can starts at the top of the school's administrative hierarchy. "We will never pressure any Early Scholar to stay here," the president of the university had made clear during our talk. "Having them transfer to Yale is simply not a 'loss'… not for them or for this institution."

In addition to dreaming big and wanting to get ahead with their postgraduate plans as quickly as possible, a majority of the participants also reported feeling ready to move ahead out of desire for increased freedom, independence, responsibility, and the

potential ability to take control of their own educational agendas. Jada, who despised the traditional structure of her K-10 experiences, made this sentiment perfectly clear, saying:

> In high school you have to wake up at 6 o'clock… in college you have the option
> not to wake up early. You have a lot more control over what classes you take,
> you can upgrade any class to honors, and it's been easier to talk to professors – at
> least for me. You just email them and they email you back…. In high school it's
> totally different. If I want to get paperwork or something done at my old high
> school I still have to send my Dad to do it because students are so much lower on
> the hierarchy level and they won't take me seriously.

John was especially frustrated with the lack of control that he had possessed at his private high school, which he criticized for charging so much money in tuition and then limiting the degree of freedom and individualization that students were able to apply to their curricular choices. When I asked him what bothered him the most about his high school, he said "The fact that this education was costing so much money and that I couldn't make it my own… I really didn't like that." In contrast, all eight of the Early Scholars now felt significantly more in control of their own academic lives and destinies, something which gave them great joy. "It's not as easy academically but you have more free time here," Lena explained, "so it's totally worth having to do a little more work." Max echoed these sentiments, sharing that he appreciated being able to "take full control of [his] education with even more resources than [he] would have been able to use if he were a traditionally-aged college freshman."

Finally, for half of these teenage students, a restrictive or boring high school environment was not the only thing they were looking forward to gaining some distance

and independence from. "To be honest, some of them are really looking forward to getting away from home as well," the program's psychological counselor shared with me during one of our initial talks. This was certainly true for many of my participants, especially Dakota, who had described her home as "bunch of strangers living in one household." Even Mark, who had a very good relationship with his parents, described that he "loved the freedom aspect of being away from home," and that he enjoyed the small "rebellious moments" when he realized that the distance was letting him get away with something that his parents would normally not have approved of. Showing me a photograph of his XBox 360 video gaming console, he remarked: "Even if it's kind of cheesy, I like the feeling of being able to play M-rated (17+) video games at age 16, because my parents would never have let me play them at home."

Ultimately, I believe that it is the congruence of these three factors – dissatisfaction with prior schooling, being aware of better options, and feeling ready to move on – that combines to motivate the majority of Early Scholars to seek early entrance to college. Some students may be more or less motivated by the academic or social components, the desire to move ahead with their future plans, or the hope to create additional distance between them and their families, but each story of early entrance that I encountered contained elements of each of these motivators.
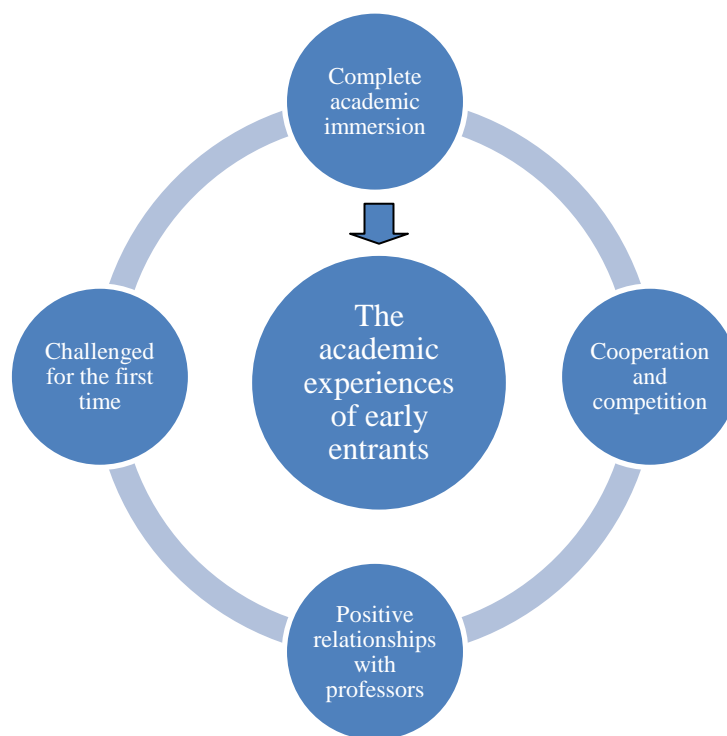
The Academic Experiences of Early Entrants

Four major categorical themes emerged from the data regarding early entrants' academic experiences as atypically young college students. Collectively, these themes paint a picture of the early entrants as being fully academically engaged in their coursework, not only due to the heightened rigor of the material but also as a result of the

powerful interactions they experience with their professors and peers. These four themes include: Complete academic immersion, being challenged for the first time, competition and cooperation, and positive relationships with professors. Each factor impacts the others, resulting in the holistic experience, while complete academic immersion most fully captures and impacts the overall topic. Represented graphically, the proposed interactions of these factors appears as such:

Figure 2

The Academic Experiences of Early Entrants

Complete Academic Immersion

The first major theme impacting the academic experiences of the Early Scholars is that of complete academic immersion, in the sense that these students are not sheltered or "held back" from the full collegiate academic experience in any way. In fact, as has been found both in the extant research literature and described in the previous description of

this research setting, early entrants in most cases take on a heavier credit load and fuller

academic schedule than the traditionally-aged undergraduates who share their classes.

Far from having reservations about this practice, the Early Scholars tended to seek out

this additional challenge and rigor, pursuing wholeheartedly the opportunity to become

fully involved in the university's academic life. In fact, one of the most common

complaints by Early Scholars was that of how much they disliked feeling "babied" on the

occasions that they were treated differently due to their age, which they described as

being few and far between but bothersome nonetheless. "I believe that if you're going to

be in this program you should be able to handle your own stuff," Greg told me during one

interview. "You shouldn't have to be pushed and helped like that. I've maintained a 4.0

the whole time I've been here with all honors classes… so I really don't think they should

do too much for us." Similarly, Lena complained about one newly-minted college

professor who "treats [all the students] like we're high school students or middle school

students. It's kind of annoying but it's his first year teaching," she said. Two Early

Scholars did disagree with this sentiment, however, claiming that it would be foolish to

turn down any advantage which could help them to further succeed in their early entrance

endeavors. As Jada explained:

> I can see why treating early entrance students as normal would be desirable, but to
>
> be honest, your average college freshman is only a couple years older than I am
>
> when I started and I don't appreciate being treated like a piece of glass because of
>
> it. I don't need a special dorm, special facilities, a special guidance counselor, or
>
> indeed the "special" curfew. However… I'm very fond of unfairness when it's
>
> skewed in my favor.

Max, who also shared Jada's appreciation for "beneficial unfairness," additionally argued that the most important element of full academic immersion at the Early Scholars Program was that it allowed students to fully pursue their own intellectual interests rather than being tied down by a prescribed curriculum. "The more I thought about early entrance and time passed by, I realized that I hated doing this work and wanted to do more of what I liked," he told me, "What I wanted to do was to get a degree in something that I was interested in now… I wanted to get rid of all the other stuff like English and history." Mark and Lena typified this individualist drive as well, as each had signed up for 3000 and 4000 level courses in areas that they were especially interested in. "This semester I'm not really taking any basic classes," Mark said, "I'm taking modern physics, which is a 4000 level class, and three different math classes at the 2000 level or above, and I've got upper-level German too." Similarly, Lena's favorite class this semester was an 4000-level Jane Austin-themed literature course whose student body was comprised of college seniors and master's degree students. As she reflected on the difference between her current degree of academic immersion and what she had become accustomed to in high school she stated, "In high school it was pretty much just a set path that you followed… you got to choose about two extracurricular courses…. Here, you get to choose about three semesters worth of classes that you'd actually want to take!"

While a majority of Early Scholars actively sought out as much academic immersion and challenge as they could find, it became apparent that a dangerous flipside to this trend existed as well: The issue of taking on too much. A former program director commented in one interview that one of the more common academic challenges that early entrants face is "Biting off more than they can chew" and the participants'

experiences gave credence to this statement. Three of them, Greg, Rose, and Max, had

each dropped at least one class since entering the program and I routinely heard other

students speak about their declining credit loads in the top-lobby conversations as well.

"I started this semester with 21 credits," a visibly stressed Aggie once shared with the

group, "But after running into trouble with organic chemistry and dropping the lab, I'm

down to 14 or 15 at this point I think." Program administrators were well aware that

these students had a proclivity for pushing themselves to take more credits than might be

initially recommended and tried to balance their enthusiasm with tempered advising. As

one former director, still employed at the program in a different capacity, made clear:

> I'm aware that many ESP students take 18 to 22 credits per semester, but I
>
> personally advise them to only take 12 to 15. When they take more, it's because
>
> of their own initiative and motivation. I need to approve students' requests to
>
> take more than 18 credits, and before I do that, I consider their current GPA
>
> before approving or rejecting their request. If a student has as 3.2 or below, I
>
> reject it. If they have a 3.5, I'll probably agree. If they have a 3.75 or above, I'll
>
> approve anything they want.

It is important to note that while carrying high credit loads is common at the Early

Scholars Program, it does seem appropriate to allow students to push themselves,

considering that not only are they among the brightest segment of students on campus but

they additionally earn very high grades on average in their completed courses. As

previously mentioned, the average GPA for Early Scholars is 3.62 and a significantly

higher percentage earn a perfect 4.0 (17%) than earn below a 3.0 (7%). Clearly, most are

not only taking heightened course loads but thriving in the challenge as well.

Another reason why Early Scholars are so willing to take on such a high degree of challenge and immerse themselves fully in their new academic environment stems from the fact that many possess a wide-array of diverse intellectual interests. Mark, for example, was planning a double-major in math and physics along with a double-minor in German and French. Lena, who hopes to be a doctor, was also trying to carve out an extra year of schooling in between her undergraduate graduation and the start of medical school, to enable her to pursue a master's degree in literature. Additionally, students such as Rose and Dakota were contemplating several avenues and actively exploring each. "I probably want to work with marine mammals," said Rose, "but I'm also interested in veterinary medicine and maybe linguistics." Dakota echoed this notion of dedicated exploration, commenting that "I think I want to go pre-med, but I'm also interested in psychology and maybe anthropology." These students' academic years were not the only thing to have been placed on a compressed timeframe – the amount of time they had to make important career decisions had been as well. As a result, many were signing up for as many classes as they could in order to fully explore their range of possible options before making a commitment, while the ones who had already settled on a career path were happily devoting themselves to the material completely.

This academic immersion was also evident in the nighttime culture of the ESP's dorm. Rather than causing trouble or playing pranks, most of the students used the hours after curfew to continue with their studying, and they could always be found in study lounges, private carrels, meeting rooms, and spacious lounges with textbooks and coffee cups strewn about. That is not to say, of course, that these students did not have fun or enjoy vibrant social lives, but my observations of their study patterns always

demonstrated that academics were the top priority for almost all of these bright young men and women. "I do homework every night until about one or two," John mentioned casually when asked about his habits. "It's easier to study once curfew hits and there are fewer distractions."

Being Challenged for the First Time

The second major theme present in the academic experiences of the Early Scholars was that of being intellectually challenged for the first time. Six of the participants described this experience as being one of difficulty and transition, in which they were forced to recognize that they would need to alter the ways in which they had conducted their previous academic business. As Dakota explained:

I took chemistry for the first time here and I bombed it…So I thought, "Oh crap, some of this stuff isn't as easy as it was in high school." Like the interactions with my teachers aren't going to let me get easy help and I'm going to have to put myself out there in class and ask questions. As a high school student I'd never really asked questions. I just understood things on my own and could figure it out if I needed to.

Similarly, John recalled the experience of struggling at first to gain his academic footing, and then adjusting his study habits in order to meet the increased demand. "My first semester I had a 3.4," he said, "but then second semester I took 17 credit hours and messed up a bunch and ended up with a 2.8…. But right now I'm focusing primarily on my grades and this semester is looking like a 4.0." Not every student felt this way, however, and Greg and Rose actually believed that in some ways their college courses were easier than those they had taken in high school. As Rose explained:

In high school they give you lots of worksheets to do, but here your grades are

mostly tests. So if you're a good test taker, you can get much better grades, and

you don't have to do as much work. Also, the lower level classes are really

easy… it's the upper level ones that are really hard.

Greg believed that his high school AP courses had prepared him well for the demands of

college, saying "I'm still getting all A's, even here." He did feel more challenged by the

material, however, just not to a point where he felt incapable of high-level achievement.

For some of the students, being challenged by their coursework was a thoroughly

new and even frightening experience. Lena, for example, described feeling "neurotic"

during her first semester when she began to encounter material in classes that she was

unfamiliar with. "It's better now," she told me, "because I understand that I'm not

supposed to have seen some of this before. You're not supposed to do derivatives in high

school." Lena continued to talk about these "knowledge gaps" that she occasionally

encountered – meaning information that other students would have learned in high school

but she skipped due to early entrance – saying "Everyone else might have seen this stuff

in high school, but I need to accept that it's ok that this is the first time I'm being

introduced to the material." A majority of the participants, six out of the eight, did not

feel as if these "knowledge gaps" were a significant hindrance to their education,

however. John confessed to worrying about them at first, but then quickly realizing that

he was able to fit in with his older classmates academically just fine. He explained:

I was worried about that a little bit… realizing that what all these other people

learned in high school I would have to learn in college. And then I went to my

political science class and it made me start to feel a lot better. In that class of 125

kids, not a single one raised their hand to answer how the electoral college

worked, and then I raised my hand and got it right. At that point, I realized that if

there was anything missing from my background I'd just go ahead and learn it and

be alright, so I felt a little bit better.

Additionally, five of the participants reported that facing this additional challenge

invigorated their desire to learn and improved their self-esteem, their abilities, and their

accomplishments. "I'm afraid I won't get an A sometimes," said Max, "but I stick with

the challenges and when I still do I realize that I've learned so much and it makes me feel

proud." Mark greatly appreciated the level of challenge he faced at the ESP, calling it

"about the level I was looking for" and remarking that from time to time he would pause

to reflect on how boring his academics would still be if he had remained in high school.

"Just yesterday I was sitting in class and my professor was talking about Einstein and

ending the chapter on special relativity," he said, "and I thought 'There is no way that I

would ever be learning any of this in high school' and I think that's a very good thing."

In my conversations with current and former program administrators, one of the

most frequent topics to develop was that of the students' need to "learn how to study," as

it is widely believed that the Early Scholars often arrive on campus with few pre-formed

study skills. "The most common challenge that I see is them not knowing how to study,"

said Kelly the program's psychological counselor, who maintained a selection of booklets

and informational pamphlets on study skills and habits outside of her office door. The

program's academic advisor, Lindsey, who was beloved by the Early Scholars for helping

them with everything from negotiating with their high schools to getting them into

senior-level classes, additionally stated that the need for giving the students time to

develop these skills was something that she continually emphasized to parents of first-year Early Scholars. "It's critically important for parents to create a 'communication safe-zone' so that their kids can feel ok to call home and say 'Mom, Dad, I screwed up and got a bad grade," she told me. "That's part of letting them learn how to study and handle college academics well."

While the program's administrators saw the issue as one of study skills, however, the Early Scholars tended to see it as a question of time management instead. Only one participant, Greg, talked openly about needing to "develop study skills quickly" upon entering the program. Five of the others argued that they either "knew how to study" in a conceptual sense or just needed to grow up a bit and learn how to manage their time more efficiently and effectively. As Max stated, "This is where people start to grow up and mature into actual adults… and one of the parts of that is to be able to handle things on your own and to be more prepared and organized with your work." Mark, Rose, and Lena also made comments in the same vein, stating that what they really needed to do was to learn "moderation" and come to the understanding that they would simply have to devote more of their time and energy to preparing for classes than they had in the past. This need for moderation and balance, Mark claimed, is not specific to early entrants, but is rather a challenge common to all college students regardless of age. "One of the best visual diagrams I've ever seen is a drawing of a triangle with the word 'college' inside it," he told me, "at each of the three points are the words 'social life,' 'straight A's,' and '8 hours sleep.' At the bottom of the picture, it says 'You can only pick two.'"

Cooperation and Competition

The third categorical theme evident in the Early Scholars' lived academic experiences was that of cooperation and competition. These two characteristics, although opposites, jointly describe the academic aspects of interpersonal relationships among students at the ESP as they would simultaneously go to great lengths to help each other succeed yet compete intensely amongst each other over grades and achievement. Cooperation is pushed by the program's administrators and residential staff as a way for "iron to sharpen iron." As Lindsey and Kelly, the academic and psychological counselors tell students when they are worried about an upcoming exam, "You have lot of smart people around you, take advantage of that!" The residential staff similarly encourages group study activities and tutoring opportunities, challenging students to help others in subjects in which they excel in exchange for help in subjects in which they struggle. One concrete example of this mindset was seen in the program's "wall of tutors," a large white poster-board which hangs in the dormitory's recreational center. The sheet is separated into several areas, with each space representing a different academic subject. Students who consider themselves particularly adept at that subject are asked to write their names and room numbers in that zone, so that other students can seek them out if they have a question regarding that material.

The students, in general, love the system and many see the willingness of their peers to help them study as one of the best things about their academic experiences. "If you encounter anything difficult, you can always ask someone to help you with it," Jada detailed. "People come to me all the time to ask if I'll edit their essays or go to Aggie and ask if she has any ideas for what they can write about for a literature paper." Lena

agreed, adding "You might have to bribe someone with a brownie, but you can always find someone to help you with whatever you need. No one ever turns you down." Max especially enjoyed the "huge information exchange" that he found in the top-lobby, saying that "at any point I can yell out 'I need help with so-and-so's law' and someone will immediately explain it to me off the top of their head." I witnessed this firsthand during one session in the top-lobby, when a student yelled out "Avogadro's number!" without even looking up from his chemistry textbook, and was quickly answered by another student's answer of "6.022 times 10 to the 23rd power!" In addition to helping students to better grasp the material, this mentality of partnership and community was reported by several participants to support their motivation to excel. "The people here are really motivated and really interested in what they like to do," Rose said, "And being around people like that makes me want to be more like that as well."

While Early Scholars greatly enjoy, and benefit from, this atmosphere of academic cooperation, several participants shared that the academic environment has a darker edge to it as well. While students are very happy to help each other and push each other to do their best, each early entrant was also used to being one of the "smartest kids" in their old high school and many came to the ESP with a competitive mentality of needing to be the best. "There's a lot of competition here, not only in what grade you get or how you did on the SAT, but also in terms of how little you studied to get that grade," Max explained. "People will claim that they studied less than you did and got almost the same grade, so really they 'did better' then you did." One participant in particular, Dakota, became so bothered by people asking her what her grade was after every exam that she no longer shared that information with anyone. "That's my business, not theirs,"

she said with a huff. Additionally, while showing me some of her recent artistic

photographs one afternoon I spied a picture of another female Early Scholar climbing a

tree and reaching for a leaf and asked Dakota to explain what the picture represented.

"It's about all the feelings of being alone here and feeling like you have to climb to the

top," she responded.

For many of the Early Scholars, competition also affected another critical element

of their personalities which I regularly observed within the students' study habits and

their discussions about grades. This characteristic was that of perfectionistic tendencies,

as many of the students had never before earned a grade lower than an A before coming

to college and felt as if doing so would spell doom for their academic and career dreams.

As Dakota indicated:

> The most common worry of Early Scholars is that of getting bad grades and
>
> failing out. You would think that because we're all so smart and intelligent that
>
> we wouldn't worry about failing, but we do. We're so stressed about even getting
>
> a B or getting a 3.2 or anything low at all. We worry that we're not going to
>
> make it to that school we want to go to, because our standards are higher.

Similarly, Lena, who had described herself as "freaking out" in high school when she

would get a "low A" on a test, continued to work through issues of perfectionism. "I

always get upset before a test," she told me. "What if I get a B? What if I don't do well?

My parents always say 'It's ok, you'll be fine if you don't make straight A's.'" Lena's

parents had always emphasized that she could do anything she wanted and didn't need to

compete with other people, as long as she valued education and tried to do her best.

"They always told me I could grow up to be anything I wanted to be… even a bum," she

recalled with a smile. The program's psychological counselor felt that these internalized pressures were typical and that the majority of perfectionism at the ESP was similar to Lena's, in that it was self-oriented and not the result of parental pressure. "Still," said Carly, the program's academic recruiter, "early entrance kids can put a lot of pressure on themselves. I've even seen some drop classes because they were going to get a B."

Although it might seem dangerous to place perfectionists in an environment that is even more academically demanding, two of the three participants who struggled with this issue felt as if coming to the ESP helped them to improve their attitudes and to realize that they didn't need to be perfect, grade-wise. Mark, for example, expressed his perfectionism in terms of talking about "letting the fear get the best of him," and spoke openly about his journey towards realizing that sometimes relaxing and just trying to learn is more productive than worrying non-stop about the intricacies of your grades. "That's definitely the hardest thing for me… In my calculus II class last semester I let the fear get the best of me and I ended up with a 74 on the first test," he said, "But then as the semester went on I thought 'You know what? If I end up with a B, maybe it isn't that big of a deal'… And that's when I started to make A's." Lena also spoke of her gradual realization that she was already "ahead enough," commenting that:

> I came here expecting A's out of myself but I made my first B last year and I was really upset. But then I said "OK, I started college at 15. I should actually be a sophomore in high school right now…and I just made a B in a college-sophomore level class." So actually, I'm four years ahead of where I should be. I'm going to go ahead and decide to let myself feel alright about this.

Relationships with Professors

The fourth and final categorical theme to emerge concerning students' academic experiences at the Early Scholars Program was that of their relationships with their professors. While none of the eight participants had ever experienced a case of negative interaction with a professor due to being an early entrant to college, three were happy to report that professors treated them like any other students in the class, and five participants felt that they were actually placed at an advantage by being members of the Early Scholars Program. "Some professors might treat me a little bit different because I'm an Early Scholar," Jada informed me. "For example, my U.S. History professor loves us because we do all the work, volunteer to upgrade the class to honors, participate in class discussions, and never fail any of the tests." For several of the students, such as Dakota and Greg, initial feelings that the professors were just like their former teachers dissipated once they began to approach the professors after class or stop by their office hours to ask questions about the material. "The student-teacher interaction is so different in college," Dakota reflected, "You have to reach out to the professor first before they interact with you… At first I didn't care to get to know them but this year I'm getting a lot better at it and interacting with them more." As they did so, Dakota and others found that the professors were more willing and able to help them by answering their questions and providing them with individualized attention and feedback. Lena had even found that her freshman composition teacher so enjoyed her essays that she recommended that Lena submit them to McGraw-Hill for publication consideration as "model essays" in their college writing manual. The young woman did submit them as suggested and samples of her work can now be found in the latest edition of that guide.

In some cases, the Early Scholars were in fact actively sought-out by faculty members, however, who recognized that these students were highly intelligent and could make great research assistants or teaching aides. Lena had worked as a chemistry research assistant, John was considering doing so and shared that one of his best friends at the ESP had been published in academic journals three times, and Rose had been invited to take a new job as a biology tutor. In one conversation with another Early Scholar named Aggie, I was treated to a fifteen-minute discussion regarding her laboratory work with carbon-nanotubes, and her face beamed as she described what it felt like to be involved with such current, cutting-edge research. "These nanotubes could change everything!" she said. It was clear that even when professors did not actively seek out Early Scholars, the opportunities available to them for the taking were still so plentiful and meaningful that they made the academic environment of high school pale in comparison. "I can do research work here with professors, at age 17, that I wouldn't normally be able to do until graduate school," John remarked. More so, the existence of these undergraduate research opportunities were not an accident, I learned, but were instead being actively pushed by the university's president as a major goal for the regional university. As the president explained to a roomful of attentive Early Scholars during his annual Thursday Night Dinner address to the program, "Learning content is no longer as important as learning methods. Anyone can go and "look up" known content. Instead, the most important thing you can take from your education is an understanding of how to research and discover *new* knowledge."

In the end, the powerful experiences that early entrants take part in with their professors and peers creates an environment which pushes them to succeed through

sharpening their skills, fostering competition, and introducing them to new levels of rigor as they become completely immersed in collegiate academic life.

The Social and Emotional Experiences of Early Entrants

Analysis of the data revealed three major contextual themes dealing with the social and emotional experiences of early entrants. These themes described the feeling of finally fitting in upon encountering a program comprised of students with similar interests and goals, the sense that one must try to "pass" among the older student body as a traditionally-aged student, and a need to overcome new challenges which arise as part of the early entrance experience. Additionally, the series of new challenges developed from three distinct sources, being matters of normal acclimation to college life, issues related to growth and development, and the need to locate outlets for healthy stress relief in order to maintain an emotionally balanced state. Represented graphically, these contextual themes interacted as presented below:

Figure 3

The Social and Emotional Experiences of Early Entrants
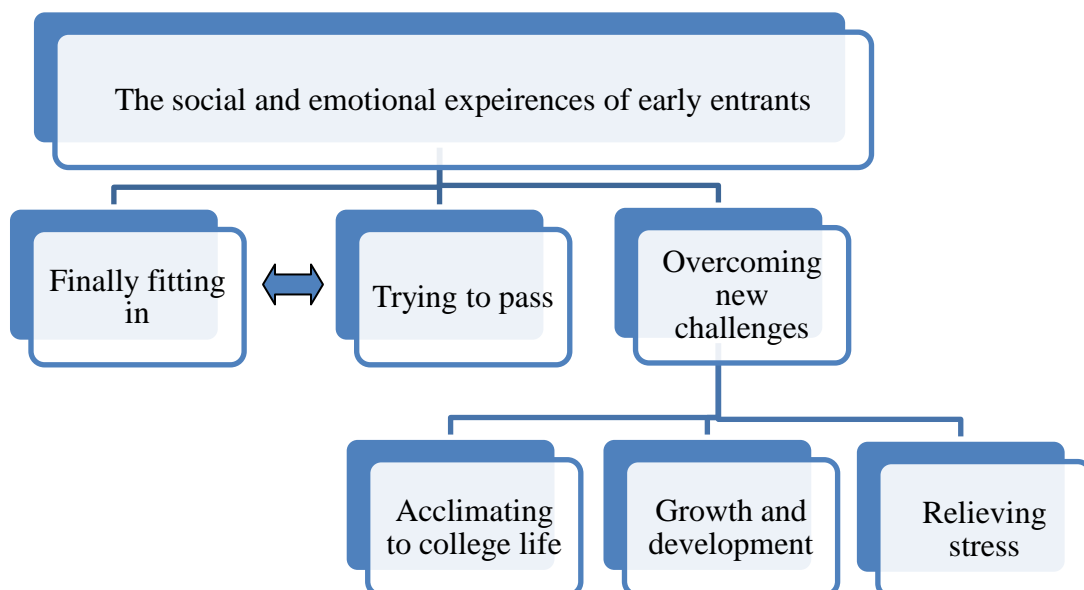
Finally Fitting In

The first categorical theme was that of finally fitting in, something which came easily to almost all of the Early Scholars. "You never know if you'll fit in here until you try – but it would take a really special person NOT to find their niche in this environment!" said Jada. This sentiment that the Early Scholars Program was a special place where nearly every student would be socially welcome was shared by a majority of the participants. Five of the Early Scholars openly discussed how wonderful it felt to have found a place where they were accepted and felt as if they fit in with the other students socially, after undergoing significant trials with peer interaction at their previous educational settings. For many of the participants, this feeling of social fit originated in the sense that they shared much in common with the other Early Scholars. As Lena recalled, "I loved it here right away. I found a lot of people with the same interests as me immediately and I loved being able to sit and talk with people for hours." Max and Jada shared similar observations concerning the common hobbies and activities that were popular among Early Scholars but not as accepted back at their high schools. "When you talk to people here you can mention an obscure band… or a programming concept or electronics competition, and they would likely have heard of it," Max stated, "if I did that to someone at my high school they would have looked at me weird and kept walking." Jada was an avid fan of foreign films and television and was thrilled to find that others in the community shared her interest as well. "There's a certain type of person who would seek out early entrance to college," she said, "and I think that kind of person is more worldly in general and would better appreciate and understand British TV shows or Japanese game shows like me."

In addition to finding common ground in their interests and hobbies, another perceived rationale for their sense of social "fit" stemmed from the fact that the Early Scholars now felt free to speak openly about academic issues and questions without fear of being seen as "nerds" or "brains." As Rose made clear, "We care a lot about school… and we're all motivated to do well… So our personalities just match a lot better." This notion was evident from my observations of the Early Scholars during their recreational time and top-lobby conversations as well. Regularly, conversations would begin with topics common to any adolescent conversation, such as fashion, movies, music, or the opposite sex, but would end up diverging into serious discussions regarding philosophy, science, religion, or politics. One afternoon I observed five students in the top-lobby loudly airing their disagreements regarding certain chemical interactions, which some of them had apparently encountered in a recent laboratory course. This type of public arguing over academics may have been socially unacceptable in most American high schools, but it was not at all uncommon at the Early Scholars Program. As Lindsey, the program's academic advisor explained: "The students like that they can bring up intellectual topics and their fellow Early Scholars will 'get it' and want to talk about those things too. Back home they would be ignored or teased for talking too intellectually."

For six of the participants, central to their feelings of acceptance was an overarching view that the Early Scholars Program was "a supportive community" where students could lean on each other for both academic and emotional support. For many, this was seen as something that would enable them to grow as young adults and unique individuals. "It's a lot more interactive here than most college dorms… you know pretty

211

much everybody's name…" Dakota emphasized, "it's also a place where you really get to know yourself. You figure out who you are, because you know that you'll be accepted here no matter what." Jada described this aspect of life at the ESP through discussing the mutual trust that existed among its members: "We all leave our dorm room doors open," she said, "I didn't even know where my keys were for the longest time." John, meanwhile, appreciated this increased sense of community for its value in helping him to transition to college life in general, saying that "Freshman year is difficult for many people, but this place really helped me to find my beat." In fact, seven of the eight participants reported finding the transition to college to be easy due to the supportive and welcoming social environment of the Early Scholars Program. The lone dissenter, Mark, described how it "took him some time to find his social niche" upon arriving, which was an interesting remark considering that he was only 14 upon entering college and thus 1-2 years younger than most first-year Early Scholars. Still, however, he reported that the social experience here was significantly better than those he had encountered in the past and that once he "learned to relax and be a more social person" he found it easier to make friends and also began to feel better about his own self-esteem and social abilities.

The administrators of the Early Scholars Program were well aware that many of their new arrivals each year were coming from less-than-successful social histories, and they took great efforts to build systems of "social scaffolding" into the Early Scholars' residential experience. "I administer the Myers-Briggs test regularly for our students as part of their career counseling," Kelly the psychological counselor shared, "and I can attest to the fact that our program's students are highly introverted on average according to that measure." As a result, programs are designed to force social interaction from the

very beginning of the school year in order to both foster a welcoming atmosphere and help students suffering from homesickness to get over that early hurdle. For example, residential assistants are asked to create and host dynamic, fun programs from the very start of the year, in order to help students to meet each other and form bonds quickly. "They have so many events that you get to know people and have things to do all the time," Max recalled. "I never had to worry about making friends." To illustrate several examples, early in the academic year I observed creative, well-attended residential activities such as ultimate frisbee games, speed-dating sessions, a pirate-themed movie marathon, group volunteering trips to local charities, "The Roommate Game" (similar to *The Newlyweds Game*), a pumpkin-carving contest, and several chaperoned trips to blockbuster movie premieres. Mark in particular felt that these structured activities had been to his personal benefit. He commented:

> I think that the Early Scholars Program has changed my personality. That sounds weird, but it has. It's changed me as a person and for the better. I was tightly wound when I came here and kind of socially awkward… but the Early Scholars Program has helped me to be less awkward and to be more outspoken. I think that's been a good thing for me.

Similarly, Lena had also reported being a painfully shy child who had come to socially grow and flourish in her time at the ESP. "When I think about it I get freaked out a little bit," she said, "I'm now able to walk into a room of forty people… and be able to talk with everyone. That is amazing for me. In the past I just couldn't bring myself to do it."

While the students of the Early Scholars Program spoke openly and often about how thoroughly they enjoyed their social lives as contrasted to their experiences in

middle school and college, an interesting flipside was revealed in one conversation with a residential assistant who was herself a graduate of the ESP. "I don't know of a single graduate who found the transition to 'regular' college to be easy," Betsy explained. "People get so used to the supportive, structured environment here that when they transfer or enter the general population they feel like they've lost the best parts of college." Indeed, while the Early Scholars "fit in" well with each other, this was not always the case with the outside world and the students beyond the program's walls. While each Early Scholar must deal with that transition upon graduating from the ESP, they are also forced to interact with older students on a daily basis as well, with some having more success than others. Nearly all, however, attempt to keep their true ages a secret when dealing with older students, in order to attract less attention to themselves and be seen as outsiders or "little kids."

Trying to "Pass"

The second social and emotional theme, trying to "pass" as an older student, was a common topic of conversation in the ESP's lobbies and recreational areas. These behaviors were in response to the persistence of stereotypes among older undergraduates about the Early Scholars and their program. "When people in your classes find out that you're an Early Scholar, they are shocked!" I was told by one young woman with sandy-blond hair named Rebecca. "They think of Early Scholars as being super-genius little kids." The young women seemed particularly bothered by these mistaken beliefs, especially because they saw them as an obstacle to their dating lives. Rose, one of the Early Scholars who was 18 years old, explained: "Guys will stay away from you if they hear that you're an Early Scholar because they think that you're jail bait. Their RA's tell

them that if they even talk to us they can be sent to jail." Part of the stereotyping of Early

Scholars derived from the older students' lack of awareness regarding the program, as the

dormitory was located at the far edge of campus and Early Scholars were not permitted to

enter older students' dorms. As a result, traditionally-aged students did not often realize

when they were interacting with an Early Scholar and maintained false beliefs about what

program participants looked and acted like.

This lack of knowledge regarding the program played well into the social lives of

most Early Scholars, who were able to remain quiet, blend in, and appear to be "young

looking" freshman students. Six of the participants reported that few of their friends or

classmates on campus realized that they were early entrance students and several

described "leaving this fact out" when interacting with other students on campus. "It's

no big deal," Jada explained, "I'm 17, they're 18…. Are they supposed to treat me

differently because of that?... We're almost the same age anyway." Mark, Max, Dakota,

John, and Greg also reported keeping silent in their interactions with others in the

classroom. "They assume I'm just a normal university student, not that I'm an Early

Scholar," Max described. Dakota even mentioned how surprised her older friends were

when she revealed her age:

> Most students don't think that I'm in the ESP. Just this past week someone found
>
> out and said "You're an Early Scholar?" I told him "Yeah, I'm 17." He was
>
> shocked and told me that he had always assumed I was 19 or 20 years old.

While the vast majority of Early Scholars tended to remain quiet about their ages

to blend in with their older peers, every male participant in this study actually described

trying to actively keep their age a secret in order to "pass" – something which went

slightly further than most of the females' attitudes regarding their age. "Nobody knows that I'm younger," Greg admitted, adding that most of his campus friends are between the ages of 20 and 22. "Sometimes we'll even go out to pizza places that serve beer," he said, "and I just tell them that I don't drink." Sadly, John remarked that "The few social bonds I have outside the ESP are with people who don't know I'm an early entrant… When people who you think are your friends find out, it really does change things."

While most males were hesitant to describe why they chose to avoid mentioning their age, instead dismissing age as an "irrelevant" figure, females at the Early Scholars Program were more than willing to provide their insights. "What college-aged girl would ever want to date a 16 year-old guy?" Lena rhetorically asked when posed with the question. Rose and Dakota each agreed with this assessment, with Rose adding that she had "never seen any example of a guy Early Scholar dating outside of the program" but could name several examples of ESP females dating older boyfriends on campus. Greg agreed with this assessment as well, saying that while he had in fact dated older women in the past, he had been careful to hide his true age from them until they had already "built a connection." Moreover, John made clear that this was a difficult issue for all male early entrants, not just members of the Early Scholars Program. As he explained:

> If you want to pursue something romantic with an older girl, you can't tell them that you're in this program. That is rule number one… And any early entrance program will be just like that. It's something that just won't change.

Even going beyond John's description, this is actually one challenge for male early entrants that program administrators recognize does not get easier for quite some time. "Our students are young when they get here and they're young when they

graduate," Lindsey, the academic advisor described. "Even when they go on to graduate school, some of the young men find that they are a hit with the ladies… until the ladies find out that they are only 20 years old." Post-graduation complications with age were not only a romantic issue or one that males alone had to struggle with either. Carly, the program's academic recruiter, who herself had been an early entrant at another institution, commented that "Age is a frustrating thing for former early entrants." Even as a successful, married young woman, she continues to answer questions regarding her age in vague manners as a result, telling new acquaintances that she is "in her twenties" rather than giving them a more concrete figure or range.

While Early Scholars were almost universally able to blend in with their older classmates or hide their age entirely, some were in fact willing to openly share the information with older students in the classes, clubs, and organizations to which they belonged. They described the resulting reactions in mixed terms, often depending on how close they were with the individual before their true age had been revealed. To illustrate, Lena giggled as she recalled telling the members of her gospel choir that she was an Early Scholar and said that several of them now refer to her with the affectionate nickname "Baby Genius," which she did not mind. Her demeanor and attitude changed drastically, however, when she angrily recalled the words of a relative stranger in her pre-calculus class:

> One girl in my math class was complaining about how difficult it was and then she found out that I was only 16. She told me "You'll understand when you get to *real* college." Excuse me? I'll understand when I get to "real" college? I probably had more credits than she did anyway.

Considering how well the Early Scholars felt that they "fit" with their fellow program members, and how difficult the additional social challenges of being honest with older peers could be, it was not surprising that most Early Scholars chose to spend the majority of their social time with each other. "Usually a lot of us just hang out around here," Rose commented, "ESP students stick to each other." Mark expressed the same notion, commenting that while more females than males can find romantic partners outside the dorm, the vast majority of romantic couplings are in fact between pairs of Early Scholars. Additionally, while the traditionally-aged students in their classes usually did not realize that several of their classmates had not yet graduated from high school, Dakota and Jada each spoke about how clusters of Early Scholars would form in the common freshman and sophomore-level courses, with students choosing to sit together and interact throughout the class. As Dakota described: "It depends on the class, but normally I'm just more willing to hang out with the other Early Scholars. It's a comfort zone thing." This was certainly true in my observations of their classrooms as well, as in each class that I visited I observed groups of 3-5 Early Scholars sitting together, geographically separated from the other students. It is important to note, however, that this isolation was self-imposed and not due to rejection from their classmates. One former director openly mentioned that he wished this would not happen, as he believed one of the greatest strengths of the Early Scholars Program to be the fact that they placed their students directly into the regular college courses in the hopes of mixing them socially with the older students. "When you mainstream a special population," he told me, "it forces them to interact with others and it forces others to interact with them." While this was at least partially true, in that Early Scholars did not

meet open resistance from their older peers, it was still evident that most did not yet feel ready to leave the "comfort zone" Dakota had described in order to more fully integrate themselves within the larger classroom community.

Overcoming New Challenges

The third theme regarding the lived social and emotional experiences of early entrants related to a series of new challenges that the accelerated move to college forced them to confront. These challenges emerged from three distinct sources, being issues related to acclimating to college life, those regarding students' growth and development, and others regarding the need to find healthy outlets for stress. While new undergraduate students of any age must confront these difficulties, Early Scholars were forced to do so on a condensed timeframe, sometimes leading to slight but meaningful differences in their shared experiences.

Acclimating to college life.

Acclimating from their familiar home routines and family situations to life in a dormitory with 60+ other early entrants was not always easy for the Early Scholars. For example, both Lena and Mark reported that they often missed friends who they had left behind, although in both cases they were lucky enough to consider these friends as a secondary support system. For both of these individuals, technology and social networking were a significant help. "I'm still connected to my old high school friends through Facebook," Mark explained, adding that he still kept in touch with friends from his middle school in Tennessee as well. Lena shared these sentiments but also expressed gratitude at being able to speak with high school friends about sensitive situations at the ESP when she would prefer to have an outsider's opinion. She described: "It can be

really good to have a support system back home, because I can call them and say 'You're not going to believe what happened today'… especially if I'm having problems with my roommate or another Early Scholar."

Not all Early Scholars were as lucky, however, and one common complaint among the early entrants related to the difficulties in keeping those ties going when you are no longer physically present in your old hometown or high school. On one occasion, I found myself comforting a second-year Early Scholar who was on the verge of tears in the top-lobby after having returned from Thanksgiving break. "It's always worst when you come back from breaks," she said, "You go home and see your friends and family and then get homesick all over again."

Interestingly, homesickness and emotional difficulty related to missing one's family and friends is common among new arrivals to the Early Scholars Program, but occurs on a more delayed timeframe than one would expect. "Many of our students have attended summer camps for the gifted, like Duke TIP or the Governor's Honors Program, so they're used to being away from home," explained Kelly, the psychological counselor. She continued: "Then something happens after about three-weeks that I call 'Camp ESP Syndrome.' These students, who are used to being away for a month or so, begin to realize that they're not going home and reality begins to set in."

In addition to homesickness and missing their loved ones, new Early Scholars must also contend with the difficulties of sharing a room, many of whom are experiencing this for the first time. "You're always around people 24/7 unless you have your own room," Dakota said, "Which sucks for me because I've always had my own room before I came here. Not having any personal space is a huge disadvantage." Other

participants sympathized with Dakota's assessment. "It's hard for people who have issues with privacy," John explained, describing his own challenges during his first year. He added: "Sometimes roommate difficulties get to a point where certain problems can't be resolved. One thing I've learned is that people will go to extraordinary lengths to change their roommates if that happens." John then shared the story of an Early Scholar the previous year who had disliked his roommate and "paid" another student to switch rooms with him, by quietly giving him a professional-grade camera worth $700. While this was an extreme example, the psychological counselor did share that one of the major challenges of roommate difficulties with this age group is that the students would often avoid conflict rather than speak directly to their roommate about a problem. As a result, one of the program's policy goals was to help students to peacefully confront and discuss disagreements with their roommates directly, rather than immediately agreeing to room change requests, in order to help the students to mature through the process.

Finally, a third challenge of acclimating to college life existed for several of the participants, who expressed that their relationship with their parents was fundamentally changing now that they were living out of the house. "I get along a lot better with my mom now, because we've gone from a parent-child relationship to more of a friend-friend relationship," 16 year-old Mark explained. He paused before continuing: "… I'm not sure that's really a good thing considering my age, but we do get along a lot better for it." John and Greg expressed similar sentiments, remarking that now that they were out of the house they were treated with more respect and independence. While these three young men felt that the change had been positive, the stories I heard from young women at the ESP were significantly different. Many would routinely gripe about their parents'

continued "babying" of them while speaking to friends in the top-lobby, and they described the summer between their first and second year at the Early Scholars Program as being particularly complicated. One second-year girl named Debra stated: "Summer was brutal and I couldn't wait to get back! I feel like I've matured so much in the past year but my parents kept telling me 'You're only 16.'"

Growth and development.

An additional source of new challenges for early entrants stems from the forced need to accelerate their social and emotional maturation as a result of moving permanently away from their parents and childhood homes at an atypically young age. While all eight participants reported newfound feelings of independence and personal growth as a result of this transition, several described the realization that they were now "on their own" to be sudden and difficult. Rose, for example, sadly recalled the moment when she realized that she had truly left home:

> When I first came here, I would video-chat with my mom and dad regularly. But one day, after about a month, I missed their scheduled video call because I was out playing Frisbee. It completely slipped my mind. So my mom was worried and called my cell phone five times and left voice mails and my dad called and said that my mom was really worried about me…. And that's when it hit me that I really had left my parents.

For some Early Scholars, this separation and the resulting need to mature quickly and become an independent, functioning adult was viewed as a positive development. John, for example, represented his transition to self-sufficiency through showing me a picture of the dorm's laundry facilities and proudly proclaiming that he had learned how

to wash his own clothes upon starting at the ESP. Others, however, continued to feel "at risk" without their parents by their side. Lena explained: "Because you're away from your parents, you don't have that safety net if something goes wrong here… If there is an issue, you actually need to work it out on your own." Even more so, Lena went on to describe that sometimes "growing up quickly" isn't always a good thing, in that it can have real financial consequences that a teenager may not be ready to deal with. Reflecting on her decision about whether or not to enter the Early Scholars Program, she offered: "I started to freak out about how I was going to pay for it because my family didn't have the money. I was only 15, I didn't want to worry about student loans yet!"

In addition to issues of independence and personal growth, another serious developmental challenge for early entrants was that of identity development and reinvention. Every student at the Early Scholars Program had a history of academic success and had been seen as a "gifted child," and in many cases they had built their identity and self-concept around that notion as well. While psychologically defining themselves as "the smart kid" was understandable when they were in high school, their decision to enter college early placed them with a whole new caliber of students, most of whom were equally as talented and academically capable as they were. As a result, Early Scholars had a tendency to experience a not-so-subtle identity crisis during their time in the program, confronting those deep questions of who they were and what made them unique, if it wasn't their grades or SAT score. Max described this realization and its consequences:

> I was one of the smartest kids in my school and I'm not the smartest kid here, so that kind of irritates me. We all used to be the best at what we did in high school,

but when we came here we lost that. Now it feels like we have to get it back through something. We all want to be seen as unique and different again.

One of the program's former directors echoed this notion, saying that apart from study-skills challenges the next most common difficulty for Early Scholars was this issue of forging a new identity. "They all used to be 'the smart one' back home," he asked rhetorically, "so who are they now?" While each Early Scholar answered that question in his or her own way, some commonalities did exist across several of their experiences. Some, for example, built new identities by focusing on extracurricular involvements and interests. Others responded by "specializing" and seeking to be seen as an expert in one particular subject or major. A third group defined themselves through reference to their backgrounds or beliefs, such as those who became outspoken atheists or religious adherents. Finally, a fourth group responded by undergoing a period of identity moratorium, simply using the time, like many adolescents, to explore potential new identities without committing to any particular idea of self. For example, it was not uncommon to see first-year Early Scholars altering their outward appearance and style over the semester, through both changes to the style of clothes that they wore and the degree and manner of body art, jewelry, and piercings that they utilized.

Relieving stress.

A third source of new challenges for early entrants relates to the novel stresses they encounter in the college environment and the need to find healthy, appropriate means of relieving that tension. Five participants directly spoke about their struggles to maintain control over stress, sharing a number of recurring ideas as to how this could best be accomplished. Several participants stated that they relied on their friends at the Early

Scholars Program to "keep them sane" and that their most treasured times were those spent socializing with their fellow ESP students. "I really enjoy playing video games and watching TV with my friends," Mark said, "especially because video games aren't something that I ever did on my own. It's a group thing." Other Early Scholars focused instead on residential programs as a means of getting their frustrations out and forcing them to socialize. Lena and Dakota enjoyed these activities immensely, with Dakota praising Thursday Night Dinners as a set time that she knew she could look forward to relaxing with friends, while Lena preferred more physical activities such as "making and breaking piñatas" – one of the residential staff's more popular activities each finals week.

Apart from time spent with friends or engaging in residential programs, others students found that they were able to effectively cope with pressure and stress through pursuing hobbies and personal interests in their spare time. Rose once showed me a photograph of the music room where she routinely practices the piano, commenting that she finds music to be an excellent outlet for her creativity as well as an important means of relieving the tension from the day. Similarly, Lena relied on choir practice as a means to express herself and relieve stress, Greg utilized physical activity such as working out at the gym, and Max saw his independent engineering projects as an opportunity to escape from the ESP and devote time to his own passions in a relaxed manner.

The majority of the Early Scholars also believed that it was critical to be able to step away from the program from time to time, whether through driving home for a weekend or going off campus with other students. The vast majority of Early Scholars returned home on the weekends, as automobiles were permitted and most students within reasonable driving distance of their homes had brought one along. While these short trips

back home would help the students to recharge their energy levels and alleviate stress, they also provided a break for the small number of students who were unable to leave the Early Scholars Program on weekends due to being either international students or coming from places too far away. As a result, the weekends were quiet and the students who were present were able to enjoy peace and quiet that they could not experience during the week. Dakota explained: "It can be boring on the weekends but we get to watch a lot of movies." The residential staff was also aware that these students who remained on campus required some extra stress-relief during the weekends and as a result there were often special food-oriented activities such as marshmallow roasts on Saturday evenings.

Finally, while most Early Scholars had built their social lives around friendships with other students their own age, some were more successful than others at integrating themselves within older peer groups and could rely on that for additional stress-relieving opportunities. Greg, in particular, mainly spent his social time with traditionally-aged college students. While Early Scholars were not allowed to visit fraternity houses or sorority houses and the program had a strict zero-tolerance policy regarding alcohol and drugs, Greg did look forward to accompanying his older friends each week to a nearby "karaoke-night" at a popular pizza restaurant. Showing me a photograph of the location, he laughed while saying "Ah! My weekly escape! Every student needs one."

### How Background Factors Affect Early Entrance

Four major categorical themes emerged from analyzing the data concerning the effects of background factors on students' lived experiences as early entrants. These four themes included frequent relocation and school switching, having parents who emphasized education and independence, the juxtaposition of tolerance and tension in

matters of race, genders, and religion, and the relative unimportance of family wealth. Within these four factors, two pairs exist which exert a degree of influence over each other, being the interplay of frequent geographic relocation with parental emphasis on independence throughout the educational process, and the finding that while tension seemingly existed in matters of race, gender, and religion, students placed little importance on matters of family wealth or socio-economic status (SES).

Represented graphically, background factors were found to affect the lived experience of early entrance in the following way:

Figure 4

How Personal Background Factors Affect Early Entrance
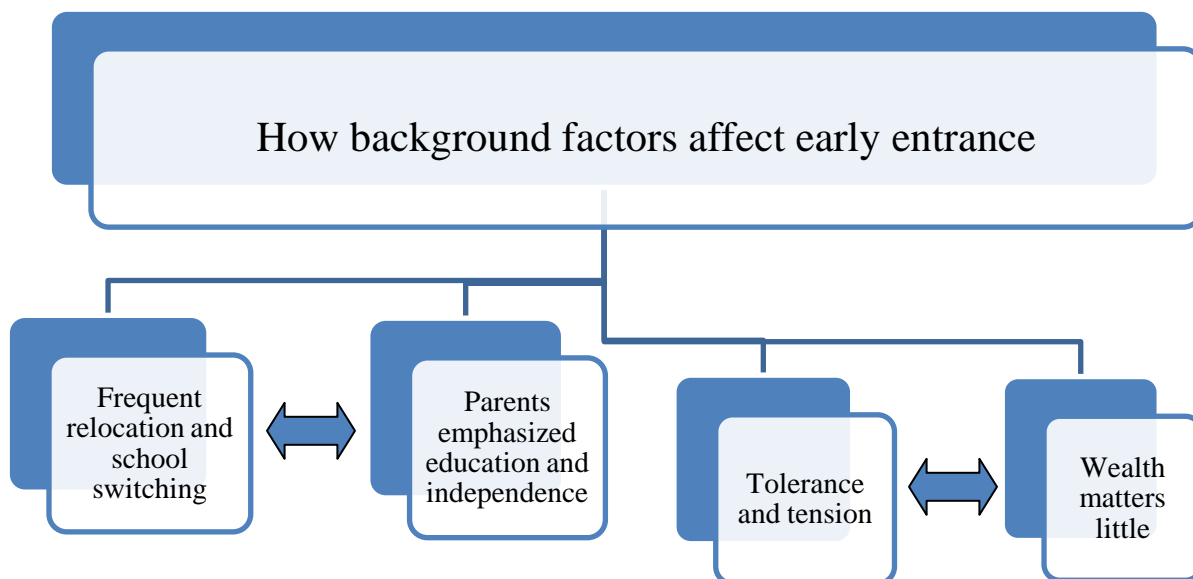
Frequent Relocation

The first categorical theme dealing with students' background factors and experiences is that of frequent familial relocation, along with the heightened number of school switches and transfers which that necessitates. Of the eight participants in this study, five experienced at least one geographical relocation during their childhood,

counting only those that involved moving between states or countries. One of these five, Jada, was too young at the time for the move to have affected her schooling, but the other four experienced several school changes as a result of the changes. To illustrate, Mark switched from a school in Tennessee that had a thriving gifted education program to one in Georgia that provided slightly less support, Dakota's military family relocated to numerous states and countries, Rose moved back-and-forth from South Korea twice and spent time in seven different schools, and Lena's military family lived in five different places throughout her childhood, attending at least eight K-10 schools before she matriculated to college.

Even among the students who did not experience major relocations, however, a fair amount of school switches and transfers are present in their educational histories. Greg, for example, attended four schools and also completed two years of home-schooling, for a total of five different educational environments from first to tenth grade. Jada, John, and Max also transferred from one middle school to another, with meaningful impacts for each upon their educational experience. Additionally, three students, Lena, Max, and Greg, were grade-skipped during their K-10 experiences, resulting in yet another manner of disruption to the traditional flow of the educational experience.

Ultimately, this high frequency of geographic relocation and school switching/acceleration appeared from interviews and observations to have three effects on the lives and attitudes of the study's participants. First, it disrupted the students' social bonds in their home environments, making it more difficult to forge and maintain friendships. As Lena related, "I got used to making a friend and then they were gone." Dakota and Mark also struggled to find friends in their new schools in Georgia at first,

clinging instead to older relationships from their schools in New Jersey and Tennessee. Second, for several participants, frequent relocation became the psychological norm and in fact became their preferred mode of operation. As Lena described:

> We actually moved around every year, so this is my 9th or 10th school. And every time we moved to a new place I would have to make new friends. It's something I'm used to. It's kind of a comfortable thing, actually. I know that's weird, but it was comfortable to be in an unusual situation, a new environment, because I'm used to moving around all the time and like it.

Dakota similarly became used to relocation, even though her move to Georgia had been emotionally rough. As a result, she was now greatly looking forward to transferring to another university following the completion of her time at the Early Scholars Program, even though she had enjoyed her time at the ESP and its host university. As she made clear, "I'm transferring. I am leaving and going somewhere else. I don't want to stay here any longer, because I know too many people… I'm just looking for something new."

Finally, the third apparent effect of frequent relocation and school switching on the participants was to minimize their fear in entering college early, in that they were already used to navigating new educational environments. As a result, seven of the eight participants reported very little worry or anxiety regarding their decision to enter the ESP, and the eighth – Max – saw his fear that the other students would be "super geniuses" dissipate after a tour of campus during which he realized how well he fit in with the other Early Scholars. In actuality, far from being anxious about their decisions, the participants were actively seeking out this new change of educational scenery, along with the richer academic and social opportunities it could provide.

Parents Emphasized Education and Independence

The second theme regarding early entrants' backgrounds relates to the attitudes and values that their parents emphasized throughout their childhoods. Parents valued education and communicated the expectation that their children would attend college, but at the same time stressed independence and allowed their children to make significant personal and educational decisions on their own from an early age. This finding was especially strong numerically, as six of the eight participants reported a high family value on education and seven participants spoke of their parents fostering early independence and allowing them to make their own academic decisions.

For three-quarters of the participants, education was always something that the family considered a priority. This emphasis was apparent to the children in two ways, being both the parents' clear expectations that their children would attend college and the active involvement of a majority of participants' parents in their K-10 academic lives. Many of the participants' parents were highly educated themselves and visibly demonstrated their belief in the value of advanced schooling. As Jada explained:

> We're very education oriented… I read a study once that said that a large percentage of American homes don't have books, but we had a library down in the office and I could read all my parents books if I wanted to… There was never any doubt that they wanted me to go to college.

In a similar vein, Lena reported that her mother always told her that she "could be anything she wanted to be, even a bum," but that if she decided to be a bum then "she would be the most educated bum ever… because you're going to college."

Along with emphasizing the value of education, a majority of participants' parents also stayed actively involved with their children's academic lives. "Ever since second grade or third grade, when I started taking home assignments and homework, they've always asked what I'm doing and kept up to date on what I'm learning about," John reflected. "In elementary school they would check my homework… they always showed that they were interested in what I was doing. They stayed actively involved the entire time. Motivationally, it's been amazing." Max's parents were similarly involved and even as a sophomore in college he regularly received phone calls from his mother to remind him of upcoming exams and papers, which she learned of by checking the online scheduling calendar that Max maintained. Mark and Greg's parents were also highly involved, with Mark's mother serving a term as president of the school's Parent-Teacher Association (PTA), and Greg's parents purchasing several tutoring programs for he and his twin brother from pre-school to middle school.

While the majority of participants had parents who emphasized education and were actively involved, only one of the participants reported feeling a high degree of parental pressure to earn high grades. As Dakota explained:

My mom was actually the person who told us that we had to do well and get A's. I remember in elementary school my brother got a D and he got in so much trouble that it scared the crap out of me. That's why I did well and got A's.

In contrast, the other seven participants (as well as Dakota, after her mother's passing), reported that they were primarily self-motivated to achieve and that their parents asked them to "do their best" but did not demand perfection or straight A's. "They didn't really care what my grades were as long as I was doing my best," Mark recalled. Lena had a

parallel experience, remarking that her zeal for A's was self-driven and that all her parents wanted to see was effort and hard work, even if it resulted in a grade of B or C.

Along with participants' parents valuing education and being actively involved, the other major component of this categorical theme relates to the parents' emphasis on independence and personal growth from an early age. Five participants spoke openly regarding the freedom their parents provided them with, even as children, fondly recalling what it meant for their academic lives. Max's parents placed him in an elementary school that was designed to provide even first and second-grade students with autonomy and independence and he loved being able to wander the grounds and eat lunch unsupervised as a 7 year-old. In middle school, several of the participants attended summer camps where they lived away from home on a college campus for 3-4 weeks at a time. Perhaps most exemplifying this theme was Greg, who from age 12 on was allowed to travel the world on his fathers' airline pilot standby perks, visiting Las Vegas, Germany, and Spain among other places, sometimes on his own and sometimes with an adult chaperone. Greg's parents, like many of the participants' parents, were not always supportive of their child's plans or academic desires, but they typically allowed the child to make their own independent decision regardless. As Greg described, "I have always kind of made my own decisions… I would stick to my guns and tell my parents 'I'm going.'" Lastly, a former program director made clear that this parental emphasis on early independence was especially common among international students, as a majority of these students had attended private boarding schools for years prior to enrolling in the ESP, meaning that they had been living away from home since the age of 14 or even younger.

Of all the ways in which parents pushed for their children to develop early independence, none is more telling than their decisions to let their children make their own decisions regarding academic matters, school-switches, grade-skipping, and early entrance. Seven of the eight students claimed that they were the primary decision-makers in their households when it came to their own academic affairs, generally from middle-school onwards. Max convinced his parents to let him skip a grade, Greg decided to grade-skip and remove himself from school for two years of home-schooling, Dakota both independently entered and withdrew from her middle school gifted program, and Rose continually requested (and received) permission to switch schools and not attend certain traditional educational programs in Korea such as cram school. Moreover, both Rose and Jada had been initially planning to drop out of high school and both felt confident that their parents would have let them do so. When it came to the decision to apply to the Early Scholars Program, seven participants described it as their idea and being their decision to make, even when in two cases (Dakota and Greg) the parents were not initially in favor of the decision. Even in the one negative case, being John, whose parents were the primary decision makers, elements of joint-decision making existed as they made clear that they would not enroll him in a school or program if he did not desire to participate.

Tolerance and Tension

The third categorical theme related to participants' background experiences was that of the juxtaposition of tolerance and tension when it came to matters of race, gender, and religion in the social fabric of the Early Scholars Program. Among the most commonly repeated "catchphrases" I heard while visiting the ESP was the sentence "The

only thing we don't tolerate is intolerance." This motto, or some iteration of it, was said by one current administrator and no less than six participants. While it was clear that all genuinely believed this to be the case and that in many aspects observation and interview data partially validated their claim, there was in fact a great deal more tension when it came to sensitive matters of racial, ethnic, gender, and religious diversity at the Early Scholars Program that this catchphrase would suggest.

To begin by accentuating the positive, my firsthand observations, document analyses, and conversations with students, administrators, and residential staff members at the ESP did reveal that in many ways the program's participants do in fact strive to be open, accepting, and tolerant of those different from themselves. Many of them spoke about how welcome and accepted they feel, especially in contrast to their harsher, more judgmental middle school and high school environments. "For the most part, it's a very welcoming environment," reflected Jada. Going further, Max spoke about how diversity and personal uniqueness was seen as "cool" by most Early Scholars rather than something to tease or mock. He explained:

> This is a very, very open-minded, liberal place… The people here are very, very accepting of anything. Not just my sexual orientation but also things like religion. For example I'm Unitarian, which is like 0.2% of the population. So that's seen as cool.

John, Lena, Rose, and Dakota additionally agreed with Max's overall assessment, with each describing the ESP as a place where students accept each other for who they are and celebrate differences. While Max and John attributed this progressive attitude to the advanced intellect and maturity of the students, Jada and Rose argued that the students'

willingness to accept others who were "different" stemmed from the fact that most Early

Scholars were considered "different" in their prior schooling experiences as well and

understood all too well the effects and feelings of being teased. As Rose described:

> There's a lot of people here who came to the Early Scholars Program not just
>
> because they wanted to go to college early but also because they didn't like their
>
> high school. And a lot of those people had a hard time there… for example, gay
>
> guys have a really hard time in high school. But here we think they are cool.

> While the Early Scholars did, for the most part, verbally claim to appreciate

diversity and difference, observation of their public conversations in the top-lobby and

recreational social areas around the dormitory and campus occasionally reflected a

different story. This story was one of tension between the ideals they claimed to hold and

their adolescent, inappropriate senses of humor. Many Early Scholars frequently made

jokes that were racist or sexist, usually in public spaces, and often in the presence of

residential assistants who did nothing to correct these behaviors. "You hear a lot of

woman jokes in this building," Dakota expressed, "Last year guys would yell things at us

like 'Make me a sandwich, woman!'" Ethnicity and race were similar targets and top-

lobby conversations commonly included distasteful jokes aimed at, and in the presence

of, international students, African American students, and "gingers" – pale-skinned

redheads of Irish heritage.

> When asked about this apparent disconnect between their ideals and behaviors, a

majority of participants, including those whom had been the targets of the jokes, simply

laughed and dismissed the comments as "just being jokes." "We make jokes like that all

the time and if you get offended by that then this isn't the place for you," Rose

commented, asking "haven't you ever heard anyone sing *My Little Asian*?" This song, which another Early Scholar had written and would occasionally perform, combined lyrics about Rose's Korean heritage with caricatured Asian hand and body gestures, to the tune of *I'm a Little Teapot*. Similarly, Greg commented that because everyone was so close with the program's only African American male, "we call him all the Black names that we shouldn't call anybody," attempting to justify this by adding that "he calls us different names and stuff too – we kid around about it." Two participants did recognize that a potential for hurt feelings did exist in these exchanges, even if they did not view the jokes as being serious, and emphasized that in the cases where someone "crosses a line" they apologize and it is dealt with, as it is always a "joke gone wrong" rather than a statement made with cruel intent. This continuing tension was plainly evident as Lena explained:

> We're an offensive group, but typically we know where the line is…. Sometimes people say things about our only Black guy, but when people say things they aren't terribly offensive, they're more like a random joke. It's never meant maliciously. There's two people this year who can get a little over the line, but as far as being really "intolerant" – that's not tolerated.

Interestingly enough, while participants and non-participants alike presented these comments as jokes that were not meant with ill-intent, there was one group that did seem vulnerable to actual, socially-accepted teasing: Republican students. As one former Early Scholar and current RA explained: "This place is very politically left-wing, and Republican students often get mocked and verbally abused." As a result, conservative students would usually stay out of political conversations in the public lobbies and

dormitory spaces, keeping their views to themselves. Similarly, openly religious students were often faced with the choice of discussing their faith in private with other students of similar belief or needing to prepare themselves for a serious debate if they mentioned their faith in the top-lobby or other recreational common areas. "There's a lot of atheists and agnostics around here," one religious young woman named Aggie told me, "and many of them know the Bible better than the religious students do. If you're going to argue with them, you need to be prepared." Still, opportunities for religious Early Scholars to express and further develop their faith did exist at the ESP and several Christian females had founded an unofficial weekly Bible study group that was now in its second year. Echoing the challenges of these two "minorities" at the ESP, the Residential Coordinator commented "The biggest diversity issues at the Early Scholars Program are actually politics and religion."

Aside from offensive verbal humor, a second source of tension at the Early Scholars Program stemmed from the de-facto racial grouping and self-segregation that frequently occurred among the ESP's student body, especially by international students and African American females. While several program administrators and residential staff members were aware of this grouping and saw it as undesirable, certain participants in the study were more vivid in their descriptions. Greg, laughing, explained:

> The Koreans hang out together, the Catalonians hang out together, and the Americans hang out together. It's kind of like we have "friendly gangs" or something like that. It's like if Disney did a gang movie. We get along all right though.

More so, Jada, Dakota, and Greg each commented regarding the tendencies of African American females at the ESP to isolate themselves from the larger community. "Last year there were three Black girls that just kind of stayed to themselves," Jada recalled, "they also criticized the program a lot and I think that the fact that they separated themselves from everyone else had a lot to do with how they felt."

While almost all participants in this study recognized this tendency for various racial or ethnic groups to stick together socially, few saw it as a serious concern. Max did comment, however, that he was aware that one young Korean woman was being teased by other Korean students for "not being a real Korean because she mainly hung out with Americans." The Catalonian students, many of whom strongly objected to being labeled as "Spanish" due to their sympathies with their region's political separatist movement, experienced a similar tendency to group together although certain members did associate themselves successfully with American students as well. John in particular was sensitive to their reasons for sticking together, explaining that "common experiences are going to attract common experiences." Still, John and Greg did express frustration at certain male Catalonians who often made jokes at America's expense and played practical jokes such as replacing the dormitory's American flag with a Catalonian flag instead.

The Early Scholars, by and large, appeared to truly desire to be welcoming, accepting, and genuinely tolerant of others of different backgrounds. At the same time, they struggled to enact these values in practice, making inappropriate, juvenile jokes and commonly remaining within a racially-defined comfort zone when forming social bonds. It is unlikely, however, that this is the "fault" of the ESP, as their behaviors unfortunately

reflect the common attitudes and practices of most adolescents their age and those of many college undergraduates as well.

Wealth Matters Little

While meaningful tension existed with regards to issues of race, gender, and religion at the Early Scholars Program, one social justice area where the program was performing remarkably well was that of economic equality and fairness of access to its services. Whereas early entrance programs nationwide struggle with this issue and have historically overrepresented the wealthiest segments of the American population by a large margin (Caplan, Henderson, Henderson, & Fleming, 2002), students from all income levels were well-represented at the ESP. In fact, 33% of the Early Scholars were from "low-income homes" according to the program's statistics and a majority hail from middle-class homes. Even more importantly, in contrast to the demographic classifiers discussed above, students' socioeconomic status (SES) appeared to hardly matter in terms of students' interactions and friendship patterns.

While four participants mentioned that students have a "general idea" who comes from more economically privileged backgrounds, three of the four additionally argued that it can be difficult to determine this information. Few students volunteer or advertise their family's SES level, they argued, so you must infer information from students' spending habits and what type of car they drive. Even still, this is quite difficult, and as one second-year female jokingly explained, "It's hard to showcase wealth in a dorm room."

Even if a student came from a wealthy background, the overwhelming attitude of the study's participants was that it is likely to have little or no effect on their life at the

Early Scholars Program. "Maybe they could order more delivery food instead of going to the dining hall," John offered. Lena added that those students with newer, more reliable cars, might be able to drive home as often as they like, but emphasized that the most important element for one's social status at the ESP is not what type of car you have but whether you have a car at all. John shared this viewpoint:

> First-year Early Scholars learn that when they need a ride somewhere, they should sit in the top-lobby and listen for the jingle of car keys in people's pockets as they walk out of the dorm. You *need* to make friends with someone who has a car.

Max, who was fortunate enough to come from a relatively blessed economic background and drove a Saab convertible, worried that others might think poorly of him if he was too "flashy" and thus tried to find ways to help students without cars by giving them rides when needed. He described:

> I paid for most of it, but my parents helped me with the rest. Maybe other kids' parents can't afford to do that for their kids, so I always invite people to go with me wherever I'm going. I've even driven people to the dining hall when I wasn't going to eat myself – just to give them a ride and drop them off.

In contrast to Max's dilemma, significantly more Early Scholars were from lower income brackets than higher ones and economically they dealt with a different set of challenges. Thankfully, these challenges were not major, as the state which the Early Scholars Program resides in provided in-state college students who maintained at least a 3.0 GPA with an impressive scholarship that included nearly all of the student's tuition, fees, and book expenses. Additionally, the ESP and it's host university also offered a limited number of need and merit-based scholarships and Lindsey and Kelly, the

program's academic and psychological counselors, routinely distributed information to students concerning outside grants and scholarships via email. As a result, the Early Scholars Program was significantly more affordable for students from low-income backgrounds than many other early entrance options across the nation, likely explaining their more equitable rates of representation across the economic spectrum.

Participants' Perceptions of Institutional Support Factors

Having examined the lived experiences of early entrants at the Early Scholars Program, we now turn to the study's second primary research question, describing participants' perceptions of the institutional support factors they encountered. In other words, how satisfied were Early Scholars with their early entrance experience and what did they perceive to be the ESP's main strengths and weaknesses?

High Overall Satisfaction

The eight participants involved in this research were all very satisfied with their academic and social experiences at the Early Scholars Program and were happy that they had made the decision to enter college early. When each student was asked to rate their overall happiness with the Early Scholars Program on a scale of 1 to 5, with 1 being "extremely unhappy" and 5 being "extremely happy," all eight responses ranged between 4.0 and 5.0, with Max's rating of "5.5" being interpreted as a 5.0 score. More so, the average overall happiness rating among the eight participants was a 4.45 score. The most common reasons that the participants offered for these high scores related to their general satisfaction with the program's social life, the heightened sense of engagement that they felt as a result of participation in collegiate academics, and the increased freedom that they enjoyed by living away from home.

Apart from the eight primary participants, data from my observations of and interactions with the other Early Scholars lead me to conclude that the vast majority of program participants are very satisfied and happy with their decision to enter college early as well. Students routinely talked in the top-lobby and common areas about how much they preferred the ESP to their high school environments, citing the program's sense of community and increased academic rigor as two key factors in their assessment. Additionally, it was clear that the students greatly enjoyed, and responded well to, being treated as "young adults" rather than "high school kids," and felt that they were taken more seriously by their college professors and peers than was the case in their former high schools. While I heard countless positive comments regarding the Early Scholars Program from its students over my semester in residence, and regularly heard them complaining about some program weaknesses as well, at no point did I ever encounter a single student who expressed remorse for having entered the program. I was, however, told that one young woman did choose to leave the year before after only three days on campus, an event that was attributed to homesickness by the program's administrators.

This determination of high overall satisfaction is consistent with the self-reported data and statements from Early Scholars Program administrators, both current and past, which presented the ESP as a place that few students did not like or ultimately chose to leave. "In my 11 years of working here, I've only had one student ever tell me that they wouldn't do it over if they could," said Lindsey the academic coordinator. Moreover, while the Early Scholars Program has suffered an attrition rate of only 1-2 students per year in recent years, one of the program's former directors claimed that the overwhelming majority of these "withdraws" actually stemmed from student disciplinary

issues rather than a true desire to leave. "If a student did something so bad that they were going to be expelled," the director remarked, "I would first explain the situation and offer them the opportunity to voluntarily withdraw from the ESP in order to save face on their college transcript records." Finally, the former director also pointed out that a second subgroup of those students who withdrew consists of students who were emotionally immature and ran into serious difficulties balancing the academic work with their social lives. These students, they argued, would usually decide to leave the Early Scholars Program but remain enrolled as a full-time college student if their parents lived close enough that they could live at home and commute daily to campus. The director recalled that when that would occur, "things usually ended up fine, because the student's parents were able to give them that added support that they weren't ready to give up yet."

<div align="center">

Perceived Program Strengths

</div>

While the three most commonly perceived "strengths" of the Early Scholars Program, increased academic challenge, supportive social life, and heightened independence, have already been discussed at great length, participants also identified five additional areas of program support. They saw each of these strengths as having a positive impact on their experiences as early entrants and praised the Early Scholars Program for their strong performance in these areas.

Supportive Program Administrators

The first of these strengths was that students perceived the program's administrators being truly supportive and actively involved in helping them to be successful in their transition to college. This finding was also among the study's most robust, in that all eight of the study's participants held this belief. "I feel that the ESP's

staff tries to make a personal connection with each of the students," Mark reflected, adding that "even if you make a mistake or don't do well at first, they always give you a chance to redeem yourself." In terms of specifics, students were especially grateful for the work of Lindsey and Kelly, the program's academic and psychological counselors, who were widely viewed as being significant resources for the students and being highly involved in helping each Early Scholar to do their best. John explained:

> We have our own special set of people here to do everything for us. There's Lindsey, who designs our schedules and makes sure that we can register for class before the older students. And there's Kelly, who you can go to for counseling or career advice. And all these people have special training to be able to help us.

Lindsey was especially praised by the participants and other Early Scholars, as they perceived her as "having their back" and supporting them with concrete actions that affected their lives. "Lindsey always makes sure that you're on the correct course academically and taking the right classes that you need to graduate," Jada offered, going on to say that "if an Early Scholar gets rejected from a college they want to transfer to, Lindsey calls and asks 'What happened?' and tries to change their mind. Last year she did that for someone and got them accepted into Cornell." Moreover, Lindsey's intervention was also seen as being invaluable to students' interactions with their high school guidance offices and school boards. This was critical to the students, as navigating the system and actually receiving both high school credit and college credit for their academic courses could be challenging if their high schools did not support the student or file the necessary paperwork in a timely manner. When Early Scholars

encountered these problems, they felt as if Lindsey's willingness to speak directly to their school led them to be taken more seriously.

Kelly was also highly praised by the students, especially for her involvement in personal counseling, career counseling, and academic probation checkups. "I talk to Kelly for an hour a week," Dakota said, "we talk all about my life and what I'm doing here now… I really do love her and Lindsey." Max and John also expressed appreciation for her help with the career counseling process, during which time Kelly invites interested Early Scholars to take a series of career, interest, and personality tests, and then discusses the results with them and suggests occupations that could result in a high degree of personal life satisfaction. Reflecting on the process, Max explained: "I got this nice, big report back from Kelly, which told me what careers I might like the best. The results weren't too surprising for me, but it was nice to see it all spelled out."

Plentiful Creative Outlets

The second commonly expressed strength of the Early Scholars Program praised the high number of creative outlets available at the ESP. Creative expression was extremely important for many of the program's students, most commonly taking form in musical performance, creative writing and poetry, and visual artwork. A majority of participants played at least one musical instrument and having two separate music rooms for rehearsal space was seen as vital to their happiness and creative well-being. "I play the piano, guitar, bass, ukulele, synthesizer, and harmonica," Greg told me once. "Music is important to me and I used to be in a couple bands." Similarly, Rose, Jada, and Mark all played the piano and Jada and Mark were actively taking lessons on campus as a collegiate elective. Another young woman in the program, Aggie, was an "all-state

bassoon player" and was still able to travel to her high school and participate in their symphony orchestra as an extracurricular activity. With so many musicians in residence, it was no wonder that impromptu jam sessions would occasionally develop around the dormitory. In one such occurrence, I walked into the main recreational room to find several male students with guitars and small conga drums, singing and laughing.

In addition to the opportunities for musical expression, students also praised the opportunities to become involved in creative writing and visual art, through program organizations such as the hall newspaper, the yearbook, and even program's such as Max's NaNoWriMo novel-writing competition. "I've always been really into writing poetry and short stories," Dakota illustrated, "but in the past year I've started to get into photography as well." Rose had also increased her creative output through writing more poetry and short stories since coming to the Early Scholars Program and both young women regularly contributed to the hall newspaper. Additionally, the ESP was also planning to found a literary magazine the following semester as an additional resource for students to share their work with the community. Edgar, the program alumni who had attended the year's kick-off cookout and told new students that attending the program was "the best decision he had ever made," had already been invited to move back into the dorm as an "Early Scholar Mentor" in order to provide leadership and guidance to this fledgling magazine.

Campus Events

Another commonly mentioned strength of the ESP related to the high number of organizations and program and campus events that Early Scholars were able to join and attend. With the exception of Greek life and NCAA collegiate sports, Early Scholars had

full access to the campus' organizations and events and were strongly encouraged to participate fully. Students by and large appreciated these opportunities and high involvement in campus and program clubs and activities was the norm among the Early Scholars. Lena, for example, was involved with the university's pre-med society, the chemistry society, an honors fraternity that was actively engaged in community service, the residence hall council student government organization, the Early Scholars Program's yearbook club, and a local gospel choir. Max, who had been heavily involved in clubs at his magnet high school, similarly reported that he "got here and realized that not being in clubs was simply not an option." He promptly joined the university's mock trial team and was in the process of founding his own club, the 4 a.m. Tech Club. Dakota was also highly involved around campus, being part of the university's tutoring program and a member of the gay-straight alliance, the ESP's yearbook, and a community advocacy group for progressive issues.

Beyond simply joining these clubs and organizations, many of these bright young men and women had actually assumed leadership responsibilities as well. "I'm a member of seven clubs and an executive of five of them," Greg shared. "I'm on residence hall council, the county Republican party, the prelaw society, the hall newspaper, an honors fraternity, intramural tennis, and also holding a job in the current gubernatorial campaign." Greg was especially proud to have been recently elected the vice chairman of the College Republicans, which was quite a coup for this young, non-Greek student. He explained: "Most of the members are also in fraternities or sororities and I was the only non-Greek elected. That's difficult to do, because they vote for their own."

Besides clubs and organizations, membership in the Early Scholars Program additionally allowed students to attend a number of program and campus events. The most routine of these was Thursday Night Dinner, the regular gathering for Early Scholars where they were treated to a guest speaker along with their meal. Student feelings regarding TND were mixed, as some students did not like being required to attend, but others saw the ritual as a welcome time to socialize and relax. The ESP hosted other activities as well, including dances, contests, community service trips, and sponsored lectures by guest speakers such as Latina novelist Julia Alvarez, author of *How the García Girls Lost Their Accents* and *In the Time of the Butterflies*. Students were also welcome to attend broader campus events, something which many took advantage of. Lena, for example, beamed as she recalled attending a lecture the previous year given by a prior Nobel Prize laureate. "I really like going to special talks," she emphasized.

The Program as a Refuge

Another perceived strength of the Early Scholars Program was its role as an occasional "refuge" for the Early Scholars, in that these intellectually advanced young men and women loved being full members of the college community but still enjoyed having a place where they could interact with other peers their own age. Lena explained:

> You have to act a certain way when you're out on campus… you have to keep a certain maturity level in order to fit in. Sometimes it gets awkward because once in a while you'll do something or say something and realize that you just made yourself look like a little kid in front of the older college students… and they'll call you out on it. So it's nice to have this place, where you can still be a 15 or 16 year-old every once in a while.

This was clearly evident in my observations of the program's social spaces and student activities, as students would often joke and act in more juvenile ways than they would outside of the building. For example, humor in the top-lobby was significantly more low-brow than students used when making jokes in their classes or the dining hall, library, or student union. Jokes involving race, sex, and bodily functions were always popular, as is the case with almost any young adolescent culture. Even beyond humor, however, students also seemed to let their emotional guard down more when in the dormitory with the other Early Scholars and were more willing to share their feelings regarding homesickness or missing friends and family. "I love it here but it can be difficult too," one young woman explained, "When I talk on the phone to my friends back home it makes me feel so left out sometimes. Like I don't know what's going on with them anymore." While students often strove in public to blend in and "pass" as older students, the dorm was a place where they could be themselves without fear of others' judgment.

Valuing the Residential Staff

A final commonly perceived strength of the Early Scholars Program related to the students' general appreciation for the residential assistants and residential coordinator, who they saw as playing a major role in defining their overall experience as early entrants. "The RA's are *huge*," Dakota stated, emphasizing that the ways in which they treated the students carried tremendous potential to affect the Early Scholars satisfaction with the program, for better or worse. Most participants saw the current crop of residential assistants and staff members as being effective leaders for the program, especially as a result of their perceived willingness to listen to student grievances and work to resolve the situations effectively.

Additionally, students praised the residential staff for giving them a voice and including their input in major decisions. Dakota especially praised the program for reinstituting the judicial board that had been absent the year before, giving students' peers input into the ESP's disciplinary proceedings. Far from being a means of providing leniency, she additionally emphasized that having to face a judicial board of your peers often resulted in stiffer punishments for the offenders. Max and John also praised the residential staff and program administration for listening to their complaints and producing meaningful change. As John described: "If you go to them and explain why some rule doesn't make sense, they will usually listen to you and consider your argument. Being in this program has shown me that my thoughts and opinions actually matter."

Perceived Program Weaknesses

Data from interviews, observations, and document analyses also revealed three significant areas that Early Scholars commonly perceived as weaknesses of the ESP. Students typically saw these weaknesses as annoyances rather than serious matters that would cause them to rethink or question their decision to enter college early, but they still hoped that the program would successfully address these challenges in time. Specifically, the three commonly mentioned weaknesses of the Early Scholars Program were a lack of publicity and understanding of the program among the general population, complaints regarding the program's facilities, and the difficulty of developing and maintaining healthy dietary and living habits as an Early Scholar.

Lack of Awareness and Understanding

The chief complaint among Early Scholars, as shared by six of the study's participants, relates to the fact that few of the students' same-age peers, older classmates,

high school teachers and guidance counselors, and even admissions officers at schools to which they submitted transfer applications seemed to understand the concept of early entrance or have any awareness of what the ESP actually was. "People don't understand what we're doing here," I was told by one young woman named Kaitlyn, "they either assume that the program is for little kid geniuses or they think that we're high school students who are living on campus but still taking high school classes." Greg shared in this frustration, commenting that "People assume that I'm only attending college for part of the day to take a couple classes and then go back to high school…. You have to explain to everyone that you're an actual freshman." Even the local metropolitan newspaper struggled to understand the nature of the program, unintentionally awarding it a backhanded compliment when it ran a story identifying the Early Scholars Program as the "top-performing high school in the state" as measured by average student SAT scores.

While this lack of awareness regarding the program and early entrance as a legitimate educational option was annoying for the Early Scholars when it affected their peer relationships, it carried significantly higher consequences when it affected their pursuit of a high school diploma or likelihood of having their two years of college credit accepted and legitimized by transfer institutions. While four of my participants shared positive stories about their high school guidance counselors, the other four had experienced great difficulty in convincing their high schools to "let" them leave, mainly due to grave misconceptions regarding the program, its nature, and its desirability. In fact, griping about one's poor interactions with their high school guidance counselors, who were still needed to submit paperwork and guarantee that the student would receive a high school diploma, was one of the most common topics of conversation in the top-

lobby and program social areas. "I was told that colleges prefer to see honors and AP courses," one young man named Bruce told me, "I said, they prefer them to what, actually taking real college classes?" Similarly, a former director of the ESP shared:

> A few years ago, one of the local county public school systems briefly refused to accept our university's credits towards their high school diplomas, because they claimed that they had yet to see evidence that our university classes were better academically than their high school classes.

While some private high schools, such as those that John and Rose had attended, refused to accept duel enrollment credit for financial reasons, the state's public schools did not have this as an excuse – even though they often thought they did. State law guaranteed that high schools with dual enrollment students would continue to receive funding as if the student was physically on campus, yet many districts operated under the assumption that dual enrollment costs them money, according to another former director. As such, they would make life difficult for early entrants, refusing their paperwork or counting their collegiate grades as the lowest possible score in the grade range when calculating high school GPA and class rank. Lena angrily recalled:

> My high school told me that I wasn't going to graduate because I didn't have a certain class and then Lindsey called and they admitted that they didn't require that class anyway. I'm still fighting the school board over whether or not I get to be valedictorian, because state law says that I'm eligible but my school is claiming that I'm not.

The worst experience, however, belonged to a former Early Scholar and current RA named Betsy, whose high school had reported her to the state as a truant when she

failed to physically appear for class, resulting in a temporary suspension of her driver's license until the mess could be sorted out. Most students continued to pursue their high school diplomas regardless of the frustration, however, although several of the participants indicated that they had considered simply giving up and dropping out. When asked if this was common, Betsy the RA replied "People here don't drop their high schools… their high schools drop them."

In addition to the difficulties of getting their peers and high schools to understand and support their early entrance, program participants also faced significant uncertainty when it came to applying to transfer institutions and successfully redeeming their prior university credit. Students were well aware that while in-state public universities were familiar with the ESP and would accept nearly all of their college credit, one could not assume that private or out-of-state colleges or universities would do the same. A majority of the participants in this study were openly contemplating whether it would be better to transfer to a lower-ranked state school with their credits or to apply to a more prestigious out-of-state institution that would accept little or none of their prior work. In some cases, such as Ivy League institutions, there was very little chance of having credit recognized. At other institutions, however, Lindsey the academic counselor suggested that negotiation was possible. She explained: "I know at least two big-name schools that claim not to accept transfer credit from our program, but once our students transfer there if they fill out the correct paperwork there's been success in receiving at least partial credit." Still, the Early Scholars universally agreed that as full-time college students, regardless of their age, they would prefer for other universities to fully recognize and accept their college credits as being as legitimate as those of any older student.

Facilities Complaints

While significantly less serious than their concerns regarding awareness and acceptance of the ESP, the Early Scholars' second most common source of frustration stemmed from complaints regarding their dormitory facilities. Although the building had been recently renovated and continued to undergo changes, the dormitory housing the Early Scholars was nearly fifty years old and showed signs of its age in several key areas.

The building's temperature control system, for example, consisted of a three-setting switch that affected the entire building, rather than having individual thermostats in each room like more modern facilities. As a result, the ESP's residential coordinator was in charge of "the switch" and was responsible for making the determination of when, exactly, the building would shift from "cool" to "neutral" to reflect the change from summer to fall, from "neutral" to "heat" as fall became winter, and back through the progression as spring and summer arrived. The decision carried significant weight, as the change was viewed as reasonably permanent, and so the switch typically remained on one setting for as long as possible to prevent any need to change back. As a result, the hall was always slightly cooler or warmer than most students desired, a fact which they regularly mentioned in conversation with residential staff.

Another facilities concern related to the building's plumbing system, which was similarly aged and was in need of repair. Students shared community bathrooms and showers on each floor, but the drainage system would frequently backup and fail to drain properly. As a result, shower stalls on certain floors would fill with several inches of water and take upwards of half an hour to empty. Furthermore, certain showers occasionally experienced water discoloration as a result of the aging pipes and their rusty

build-up and a blackish, gritty substance would occasionally emerge from the drains of the least desirable shower stalls if too little drainage occurred.

A final facilities concern did not stem from the building's condition, but rather from its geographic location on campus. The ESP's dormitory was located on the far eastern boundary of campus, close to the library and certain classroom buildings but all the way on the other side of the medium-sized campus from the dining hall facilities and other often used facilities and classrooms. As a result, students wishing to eat at the dining hall were required to drive, ride a bus, or make the trek all the way across campus. While certainly not an issue of extreme import or concern, most Early Scholars did feel inconvenienced by the building's location and wished they were more centrally located.

The Early Scholars Program's administrators, and even the university's president, were well aware of these facility issues and did hope to make changes in the future. "Eventually, the program is going to need a new dorm," the president calmly told me with a tone of inevitability. However, university finances were tight at the moment and priorities lay elsewhere during this era of budget cuts and economic recession.

Unhealthy Living Habits

For all eight participants in this study, one of the most difficult challenges of early entrance was their collective difficulty in developing and maintaining healthy dietary and living habits. Most of the students carried high credit loads, were very involved in program and campus events, and were already prone to perfectionistic attitudes prior to their matriculation to college. As a result, student stress levels were high and the two aspects of their lives most likely to suffer were their eating habits and sleeping patterns.

Additionally, due to their poor eating choices and lack of sleep, most students relied heavily on caffeine to get them through each day.

"I hate the meal plan and I don't cook," Jada confessed, "So I don't really eat that much. Maybe once a day, or once every two days. I know it isn't healthy." Other students expressed similar disdain for the food options on campus, complaining about the distance to the dining hall, their assessment of the food there as being of poor quality and taste, and the fact that the student union's eating options were heavily skewed towards fast-food chains, burgers, and fried chicken. Showing me a picture of microwavable "hot pockets," John commented that most of his caloric intake came from microwavable meals, vending machines, and food that he "steals" from others by waiting until people order delivery and then asking for their leftovers.

Agreeing with my initial shock at these patterns, Betsy the RA said: "You're right, it's a terrible situation here food-wise. Most of these students are living off the McDonalds and the burrito restaurant across the street. There are no healthy options and the dining hall is too far away." Participants were in fact regulars at these locations, with Mark reporting that he ate at McDonalds 3-4 times a week and Rose stating that students with the money to eat off-campus get most of their meals from "The burrito place, McDonalds, Dairy Queen, IHOP, and the Waffle House." Some students did cook in the program's kitchen, but their meals were basic and non-balanced. For example, one young woman reported cooking spaghetti and tomato sauce several nights a week to save money. Shockingly, these behaviors were present even among the first-year students, who were required to purchase an on-campus meal plan, as the prospect of traversing the

campus to visit the dining hall could not compete with the allure of Big Macs and fries located right across the street.

In addition to poor eating habits, all eight of the study's participants reported poor sleeping habits and chronic fatigue. On average, the eight participants estimated that they slept for roughly six hours per night. Additionally, Mark and Greg reported regularly skipping sleep entirely for a night depending on schoolwork demands. "Will this take long? I pulled an all-nighter last night and still haven't eaten anything today" Greg once asked upon arriving for our scheduled interview at 5 p.m. Participants' rationales for these poor sleeping habits typically included two common elements: High social and extracurricular involvement during the day, which kept them from accomplishing their work, along with a developed preference for not beginning the day's studying and homework until after the 11 p.m. curfew had arrived.

While waiting until eleven to begin one's work afforded more peace and quiet and lessened the odds of being distracted by friends it also ensured that most students would be working until late in the night, often until 2, 3, or 4 a.m. Considering that many students had early morning classes, this practice was unsustainable on its own, and several participants reported either seeking out naps during the day or "crashing" every weekend in a vain attempt to make up for lost sleep. As Dakota illustrated: "During the week I get six to eight hours of sleep a night. During the weekend it's more like ten or twelve hours at a time." Two students, Max and a friend, had even experimented the prior year with "polyphasic sleep" in a quest for additional time, by taking short naps at multiple points during the day and night rather than ever sleeping for an extended block of time longer than 3 hours. While Max's parents forced him to give this up relatively

quickly, his friend maintained the practice for several months before his girlfriend became concerned about his increasingly erratic behavior and convinced him to stop.

In contrast to Max and his friend's extreme approach, most Early Scholars deal with their exhaustion through a more traditional means: Caffeine. The program houses three soda-pop vending machines, is located across the street from a McDonalds, and many students keep coffee machines and refrigerators stocked with 12-packs of soda in their rooms. Most students I spoke with reported drinking at least several cups of coffee or bottles of soda a day, with a few admitting to a much higher intake. "I live on caffeine," Rose stated honestly. The worst offender, though, was a young woman named Aggie, who claimed to drink "two 2-liters of Diet Coke a day" on average. When I asked if she ever experienced ill health as a result, she shrugged and responded, "Well, sometimes I get heart palpitations."

CHAPTER VII

DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

Summary of Findings

This research study revealed several insights into the lived experiences of early entrance students attending the Early Scholars Program, especially as they pertained to the students' motivations, academic and social experiences, influential background factors, and perceptions of institutional support. The research participants were primarily motivated to pursue early entrance due to dissatisfaction with their prior schooling experiences, both academically and socially. Two of the eight participants, in fact, had even planned to drop out of high school before discovering the ESP. They were also aware of the existence of better educational options, which a majority discovered through either program advertising or participation in a summer program for the gifted such as Duke TIP or the Governor's Honors Program. Moreover, most participants felt they were ready to move on to college due to a sense of advanced maturity, social struggles with their chronological-age peers, and an awareness that their high school academic environment had little to offer them in terms of personal or intellectual growth.

Academically, the Early Scholars' experiences may be seen through a lens of complete academic immersion, as they fully integrated themselves into the collegiate environment through taking high credit loads and becoming very involved in program and campus events. For many, this immersion resulted in their first experiences with true academic challenge, pushing them to develop study skills and confront prior

perfectionistic personality characteristics and behaviors. These areas of maturation were additionally impacted by the environment of simultaneous cooperation and competition that existed at the Early Scholars Program, which both provided an academic safety net for students while creating stress in their lives as well. Finally, students' relationships with professors was also seen by many as key to their success on campus, in the sense that professors were widely respected for their knowledge, passion, and willingness to involve early entrants in their academic research. This provided additional challenge and interest for several Early Scholars, as well as enhancing their résumés for future graduate or professional school applications. Students' grades were also found to be extremely praiseworthy, with 93% earning above a 3.0 GPA in their most recent semester and 17% earning a perfect 4.0 GPA.

Socially, participants reported a seemingly contrasting experience of "finally fitting in" among their same-age peers while actively working to "pass" or blend in among the campus' older students. A majority were very satisfied with the social experiences they encountered as early entrants to college, although three new challenges were reported. Acclimating to college life was the first of these and involved all of the usual trappings of life as a first-year college student, including the difficulties of getting used to dormitory life, having a roommate, and the general lack of personal space and privacy that communal living can bring. Another challenge was that of personal growth and identity development through the students' time in the Early Scholars Program, as each student had formerly built their self-concept around being "the smartest kid in class," something which was no longer true. As a result, Early Scholars were forced to reinvent themselves, exploring new identities and maturing over time. Lastly, a third new

social challenge for early entrants consisted of finding appropriate outlets for stress relief,

something which a majority of participants saw as being crucial to their overall success in

the program.

In terms of the impact of personal background factors on early entrants' college

experiences, several themes were found to exist in the lives of the research participants.

A history of frequent relocation and school switching was a common factor for several

participants, some of whom had attended as many as 8-10 schools over a 11-year time

span. As a result, the notion of leaving high school classmates and entering a new

educational experience was not a daunting prospect to these students in the least.

Another thematic background finding related to students' upbringings, in that a majority

came from homes where parents both stressed education and personal independence, with

most allowing students to make their own decisions regarding their academic affairs from

an early age. Several students, for example, switched schools or skipped a grade on their

own initiative and a majority made the determination to enter college early without their

parents' encouragement or initial blessing. When it came to issues of equality and

diversity, such as race, gender, and religion, students' experiences could best be

characterized as a blend of tolerance and tension, with Early Scholars verbally

emphasizing tolerance and support while engaging in behaviors and sharing jokes that did

not reflect that virtue. A notable exception to this tension, however, was the issue of

family economic power and wealth, which seemed to matter for little at the Early

Scholars Program in terms of both students' interpersonal relationships and program

demographic statistics.

Finally, participants' perceptions of institutional support factors were generally very positive in nature. The eight participants were all highly satisfied with both the Early Scholars Program and their decision to enter college early and the ESP's withdrawal rate in recent years had been both very low and generally attributable to disciplinary incidents. Participants' perceptions of specific program strengths included their appreciation for supportive program administrators, plentiful creative outlets, program and campus events, using the program as a social refuge, and valuing the contributions of the residential staff. Participants' perceptions of program weaknesses included the general lack of awareness and understanding they encountered regarding early entrance and the ESP, facilities complaints, and the difficulties of fostering and maintaining healthy dietary and living habits.

Discussion

Ultimately, the students of the Early Scholars Program were generally a happy and satisfied collection of exceptionally bright young men and women. They were performing well academically, enjoying their newfound social opportunities, and widely recommended early entrance as a viable alternative to the boredom and poor social interactions experienced by many gifted and talented students in traditional high schools. Of these findings, however, which are consistent with the extant research literature and which are novel and require further exploration?

Findings Consistent with Extant Research

Many of this study's findings are consistent with, and provide further support for, current understandings of early entrance to college as typified in the extant research literature. In terms of early entrants' motivations, for example, participants' expressions

of boredom and dissatisfaction with their previous academic environments and lack of

intellectual challenge is thoroughly consistent with the prior research (Noble & Childers,

2008; Olszewski-Kubilius, 1998; Sayler & Lupkowski, 1992). Additionally, the Early

Scholars' motivations to find a social environment of better interpersonal fit where they

can interact and form friendships with students of similar interests and mental age is also

well supported (Noble & Drummond, 1992; Noble & Smyth, 1995; Sayler, 1990).

Concerning academic performance, as measured by grade point average, the Early

Scholars' noteworthy levels of collective achievement were also consistent with the

extant research on the academic output of early entrants (Gross & van Vliet, 2005;

Olszewski-Kubilius, 2002). The participants' high credit loads and GPA's echoed the

findings of Stanley (1985b) as well, who found that early entrants typically take more

challenging course loads and yet still outperform traditionally-aged college

undergraduates on average. Moreover, the high level of postgraduate career aspirations

among the study's participants, in that seven of the eight planned to attend graduate or

professional school, is also consistent with published data concerning accelerated

students and their academic goals (Benbow, Lubinski, Shea, & Eftekhari-Sanjani, 2000;

Gross & van Vliet, 2005; Noble, Robinson, & Gunderson, 1993).

The Early Scholars' high levels of extracurricular, political, and community-

service involvement on and off campus are also connected to several established lines of

research concerning gifted students. These include findings that gifted students are often

highly intrinsically driven (Gottfried & Gottfried, 1996), morally sensitive (Lovecky,

1997), and active in social justice pursuits (Terry, Bohnenberger, Renzulli, Cramond, &

Sisk, 2008). Additionally, the common experience of helping professors as research

volunteers also echoes the large body of work concerning gifted students and the significance of mentoring experiences in their talent development process (Casey & Shore, 2000; Clasen & Clasen, 2003; Zorman, 1993).

The Early Scholars' common social experiences were also consistent with several prior studies. One such set of experiences concerned their interactions with fellow accelerated students, which were characterized by feelings of good social fit, shared interests, and the potential for forming quality friendships. Noble and Smyth (1995) and Olszewski-Kubilius (1998) each uncovered similar findings, reporting that early entrance program students are apt to encounter same-age peers within their early entrance programs. These students, they claimed, would be more likely to share similar histories, experiences, talents, and interests, thereby creating an environment in which meaningful friendships can blossom, in contrast to the social stifling effects that traditional high schools may exert on the highly gifted. Furthermore, while participants in this study were more likely to form social bonds amongst themselves than they were with the general college population, they did not report any significantly negative social interactions with older students either. Similarly, literature concerning the social and emotional effects of acceleration has shown it to have fairly neutral impacts on atypically young students' broader social lives (Gross, 1998; Rogers, 2002; Pollins, 1983).

The notion that traditional K-12 social experiences are more difficult for gifted females is consistent with prior research literature as well. Noble and Smyth's (1995) found high school to be a "poisonous environment" for bright girls' talents and Reis (2002) described how gifted females are under increased pressure to "play dumb" in order to attract potential boyfriends and "better conform to the norm of the peer group."

At the same time, however, several other studies have also documented that female early entrants have an advantage over their male counterparts once they accelerate to college, as they have better odds of finding an older boyfriend than the male early entrants have of finding an older girlfriend (Janos, Robinson, & Lunneborg, 1989; Janos et al., 1998).

Another important finding connected to extant research concerns the pattern of racial self-segregation that could be seen among the Early Scholars. The tendency for African American females, Koreans, and Catalonians to cluster together by race is likely the result of two main factors. The first of these, as highlighted by the work of Tatum (1999), is that doing so provides a "safe space" for adolescent racial identity to develop, letting the students form positive self-concepts of who they are and what it means to be a member of their racial or ethnic group. The second, in my opinion, is that for the Korean and Catalonian students doing such allows them to discuss and process their shared experiences as foreign students, as well as providing additional comfort in being able to speak in their native language.

Finally, the high overall satisfaction that participants expressed regarding both the Early Scholars Program and their decision to enter college early are also supported by research precedent. Both Gross (2004) and Rimm and Lovance (1992) conducted polls of formerly accelerated gifted students and their parents, asking whether they would make the same choice if they had to do it over, and each study reported receiving a startling 100% positive response.

Novel Contributions to Early Entrance Research

Along with the previously supported findings discussed above, I have also presented findings in this research study which appear to be novel contributions to the

body of literature concerning early entrance. The suggestion that early entrants to college may be more likely than their non-accelerated peers to have a history of frequent geographic relocation and/or school switching, for example, is a finding that I have not encountered in other studies. In addition, this study has uncovered evidence that early entrants' parents may potentially utilize a more "academically permissive," child-empowerment focused parenting style than the norm, in that seven of the eight participants claimed to be the primary decision makers in their families when it came to matters concerning their academic lives and education. Moreover, while previous studies of early entrants' challenges have focused solely on their academic and social experiences, this study has presented data concerning their struggles to live balanced, healthy lives in terms of nutrition, sleep, and stress management. In doing so, I believe, it paints a fuller picture of the accelerants' actual lived experiences.

In addition to the findings which appear to be new, two other discoveries from this research study appear to contribute to the research literature through significantly extending prior understandings. For example, while Gross (1989) reported that accelerated students benefit from diminished self-criticism, this study has gone beyond this notion to argue that acceleration actually successfully challenged students' perfectionistic tendencies and attitudes, which are a major source of self-criticism. A second example of this extension is present in the finding that early entrants to college commonly strive to "pass" as traditionally-aged students, obscuring their true ages and withholding information in order to blend in with their older classmates. While this has been discussed to some extent in conversations regarding the dating habits of accelerated males (Janos et al., 1998), I believe that this study has extended this notion of "passing"

to incorporate females' behavior as well and present it as a normalized aspect of early entrants' social interactions with older classmates.

Lastly, another novel contribution that this study has provided to the academic research concerning acceleration and collegiate early entrance derives from its methodological research design. I am unaware of any other American study that has ever examined an early entrance program through an ethnographic fieldwork approach and in doing so I hope to have provided the field with a richer, more contextually-grounded description of the actual lived experiences of early entrants to college.

Implications for Prospective Early Entrants

This study, like nearly all research conducted on acceleration and early entrance in the past three decades, has presented findings of a positive nature regarding the overall experiences of accelerants (Kulik, 2004; Olszewski-Kubilius, 2002; Sriraman & Steinthorsdottir, 2008). As such, it joins a growing body of literature that argues for the increased use of acceleration, whether through grade skipping or early college entrance, as a means of further differentiating and individualizing the K-12 experience for students of exceptional talent and ability.

While the research literature strongly supports acceleration as a viable and beneficial experience, however, research has demonstrated that a majority of parents and educators are opposed to its use as a matter of principle (Southern, Jones, & Fiscus, 1989). Unaware of the research showing otherwise, or perhaps ignoring it out of disbelief, these guardians and gatekeepers deny many able students the opportunity to grade skip or enter college early out of misguided fears regarding their chances for academic and social success. Perhaps this explains why six of the eight participants in

this study discovered early entrance on their own, rather than from parents, teachers, or guidance counselors, and why seven of the eight saw the decision to enroll as theirs to make, even if their guardians and educators were opposed to the idea. Capable students who were aware of early entrance yet heeded the cautionary, "common sense," and uninformed opinions of their parents and educators would not have applied to the Early Scholars Program. Well-intentioned but poorly informed advice would have doomed these students to two additional years in an educational environment devoid of academic rigor, social fit, or appropriate levels of support for their career goals and trajectories.

Harkening back to Borland's (1989) remarks that "acceleration is one of the most curious phenomena in the field of education," in having such a tremendous gulf between what research has shown and what practitioners continue to believe, one critical question that thus arises is that of what a prospective early entrant is supposed to do with this information. It is my recommendations that until the educational community catches up with the actual research findings concerning the positive academic and social effects of acceleration and early entrance, prospective students must unfortunately take the lead in educating themselves and presenting the data to parents, teacher, guidance counselors, and other guardians and mentors. In addition, they should work to convince hesitant parents to accompany them on campus visits to established early entrance programs, where they can learn firsthand about the academic and social offerings, speak with actual students, and determine whether or not early entrance might constitute an appropriate fit. Specifically, the student should be sure to ask questions of the program regarding student satisfaction, attrition rates, academic performance, common social acclimation experiences, whether students generally remain on campus during the weekends or return

home, and whether program graduates usually remain at the college or university for the remainder of their bachelor's degree or transfer to another institution. Additionally, if the interested student is eventually allowed to matriculate early to college, they should also work to educate their guidance counselors and teachers, keeping them up-to-date on their progress and accomplishments, in order to hopefully make the process easier for the next student at that school who might be a fitting candidate for early entrance.

<div style="text-align: center;">**Implications for Early Entrance Programs**</div>

While many prospective early entrants are unfortunately in a position of educating themselves and their guardians about this beneficial educational opportunity, much of this pressure could be alleviated if existing early entrance programs and the universities which house them were to do a better job with advertising and self-promotion. The number of early entrance programs in this nation has grown exponentially over the past two decades, yet these programs remain relatively unknown to many educational professionals and advisors across the nation. In order to break down the wall of faulty assumptions and mistaken notions regarding acceleration and early entrance, these programs will need to actively engage educational professionals through data-driven advertising campaigns targeted at students, parents, teachers, guidance counselors, and even admissions officers at other colleges and universities. As the notion of acceleration as an academically and socially risky practice appears to be so deeply entrenched in the public consciousness, the burden of changing opinions ultimately falls upon these programs and their respective host institutions. Changing public perception of acceleration and collegiate early entrance will be difficult, but is to the programs'

advantages as well, as additional public acceptance of acceleration as a viable educational practice would allow them access to a larger population of potential applicants.

One possible step in enacting such an advertising campaign could be the forging of school-partnerships with educational districts in a program's geographic area. Establishing and maintaining direct contact with local schools could allow early entrance programs opportunities to build positive relationships with high school administrators and guidance counselors, address their concerns regarding academic and social challenges through presenting data and research, and correct misconceptions regarding the financial and standardized testing implications of "losing" a high-achieving student to the program. More so, forming good relationships with districts might enable them access to speak directly with schools' gifted students, through offering annual on-site recruitment presentations for interested students to learn more about early entrance. In cases where school districts are reluctant to engage the program or promote their offerings, I would advise that programs follow the advice of one former director of the ESP, who argued that dealing directly with those schools' parent-teacher associations or other community-based organizations presents a reasonable alternative.

Another potential element of any campaign to improve general awareness and acceptance of early entrance programs could involve existing programs, either on their own or in partnership with each other, to spread awareness of their existence and missions among admissions officers at other colleges and universities around the nation. Doing so would also help early entrants to stand a better chance in earning full credit for their prior college work when transferring to another institution. For example, sending promotional information or arranging for a program recruiter or administrator to visit the

colleges where their early entrants most frequently transfer may help to establish greater

understanding of the program's legitimacy. Ideally, this may even result in the creation

of informal "pipelines" between the program and the transfer institutions, or the

establishment of scholarships designed to entice the early entrance program's finest

students to consider applying to those universities as transfer students. Additionally, with

students enjoying wider recognition of their credits and experiencing fewer limitations,

this would enhance the academic reputation of the early entrance program and help them

with future recruiting efforts as well.

Along with the efforts listed above, the findings of this study suggest that early

entrance programs should absolutely continue to advertise directly to students as well.

Students should be targeted from an early age, such as middle school, and can be

identified for mailings through direct queries with school districts and the purchasing of

prospective mailing lists from organizations such as the Educational Testing Service,

Duke TIP, Johns Hopkins' Center for Talented Youth (CTY), and the Governor's Honors

Program. Three of the study's participants had learned about the Early Scholars Program

while in middle school, through information received from the Duke TIP program, and

each was immediately struck by the attractiveness of the opportunity and began to plan

on eventually attending even if they were only in seventh or eighth grade at the time.

This shared experience further illustrates how crucial it may be for early entrance

programs to continue with their partnerships with these specialized acceleration and

enrichment programs for the gifted as these programs draw from the same student

populations as early entrance programs. Finding ways to advertise to these program's

students, whether through mass-mailings, presentations to students during their summer

camp experience, or the volunteering of university facilities to these programs in exchange for distributing promotional materials might also help to spread awareness and increase the number of applications received. In addition to partnerships with these programs, traditional, targeted postcard mailings were responsible for two other students' applications and should continue to be utilized. Maintaining a vibrant internet presence would be advisable as well, both in terms of designing a program webpage that provides as much recruitment information as possible while also directly responding to questions of students' academic and social readiness for college via presenting established research data and conclusions. Finally, forging personal connections to local psychologists who cater to the social and emotional needs of gifted students could be beneficial as well, as they may wish to refer students and their parents to investigate early entrance as a means of addressing challenges with perfectionism, asynchrony, and curricular mismatch.

Aside from the questions of program and awareness, the findings of this study have also raised another critical implication for existing and future early entrance programs: addressing their students' needs for training and support in establishing healthy lifestyle choices when it comes to issues of nutrition, exercise, sleep, caffeine-intake, and stress management. While early entrants are intellectually mature compared to their same-age peers, giftedness does not guarantee emotional maturity or heightened responsibility. Additionally, while being atypically young may not impact their academic performance or ability to form quality social interactions, it may limit them in the sense that they have had less time than their older classmates to learn basic independent-living skills. As such, it is my recommendation that the Early Scholars Program and other early entrance programs pay additional care to helping students to develop these skills through

providing quality programming, supervision, and support aimed at modeling and scaffolding healthy living habits.

For example, increased residential programming should be provided to improve students' understandings of healthy dietary decisions and sleeping habits. Students who repetitively demonstrate that they are making poor nutritional choices or imbibing extreme amounts of caffeine should be additionally referred to the university's wellness center for private meetings with the school's nutritional dietician as well. While I do not personally advocate a strict "bed time" or "bed-checks," which some early entrance programs do utilize, I would recommend that the Early Scholars Program reevaluate the meaning of "quiet hours." Their current interpretation is loose and carries little meaning or weight, simply requiring students to return to their residential floors and keep a low noise profile if requested by another resident. If reinterpreted as a time by which each student must either be in their bedroom or a hall study carrel, they could be used as a means to encourage students to retire for the night at a more reasonable hour while allowing students who really do need to study an opportunity to do so quickly, efficiently, and without distractions.

Another recommendation deals with one of the strongest of this study's findings, the fact that administrators at the Early Scholars Program were perceived by the students as being actively involved in their lives, to great benefit. The students recognized and appreciated the personal attention they received from the program's academic and psychological counselors, the approachability and dedication of the program directors, and the willingness of the university's president to attend their program functions and even speak at an annual Thursday Night Dinner. As a result, I would both applaud the

Early Scholars Program administrators and recommend that other early entrance

programs similarly strive to maintain personal involvement in the lives of their charges.

For example, some Early Scholars highlighted the fact that beyond the college campus

they were still seen as high school students and were not taken seriously by adults. The

willingness of Lindsey, the academic coordinator, to speak to their high schools on their

behalf, or call universities who had rejected the students' transfer applications to explain

the program and request that they reconsider, was able to help the Early Scholars to

bridge the gap between their age and their goals.

Lastly, while some participants praised the current residential staff while others

expressed frustrations, almost all appreciated their work and recognized the important

effects that the RA's had upon their college experiences. Rather than leniency, as might

be expected, most Early Scholars expressed that the most important qualities of good

residential staff members were understanding, appreciating, and respecting the program

and its students. The most successful RA's were those who valued the program's goals

and treated the students with the same level of respect and responsibility due any other

college student. At the same time, however, early entrance students are still young, both

chronologically and emotionally, and the residence hall staff must be specially trained to

understand and respond appropriately to their unique challenges and difficulties.

Recommendations for Future Research

The results of this study suggest at least five potential avenues for future research,

each of which could contribute significantly to the field's understanding of acceleration

and early entrance to college. Three of these suggestions derive specifically from the

study's findings and two are based on prior studies that are now in need of being

revisited, both due to their age and the rise of structured early entrance programs that has occurred since they were first conducted.

In terms of future research suggested by the study's findings, further investigation into the home lives and parenting styles which nurtured early entrants would be highly desirable. A common misconception exists that accelerated students and collegiate early entrants are "hurried children" with pushy parents who force them to move faster than developmentally appropriate. In sharp contrast, a majority of participants in this study were extremely intrinsically motivated and reported that the decision to accelerate was theirs to make, even when their parents initially opposed the idea. Even more so, a majority of the students' parents could be considered "academically permissive" in their parenting style, allowing the children to make major educational decisions on their own from an early age. A more detailed study exploring these phenomena could identify whether or not this manner of parenting is in fact common in early entrants' homes, along with whether certain parenting attitudes or behaviors more thoroughly prepare a talented student for success as an accelerant or early entrant to college.

Another avenue for future research which derives from the findings of this study concerns academic perfectionism among early entrants to college. Three of the eight participants openly shared their struggles with perfectionistic attitudes and beliefs, and two additionally felt that the newfound academic rigor and challenge that they encountered upon entering college classrooms actually helped to "cure" them somewhat. The gifted education research community could learn much by pursuing this lead and examining the prevalence of perfectionistic attitudes among early entrants as well as studying the effectiveness of acceleration as a means of psychological intervention. It

has been well documented in the past that perfectionistic attitudes can result from an extensive lack of academic challenge or rigor through one's educational experiences (Rimm, 1996; Speirs Neumeister, Williams, & Cross, 2009). Perhaps timely acceleration or early entrance may be used as a means of combating these attitudes through providing a more rigorous and intellectually appropriate educational environment.

An additional need for future research highlighted by this study's findings actually harkens back to the initial wave of research on acceleration and early entrance conducted by Dr. Julian Stanley's Study of Mathematically Precocious Youth (SMPY) through the 1970's and 1980's. As only a few formal, structured early entrance programs existed at that time, the vast majority of SMPY's research participants had matriculated to college on their own, blending among the general freshman population and having little or no access to additional services or support. The rise of early entrance programs nationwide has greatly altered the experience in the decades since, however, with two major results. First, considering how important this study's participants believed the program's academic and social environments and institutional support factors were in shaping their overall experience, research examining the lives of modern early entrants who matriculate without an early entrance program may reveal significant differences in their lived experiences. Second, many older studies of early entrants' social experiences also mainly relied on participants who were not members of a structured early entrance program. It is possibly, therefore, that examining the social effects of participation in an early entrance program may reveal social benefits that have not yet been reliably shown in studies or meta-analyses that included non-program-affiliated early entrants.

Finally, in conducting this study, it became apparent that two foundational studies in particular are in serious need of replication and modernization for the benefit of the field. The first of these is Fluitt and Strickland's (1984) study of college and university attitudes towards early entrance, which found that 87% of higher education institutions were willing to admit early entrants if they met normal freshman-class criteria otherwise. In the past 27 years, especially considering early entrance's historical tendency to ebb and flow in popularity, this figure is likely to have changed significantly. The second such study is Southern, Jones, and Fiscus' (1989) research into public attitudes concerning acceleration, which discovered the often cited statistic that 75% of parents and teachers are opposed to grade skipping and early entrance for fear of ill academic and social effects. While I personally suspect that little has changed numerically, this figure is still quoted so widely in the research literature that a replication study would be of great importance. This is especially true in light of the rise of structured early entrance programs, as further investigation into the rationales behind these negative beliefs could help programs to better tailor their advertising and challenge misconceptions.

Concluding Remarks

For well over a decade, American educators have been repetitively told to differentiate their instruction and find ways to make educational content, products, and processes individualized to best meet the needs of each specific learner. Doing such, they are told, provides each student with a level of challenge commensurate to their abilities and eliminates the need to fracture students of the same chronological age into separate classrooms or tracking systems, as they can all be accommodated in the same classroom.

At the same time, however, state and federal governments are becoming increasingly restrictive in establishing prescribed curricula and dictating stricter standards.

While I am a supporter of differentiation in most cases, I question whether any degree of individualization within a single classroom could possibly meet the needs of many of the students I encountered at the ESP, especially considering state curricular limitations. How, for example, could Jada's third grade teacher have successfully modified the state-prescribed third grade curriculum to incorporate her passion for Shakespeare? And what was the local school district supposed to do for Mark, who had begun to study algebra at age seven and spent his afternoons following middle school teaching himself to speak German? For students such as these, I believe that differentiation alone is incapable of providing an adequate learning environment and that true individualization of the curriculum requires that they be placed with students of a similar mental, rather than chronological, age. Rather than stifling their intellect and creativity by leaving them at a level whose content and speed is well below their ability, and then trying to make up for it through tweaks and modifications, accelerating students frees them to move and learn at their natural pace. While the research evidence agrees with my assertion, however, educational practice by and large does not, and thousands of highly gifted students suffer for it. I am left to ponder a question first posed by Sir Ken Robinson (2008), the renowned British expert on creativity, education, and the arts: "Why is there this assumption that the most important thing kids have in common is how old they are?"

REFERENCES

Admission FAQs (2010). Retrieved April 4, 2010, from http://www.simons-

    rock.edu/admission/faqs/admission-faqs/

Angrosino, M. (2007). *Doing ethnographic and observational research.* Thousand Oaks,

    CA: Sage Publications.

Beals, A. R., Spindler, G. D., & Spindler, L. (1973). *Culture in process* (2nd ed.). New

    York, NY: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston.

Benbow, C. P., Lubinski, S., Shea, D. L., & Eftekhari-Sanjani, H. (2000). Sex differences

    in mathematical reasoning ability: Their status 20 years later. *Psychological*

    Science, 11, 474-480.

Berger, P., & Luckmann, T. (1966). *The social construction of reality.* New York, NY:

    Doubleday.

Bogdan, R. C., & Biklen, S. K. (2007). *Qualitative research for education: An*

    introduction to theory and methods (5th ed.). Boston, MA: Allyn & Bacon.

Booth, D., Sethna, B. N., Stanley, J. C., & Colgate, S. O. (1999). Special opportunities

    for exceptionally able high school students: A description of eight residential

    early-college-entrance programs. *Journal of Secondary Gifted Education, 10*(4),

    195-203.

Borland, J. H. (1989). *Planning and implementing programs for the gifted*. New York,

    NY: Teachers College Press.

Boston University Academy (2010). Retrieved April 4, 2010, from

http://www.bu.edu/academy/files/2009/11/bua-at-a-glance-0910.pdf

Brewer, J. D. (2000). *Ethnography*. Buckingham, England: Open University Press.

Brody, L. E., Assouline, S. G., & Stanley, J. C. (1990). Five years of early entrants:

Predicting successful achievement in college. *Gifted Child Quarterly, 34*(4), 138-

142.

Brody, L. E., Lupkowski, A. E., & Stanley, J. C. (1988). Early entrance to college: A

study of academic and social adjustment during the freshman year. *College and

University, 63*(4), 347-359.

Brody, L. E., Muratori, M. C., & Stanley, J. C. (2004). Early entrance to college:

Academic, social, and emotional considerations. In N. Colangelo, S. G.

Assouline, & M. U. M. Gross (Eds.), *A nation deceived: How schools hold back

America's brightest students* (pp. 98-100). Iowa City, IA: The Connie Belin &

Jacqueline N. Blank International Center for Gifted Education and Talent

Development.

Brody, L. E., & Stanley, J. C. (1991). Young college entrants: Assessing factors that

contribute to success. In W. T. Southern & E. D. Jones (Eds.), *The academic

acceleration of gifted children* (pp. 102-132). New York, NY: Teachers College

Press.

Callahan, C. M. (1980). The gifted girl: An anomaly? *Roeper Review, 2*(3), 16-20.

Caplan, S. M., Henderson, C. E., Henderson, J., & Fleming, D. L. (2002). Socioeconomic

factors contributing to adjustment among early-entrance college students. *Gifted

Child Quarterly, 46*(2), 124-134.

Casey, K. M., & Shore, B. M. (2000). Mentors' contributions to gifted adolescents' affective, social, and vocational development. *Roeper Review, 22*, 227-230.

Charmaz, K. (2006). *Constructing grounded theory: A practical guide through qualitative analysis*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

Clasen, D. R., & Clasen, R. E. (2003). Mentoring the gifted and talented. In N. Colangelo & G. A. Davis (Eds.), *Handbook of gifted education* (3rd ed., pp. 254-267). Boston, MA: Allyn & Bacon.

Colangelo, N., Assouline, S., Gross, M. U. M. (2004). *A nation deceived: How schools hold back America's brightest students.* Iowa City, IA: The Connie Belin & Jacqueline N. Blank International Center for Gifted Education and Talent Development.

Coleman, L. J. (2005). *Nurturing talent in high school: Life in the fast lane.* New York, NY: Teachers College Press.

Coleman, L. J. (2007). Insights into the culture of a residential high school. In J. L. VanTassel-Baska (Ed.), *Serving gifted learners beyond the traditional classroom* (pp. 105-122). Waco, TX: Prufrock Press.

Cornell, D. G. (1994). Young women who entered college early: A follow-up report. *College and University, 69*(2), 136-145.

Cornell, D., Callahan, C., & Lloyd, B. (1991). Socio-emotional development of adolescent girls enrolled in a residential acceleration program. *Gifted Child Quarterly, 35*(2), 58-65.

Cox, J., Daniel, N., & Boston, B. A. (1985). *Educating able learners: Programs and promising practices.* Austin, TX: University of Texas Press.

Crabtree, B. F., & Miller, W. L. (Eds.). (1992). *Doing qualitative research: Multiple strategies*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage Publications.

Crang, M., & Cook, I. (2007). *Doing ethnographies.* Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

Cross, T., & Stewart, R. (1995). A phenomenological investigation of the "Lebenswelt" of gifted students in rural high schools. *Journal of Secondary Gifted Education, 6*, 273-280.

Crotty, M. (1998). *The foundations of social research: Meaning and perspective in the research process*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

Davidson, J., Davidson, B., & Vanderkam, L. (2004). *Genius denied: How to stop wasting our brightest young minds.* New York, NY: Simon & Schuster.

Davis, G. A., & Rimm, S. B. (1998). *Education of the gifted and talented*. Needham Heights, MA: Allyn & Bacon.

Eligibility (2010). Retrieved April 4, 2010, from http://www.tams.unt.edu/admission/admission_eligibility.shtml

Elkind, D. (1981). *The hurried child: Growing up too fast too soon*. Reading, MA: Perseus Books.

Erickson, F. (2006). Studying side-by-side: Collaborative action ethnography in educational research. In. G. Spindler & L. Hammond (Eds.), *Innovations in educational ethnography: Theory, methods, and results* (pp. 235-258). Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

Ferguson, A. A. (2000). *Bad boys: Public schools in the making of black masculinity*. Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press.

Fluitt, J. L., & Strickland, M. S. (1984). A survey of early admission policies and procedures. *College and University, 59*, 129-135.

Ford, D. Y. (1992). Determinants of underachievement among gifted, above-average, and average Black students. *Roeper Review, 14*, 130-136.

Ford, D. Y. (1994). Underachievement among gifted and nongifted Black females: A study of perceptions. *The Journal of Secondary Gifted Education, 6*, 165-175.

Ford, D. Y. (2002). Racially identity among gifted African American students. In M. Neihart, S. M. Reis, N. M. Robinson, & S. M. Moon (Eds.), *The social and emotional development of gifted children: What do we know?* (pp. 155-163). Waco, TX: Prufrock Press.

Ford, D. Y., & Harris III, J. J. (1999). *Multicultural gifted education*. New York, NY: Teachers College Press.

Fordham, S., & Ogbu, J. U. (1986). Black students' school success: Coping with the burden of "acting White." *The Urban Review, 18*, 176-207.

Formanek, R., & Gurian, A. (1987). *Women and depression: A lifespan perspective*. New York, NY: Springer.

Frasier, M. M., Martin, D., Garcia, J. H., Finley, V. S., Frank, E., Krisel, S., & King, L. L. (1995). *A new window for looking at gifted children* (RM95222). Storrs, CT: The National Research Center on the Gifted and Talented, University of Connecticut.

Gandara, P. (2005). *Fragile futures: Risk and vulnerability among Latino high achievers*. Princeton, NJ: Educational Testing Service.

Gentry, M., Hu, S., & Thomas, A. T. (2008). Ethnically diverse students. In J. A. Plucker & C. A. Callahan (Eds.), *Critical issues and practices in gifted education: What the research says* (pp. 195-212). Waco, TX: Prufrock Press.

Glaser, B. G., & Strauss, A. L. (1967). *The discovery of grounded theory: Strategies for qualitative research.* Chicago, IL: Aldine Publishing Company.

Goetz, J. P., & LeCompte, M. D. (1984). *Ethnography and qualitative design in educational research.* New York, NY: Academic Press.

Gottfried, A. E., & Gottfried, A. W. (1996). A longitudinal study of academic intrinsic motivation in intellectually gifted children: Childhood through early adolescence. *Gifted Child Quarterly, 40*(4), 179-183.

Green, J. E. (1993). *State academies for the academically gifted*. Retrieved from the ERIC database. (ED357596).

Gross, M. U. M. (1989). The pursuit of excellence or the search for intimacy? The forced-choice dilemma of gifted youth. *Roeper Review, 11*(4), 189-194.

Gross, M. U. M. (1992). The use of radical acceleration in cases of extreme intellectual precocity. *Gifted Child Quarterly, 36*(2), 91-99.

Gross, M. U. M. (1998). "Fishing" for the facts: A response to Marsh and Craven. *Australasian Journal of Gifted Education, 7*(1), 16-28.

Gross, M. U. M. (2002). Social and emotional issues for exceptionally intellectually gifted students. In M. Neihart, S. M. Reis, N. M. Robinson, & S. M. Moon (Eds.), *The social and emotional development of gifted children: What do we know?* (pp. 19-30). Waco, TX: Prufrock Press.

Gross, M. U. M. (2004). *Exceptionally gifted children* (2nd ed.). London, England: Routledge.

Gross, M. U. M. (2008). Highly gifted children and adolescents. In J. A. Plucker & C. M. Callahan (Eds.), *Critical issues and practices in gifted education: What the research says* (pp. 241-251). Waco, TX: Prufrock Press.

Gross, M. U. M., & van Vliet, H. E. (2005). Radical acceleration and early entrance to college: A review of the research. *Gifted Child Quarterly, 49*(2), 154-171.

Gubbins, E. J. (2008). Professional development. In J. A. Plucker & C. M. Callahan (Eds.), *Critical issues and practices in gifted education: What the research says* (pp. 535-562). Waco, TX: Prufrock Press.

Hébert, T. P. (2002). Gifted males. In M. Neihart, S. M. Reis, N. M. Robinson, & S. M. Moon (Eds.), *The social and emotional development of gifted children: What do we know?* (pp. 137-144). Waco, TX: Prufrock Press.

Hébert, T. P., & Pagnani, A. R. (2008, Spring). *Up where we belong: Accelerating African-American male achievement.* Advancement Via Individual Determination (AVID), San Diego, CA.

Hoffman, N., Vargas, J., & Santos, J. (2009). New directions for dual enrollment: Creating stronger pathways from high school through college. *New Directions for Community Colleges, 145*, 43-58.

Hollingshead, A. B. (1975). *Four factor index of social status.* Unpublished manuscript. Department of Sociology, Yale University. Retrieved from http://www.yale-university.com/sociology/faculty/docs/hollingshead_socStat4factor.pdf

Hollingworth, L. S. (1942). *Children above IQ 180: Their origin and development*. New York, NY: World Books.

Howley, A. (2002). The progress of gifted students in a rural district that emphasized acceleration strategies. *Roeper Review, 24*(3), 158-160.

Howley, C. B. (1999). *Academically able rural kids: How to keep them on the farm when you can't even keep farming*. Retrieved from the ERIC database. (ED432423).

Janos, P. M., Marwood, K. A., & Robinson, N. M. (1985). Friendship patterns in highly intelligent children. *Roeper Review, 8*, 46-49.

Janos, P. M., Robinson, N. M., & Lunneborg, C. E. (1989). Markedly early entrance to college: A multi-year comparative study of academic performance and psychological adjustment. *Journal of Higher Education, 60*(5), 495-517.

Janos, P. M., Robinson, N. M., Carter, C., Chapel, A., Cufley, R., Curland, M., Daily, M., Guilland, M., Heinzig, M., Kehl, H., Lu, S., Sherry, D., Stoloff, J., & Wise, A. (1998). A cross-sectional developmental study of the social relations of students who enter college early. *Gifted Child Quarterly, 32*(1), 210-216.

Jimerson, L. (2003). *The competitive disadvantage: Teacher compensation in rural America* (Policy Brief). Washington, DC: Rural School and Community Trust.

Karp, M. M., Bailey, T. R., Hughes, K. L., & Fermin, B. J. (2004). *State dual enrollment policies: Addressing access and quality.* U.S. Department of Education: Office of Vocational and Adult Education. Washington, DC: Education Publications Center.

Kelly, D. P. (2000). Introduction: A discursion on ethnography. In J. Liu, H. A. Ross, & D. P. Kelly (Eds.), *The ethnographic eye: An interpretative study of education in China* (pp. 1-28). New York, NY: Falmer Press.

Kennedy, N. H. (2008). *Motivations and postsecondary aspirations in a technical college dual enrollment program* (Doctoral dissertation). Retrieved April 6, 2010, from https://getd.libs.uga.edu/pdfs/kennedy_nichole_h_200812_edd/kennedy_nichole_h_200812_edd.pdf

Kerr, B., Colangelo, N., Maxey, J., & Christensen, P. (1992). Characteristics of academically talented minority students. *Journal of Counseling and Development, 70*, 606-609.

Kett, J. (1974). History of age grouping in America. In J. S. Coleman (Ed.), *Youth: Transition to adulthood*. A report of the Panel on Youth of the President's Science Advisory Committee (pp. 6-29; Publication No. 4106-00037). Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office.

Kitano, M. K. (2008). Gifted girls. In J. A. Plucker & C. M. Callahan (Eds.), *Critical issues and practices in gifted education: What the research says* (pp. 225-240). Waco, TX: Prufrock Press.

Kleiner, B., & Lewis, L. (2005). *Dual enrollment of high school students at postsecondary institutions: 2002-03*. (NCES 2005-008). U.S. Department of Education. Washington, DC: National Center for Education Statistics. Retrieved April 7, 2010, from http://nces.ed.gov/pubs2005/2005008.pdf

Kline, B. E., & Short, E. B. (1991). Changes in emotional resilience: Gifted adolescent females. *Roeper Review, 13*, 118-121.

Kramer, H. J. (1988). Anxiety, perfectionism, and attributions for failure in gifted and nongifted junior high school students. *Dissertation Abstracts International, 48*, 3077A.

Kulik, J. A. (2004). Meta-analytic studies of acceleration. In N. Colangelo, S. G. Assouline, & M. U. M. Gross (Eds.), *A nation deceived: How schools hold back America's brightest students* (Vol. 2, pp. 13-22). Iowa City, IA: The Connie Belin & Jacqueline N. Blank International Center for Gifted Education and Talent Development.

Kulik, J. A., & Kulik, C. C. (1984). Effects of accelerated instruction on students. *Review of Educational Research, 54*(3), 409-425.

Kulik, J. A., & Kulik, C. C. (1992). Meta-analytic findings on grouping programs. *Gifted Child Quarterly, 36*, 73-77.

Lawrence, B. K. (2009). Rural gifted education: A comprehensive literature review. *Journal for the Education of the Gifted, 32*(4), 461-494.

Lembke, R. C. (1992). Deadly praise. *Pi Lambda Theta Newsletter, 37*(3), 2-4.

Lincoln, Y. S., & Guba, E. G. (1985). *Naturalistic inquiry*. Beverly Hills, CA: Sage Publications.

Lincoln, Y. S., & Guba, E. G. (2000). Paradigmatic controversies, contradictions, and emerging confluences. In N. K. Denzin & Y. S. Lincoln (Eds.), *Handbook of qualitative research* (2nd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

Lovecky, D. V. (1997). Identity development in gifted children: Moral sensitivity. *Roeper Review, 20*(2), 90-94.

Luftig, R. L., & Nichols, M. L. (1990). Assessing the social status of gifted students by their age peers. *Gifted Child Quarterly, 34*, 111-115.

Lupkowski, A. E., & Assouline, S. G. (1992). *Jane and Johnny love math: Recognizing and encouraging mathematical talent in elementary students: A guidebook for parents* (3rd ed.). New York, NY: Royal Fireworks Press.

Lupkowski, A. E., Whitmore, M., & Ramsay, A. (1992). The impact of early entrance to college on self-esteem: A preliminary study. *Gifted Child Quarterly, 36*(2), 87-90.

Marshall, C., & Rossman, G. B. (2006). *Designing qualitative research* (4th ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

Masemann, V. L. (2000). Conclusion. In J. Liu, H. A. Ross, & D. P. Kelly (Eds.), *The ethnographic eye: An interpretative study of education in China* (pp. 179-197). New York, NY: Falmer Press.

Maykut, P., & Morehouse, R. (1994). *Beginning qualitative research: A philosophical and practical guide*. London, England: Falmer Press.

Miles, M. B., & Huberman, A. M. (1994). *Qualitative data analysis: An expanded sourcebook* (2nd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

Morrison, M. C. (2008). *The benefits of acceleration: Baccalaureate advantages*. Retrieved from ERIC database. (ED505284).

Muratori, M. (2007). *Early entrance to college: A guide to success*. Waco, TX: Prufrock Press.

Muratori, M., Colangelo, N., & Assouline, S. (2003). Early-entrance students: Impressions of their first semester of college. *Gifted Child Quarterly, 47*(3), 219-237.

Noble, K. D., & Childers, S. A. (2008). A passion for learning: The theory and practice of optimal match at the University of Washington. *Journal of Advanced Academics, 19*(2), 236-270.

Noble, K. D., Childers, S. A., & Vaughan, R. C. (2008). A place to be celebrated and understood: The impact of early university entrance from parents' point of view. *Gifted Child Quarterly, 52*(3), 256-268.

Noble, K. D., & Drumond, J. E. (1992). But what about the prom? Students' perceptions of early college entrance. *Gifted Child Quarterly, 36*(2), 106-111.

Noble, K. D., Robinson, N. M., & Gunderson, S. A. (1993). All rivers lead to the sea: A follow-up study of gifted young adults. *Roeper Review, 15*(3), 124-130.

Noble, K. D., & Smyth, R. K. (1995). Keeping their talents alive: Young women's assessments of radical, post-secondary acceleration. *Roeper Review, 18*(1), 49-55.

Noble, K. D., Vaughan, R. C., Chan, C., Childers, S., Chow, B., Federow, A., & Hughes, S. (2007). Love and work: The legacy of early university entrance. *Gifted Child Quarterly, 51*(2), 152-166.

Oden, M. H. (1968). The fulfillment of promise: 40-year follow-up of the Terman gifted group. *Genetic Psychology Monographs, 77*, 3-93.

Olszewski-Kubilius, P. (1995). A summary of research regarding early entrance to college. *Roeper Review, 18*(2), 121-126.

Olszewski-Kubilius, P. (1998). Early entrance to college: Students' stories. *Journal of Secondary Gifted Education, 10*(1), 226-247.

Olszewski-Kubilius, P. (2002). A summary of research regarding early entrance to college. *Roeper Review, 24*(3), 152-157.

Patton, M. Q. (1980). *Qualitative evaluation methods.* Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage

  Publications.

Patton, M. Q. (1990). *Qualitative evaluation and research methods* (2nd ed.). Thousand

  Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

Pawluch, D., Shaffir, W., & Miall, C. (Eds.) (2005). *Doing ethnography: Studying*

  everyday life. Toronto: Canadian Scholars' Press.

Pollins, L. D. (1983). The effects of acceleration on the social and emotional

  development of gifted students. In C. P. Benbow & J. C. Stanley (Eds.), *Academic*

  precocity: Aspects of its development (pp. 160-178). Baltimore, MD: Johns

  Hopkins University Press.

Pressey, S. L. (1949). *Educational acceleration: Appraisal of basic problems*. Bureau of

  Educational Research Monographs, No. 31). Columbus, OH: Ohio State

  University Press.

Prus, R. (2005). Studying human knowing and acting: The interactionist quest for

  authenticity. In. D. Pawluch, W. Shaffir, & C. Miall (Eds.), *Doing ethnography:*

  Studying everyday life (pp. 7-23). Toronto, Canada: Canadian Scholars' Press.

Reis, S. M. (2002). Social and emotional issues. *Supporting Emotional Needs of the*

  Gifted, 2(3), 1-5.

Reis, S. M., Westberg, K. L., Kulikowich, J., Caillard, F., Hébert, T., Plucker, J., Purcell,

  J. H., Rogers, J. B., & Smist, J. M. (1993). *Why not let high ability students start*

  school in January? The curriculum compacting study (Research Monograph

  93106). Storrs, CT: The National Research Center on the Gifted and Talented,

  University of Connecticut.

Renzulli, J. S., & Park, S. (2000). Gifted dropouts: The who and why. *Gifted Child Quarterly, 44*(4), 261-271.

Rimm, S. (1996). *Why bright kids get poor grades and what you can do about it: A six-step program for parents and teachers.* New York, NY: Three Rivers Press.

Rimm, S. (2002). Peer pressures and social acceptance of gifted students. In M. Neihart, S. M. Reis, N. M. Robinson, & S. M. Moon (Eds.), *The social and emotional development of gifted children: What do we know?* (pp. 13-18). Waco, TX: Prufrock Press.

Rimm, S. B., & Lovance, K. J. (1992). The use of subject and grade skipping for the prevention and reversal of underachievement. *Gifted Child Quarterly, 36*(2), 100-105.

Rinn, A. N. (2006). Effects of a summer program on the social self-concepts of gifted adolescents. *The Journal of Secondary Gifted Education, 17*(2), 65-75.

Rinn, A. N. (2008). College programming. In J. A. Plucker & C. M. Callahan (Eds.), *Critical issues and practices in gifted education: What the research says* (pp. 97-106). Waco, TX: Prufrock Press.

Robinson, K. (2008). Changing paradigms [Video file]. Retrieved from http://www.thersa.org/events/vision/archive/sir-ken-robinson

Robinson, N. M. (1992). Radical acceleration in the People's Republic of China: Early entrance to university. *Roeper Review, 14*(4), 189-192.

Robinson, N. M., & Noble, K. D. (1992). Social-emotional development and adjustment of gifted children. In M. Wang, M. Reynolds, & H. Walberg (Eds.), *Handbook of special education: Research and practice* (Vol. 4, pp. 57-76). Oxford, England: Pergamon Press.

Robinson, N. M., & Weimer, L. J. (1991). Selection of candidates for early admission to kindergarten and first grade. In W. T. Southern & E. D. Jones (Eds.), *The academic acceleration of gifted children* (pp. 29-50). New York, NY: Teachers College Press.

Rogers, K. B. (2002). Effects of acceleration on gifted learners. In M. Neihart, S. M. Reis, N. M. Robinson, & S. M. Moon (Eds.), *The social and emotional development of gifted children: What do we know?* (pp. 3-12). Waco, TX: Prufrock Press.

Roulston, K. (2010). *Reflective interviewing: A guide to theory and practice*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

Ryan, G. W., & Bernard, H. R. (2000). Data management and analysis methods. In N. K. Denzin & Y. S. Lincoln (Eds.), *Handbook of qualitative research* (2nd ed., pp. 769-802). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

Sayler, M. F. (1990). *Early college entrants at Purdue University: A study of their academic and social characteristics.* Unpublished doctoral dissertation, Purdue University, West Lafayette, IN.

Sayler, M. F. (1992). *Early college entrance for gifted high school students: Experiences and guidelines*. Retrieved from the ERIC database. (ED345395).

Sayler, M. F. (1996). *Differences in the psychological adjustment of accelerated eighth grade students*. Retrieved from ERIC database. (ED396198).

Sayler, M. F., & Lupkowski, A. E. (March/April, 1992). Early entrance to college: Weighing the options. *Gifted Child Today*, 24-29.

Schofield, J. W., & Francis, W. D. (1982). An observational study of peer interaction in racially mixed "accelerated" classrooms. *Journal of Educational Psychology, 74*(5), 722-732.

Schwartz, L. L. (1994). *Why give gifts to the gifted?* Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

Scott, M. S., Perou, R., Urbano, R., Hogan, A., & Gold, S. (1992). The identification of giftedness: A comparison of White, Hispanic, and Black families. *Gifted Child Quarterly, 36*, 131-139.

Silverman, L. K. (1993). *Counseling the gifted and talented*. Denver, CO: Love Publishing Company.

Smutny, J. F., Walker, S. Y., & Meckstroth, E. A. (2007). *Acceleration for gifted learners, K-5*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

Snyder, T., Tan, A., & Hoffman, C. (2006). *Digest of education statistics, 2005*. Washingotn, DC: National Center for Education Statistics.

Southern, W. T., & Jones, E. D. (1991). *The academic acceleration of gifted children*. New York, NY: Teachers College Press.

Southern, W. T., Jones, E. D., & Fiscus, E. D. (1989). Practitioner objections to the academic acceleration of gifted children. *Gifted Child Quarterly, 33*(1), 29-35.

Speirs Neumeister, K. L., Williams, K. K., Cross, T. L. (2009). Gifted high-school students' perspectives on the development of perfectionism. *Roeper Review, 31*(4), 198-206.

Spicker, H. H. (1992). Identifying and enriching rural gifted children. *Educational Horizons, 70*(2), 60-65.

Spradley, J. P. (1979). *The ethnographic interview*. London, England: Holt, Rinehart, & Winston.

Spradley, J. P., & McCurdy, D. W. (Eds.) (1972). *The cultural experience: Ethnography in complex society*. Chicago, IL: Science Research Associates.

Sriraman, B., & Steinthorsdottir, O. B. (2008). Mathematics, secondary. In J. A. Plucker & C. A. Callahan (Eds.), *Critical issues and practices in gifted education: What the research says* (pp. 395-407). Waco, TX: Prufrock Press.

Stanley, J. C. (1985a). How did six highly accelerated gifted students fare in graduate school? *Gifted Child Quarterly, 29*(4), 180.

Stanley, J. C. (1985b). Young entrants to college: How did they fare? *College and University, 60*(3), 219-228.

Stanley, J. C. (1991). An academic model for educating the mathematically talented. *Gifted Child Quarterly, 35*, 36-42.

Stanley, J. C., & McGill, A. M. (1986). More about "Young entrants to college: How did they fare?" *Gifted Child Quarterly, 30*, 70-73.

Stephens, K. R. (1998). Residential math and science high schools: A closer look. *Journal of Secondary Gifted Education, 10*, 85-92.

Strauss, A., & Corbin, J. (1990). *Basics of qualitative research: Grounded theory procedures and techniques*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

Swiatek, M. A. (1993). A decade of longitudinal research on academic acceleration through the Study of Mathematically Precocious Youth. *Roeper Review, 15*(3), 120-124.

Swiatek, M. A., & Benbow, C. P. (1991). Ten-year longitudinal follow-up of ability matched accelerated and unaccelerated gifted students. *Journal of Educational Psychology, 83*(4), 528-538.

Tannenbaum, A. J. (1983). *Gifted children: Psychological and educational perspectives*. New York, NY: Macmillan.

Tatum, B. D. (1999). *"Why are all the Black kids sitting together in the cafeteria?" and other conversations about race.* New York, NY: Basic Books.

Terry, A. W., Bohnenberger, J. E., Renzulli, J. S., Cramond, B., & Sisk, D. (2008). Vision with action: Developing sensitivity to societal concerns in gifted youth. *Roeper Review, 30*(1), 61-67.

U.S. Census Bureau (2006). *Income, poverty, and health insurance coverage in the United States.* Retrieved on April 15, 2010, from http://www.infoplease.com/ipa/A0104552.html

U.S. Census Bureau (2008). Retrieved on April 4, 2010, from http://quickfacts.census.gov/qfd/states/48000.html

U.S. Census Bureau (2009). Retrieved on February 12, 2011, from http://quickfacts.census.gov/qfd/states/13000.html

U.S. House of Representatives (2009). *Field hearing before the subcommittee on early childhood, elementary, and secondary education.* Retrieved on April 2, 2010, from http://frwebgate.access.gpo.gov/cgi-bin/getdoc.cgi?dbname=111_house_hearings&docid=f:52241.pdf

Van Maanen, J. (1995). An end to innocence: The ethnography of ethnography. In J. Van Maanen (Ed.), *Representation in ethnography* (pp. 79-111). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

VanTassel-Baska, J. (1991). Identification of candidates for acceleration: Issues and concerns. In W. T. Southern & E. D. Jones (Eds.), *The academic acceleration of gifted children* (pp. 148-161). New York, NY: Teachers College Press.

Viadero, D. (2001). U.S. urged to rethink high school: Senior year is often dead end, panel says. *Education Week, 20*(19), 1-12.

Wallace, A. (1986). *The prodigy: A biography of William James Sidis, America's oldest child prodigy.* New York, NY: E. P. Dutton.

Wells, R., Lohman, D., & Marron, M. (2009). What factors are associated with grade acceleration? An analysis and comparison of two US databases. *Journal of Advanced Academics, 20*(2), 248-273.

Wogan, P. (2004). Deep hanging out: Reflections on fieldwork and multisited Andean ethnography. *Identities: Global studies in culture and power, 11*, 129-139.

Wolcott, H. F. (1990). *Writing up qualitative research*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

Zorman, R. (1993). Mentoring and role modeling programs for the gifted. In K. A. Heller, F. J. Mönks, & A. H. Passow (Eds.), *International handbook of research and development of giftedness and talent* (pp. 727-741). New York, NY: Pergamon.

APPENDIX A

PARTICIPANT RECRUITMENT EMAIL

Dear Students of the Early Scholars Program,

A research project is currently being conducted at your university to study the motivations, experiences, and support perceptions of students who choose to enter college early. This research will be used to help shape future early entrance programs and policies, both at our university and others, and your participation would be a great way to make your voice heard and have an impact on our community.

Participation is on a voluntary basis, and those involved will be interviewed regarding 1) their motivations for attending college early, 2) their academic and social experiences at the Early Scholars Program 3) their backgrounds and histories, and 4) their perceptions of the program and its support for their goals.

No compensation is provided for this study, but interviewed participants often find it exciting to talk about their life stories and to be involved in research that can affect future early entrance students.

For more information or to volunteer please contact the researcher directly at the phone number or email address listed below.

Thank you for your help!

Alex Pagnani
Principal Researcher

APPENDIX B

PARENTAL CONSENT FORM

I agree to allow my child, _____, to take part in a research study titled "Early Entrance to College: Understanding Students' Motivations, Experiences, and Support," which is being conducted by Mr. Alexander Pagnani of the Educational Psychology and Instructional Technology department at the University of Georgia, who can be contacted at (---) ---------. The research is being conducted under the direction of Dr. Thomas Hébert, a faculty advisor who is also from the department of Educational Psychology and Instructional Technology at the University of Georgia, and who can be reached at the UGA Torrance Center, whose phone number is (---) --------. My child's participation in this study is voluntary, and I or my child can refuse to participate or stop taking part at any time without giving any reason and without penalty or loss of benefits to which my child is otherwise entitled. I or my child can ask to have information related to my child returned to me, removed from the research records, or destroyed.

The purpose of this research is to study the motivations, experiences, and types of support available to students who choose to enter college at a young age. Early entrance to college is becoming a popular option for gifted students across the nation, and this study will research early entrants' experiences to help improve these programs and better meet students' needs. This research project includes four main questions: 1) What motivates early entrants to pursue college at an early age? 2) What are the academic, social, and emotional experiences common to early entrance? 3) How do students' backgrounds affect their experiences with early entrance, and 4) How do students perceive the institutional support factors of their early entrance program? My child's interviews will be audio-recorded by the researcher, but all transcriptions and resulting presentations and/or publications will use a pseudonym rather than my child's actual name. Following the completion of the research study, the original audiotapes will be destroyed. While many interview participants enjoy talking about their lives and experiences, participants will not receive any payment or tangible benefits in exchange for participating in this study. The study's results, however, may benefit current and future early entrance programs by informing them more fully about student needs and helping them to design more responsive and supportive programs.

If I grant permission for my child to participate, my child will be asked to do the following:

- My child will meet with the researcher on three occasions for an interview, with the three interviews taking place between late August, 2010, and December, 2010. Each interview will last approximately 90 minutes to two hours in duration, and

will take place at the Early Scholars Program. Copies of the interview questions are available upon request. The interviews will be audio recorded, and transcribed afterwards by the researcher, who will use a pseudonym to provide my child with confidentiality.

- Approximately 3-5 times during the course of the semester, the researcher will observe my child taking part in normal program activities, by attending one of his classes or attending a program social event. The researcher will be observing the class or event as a whole as well, and he will not bring any unwanted attention upon my child.

- My child will be asked to share 3-5 documents with the researcher that demonstrate or help to explain his or her life as an early entrance college student. Examples include academic papers that they are proud of, journal entries reflecting on their experiences, or photographs of their campus events or activities.

- My child will be provided with a disposable camera in October or November and will be asked to take pictures of "Things that help me or hinder me" in terms of being an early entrant to college. During the third interview, the student will explain these photos.

Potential risks to participating in this study include: 1) Possible embarrassment at revealing academic or social challenges, if your child reports this to the interviewer, and 2) The chance of your child revealing sensitive information regarding his or her own negative experiences or habits, such as stating that they cope with stress through self-harm. This information will not be specifically sought by the researcher, but could arise if your child volunteers it. If my child does experience discomfort or risk at any point, or I believe my child is being put at risk, both myself and my child have the right to speak with the researcher or his supervisors, or immediately terminate participation for any reason, without penalty, and to request that my child's data be turned over, removed from the study, or destroyed.

The only people who will know that my child is a research participant are my child and the researcher. While total anonymity cannot be offered due to the interview-based nature of the study, the researcher will be taking steps to keep my child's participation confidential. The researcher will be audio-taping all interviews, but will then transcribe the interviews and use a pseudonym instead of my child's actual name. At that point, the audio tapes will be destroyed. The researcher will not share my child's name with anyone, and any data that he uses in talks, writings, or publications will only use the pseudonym. This pledge of confidentiality will only be broken in the event that: 1) my child reveals in an interview that he or she poses a threat to self or others, or 2) If required by law. In the event that my child does reveal information of danger to self or others, the researcher will share that information with the program's psychological counselor.

The researcher is available to answer any further questions about the research, now or at any time during the course of the project, and can be reached by telephone at (---) -------- or by email at -----------------.

My signature below indicates that the researcher has answered all of my questions to my satisfaction and that I consent to allow my child to participate in this research study. I have been given a copy of this form for my records.

Alexander R. Pagnani   _____   _____
Name of Researcher   Signature   Date
Phone: (---) ---------
E-Mail: --------------------

_____   _____   _____
Name of Parent or Guardian Signature   Date

Please sign both copies, keep one and return one to the researcher.

Additional questions or problems regarding your child's rights as a research participant should be addressed to The Chairperson, Institutional Review Board, University of Georgia, 629 Boyd Graduate Studies Research Center, Athens, GA, 30602-7411; Telephone (706) 542-3199; E-Mail address IRB@uga.edu

APPENDIX C

PARTICIPANT ASSENT FORM

I, _____, agree to take part in a research study titled "Early Entrance to College: Understanding Students' Motivations, Experiences, and Support," which is being conducted by Mr. Alexander Pagnani of the Educational Psychology and Instructional Technology department at the University of Georgia, who can be contacted at (---) --------. The research is being conducted under the direction of Dr. Thomas Hébert, a faculty advisor who is also from the department of Educational Psychology and Instructional Technology at the University of Georgia, and who can be reached at the UGA Torrance Center, whose phone number is (---) --------. My participation in this study is voluntary, and I can refuse to participate or stop taking part at any time without giving any reason and without penalty or loss of benefits to which I am otherwise entitled. I can ask to have information related to me returned to me, removed from the research records, or destroyed.

The purpose of this research is to study the motivations, experiences, and types of support available to students who choose to enter college at a young age. Early entrance to college is becoming a popular option for gifted students across the nation, and this study will research early entrants' experiences to help improve these programs and better meet students' needs. This research project includes four main questions: 1) What motivates early entrants to pursue college at an early age? 2) What are the academic, social, and emotional experiences common to early entrance? 3) How do students' backgrounds affect their experiences with early entrance, and 4) How do students perceive the institutional support factors of their early entrance program? My interviews will be audio-recorded by the researcher, but all transcriptions and resulting presentations and/or publications will use a pseudonym rather than my actual name. Following the completion of the research study, the original audiotapes will be destroyed. While many interview participants enjoy talking about their lives and experiences, participants will not receive any payment or tangible benefits in exchange for participating in this study. The study's results, however, may benefit current and future early entrance programs by informing them more fully about student needs and helping them to design more responsive and supportive programs.

If I decide to participate, I will be asked to do the following:

- I will meet with the researcher on three occasions for an interview, with the three interviews taking place between late August, 2010, and December, 2010. Each interview will last approximately 90 minutes to two hours in duration, and will take place at the Early Scholars Program. Copies of the interview questions are available upon request. The interviews will be audio recorded, and transcribed

afterwards by the researcher, who will use a pseudonym to provide me with confidentiality.

- Approximately 3-5 times during the course of the semester, the researcher will observe me taking part in normal program activities, by attending one of my classes or attending a program social event. The researcher will be observing the class or event as a whole as well, and he will not bring any unwanted attention upon me.

- I will be asked to share 3-5 documents with the researcher that demonstrate or help to explain my life as an early entrance college student. Examples include academic papers that I am proud of, journal entries reflecting on my experiences, or photographs of my campus events or activities.

- I will be provided with a disposable camera in October or November and will be asked to take pictures of "Things that help me or hinder me" in terms of being an early entrant to college. During the third interview, I will explain these photos.

Potential risks to participating in this study include: 1) Possible embarrassment at revealing academic or social challenges, if I report this to the interviewer, and 2) The chance of revealing sensitive information regarding possible negative experiences or habits, such as stating that I cope with stress through self-harm. This information will not be specifically sought by the researcher, but could arise if I volunteer it. If I do experience discomfort or risk at any point, or I believe I am being put at risk, I have the right to speak with the researcher or his supervisors, or immediately terminate participation for any reason, without penalty, and to request that my data be turned over, removed from the study, or destroyed.

The only people who will know that I am a research participant are myself and the researcher. While total anonymity cannot be offered due to the interview-based nature of the study, the researcher will be taking steps to keep my participation confidential. The researcher will be audio-taping all interviews, but will then transcribe the interviews and use a pseudonym instead of my actual name. At that point, the audio tapes will be destroyed. The researcher will not share my name with anyone, and any data that he uses in talks, writings, or publications will only use the pseudonym. This pledge of confidentiality will only be broken in the event that: 1) I reveal in an interview that I pose a threat to myself or others, or 2) If required by law. In the event that I do reveal information of danger to myself or others, the researcher will share that information with the program's psychological counselor.

The researcher is available to answer any further questions about the research, now or at any time during the course of the project, and can be reached by telephone at (---) -------- or by email at -----------------.

My signature below indicates that the researcher has answered all of my questions to my satisfaction and that I give my assent to participate in this research study, pending on the

consent of my parents or guardians. I have been given a copy of this form for my records.

<u>Alexander R. Pagnani</u>　　　　　_____　　　_____
Name of Researcher　　　　　　Signature　　　　　　　　　　Date
Phone: (---) ---------
E-Mail: -----------------

_____　　　_____　　　_____
Name of Participant　　　　　　Signature　　　　　　　　　　Date

Please sign both copies, keep one and return one to the researcher.

Additional questions or problems regarding your rights as a research participant should be addressed to The Chairperson, Institutional Review Board, University of Georgia, 629 Boyd Graduate Studies Research Center, Athens, GA, 30602-7411; Telephone (706) 542-3199; E-Mail address IRB@uga.edu

APPENDIX D

FIELD NOTES EXAMPLE

(Note: Pseudonyms have been used)

- Attended the second meeting of the hall newspaper club tonight.
- We went around and each person had to tell the RA in charge what their plan was for the articles they were writing… they're due in a week in "good draft" form, so the RA wanted to hear everyone's ideas and approve or deny them, with a little room for discussion.
- Wallace proposes to write a monthly column where he interviews a professor. He speaks often about how much he likes many of the professors here, and you can see that there are several who he really respects.
- Irene wants to write a story about her summer experience teaching in India!
- Greg is volunteering with the gubernatorial campaign, and thinks he can "easily" get an interview with the gubernatorial candidate himself! He says that he will ask him about his ideas regarding early entrance and/or state educational institutions.
- The RA and Kelsey want to do a pro/con viewpoints section each month, where they would each write about one side of a current, controversial issue. The RA proposes that this month's segments be about the minister in Florida who wants to burn Korans on 9/11.
- Julia wants to write about how the Aztecs cut out people's hearts in religious rituals, but in a way that demonstrates that it wasn't "barbaric and brutal." She says that she's sick of people "misunderstanding" her ancestors. The RA jumps in and redirects it, turning it into a monthly column (with rotating authorship) on "Cultural Differences" after hearing that Zhu wrote a well-received article last year explaining how animals considered to be "pets" in one culture can be seen as "food" by other cultures, and how there's nothing intrinsically wrong with that.
- Julia also wants to write an article about immigration and has already scheduled interviews with two professors about it. (she's also doing a "recipe corner!")
- Greg wants to write an opinion piece on the Fair Tax and why it's a good thing – the RA prefers a more balanced approach with politics and says that it either has to be both sides or not at all. The look on his face tells me that he's leaning towards not at all.
- The meeting ends with a decision to put out an open call via email for all students to contribute pieces, as was done in the past too – news or creative, both are fine. The students all seem to agree that this kind of open submission is important to the spirit and purpose of their monthly newspaper and what it means for the program community as a whole.

APPENDIX E

INTERVIEW PROTOCOL #1

Interview Topics:

    1. Participant's life history
    2. Motivations to attend college at an early age
    3. Participant's experiences as an early entrant

Main Questions: (Probes will also be used to elicit more detail and clarify responses)

    1. Hello, please say your name and age for the recorder. How old are you, and are you a freshman or sophomore in college?

    2. Before we get started, we are now going to review the consent procedures and talk about what this interview will be about. [review these procedures] Do you have any questions about the interview, and would you like to participate?

    3. Let's start by just getting to know you better. Where are you from? How would you describe your hometown? What are your interests and hobbies?

    4. Please tell me about your family.

    5. What are you studying here at the Early Scholars Program? What would you like to do after you graduate? Do you plan to stay at this university after finishing the program, or do you plan to transfer to another school?

    6. Tell me about your life when you were growing up. What were your early years of school like?
                a) Elementary school?
                b) Middle school?
                c) High school?

    7. When did you first learn about early entrance to college? How did you feel about the idea?

    8. Lead me through your thought process about the decision to enter college early. What did you like about the idea? What didn't you like about the idea?

    9. What did your parents think about the possibility to enter college early?

10. Why did you decide to apply to the program? Tell me about the application process.

11. How did your high school react to you leaving early? How are your current interactions with your high school?

12. What was getting accepted like for you? How were you feeling about the idea of early entrance at that point?

13. Before you came to the Early Scholars Program, what were you most hoping to get out of the early entrance experience? What did you hope it would be like?

14. What has life as an early entrance college student been like for you?

15. What were your first weeks here at ESP like? How did you get used to college?

16. What is your average day like at the program?

17. Tell me about your academic coursework here.

18. What are your classes like?

19. How do you feel about the difficulty of the classes?

20. How does being an early entrant affect your academic life here in college? (i.e. In the classroom, academic rigor and preparedness, background knowledge, etc.)

21. Describe your experience with professors here on the campus.

22. What do you think about the social environment here at ESP? Tell me about your social life here on campus.

23. How do you get along with the other students in the program? How would you describe them?

24. What is it like being younger than most students on campus?

25. Tell me about your interactions with traditionally-aged students on this campus.

26. What social doors and opportunities does being part of the Early Scholars Program open up for you?

27. How else does being in the Early Scholars Program affect your life at this university?

28. If you were asked to describe the ESP to friends or other students your age back home, what would you tell them?

29. What else would you like to tell me about life at the ESP and the university?

APPENDIX F

INTERVIEW PROTOCOL #2

Interview Topics:

1. How do students' background factors affect their experiences with early entrance?
2. How do students perceive the institutional support factors within their early entrance program?

Main Questions: (Probes will also be used to elicit more detail and clarify responses)

1. Please say your name for the recorder.

2. How have things been for you since our last interview? What type of things have you been doing on campus or with the Early Scholars Program?

3. [Spend time discussing the participant's initial interview, and clarifying points from that first interview that were not understood or raised questions upon reflection.]

4. How do you think your gender affected your experiences in school, growing up?

5. How do you think your gender has affected your experiences here in college?

6. What diversity factors do you think could affect a person's experience as an early entrance college student? How could they affect a person's life here?

7. How do you think issues of wealth or family income affect people's experiences as early entrants?

8. How do you think issues of race or ethnicity affect people's experiences as early entrants?

9. How do you think coming from an urban or rural background would affect the lives of early entrants?

10. How have background factors in your own life affected your experiences as an early entrant?

11. In what ways do you think factors from your background help you or put you at an advantage as an early entrant to college?

12. In what ways do you think factors from your background might hinder you or put you at a disadvantage as an early entrant to college?

13. Changing gears here, tell me about your thoughts on the ESP as a whole.

14. What would you say are the biggest challenges that early entrants to college face here at the Early Scholars Program?

15. How does the ESP help students to succeed?

16. How could the ESP do a better job helping students to succeed?

17. What are the best things about the ESP?

18. What are the worst things about the ESP?

19. If you could wave a magic wand and change any one thing about the Early Scholars Program, what would it be?

20. If you could wave a magic wand and change any one thing about college early entrance as a whole – anything at all – what would it be?

21. [Explain the photo elicitation process with the student at this point, asking them to use a disposable camera to take pictures of things that "help them" and things that "hinder them" as an early entrant, in preparation for next time. The third interview will address questions raised in these two prior interviews, and will then feature the student showing the pictures they have taken and describing what they are to the researcher.]

APPENDIX G

INFORMATIONAL LETTER FOR PROGRAM STAFF

Dear Sir or Madam:

I am a graduate student in the Department of Educational Psychology and Instructional Technology at The University of Georgia. I invite you to participate in a research study entitled "Early Entrance to College: Understanding Students' Motivations, Experiences, and Support" that is being conducted with the approval of the Early Scholars Program. The purpose of this study is examine the experiences and needs of students who enter college at an atypically young age, in order to better meet these students' needs.

Your participation will involve speaking with me regarding the program and its student body, and should only take about 30 minutes. Your involvement in the study is voluntary, and you may choose not to participate or to stop at any time without penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. Interviews will not be recorded, although written notes will be taken. The results of the research study may be published, but your name will not be used. Your identity will not be associated with your responses in any published format.

While many people find it enjoyable to speak about their work, no benefits or payment will be provided if you choose to participate. The findings from this project may benefit the Early Scholars Program and other early entrance programs, however, through contributing information on the needs of early entrance students and the ways in which early entrance programs seek to meet these needs. As a result, the study may help to shape future early entrance programs and their policies, to the benefit of their students and employees. There are no known risks or discomforts associated with your participation as a program employee in this research, as questions will pertain to general program knowledge, information regarding the student body as a whole, and program actions undertaken to meet student needs.

If you have any questions about this research project, please feel free to call me, Alex Pagnani, at (---) --------- or send an e-mail to -----------. Questions or concerns about your rights as a research participant should be directed to The Chairperson, University of Georgia Institutional Review Board, 612 Boyd GSRC, Athens, Georgia 30602-7411; telephone (706) 542-3199; email address irb@uga.edu. Thank you for your consideration! Please keep this letter for your records.

Sincerely,

Alex Pagnani

APPENDIX H

ADMINISTRATOR AND EMPLOYEE INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

Interview Topics:

1. Program details.
2. Common academic, social, and emotional experiences of early entrants?
3. How students' backgrounds affect their experiences at the ESP.

Main Questions: (Probes will also be used to elicit more detail and clarify responses)

1. Hello, what is your name and occupation here at the Early Scholars Program?

2. How long have you worked at the ESP?

3. Have you worked at the ESP in any other capacities?

4. Suppose someone with no knowledge of the program asked you to tell them about it. How would you describe it to them?

5. How would you describe the students at the program?

6. From what you have learned working with Early Scholars Program students, what would you say commonly motivates them to enter college early?

7. What types of common academic challenges have you observed for students at the ESP?

8. What does the ESP do to help students address those academic challenges?

8. What types of social and emotional challenges have you commonly observed among students at the ESP?

9. What does the ESP do to help students address those social and emotional challenges?

10. What groups of students at the ESP are believed to have special academic or social/emotional needs? For example, students of certain genders, races, SES categories, etc.

11. How are these background factors believed to affect students' experiences?

12. What does the ESP do to help students from these groups to succeed in this environment?

13. What else would you like to tell me about the Early Scholars Program?

APPENDIX I

SAMPLE CODING SPREADSHEET

Location Code	Quote or Textual Excerpt	Initial Open Code	Focused Code	Axial Code Category	Related Research Question
Greg2, 599	I believe that if you're going to be in this program you should be able to handle your own stuff, be organized, and shouldn't have to be pushed or helped like that.	Don't want them to baby us	Don't baby me	Complete academic immersion	RQ1B Academics
Mark2, 572	Last year there were a lot of RA problems… I think they saw us as little high school students that needed to be protected.	Don't want them to treat us like HS kids	Don't baby me	Complete academic immersion	RQ1B Academics
Jada1, 893	Aggie is in a 4000 level Jane Austin class. She's not really supposed to be doing that, but the program's academic advisor talked to the professor and got her into that class.	Being able to take classes that interest you	Pursuing your academic interests	Complete academic immersion	RQ1B Academics
Mark2, 125	It makes me feel more motivated when I can take classes that I want to take because when I'm actually interested in the material so I'm more likely to pursue my learning.	More motivated to take classes of interest	Pursuing your academic interests	Complete academic immersion	RQ1B Academics

Dak3, 10	Photograph from her photo essay of textbooks on a shelf – Dakota explains that she doesn't like being required to take certain classes just for high school.	Wants to take more classes of interest	Pursuing your academic interests	Complete academic immersion	RQ1B Academics
Rose2, 20	I usually don't do work until after curfew.	Studying after curfew	Studying after curfew	Complete academic immersion	RQ1B Academics
John1, 895	That's when I start doing homework. I do homework from about 11 to 1 a.m. Or 11 to 2.	Homework after curfew	Studying after curfew	Complete academic immersion	RQ1B Academics
Former director #2, 32	The second challenge they often encounter is biting off more than they can chew.	Biting off more than they can chew	Taking on too much?	Complete academic immersion	RQ1B Academics
Max1, 760	I'm taking 17 credits… last semester I dropped a class and had 14 credits and felt completely inadequate. 17 is my good fit.	High credit load	Taking on too much?	Complete academic immersion	RQ1B Academics
Rose2, 866	This doesn't happen that often, but sometimes it's overwhelming. There can be too much stuff. Before I dropped my organic chemistry class I was taking 21 hours and was doing college applications and had five different meetings to go to every week. Some people even have work.	Sometimes it's overwhelm-ing (too much stuff)	Taking on too much?	Complete academic immersion	RQ1B Academics

APPENDIX J

SAMPLE MEMO ON A REFINED CODE

Still Feeling Superior – 3/14/2011

One interesting bundle of open codes has been grabbing my attention a lot lately: The three that have to do with how certain students still feel smarter than the other college undergraduates on campus even though they are younger. I suppose that after everything I've read, observed, and listened to it shouldn't surprise me at all to see and hear so vividly that age and intelligence have so little to do with each other, but it was still surprising to hear some students gripe about how much smarter they were than the "regular" kids on campus. It's more than just being smarter, too – Some of the things that certain Early Scholars said were downright disparaging towards the traditionally aged undergraduates, as if they believe they are "superior" because of their accelerated experiences. Specifically, the three open codes (representing three quotes and a personal observation), are about how the students still feel smarter than others, how Greg feels like he's still not exceptionally challenged, and that early entrants can fall into a trap of thinking that they are "academically invincible." I think that I'm dwelling mentally on this idea because I'm worried that a few kids are getting the wrong ideas from their experiences in the college classrooms at this university. They should be focusing on the new academic challenges (which almost all of them say is now at an appropriate level), not on thinking that they are superior to other students who need to move at a slower (normal?) pace. Besides, won't doing that just set them up for an emotional fall later?