

HIGH SCHOOL COUNSELORS AND ADVANCED COURSEWORK  
OPPORTUNITIES: A DELPHI STUDY

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by

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## **DEDICATION**

To my parents, James W. Creel and Bulah F. Creel, whose lack of educational opportunities led to a passion for their children to go to college. Little did you know how well we would listen! To Dr. James Creel and Dr. Dawn Short, you may have completed your doctorates before me, but I technically graduated college first. Do not forget that.

## ABSTRACT

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The purpose of this Delphi study was to describe a consensus among selected high school guidance counselors about common barriers to advanced coursework opportunities experienced by high school students. The Delphi technique developed by the RAND Corporation is a method that combines multiple rounds of questions completed by a panel of experts in a particular field (Hsu & Sanders, 2007; Pollard & Pollard, 2008). With the use of an expert panel comprised of high school counselors, the Delph technique was employed using iterations of feedback with multiple rounds of questioning. Collection of data took place from February to May of 2020, during COVID-19.

Counselors responses were split between barriers such as caseload size, fear, and disconnectedness and student characteristics such as unmotivated or lacking a support system. Counselors were asked to identify the most significant barrier for advanced coursework between these two choices: who the student is (descriptions) or what the student does/has access to (fearful of the workload, too large of a caseload size). Although perfect consensus was not reached, the counselors agreed that lacking a support system (a lack of resources at home, encouragement, or understanding by their family) was the most significant obstacle to student enrollment in advanced coursework. When asked why they chose to rank as they did, counselors agreed there was a connectedness among the barriers presented to them. Counselors believed that there was a connection

between barriers such as support system and the disconnectedness students may experience at school.

Implications from this study that could be put into practice are: reduction of caseload size, implicit bias training, campus consensus discussions, and development of a communication plan. Specifically, efforts must be made to lower the caseload size for counselors to allow them more opportunity to meet individually with students. Additionally, a lack of a support system at home could potentially be lessened through increased communication efforts. A communication plan must be designed to meet the needs of the population, respect the culture of the population targeted, and be specific as to how support will be measured and increased.

**KEY WORDS:** Advanced coursework, Advanced Placement, International Baccalaureate, Dual credit, High school counselors, Delphi.

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## **CHAPTER I**

### **Introduction**

Opportunities for students to enroll in advanced coursework such as Advanced Placement, International Baccalaureate, or dual credit can be limited by different factors. Several barriers to access include enrollment policies set forth by school districts and/or school campuses (Cetin, Moore, & Bowman, 2014), parental and student misunderstandings about the benefits of advanced coursework opportunities, a lack of offering these courses at a high school, or implicit biases against certain student populations held by authority figures who may serve as gatekeepers to these courses. Traditionally underrepresented students remain underrepresented in advanced course enrollment across Texas and the country (Green, 2015; Milner, 2012; Moore & Slate, 2008). Most notably, students in poverty are enrolled at an alarmingly low rate. This issue is compounded by the rising number of students in poverty in Texas, now totaling nearly 60% of all students in Texas (Texas Education Agency, 2018).

Traditionally, school counselors have served an integral role in the creation of personal graduation plans (PGPs) and course enrollment. Counselors are also, subsequently, charged with building relationships with students to help students achieve potential (Cholewa, Burkhardt, & Hull, 2015; Cross & Burney, 2005; Davis, Davis, & Mobley, 2013; Holland, 2015). Course planning with students requires time to meet with students individually as well as knowledge of both district and state level requirements for graduation. With increasing student caseloads well above the suggested national average (American School Counseling Association, 2018), counselors must balance the expectations set forth by the state, while also encouraging students to potentially enroll in

advanced coursework. Students gain access to social capital by enrollment in these courses, and, therefore, barriers to enrollment eliminate access to these important network opportunities (Ellison, Wohn, & Greenhow, 2014).]

### **Statement of the Problem**

Access to advanced coursework can be limited by numerous barriers beyond the control of students such as school size, school location, campus course offerings, poverty, and ethnicity. School counselors who are often charged with the creation of personal graduation plans and course selection for students play an integral role in the future of students. Either through conscious or unconscious bias, a school counselor could potentially be a gatekeeper to the access of advanced coursework opportunities for students.

*Tracking*, which is term used to express the action of directing students to enroll in particular courses geared toward a particular career path, could occur if counselors do not recognize their role in access to these advanced courses. Kolluri (2018) proposed that tracking still exists today through a lack of access to Advanced Placement courses for ethnic/racial minority students and students in poverty. Kolluri (2018) concluded that “while segregation may be more pronounced between schools than within them, students continue to be sorted within schools along the lines of race, ethnicity, and poverty status through their lack of enrollment in advanced coursework” (p. 691). The problem addressed in this study centers around the lack of access to advanced coursework for some high school students due to either perceived or actual barriers that limit or prevent enrollment in advanced coursework opportunities.

## **Conceptual Framework**

In Adelman's (2006) seminal research pertaining to high school curriculum and college completion, the author concluded "the academic intensity of the student's high school curriculum still counts more than anything else in precollegiate history in providing momentum toward completing a bachelor's degree" (p. xviii). Playing a fundamental role in the course selection process, counselors serve as potential sources of positive social capital as they help all students navigate high school and students' transition to postsecondary enrollment. Historically, underrepresented racial/ethnic minority students as well as students in poverty currently enroll in advanced coursework at rates much lower than their White or Asian peers.

Gonzalez, Stoner, and Jovel (2001) sought to understand not why students chose colleges, but why some students appeared to have a greater opportunity to attend college than their peers. The authors studied two groups of Latina females. Both groups consisted of students who were identified as economically disadvantaged. Both groups of students attended high schools that could be classified as low to middle income public schools. Gonzalez et al. (2001) developed themes based on similar responses of the students who they interviewed. As these themes were constructed, the thematic responses were placed on a continuum developed by the researchers.

This continuum considered two major types of resources in extremes. On the far right of the continuum were potential agents of social capital. These agents fell in three categories: family, school, and college/university. Gonzalez et al. (2001) named parents, siblings, and extended family members in the family category; specialized honors programs, teachers, and counselors in the school category; and college outreach and

preparation programs in the college/university category. On the far left of the continuum were potential agents of *institutional neglect and abuse* as coined by Gonzalez et al. (2001). The potential agents of neglect included general school curriculum, ESL and special education tracking, teachers, counselors, and school administrators. Gonzalez et al. (2001) stated that “exposure to or accumulation of high or low volumes of social capital or institutional neglect or abuse [either] limits or expands a student’s perceived and/or actual opportunities for college attendance” (p. 12). These positive or negative experiences by students affected their future by expanding or limiting their self-perception, which potentially changed their choices about postsecondary enrollment.

Gonzalez et al.’s (2001) concept of resources served as a framework in developing my study because of the central role that a counselor holds between each set of resources. With regard to the agents of social capital (family, school, college/university), the counselor serves in a role to make connections between the student and opportunities to participate in advanced coursework. Subsequently, this exposure to advanced coursework could allow the student to gain additional social capital connections with classmates and teachers. These social capital-based connections could lead to postsecondary opportunities. More information is needed to understand advanced coursework participation in Texas, particularly from the perspective of school counselors.

### **Purpose Statement**

The purpose of this Delphi study was to describe a consensus among selected high school guidance counselors about the most common barriers to advanced coursework opportunities experienced by high school students. Charged with maintaining personal graduation plans for all secondary school students, high school

counselors are commissioned to help students choose the coursework best representative of students' abilities and future plans. The counselor serves as an integral link between students' high school coursework choices and the impact those courses have with postsecondary planning. As such, the counselor might have information about reasons access might be limited for some students.

### **Significance of the Study**

Although researchers have studied advanced coursework participation in Texas (e.g., Clark, Moore, & Slate, 2012; Combs et al., 2010; Moore & Slate, 2008), a qualitative study exploring barriers to advanced coursework opportunities from the perspective of high school counselors could not be located. Contributions to the body of literature concerning course enrollment, Advanced Placement, International Baccalaureate, dual credit, and general advanced academics were a result of this study. Stakeholders who might benefit from this study include guidance counselors, directors of guidance, principals, curriculum directors, school district officials, educational regional service center officials, and most importantly the students and parents who the counselors serve.

Because high school counselors are the typical enforcement agent of campus or district policies associated with course selection, recognition of these barriers that limit enrollment in advanced coursework opportunities can be an initial step in seeking solutions. Potential recognition of gatekeeping mechanisms associated with district or school course enrollment policies could be an outcome of this study.

## **Research Question**

The following research question was addressed in this study: What are the most common barriers to advanced coursework for high school students as viewed by high school counselors?

## **Definition of Terms**

**Advanced Placement.** The College Board (2020), the governing body of the Advanced Placement program, administers the program, which consists of college-level classes in many subjects during high school. These courses are usually more demanding than regular high school classes and are similar to first-year college courses (College Board, 2020). Teachers of Advanced Placement courses must submit course syllabi through a biannual audit process.

**International Baccalaureate.** Specifically, “the Diploma Programme (DP) curriculum is made up of six subject groups and the DP core, comprising theory of knowledge (TOK), creativity, activity, service (CAS) and the extended essay” (International Baccalaureate Program, 2017, para. 5). Student must complete a certain number of courses and take examinations based on this coursework to earn levels of the International Baccalaureate Diploma Programme. The International Baccalaureate Programme (2017) website states that “through the Diploma Programme (DP) core, students reflect on the nature of knowledge, complete independent research and undertake a project that often involves community service” (para. 6). Students can earn college credits for taking and achieving certain scores on International Baccalaureate examinations.

**Dual Credit.** Although many words such as dual enrollment, accelerated coursework, college coursework, and joint enrollment are used interchangeably, for this study, the definition of Dual Credit is specifically “individual course or a complete curriculum of courses high school students can take where they earn both college and high school credit simultaneously” (Tobolowsky & Allen, 2016, p. 8).

**Advanced Coursework.** For the context of this study, advanced coursework is used as a general term to express an Advanced Placement, International Baccalaureate, or dual credit course, or a combination of two or three of these examples. Although not guaranteed and contingent on specific college policies, advanced coursework can lead to college credit at the postsecondary institution attended by the student who completes the course.

**Counselor.** The American School Counselor Association (2020) offered an extensive definition of school counseling, specifically in the context of secondary school counselors:

High school counselors provide equitable and appropriate services by addressing students’ academic, career and social/emotional developmental needs . . . [The counselor’s] work is reflected in improvement in academic, attendance and discipline outcomes related to academic development, college and career readiness and social/ emotional development. (“Why High School”, 2020)

### **Delimitations**

Every study has delimitations. One boundary for this study was I used a local organization of directors of guidance to help identify potential participants for this study. Although representative of different types of schools in size and demographics, the

participants in this study are isolated to one large metropolitan area. A second delimitation was the specific course offerings at high schools represented by the participants. Schools potentially could offer only dual credit; others may offer a combination of advanced academics including Advanced Placement and International Baccalaureate.

### **Limitations**

Goldschmidt (1975), citing the work of Sackman and the RAND corporation, proclaimed that the Delphi technique lacks “a fixed, universally agreed upon, working definition. . . [where] many variants have emerged, some departing widely from the Delphi procedure associated with its Rand origins” (p. 196). Although the freedom of multiple rounds of questioning during the process of conducting Delphi research allows participants to play a highly active role in research, the lack of a set number of rounds or a fixed method of interpreting results is a potential limitation of this research. Despite the lack of rigidity in Delphi, the use of this technique and its validity have been well documented (Dalkey, 1969; Rabina, 2013; Schmidt, 1997; Skulmoski, 2007). Structuring research that uses the Delphi technique to at least three iterations or rounds, taking explicit steps to form an expert panel, and managing the data collected during research are suggested steps taken to ensure that the Delphi is a valid method.

Although paramount to the success of Delphi research, the selection of an expert panel is another potential limitation to research. Without quality experts, Delphi would not be a valid method. One way to ensure validity of the expert panel would be to take great care to follow specific parameters suggested by other researchers. For example, Schmidt (1997) explained “a panel of experts must be well described. . . [so that] the

reader can judge the relevance and reliability of the respondents” (p. 772). Schmidt (1997) continued in the description of experts suggesting that “the number of panelists in each round must be reported so that the reader can confirm relevant statistics” (p. 772) presented in the research.

### **Assumptions**

Throughout the duration of this study, several assumptions were made. First, it was assumed that counselors who chose to participate in the expert panel were honest in their responses. Another assumption was the counselors responded with viewpoints representative of their roles as counselors. Because the purpose was to describe consensus about common barriers to advanced coursework opportunities, the assumption was made that using the Delphi technique was appropriate.

To facilitate strong responses in a Delphi, Schmidt (1997) suggested a three-tiered approach. First, the researcher must be conscientious about the number of iterations that participants are given. Next, the results from the first round of questioning that are proposed in the second round of questioning must be small enough to achieve consensus in a final round. Finally, Schmidt (1997) stressed the importance of using statistics to support conclusions drawn in the final round. Following these suggestions about conducting a Delphi ensured the technique was applied appropriately. For the panel of experts working in various districts with different advanced course offerings, following the suggestions of Schmidt allowed for consistency throughout the duration of the study.

### **Organization of the Study**

Chapter I of this study provided an overview of the study by offering the context in which the study would be conducted. First, a problem and a conceptual framework

were explained. These aspects were followed by the significance of the research. Next, a research question and definitions of terms were given. Finally, the delimitations, limitations, and assumptions were discussed. Chapter II presents a review of literature in three parts. First, the role of the high school counselor is discussed. Next, a historical account of advanced coursework as well as current enrollment in advanced coursework is presented. Finally, aspects of access to advanced coursework with particular regard to postsecondary implications is discussed. Chapter III focuses on the method used to conduct the research study, specifically the Delphi techniques, participants, and questions that were presented to the expert panel of counselors. Chapter IV presents the results of the study. Chapter V concludes the study with an interpretation of data collected and the implications of the study.

## CHAPTER II

### Review of the Literature

Though national standards set by the American School Counselor Association suggest a ratio of 250 students to one counselor, the average ratio in Texas in May 2018 was 442 students to one counselor (American School Counseling Association, 2018). Balancing the mental health of students, state graduation standards, and postsecondary readiness planning, counselors are often required to be experts across multiple fields. Although they serve as liaisons between teachers, administrators, students, and parents, literature focused on the self-perceptions counselors hold about their role in students' lives is sparse.

This review of literature is presented in three major sections: (a) the role of the guidance counselor, (b) advanced academic coursework, and (c) access to advanced academic coursework. The literature presented about the role of the guidance counselor begins with a historical analysis of school counseling, followed by the role of guidance counselors in postsecondary planning, and concludes with the importance of addressing cultural competencies in counselor preparation programs. Regarding advanced academic coursework, a brief history of Advanced Placement, International Baccalaureate, and dual credit coursework is presented first, and is followed by analysis of multiple studies focused on the populations historically enrolled in this coursework. The final section of this literature review, access to advanced coursework, begins with literature pertaining to advanced academic coursework offered by high schools and is followed by studies that focus on student and parent perceptions of advanced coursework, with a short analysis of the Early College High School model. The majority of the literature discussed in the

access to advanced coursework section focuses on the relationship between advanced coursework and postsecondary planning.

### **Role of the Counselor**

**History of guidance counseling.** Lambie and Williamson (2004) traced the shift from guidance counselor to professional school counselor through historical analysis of the counseling profession. The role of the guidance counselor can be traced to the early 1900s when the primary focus of counseling was vocational in nature to help students with job related skills and placement. Lambie and Williamson (2004) continued that guidance counseling in the 1920s was heavily influenced by the ideas of John Dewey and cognitive development, so guidance counselors were to combine their vocational influence with “cognitive, personal, social, and moral” development (p. 125). A seminal guide for counseling was produced in the 1930s by E. G. Williamson, whose approach to counseling was documented in his text *How to Counsel Students*. As time progressed, the 1940s gave way to a focus on the work of Carl Rogers and Abraham Maslow, and a shift toward an emphasis on social emotional wellness began to occur.

In the early 1950s, Lambie and Williamson (2004) documented that the formation of the American School Counseling Association led to an increase in the number of counselors nationally. Lambie and Williamson (2004) also cited the advent of the space race as a catalyst for the employment of counselors to help identify students who were gifted in science and math. The 1960s again led the way to an increase in social/emotional wellness. With a national decline of students attending public schools in the 1970s, Lambie and Williamson (2004) explained that U.S. counselors began to fill more administrative roles such as coordinating special education meetings, creating

course schedules for students, and completing paperwork not necessarily associated with counseling. Throughout the 1980s and continuing to the 1990s, with the publication of *A Nation at Risk*, which led to a greater role of testing and accountability in schools, counselor roles further changed to center around testing. Lambie and Williamson (2004) believed that the publication of *A Nation at Risk* precipitated the growth of the professional school counselor title.

Lambie and Williamson (2004) ended the historical analysis portion of their research with a powerful statement about counselors:

Important to note is that although school counselors' roles were being expanded no services seemed to be removed from the counselors' responsibilities . . . [and] based on this historical narrative, school counseling roles have been fast and ever-changing, making it understandable that many school counselors struggle with role ambiguity and incongruence while feeling overwhelmed. (p. 127)

Lambie and Williamson (2004) concluded the historical analysis of counseling by adding four suggestions to help with the ambiguity often felt by counselors. First, Lambie and Williamson (2004) called for principal education. As principals are administrators, many do not understand the educational background of counselors and yet are the person who primarily dictates the expectations of counselors. Second, the authors suggest dropping the teaching requirement that exists prior to counseling. Lambie and Williamson's (2004) synthesized research concluded that there was no correlation in professional school counselors' ability to counsel and their background in teaching. Next, the authors suggested supervision of counselors in schools by other more experienced counselors. Due to the ambiguity of the role, Lambie and Williamson

(2004) called for the need for other counselors to supervise new counselors instead of administrators. Finally, and most impactful to the role of a counselor was the suggestion by Lambie and Williamson (2004) to remove the “unnecessary duties” such as “supervising restrooms, substituting for missing teachers” (p. 129) that distance the counselor from the role that they have been trained to perform.

Kahnwiler (1979) cited a concern for the growing caseloads of counselors as early as the mid-1970s. Through a review of the articles that appeared in four different counseling journals, Kahnwiler (1979) sought to determine if any themes existed across the literature. Similar to the historical analysis completed by Lambie and Williamson (2004), Kahnwiler (1979) identified 40 years ago the trend toward counselors feeling as though their role was ambiguous and constantly changing. Kahnwiler (1979) discussed the importance of counselor education programs to focus on the role that guidance counselors would actually complete in schools, a more consultative role with students, parents, and other faculty and staff members. Consultation was defined by Kahnwiler (1979) as “those indirect services provided by a school counselor that are designed to maximize the social, emotional, educational, and intellectual development of students” (p. 347). The theme of consultation appeared across the two decades of articles that were scrutinized. However, the author noted that education and training on how to be a consultant lacked in both counselor education programs and in actual practice.

With ever changing and often undefined roles coupled with longitudinal growth of student caseloads, 21st-century counselors are tasked with a multitude of responsibilities. Whether the burdens faced by counselors could be decreased by better preparation during counselor education programs or by elimination of administrative

duties is unanswerable. An absence of clear expectations set by campus administrators and the constantly shifting needs of students can result in school counselors having an inconsistent job description.

**Counselors and postsecondary planning.** Because guidance counselors have historically played a large role in postsecondary planning for students, Cholewa, Burkhardt, and Hull (2015) sought to determine the role of counselors using data from the National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES). Data from a sample of more than 16,000 student surveys were analyzed, and Cholewa et al. (2015) revealed that African American students cited their school counselor as an influencer of postsecondary planning at a statistically significantly higher rate than their White peers did. The authors concluded that school counselors' outreach pertaining to postsecondary planning should be extended to include parent and family components.

Additionally, Holland (2015) studied the level of trust that existed between high school students and their guidance counselors. Two years of observations and interviews of 89 students were conducted at two different high schools in the same state. Additionally, five students were shadowed, all of whom were Black. Subsequently, 22 adults involved with these students as counselors and administrators were also interviewed by Holland (2015). Holland ascertained that the wide range of problems students face often left counselors without time to accomplish all of their tasks. Holland reported that information concerning postsecondary planning was often located only on a website, leaving students to be self-motivated to find pertinent information. Students in Holland's (2015) study expressed a desire for more support from their counselors, no matter what the students' postsecondary goals were. Finally, students of color and

students in poverty identified more readily with the counselor whose background and ethnicity most closely matched their own. Holland (2015) stated that a particular counselor involved in the study was reared in similar conditions to many of her students. The counselor was both an ethnic/racial minority and considered herself a student in poverty when she was in school. This counselor was mentioned by students as a counselor who could easily relate to students and was open about her own struggles.

Furthermore, Belasco (2013) addressed the role of the high school counselor as a positive influence on the projected postsecondary outcomes of students. Using data from the Educational Longitudinal Study of 2002, a sample of approximately 16,100 students were analyzed using a new method Belasco (2013) described as “Coarsened Exact Matching” (p. 785). Coarsened Exact Matching, a non-parametric technique, allowed Belasco (2013) to reduce the sample size "to include only observations that compare on characteristics predictive of a treatment or intervention" (p. 787). Specifically, Belasco wanted to reduce the sample by similar characteristics of students who were more likely to visit their counselor about college. After the sample was reduced, Belasco's quantitative analysis produced means associated with counselor visits and college matriculation. Belasco (2013) suggested the weight counselor interaction played in college matriculation varied by socioeconomic status. The most powerful of Belasco's findings came from students in poverty, especially those students who were categorized in the highest levels of poverty. Belasco contended that students in poverty who visited with their counselor in Grades 10 and 11 were more likely to enroll in a four-year college than students in poverty who only visited with their counselor in one grade.

Similarly, to Belasco (2013), Bryan, Moore-Thomas, Day-Vines, and Holcomb (2011) examined the role of the guidance counselor in the terms of college matriculation. Examining data from the Educational Longitudinal Study of 2002, Bryan et al. (2011) chose a sample of 4,835 seniors who represented more than 1,048,435 students across the country; slightly more than one half were female, and the ethnic diversity of the students included approximately 74% White, 12% Hispanic, 9% Black, and 4% Pacific Islander/Native Americans. Bryan et al. used a multinomial regression analysis in their quantitative research of the counselor role in college matriculation. Schools that employed more counselors per student had statistically significantly higher college matriculation rates. Similarly, students from schools where counselors made contact with students specifically about college by Grade 10 also realized higher college matriculation rates. Conversely, Bryan et al. (2013) contended that when counselors did not have contact with students in the three lowest quartiles of socioeconomic status, those students experienced adverse effects in matriculation. Bryan et al. (2013) suggested that counselors involve community and parents as much as possible when discussing college matriculation, especially with students in poverty.

Welton and Williams (2014) conducted a case study of a high racial/ethnic minority, high poverty high school located outside of a large urban area in Texas. The authors defined high racial/ethnic minority as demographically less than 50% White and high poverty by 50% or more on free/reduced lunch. During this qualitative study, the authors interviewed students, counselors, and administrators employed at a school that was attempting to raise their accountability rating while simultaneously trying to increase the number of students attending college. Welton and Williams (2014) determined that

because of the focus placed on increasing their accountability rating, the high school administrators and counselors could not adequately distribute information about college, help with college applications, or help with financial aid. The high school was in the first year of the Advancement via Individual Determination (AVID) program, but the authors cited that because the high school could not adequately staff the program, only 10% of the school's students were able to take advantage of AVID, where great emphasis is placed on taking advanced courses, completing college applications, and pursuing financial aid opportunities. Welton and Williams (2014) concluded that the high school's response to college readiness was particularly restrictive due to administrators' directives for teachers to concentrate interventions and instruction on high school exit exam preparation rather than on student academic preparation for and matriculation to postsecondary institutions. Even the scant college-related dialogue that did take place was not systematically disseminated to reach all students. . . Thus, the contention between the implementation of forced accountability and college readiness practices is all nested in the power dynamics of a high "minority", high poverty school. (p. 200)

The American School Counselor Association created a model for school counseling in 2012 that recommended counselors spend 80% of their professional time supporting students through individual planning and responsive-based services and 20% on duties such as data management. Still, the role of the counselor continues to be, at best, somewhat ambiguous. Often removed from educational reform (Dodson, 2009; Mau, Li, & Hoetmer, 2016; Morgan, Greenwaldt, & Gosselin, 2016), the education of future counselors and the primary role of the counselor may be at odds.

Dodson (2009) compared administrators' perceptions of the role of school counselors serving at the American School Counselor Association Recognized Model (RAMP) schools and non-RAMP schools. Dodson (2009) concluded that administrators at both RAMP and non-RAMP schools perceived the primary role of the counselor to provide individual academic planning; Mau, Li, and Hoetmer (2016) agreed. Mau et al. (2016) focused on the perceptions of lead counselors and the success of the students under their purview. Lead counselor participants in the study worked at a variety of public and private schools and participated in the High School Longitudinal Study of 2009-2013 (HSL:09-13). Mau et al. (2016) concluded through a series of MANOVA calculations that counselors also perceived their primary role to be that of an academic planner career advisor, and college application advisor.

However, counselors often feel unprepared for aspects of their jobs, especially that of career planning. Morgan, Greenwaldt, and Gosselin (2014) conducted a phenomenological inquiry of counselors focused on the results of the National Office for School Counselor Advocacy (NOSCA) survey that was designed for the "standardization of practices involving college access for all students" (p. 481). Counselors who participated in the Morgan et al. (2014) study graduated from both Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Education Programs (CACREP) and Non-CACREP programs. As a large part of college access is determined by access to advanced coursework and career planning, a lack of education in counselor preparation programs about career program is startling. Morgan et al. concurred that most CACREP and non-CACREP programs only offer one course in their degree plan for counseling, whether the program be 48-credit hours or 60-credit hours. All counselors interviewed

for the study concurred with statements such as “career development is definitely an area that needs more than one class,” “one of the most important things for counselors to know,” and “this is just not an area that I feel comfortable” (Morgan et al., 2014, p. 491).

With additional attention placed on college, career, or military readiness of students, focus on the counselor’s role in preparedness has increased. Lombardi, Freeman, and Rifenbark (2018) examined facets of college and career readiness in their study of both students with and without disabilities. With data from students in Grades 9 to 12 at 13 different high schools in a Midwest state, Lombardi et al. (2018) sampled 784 students with disabilities and 4,253 students without disabilities. Most student disabilities could be categorized as a learning disability (44%) or other health impairment (36%). After obtaining permission from parents and creating an agreement with participating high schools to release the data, students completed several surveys. After the data were retrieved from the results of all the surveys, Lombardi et al. (2018) conducted both a factor and bifactor quantitative analyses with the data retrieved. Lombardi et al. (2018) determined that the factors most closely associated with college and career readiness were academic engagement, critical learning processes, mind-set, and transition knowledge. The authors were not surprised to find that students without disabilities, on average, expressed a higher confidence in their preparedness for the future. Lombardi et al. (2018) concluded with suggestions on measuring college readiness through "systematic collection and evaluation of data" (p. 173) as the role of college and career preparedness increases at schools across the country.

Tieken (2016) researched two phenomena: how counselors, admissions professionals, and community-based organization professionals spoke with rural first-

generation students about the value of college, and how these professionals recounted their interactions with the parents of these students. This study was a portion of a larger study of rural first-generation students attending a private liberal arts college. These students and their parents were interviewed periodically over the entire course of their years in college. Tieken (2016) conducted interviews with 22 additional stakeholders including counselors, admissions professionals, and personnel at community-based organizations who all worked with rural first-generation students. The author used qualitative interviews, attended a college fair, and took field notes that were then coded and analyzed using qualitative data processing software to see if any themes presented. Tieken (2016) noted that the most prevalent theme was that of economic motivation. The author noted that most counselors and community-based organization staff members used language that was economically focused.

Furthermore, admissions professionals, especially those at liberal arts colleges noted difficulty in recruiting rural students and would often guide those career-focused students to other campuses with more career-based majors. Regarding perceptions about parents of first-generation students, Tieken (2016) stated that parents were generally supportive but were completely baffled by the process of admissions and financial aid. Tieken (2016) reported that the educational stakeholders interviewed mentioned that parents in the most impoverished areas were hesitant for their children to obtain a college degree due to the parents' fear of the student leaving home and not returning to the community. Tieken concluded the study with observations that all stakeholders must work together to educate rural first-generation students and their parents about college.

Atherton (2014) focused on two research questions that pertained to academic preparedness and self-perceived academic preparedness of first-generation students. Data were collected from a national higher education survey that covered a period from 1999-2009 and included 6,280 first year students from a public university in California. Of the sample, 39% were first-generation students, slightly more than one half were female, and regarding ethnicity, 50% were White, whereas slightly more than 20% were Hispanic. Atherton (2014) conducted a quantitative study through three regression analyses of the data that were already available. The author concluded that students who had two parents who graduated from college scored almost 50% above the mean on the SAT verbal whereas students with one parent who graduated college scored slightly over 30% above the mean on the SAT verbal section when compared to their first-generation peer group.

Although counselors have carried a large burden of postsecondary planning historically, simply suggesting what to do after high school is an oversimplified picture of what must occur. Whether the counselor must build trust (Cholewa et al., 2015), provide influence (Belasco, 2013), or balance accountability initiatives (Welton & Williams, 2014), the school counselor does not have an easy job. With an ever-changing landscape of college admissions, technical school applications, or apprenticeship options without adequate training, counselors must navigate constant change in policies and procedures (Tieken, 2016). With additional burdens placed on high school counselors to navigate college admissions jointly with first generation college students (Atherton, 2014), counselors continue to be unprepared to adequately help all students.

**Counselors and cultural competency.** Recognizing the important role that guidance counselors play for all students in their schools, Stadler, Sugh, Cobia,

Middleton, and Carney (2006) described changes that occurred in their counselor education program and the effects regarding diversity training through the introduction of a culturally relevant curriculum. Through reflections, Stadler et al. used the checklist developed by Potterite and Alexander in 1995 to measure the change in the participants in the counselor education program at one university. Findings by Stadler et al. included the encouragement of counselor educators to involve themselves in both campus and community activities outside of their own culture, to display artwork from multiple cultures, and to encourage the creation of safe spaces for questioning and discussions. The authors believed that there was great importance in moving diversity training from "the periphery to a core valued underlying all that we do" as counselors will be charged with working with every type of person they may encounter (Stadler et al., 2006, p. 203).

Counselors often lack the necessary cultural competencies needed to work with a changing population of students (Nelson, Bustamante, Wilson, & Onwuegbuzie, 2008; Nelson, Bustamante, Sawyer, & Sloan, 2014; Tuttle & Haskins, 2017). In testing the validity of the School-Wide Cultural Competence Observation Checklist (SCCOC), Nelson et al. (2008) compared statements by the American School Counselor Association with actual practices found in schools. The authors cited that attention is given to "guide professional school counselors to ensure equal access and an enhanced school environment . . . but revealed almost non-existent attention to ethnic development" (pp. 207-208). Nelson et al. (2008) continued that "counselors should play an integral role in social justice issues, advocacy for marginalized youth, and activism in schools and communities made up of predominately poor and minority families" (p. 208).

Martinez (2014) studied the unequal opportunities and limited resources that Latinx students encounter through qualitative interviews of 10 high school seniors (five boys, five girls) and one female counselor in a south Texas high school. Martinez (2014) ascertained several themes, the most prevalent being inequality of information and opportunities for all students. Many students cited the same story centering on a college visit that was limited to a certain number of students. By limiting this trip to only a small number of seniors, many students felt neglected, and some students broke rules associated with signing up for the visit because they did not understand the process to register. Martinez (2014) shared that students felt hesitant to approach their counselor, “I rarely go talk to them [counselor] because they are always busy . . . right now they have schedule changes. . . [and are] hard to sit down and actually talk to them” (p. 99). Martinez (2014) relayed the feelings of one of the counselors interviewed who stated, “in a perfect world . . . have one person in charge to try to help these kids with college” (p. 99). Similarly, Martinez (2014) expressed the sentiments of most of the interviewed students who continually reiterated that they wished that they had access to their counselors prior to senior year to discuss college.

More consideration should be placed on increasing the preparedness of counselors, whether that is with additional coursework or professional development. Counselors consistently cited a lack of cultural competency knowledge in their positions (Nelson et al., 2008). Counselors working with the most demanding populations are quite often working with the most limited resources (Martinez, 2014). This challenge can place additional burdens on counselors already pulled in several directions.

## **Advanced Academic Coursework**

### **History of Advanced Placement, International Baccalaureate, and Dual**

**Credit.** After its initial inception in the mid-1960s, the International Baccalaureate Program (IB) in 1971 was comprised of less than 800 students across fewer than 10 private schools compared to more than 1.2 million students across more than 4,000 schools, both public and private (International Baccalaureate Programme, 2017). The International Baccalaureate Programme (2017) founders sought to “create a better and more peaceful world through intercultural understanding and respect” (p. 2) and therefore consult with educational institutions, government officials, and organizations that hold similar thoughts and values. Students participating in an International Baccalaureate program must take a variety of courses across multiple disciplines including the arts, humanities, ethics, science, and complete three years in a foreign language. Students also enroll in courses that emphasize the theory of knowledge, creativity, writing, and philosophy. Students in International Baccalaureate programs, like those in Advanced Placement programs, finish the course experience with tests that they must score within a certain range in order to obtain credit.

Kolluri (2018) offered an insight to the history of the Advanced Placement program in a study focused on access and effectiveness of the Advanced Placement program. With beginnings in elite private boarding schools located in the Northeastern United States, Advanced Placement was a description of tests offered to only top students who planned to attend the country’s most elite private institutions (Kolluri, 2018). The set of examinations was then administered to these students who would then, dependent on the score, be offered college credit. College Board, the organization that administered

the SAT, took control of these exams in 1955 (Kolluri, 2018). Early leadership of the Advanced Placement program believed “all students [were] not created equal” and early Advanced Placement leadership “fixated on identification and preparation of the ‘best and the brightest’” therefore “early stages of the Advanced Placement program were dominated by prestige” (Kolluri, 2018, p. 685). The Advanced Placement program became more popular nationally in the 1960s and 1970s, as the idea of more equal access gained popularity in the United States. Beginning with 11 courses in the 1950s and evolving to 38 courses in 2018, Advanced Placement exams were taken by more than two million students in the 2017 school year (Kolluri, 2018, p. 675). Kolluri (2018) reported that an exact number of students enrolled in Advanced Placement coursework is difficult to obtain because an estimated 30% to 40% of students enrolled in coursework choose not to take the Advanced Placement exam (p. 675). Students can now earn college credit for making a 3, 4, or 5 on their Advanced Placement examination at thousands of colleges across the country.

Giani, Alexander, and Reyes (2014) studied the impact of dual credit coursework on postsecondary outcomes for students in Texas. Although the development of dual credit may have its roots in supplementing students who were already identified as high achieving, dual credit is now used to introduce postsecondary opportunities to “populations historically underrepresented in higher education” (Giani et al., 2014, p. 214). The researchers gave a brief history of dual credit in Texas where the number of students participating in dual credit coursework increased 10-fold over the first decade of the 21st century. Giani et al. (2014) cited that the reason for expansion “appears to be the desire [of the Texas Education Agency] to increase postsecondary participation and

completion rates” (p. 202). Giani et al. (2014) included enrollment data from multiple educational agencies in Texas and concluded that students dually enrolled in core subjects such as mathematics, science, history, or English had a statistically significantly higher rate of continued enrollment in college; mathematics course enrollment showed the most positive correlation in a student completing a bachelor’s degree.

With the desire to “increase student participation rates in college by an additional 500,000 students by 2015” the Higher Education Coordinating Board of Texas created the *Closing the Gaps* program, in hopes of a positive long term impact to the Texas economy (Mansell & Justice, 2014, p. 1). Dual credit, or the enrollment in a course that provides both high school and postsecondary credit, requires that a high school student meet college readiness requirement in order to participate in these courses. A hoped for byproduct of this program was to ease the transition from high school to college for students. Mansell and Justice (2014) focused on both traditional dual credit students who remain enrolled in their high school while concurrently enrolling at their local community college and students participating in an Early College High School. An Early College High School is a high school where a student has a primary intent of earning an associate’s degree and a high school diploma while still in high school. Students attending traditional high schools cited long-term cost savings as a primary benefit of enrollment in dual credit. The high school typically supplemented the cost of the dual credit course. Students in the study also cited their belief that Advanced Placement courses were more rigorous than dual credit and mentioned that taking the Advanced Placement exam was usually less expensive than the dual credit course (Mansell & Justice, 2014). Early College High School students cited the major drawback of

participating in an Early College High School was leaving the traditional extracurricular activities such as sports from their home high schools and their classmates. The researchers uncovered that in the population studied, the vast majority of students at Early College High Schools were from homes where the highest education obtained was a high school diploma.

Mansell and Justice (2014) warned high school counselors to “educate students in an unbiased manner on the advantages and disadvantages of advanced placement and dual credit” and to learn about “both programs so that they can provide parents and students with [enough] objective information to make an informed decision” (p. 7). Counselors were also encouraged by the authors to work to understand the fear of failure often experienced by students seeking to take dual credit courses, especially those who were considered first generation students.

With the advent of the Advanced Placement program, followed by the creation of the International Baccalaureate Programme, some high school students were offered two primary ways to earn college credits in high school. Although the programs had their roots in prestigious boarding schools and international schools, the programs were offered eventually across the country and subsequently, the world. As partnerships between high schools and colleges became more common, coupled with state initiatives to increase college enrollment, dual credit programs offered students a third avenue to earn college credit while still enrolled in high school. Although the opportunities to earn college credit have increased in both number and variety, the enrollment of students who are economically disadvantaged and certain underrepresented racial/ethnic minority groups of students remain stagnant.

**Advanced academic coursework enrollment.** As counselors are often the school official mandated to create and follow course selection plans that include access to advanced coursework, it is important to review the characteristics of advanced coursework. Moore and Slate (2008) sought to analyze the demographic characteristics of students in Texas who enrolled in Advanced Placement coursework over the 2004-2005 and 2005-2006 school years. The authors analyzed student data, specifically with non-parametric Wilcoxon's dependent samples t tests, from slightly less than 2,000 school districts each school year. Moore and Slate (2008) verified that statistically significant differences existed for both the 2004-2005 and 2005-2006 school years when comparing Advanced Placement course enrollment of White students and Black students and Advanced Placement course enrollment between Black students and Hispanic students. The authors also determined that more White students than Black students enrolled in Advanced Placement courses and more Hispanic students than Black students enrolled in Advanced Placement courses. Regarding gender, Moore and Slate (2008) acknowledged a statistically significant difference between boys and girls in enrollment in Advanced Placement courses, with girls enrolling more often than boys did. Moore and Slate (2008) further suggested further additional studies regarding students classified as economically disadvantaged.

Despite the growth of the Advanced Placement program over the past several decades, the enrollment of students with an economic disadvantage or of students who have been historically underrepresented are participating at a lower rate than their White or Asian peers. Kolluri (2018) cited several examples of the disparate enrollment trends. Students in poverty enrolled at one third of the rate of their middle income peers.

Students whose parents were college educated were twice as likely to have enrolled in an Advanced Placement course than their peers whose parents did not finish high school. Despite making up nearly 15% of the nation's graduating class, African American students accounted for less than 10% of Advanced Placement examination Kolluri (2018) continued with an in-depth look at each exam in regard to socioeconomic and ethnic participation. Hispanic students were underrepresented in every subject with the exceptions of Spanish Language, Spanish Literature, and Italian Language. In the area of STEM, physics examination participants consisted of only slightly more than 2% Latina/o and slightly more than 7% African American students. Calculus had similar percentages at slightly less than 3% Latina/o participation and slightly less than 9% African American participation.

As a specific example, Clark, Moore, and Slate (2012) documented the characteristics of student enrollment in Advanced Placement courses in a single urban school district in Texas over the 2005-2006 and 2006-2007 school years. Clark et al. (2012) analyzed data from 1,396 students and 2,626 Advanced Placement courses in the 2005-2006 school year and 1,707 students and 3,550 Advanced Placement courses in the 2006-2007 school year. Subpopulations on average for both years were almost equal regarding gender, with a slightly higher percentage of girls in the 2005-2006 school year. Student ethnicity reflected approximately 60% of students were White, about 15% of students were Asian, approximately 11% were Hispanic, and about 7% were Black. Over the course of both years, Clark et al. (2012) discovered that Advanced Placement social studies courses were the most frequently enrolled courses, and foreign languages were the least frequently enrolled. Regarding gender, boys comprised 80% of computer

science enrollment and more frequently enrolled in mathematics courses. The authors also noted that the highest enrollment in Advanced Placement foreign language courses was from Hispanic students. Of note, Clark et al. (2012) discovered that almost two thirds of all students enrolled in any Advanced Placement course throughout these two years were eligible to receive credit at college.

Klopfenstein (2004) conducted a quantitative regression analysis using data from the state of Texas regarding enrollment in Advanced Placement courses. Findings from Klopfenstein (2004) documented participation by Black male students as one half as likely to enroll in an Advanced Placement course as White males; Black female students enrolled at an even lower rate than that of White female students. Continuing, Hispanic female students enrolled at an even lower rate than Black female students. As suspected, a student's economic status amplifies the impact that race had on enrollment in an Advanced Placement course. Regarding the participation in Advanced Placement courses by racial/ethnic minority students, Klopfenstein (2004) stated "even when income coefficients are identical, [students identified as] low income [are] disproportionately [affected]" (p. 124).

Furthermore, Hertberg-Davis and Callahan (2008) examined the appropriateness of Advanced Placement and International Baccalaureate courses regarding high ability students enrolled in those courses. The authors collected data from 23 high schools in seven states; 200 teachers, 25 administrators, 300 students and eight program coordinators were interviewed or observed over the course of the four-year study. Hertberg-Davis and Callahan (2008) reported that students enrolled in Advanced Placement or International Baccalaureate courses described those courses as more

challenging, employing higher quality teachers, and creating a stronger learning environment. However, the authors cited student complaints of feeling rushed through the curriculum, burdened with excessive homework, and overwhelmed. Hertberg-Davis and Callahan (2008) presented information from interviews of racial/ethnic minority students who stated feeling alone in the advanced courses due to underrepresentation in Advanced Placement and International Baccalaureate coursework. Both students in poverty and racial/ethnic minority students expressed a need to "disprove racial stereotypes [by] being the first in [their] family to go to college [and having the] opportunity to escape a lifestyle they did not want for themselves" (Hertberg-Davis & Callahan, 2008, p. 208).

The authors concluded with several recommendations to schools including promoting the experience of Advanced Placement and International Baccalaureate curriculum over excessive assignments, adding additional training opportunities for Advanced Placement and International Baccalaureate teachers, and working to prioritize Advanced Placement and International Baccalaureate enrollment equity. Regarding equity of enrollment in Advanced Placement and International Baccalaureate courses, Hertberg-Davis and Callahan (2008) suggested "recognizing, responding to, and supporting talent in all populations [and broadening] recruiting practices" (p. 211).

Burney (2010) reviewed, through quantitative linear regression, the relationship between school enrollment and Advanced Placement scores. Data available from a group of 339 public high schools located in a Midwestern state were analyzed by Burney (2010) using variables that included enrollment size and Advanced Placement scores of 3, 4, or 5. Burney's (2010) study served to confirm previous research that established that

number of Advanced Placement courses and high achievement of students is correlated. Although schools that have higher enrollment typically offer more Advanced Placement courses, when size was removed as a variable in Burney's (2010) study, the "number of Advanced Placement course offerings contributed uniquely to the explanation of variance in high achievement" (p. 122). When more opportunities for enrollment in advanced coursework exist at a high school, the opportunity for achievement may also increase.

Corra, Carter, and Carter (2011) analyzed the impact of race and gender on enrollment in advanced coursework. The authors used demographic and testing data from 5,470 students across 47 courses labeled *honors* or *advanced placement* as well as SAT scores in the 2002-2003 school year. Corra et al. (2011) concluded that race had a "strong impact" (p. 39) on course enrollment citing that White girls had the highest participation in advanced courses and Black boys had the lowest participation in advanced courses. Corra et al. (2011) continued that past research indicated limited access to advanced courses for Black students, and predominately low-income communities tended to offer less advanced courses for all students. The authors contended that Black students "may choose not to enroll in advanced courses in high school in an effort to protect themselves from an unwelcoming environment" (Corra et al., 2011, p. 42).

Focusing on qualitative literature rather than quantitative data, Park, Caine, and Wimmer (2014) conducted a systematic review of literature pertaining to participants in Advanced Placement and/or International Baccalaureate coursework. A starting total of 61 articles was reduced to 24 articles that were reviewed systematically by the authors. Park et al. (2014) cited five themes that developed as a result of the review of articles:

"impact of peer relationships, impact of teacher-student relationship, construction of self-image, development of the concept of success, and the impact of future planning" (p. 135). Advanced coursework opportunities for students give way to non-academic benefits for students such as improved relationships, self-concept, and planning.

Students who were economically disadvantaged as well as Black and Hispanic students enrolled in advanced coursework at a much lower rate than their White and Asian peers (Burney, 2010; Clark et al., 2012; Corra et al., 2011; Hertberg-Davis & Callahan, 2008; Klopfenstein, 2014; Kolluri, 2018; Moore & Slate, 2008). When enrolled in advanced courses, students in poverty and Black and Hispanic students often cite feelings of being underrepresented or stereotyped (Hertberg-Davis & Callahan, 2008). Moreover, Corra et al. (2011) concluded that the "strong impact" that race plays in enrollment should be noted by educators, and cited that students of color "protected themselves" by not enrolling in advanced coursework (p. 39-41).

### **Access to Advanced Coursework**

**Coursework offered by high schools.** Kolluri (2018) reviewed a study from the mid-1980s titled "Keeping Track" by Jeannie Oakes, which sought to reveal the plight of forcing students on one particular track of courses throughout high school. Kolluri (2018) proposed that tracking, through a lack of access to Advanced Placement courses, still exists today, particularly for racial/ethnic minority students and students in poverty. Whereas "segregation may be more pronounced between schools than within them, students continue to be sorted within schools along the lines of race, ethnicity, and poverty status" through their lack of enrollment in advanced coursework (Kolluri, 2018, p. 691). Citing one study, Kolluri (2018) revealed that the enrollment of African

American students in Advanced Placement courses is negatively correlated with the number of White students. Most intriguing, Kolluri (2018) proposed that the course request policies at high schools “reinforce the trends toward unequal enrollment” (p. 693).

Iatarola, Conger, and Long (2011) sought to understand the reasoning that might exist when schools determine what courses to offer at their schools. The authors focused on data from 407 schools in the state of Florida across a five-year period in the early 2000s. Iatarola et al. (2011) confirmed previous studies on school size and course offerings reiterating that, not accounting for any other variables, the larger the school size, the more Advanced Placement/International Baccalaureate courses were offered. Continuing, Iatarola et al. (2011) concluded that schools with a higher percentage of high performing eighth-graders offered more Advanced Placement/International Baccalaureate courses at the high school level. Iatarola et al. (2011) also provided additional context with findings surrounding schools where most students were non-White, stating these schools often offered advanced coursework due to monetary incentives. Finally, Iatarola et al. (2011) determined schools with many students in poverty were the least likely to offer many advanced courses.

Archibald and Farley-Ripple (2012) documented, using quantitative analysis of the HIMATH exam measuring college readiness and demographic characteristics of students, the impact that poverty and race plays on student tracking and college outcomes. Through the analysis of a mid-Atlantic state mid-sized school district's student data, the authors focused on exam data and Grade 8 to 10 course selection and placements. Archibald and Farley-Ripple (2012) reported that, without controlling for

previous achievement, Hispanic students were 70% less likely to be enrolled in a higher-level mathematics course. Regarding college-readiness level performance in mathematics, students of color and students in poverty were less likely to be enrolled in upper level coursework unless their grades in the year prior were above average.

Archibald and Farley-Ripple (2012) documented that in the case of the participants in their study, students' race and economic status accounted for more than 20% of their level of access to higher mathematics courses.

Labeling access to Advanced Placement and International Baccalaureate coursework as a programmatic resource that is not available in every high school, Klugman (2012) sought to determine if a school's resources influenced college outcomes for the students who attended those high schools. Like Bryan et al. (2011) and Belasco (2013), Klugman (2012) utilized data from the Educational Longitudinal Study of 2002, produced by the National Center for Educational Statistics. After removing missing values, a sample of 9,880 students was selected from 710 schools participating in both the original 2002 survey and the 2006 follow-up survey and had students who did not drop out of high school. Klugman (2012) used the categories of "no postsecondary education, 2-year colleges, 4-year non-selective colleges, and 4-year selective, and 4-year more selective colleges" (p. 808) based on an index where ranges of selectivity were determined by the average SAT scores of accepted students. Klugman's (2012) variables included college destination and the multiple independent variables of "socioeconomic status, programmatic school resources, pedagogical school resources (number of master degreed teachers), social school resources, school typologies, and marks of distinction" (pp. 810-811). Several common hypotheses of Klugman (2012) were confirmed:

students from high income families attended private schools more often than their less wealthy peers and students of higher socioeconomic status tended to have higher parent involvement concerning college matriculation. Klugman (2012) did expound on the discovery that a student moving from one level of socioeconomic status would greatly increase their chances of attending a highly selective college or university. Klugman (2012) also addressed that when schools offered Advanced Placement and/or International Baccalaureate courses, a student's chance to attend a more selective school increased. These programmatic resources, as Klugman (2012) deemed them, "significantly mediate the effect of SES for the choices between more selective colleges" (p. 820) for the students who attend that school, thus verifying the importance of Advanced Placement/International Baccalaureate curricula for students in poverty.

A lack of variety of course offerings should be cited as a predominant barrier to enrollment in advanced coursework. The reasons motivating schools to offer or not to offer particular courses was varied. Iatarola et al. (2011) identified performance of a school district's eighth-grade class as a reason to consider offering advanced courses. Archibald and Farley-Ripple (2012) concurred, furthering that standardized exam scores, particularly in math, can dictate course opportunities offered in schools. Not surprisingly, Klugman (2012) attested to the socioeconomic status of a student as a barrier to advanced coursework. Klugman (2012) contended that the upward mobility of a student's income allows the student to have a greater chance to enroll in a particular college or university, simply because they would have had the opportunity to access advanced coursework.

**Advanced coursework opportunities and postsecondary planning.** The Coleman Report, an extensive dive into the equality of educational opportunities written in 1964, produced results that were expected: White students were disproportionately able to receive smaller class size, access to advanced coursework, more experienced teachers, and subsequently gain more social capital through access than non-White peers. Hill's (2017) study focused on academic inequality in schools, specifically if change had occurred in the 50 years since the 1964 report headed by James Coleman as part of the Civil Rights Act. The Coleman Report concluded that a student's ability to be successful in school had less to do with the school he/she attended and more to do with race and social status, independent from his/her school. The Coleman Report was considered controversial, but when tested more than a decade later, the same results stood—students' "background, peers, and self-concept" played a larger role in their success than the school they attended (Hill, 2017, p. 14). Hill (2017) continued that a trend toward how schools are spending their money to create opportunities for all students is now being examined—not necessarily the amount of money spent but rather how the money used by a school creates the largest positive impact for students.

Hill (2017) continued that most findings by Coleman in 1964 still hold true in 2017. Citing an extensive study of tracking of high school courses (students taking courses labeled regular, honors, advanced), Hill (2017) stated that "income, race, and ethnicity are correlated with track assignments . . . higher tracks have opportunities to learn more challenging content from more qualified teachers, resulting in inequality of growth rates" (p. 22). Hill (2017) concluded with data from a study by the U.S. Department of Education's Office of Civil Rights. As of 2016, "high school students'

access to Advanced Placement courses varies by the racial, ethnic, and income composition of the schools they attend—gaps very much similar in size to those reported by Coleman 50 years ago” (Hill, 2017, p. 22).

Attewell and Domina (2008) used propensity score matching in their qualitative analysis of curricular strength and students' postsecondary choices. Using data from the National Center for Educational Statistics, nearly 8,000 students were analyzed. Nationally, on average, the most demanding curricula is taken by Asian students, followed by White students, Hispanic students, and finally Black students. Attewell and Domina (2008) ascertained that students in poverty take a less rigorous curriculum than their peers did. A student who is only one standard deviation below average on a scale measuring socioeconomic status is more than one quarter of a standard deviation below average in his/her strength of curriculum (i.e., the rigor of the coursework taken). Attewell and Domina (2008) continued that after accounting for race and socioeconomic status, differences in curriculum strength are "within-school effects rather than between-school effects" (p. 62) indicating that differences in curriculum strength are likely the results of policies or tracking in schools.

Moller, Stearns, Southworth, and Potochnick (2013) analyzed how Advanced Placement curriculum and gender intersect in the realm of college selectivity. Moller et al. (2013) examined data from the National Educational Longitudinal Study and the Postsecondary Education Transcript study. Moller et al. (2013) surmised that the more expansive of an Advanced Placement program that existed at a high school, defined by more than one-third of all students participating in one or more Advanced Placement courses, the higher the level of selectivity of colleges attended for both girls and boys

existed. At schools where a smaller Advanced Placement program existed, girls were less likely to attend even a moderately selective school than boys attended. The authors indicated that the "probability of attending a moderately selective postsecondary institution diminishes as the coverage of the Advanced Placement curriculum increases" (Moller et al., 2013, p. 861). Moller et al. (2013) noted that "Advanced Placement opportunity is a critical component of secondary schools' organisation in the USA because it reflects the extent that schools offer students more rigorous educational opportunities" (p. 864). The authors continued that it was especially important for the adults who determine the policies at high schools to understand that female students "thrive in a more rigorous context, and falter in a less rigorous context" (Moller et al., 2013, p. 865).

Page and Scott-Clayton (2016) addressed college access barriers for students and potential implications to policies surrounding college access. The authors cautioned that college access is more than information about college; college access includes "transitions, . . . timing of enrollment, choice of institution, method of financing, and the pace of progress towards a degree" (Page & Scott-Clayton, 2016, p. 6). The authors indicated that the best source of management of these crucial aspects of college access are counselors, who according to the authors are highly overworked with caseloads of students typically twice what is recommended by national counseling associations. The authors conducted a meta-analysis of economic research focused on college access. Page and Scott-Clayton (2016) advised that because the variability of coursework access and counseling pertaining to college is disparate, in many cases both students in poverty and students of color are at a major disadvantage in the college access process. Moreover,

when students complete advanced coursework, particularly Advanced Placement coursework, places them at an advantage. Simply completing a course regardless of the score on the Advanced Placement Examination was correlated with students being more likely to complete college in a shorter amount of time (Page & Scott-Clayton, 2016).

Kirabo Jackson (2014) outlined the role of the Advanced Placement Incentive Program regarding access to Advanced Placement classes, specifically for Hispanic students. The Advanced Placement Incentive Program matches school districts with private donors who offer monetary incentives to both teachers and students who score within a predetermined range on the Advanced Placement examinations. The program, administered through a non-profit organization in Dallas, Texas, known as Advanced Placement Strategies, sought to raise the number of students, teachers, and school districts participating in the Advanced Placement program. Through quantitative analysis of like school districts in Texas, Kirabo Jackson (2014) compared previous participation, results, and post program participation. Within the cases studied by Kirabo Jackson (2014), Hispanic students showed an increase of participation and scoring when the program was introduced in their school districts.

Wilson and Adelson (2012) sought to find any potential connection between college matriculation, participation in Advanced Placement or International Baccalaureate coursework, and income status. Using data from the state of Texas, juniors and seniors from four suburban high schools in north Texas enrolled in either Advanced Placement or International Baccalaureate courses. These students completed a survey where they indicated their college choice, reason for that choice, and their SAT score. The students in the study also completed several other instruments that measured self-

perception and perceived difficulty of coursework. Wilson and Adelson (2012) used multiple quantitative analyses such as chi-square and exploratory factor analysis to compare different variables. The authors determined that students' reasons for choosing a particular college were not influenced by their gender, but students who enrolled in Advanced Placement courses tended to enroll in colleges closer in proximity to their homes. Students who enrolled in International Baccalaureate courses tended to choose their colleges based on the potential for scholarships. The authors believed that this finding was due to the higher enrollment of students in poverty in International Baccalaureate coursework in these particular schools and discussed this finding as a limitation of their study.

Gagnon and Mattingly (2016) continued that although "considering the overwhelming importance that home and community factors play in determining one's likelihood of enrolling and succeeding in Advanced Placement coursework," (p. 269) access to advanced courses is severely lacking in rural areas. The authors addressed that although nationally almost 75% of all high schools offer some sort of Advanced Placement course choice or choices to their students, only slightly more than half of all schools labeled as rural offer any choices of Advanced Placement coursework. The authors conducted a quantitative logistical regression analysis focused on access and enrollment in Advanced Placement coursework in relation to school size and location. Not surprisingly, Gagnon and Mattingly (2016) concluded that the average urban or suburban district included in the study of more than 6,500 school districts nationwide enrolled 5% of all students they served in at least one Advanced Placement class. This finding was more than 30% higher than students from rural areas. Suburban school

districts, when isolated from urban and rural districts had an average enrollment of more than 50% of all students completing an Advanced Placement course by graduation.

Gagnon and Mattingly (2006) reported that many rural school districts indicated that their districts lacked “numbers of capable students” (p. 278) that would justify adding Advanced Placement courses to their curriculum, however, some rural district officials conceded that dual enrollment opportunities through online or distance education might be better suited for their population.

Cross and Burney (2005) sought to describe Project Aspire, which was designed to promote academic rigor among students who were economically disadvantaged in order to increase knowledge concerning obstacles students identified as high ability in rural communities might encounter. Project Aspire included tasks and training for guidance counselors that included increasing their knowledge about Advanced Placement coursework for students who were economically disadvantaged, preparing students for the stress often related to advanced academics, and providing postsecondary planning assistance. Cross and Burney (2005) conducted a qualitative study with a group of 21 counselors who were interviewed an average of four times over the course of three years, typically in small groups, for sessions lasting two to three hours. Cross and Burney (2005) reported three themes: "rigorous courses are too much work or take too much time" (p. 150), “school climate, issues, and rules discourage participation in advanced options” (p. 152), and “there are issues relating to generational poverty" (p. 153). Regarding the second theme concerning participation in advanced courses, Cross and Burney (2005) ascertained several implications. Counselors stated during the interviews that they believed students were more concerned with GPA than course curriculum.

Citing a potential shift in the state policy concerning earning high school credit in middle school, high achieving students would be required to take calculus their senior year, which students feared would lower their GPA if they did poorly. Cross and Burney (2005) indicated that many rural teachers of academically gifted students did not know that past research has specified that exposure to rigorous curriculum has a great effect on persistence through college compared to having a high GPA or Advanced Placement examination test scores.

Kolluri's (2018) extensive meta-analysis of literature pertaining to Advanced Placement coursework was conducted to determine if the rigor of Advanced Placement coursework would remain if access to Advanced Placement coursework was increased. More than 50 articles that addressed rigor and access dating from 1992 to 2017 were analyzed based on multiple criterion determined by the author including sample size, validity, replicability, and population. Kolluri maintained that although the initial beginnings of the Advanced Placement program sought to measure students' college-level coursework ability in elite private schools, College Board (the distributor of Advanced Placement coursework) now promotes equal access to all students and stresses the importance of that access to all students regardless of race or socioeconomic status. Despite College Board's promotion of access, Kolluri's findings were the opposite. The meta-analysis conducted revealed significant gaps in enrollment between students in poverty and their middle-income peers when enrolled at the same high school. Additionally, the analysis indicated that first generation students were only half as likely to enroll in Advanced Placement coursework as their peers who had at least one college-educated parent. Courses offered at high schools also varied widely, most prominently in

the area of Advanced Placement Computer Science, a programming course, which was found to be offered predominately at higher income suburban high schools.

Time has not changed the most common barriers to postsecondary opportunities. According to Hill (2017), the findings of The Coleman Report, a seminal study in the field of education conducted more than 50 years ago, still occur: students in poverty, Black students, and Hispanic students have fewer options for postsecondary opportunities. Course selection policies at high schools, according to Attewell and Domina (2008), could limit access to advanced coursework opportunities for students, particularly students in poverty. Moller et al. (2013) furthered this argument by reporting the high level of importance of access to advanced coursework curriculum in regard to postsecondary planning, particularly with Advanced Placement coursework, stating that enrollment “is a critical component” to increase rigor and matriculate to college (p. 864).

Acknowledging the importance of both family and community influences in course selection (Gagnon & Mattingly, 2016), schools located in rural areas often struggle to offer a variety of advanced courses, potentially limiting opportunity to access postsecondary options for their students. This phenomenon is mirrored at many urban schools that struggle to offer advanced coursework opportunities because the necessity to focus on accountability standards (Lambie & Williamson, 2004). Many schools turn to programs such as Project Aspire (Cross & Burney, 2005) for additional opportunities to expose students in poverty to advanced coursework.

**Student and parent perceptions of advanced coursework.** Rudasill and Callahan (2010) sought to determine the relationship between gender, grade level, and students' perception of both their ability and their future coursework plans. A total of 447

students in Grades 5-11 who were attending a summer enrichment camp for gifted students completed a questionnaire designed by Rudasill and Callahan (2010). After the questionnaire was completed, a quantitative factor analysis was performed. The authors determined statistically significant differences between girls and boys in the area of course planning, specifically, in the areas of humanities and math. Girls' perceptions of their abilities in the area of humanities was higher than the perceptions of boys in the same area. Boys, however, planned to take more mathematics courses than did girls in the same ability and age range. Rudasill and Callahan (2010) proposed that "academically advanced students' self-perceptions of ability correlated with their future plans" (p. 301). The authors acknowledged the importance of schools' personnel encouraging students to take a variety of courses to expand their career choices and suggested that further research in the areas of perceived disinterest among girls in STEM fields, coursework planning and self-perception, and gender stereotypes in career planning are needed.

Ellison, Wohn, and Greenhow (2014) sought to understand how adolescents' life plans are developed both online and offline. Interviews were conducted with 43 students at a Michigan high school and many were first generation students and students in poverty. Slightly more than half of those interviewed were seniors at their high school, and the others were juniors. Ellison et al. (2014) concluded that most students' future plans and understanding of how their future plans would come to fruition were based on their social contacts, primarily with their friends and family.

Smith (2008) undertook qualitative interviews of single Black mothers with daughters to determine the college choice processes of the daughters who were enrolled

at an urban high school in California. Although the initial study began with three women, nine additional women were added, and 34 transcribed audio interviews were analyzed. Smith (2008) determined that the mothers believed that the high school diploma their daughters earned would help them out of abject poverty. Another finding presented by Smith (2008) was the theme of unpreparedness in the college planning process, specifically with financial aid. Smith (2008) suggested that information about college financial aid be distributed to the lowest economic communities as many parents in these areas believed that it was the parents' sole responsibility to pay for college.

In their qualitative case study of multiple midwestern high schools, Foust, Hertbert-Davis, and Callahan (2009) interviewed more than 80 students about their perceptions of participating in either Advanced Placement or International Baccalaureate programs at the high schools they attended. Themes that arose from the interviews included the perception that taking advanced courses guaranteed that one would have more experienced teachers and be in classes with other students who wanted to push themselves academically. Students in the International Baccalaureate classes commented that when they were participating in general academic courses, the focus of conversations from other students would be surface-level whereas the conversations between International Baccalaureate classes were much deeper. Ability grouping seemed to produce divergent themes: some students interviewed believed that anyone who worked hard could be in Advanced Placement courses, whereas other students, particularly those participating in International Baccalaureate programs, believed there were intellectual differences in students who chose to take advanced coursework. International Baccalaureate students, in particular, cited a divide among International Baccalaureate

and non-International Baccalaureate students at their schools but stated that the specific scheduling that takes place for International Baccalaureate students created the divide. In the area of stress, Foust et al. (2009) cited that students interviewed mentioned high levels of stress and lowered amounts of sleep but did feel comradery with other students in the same courses in which they were enrolled.

Although the academic benefits of advanced coursework are both consistent and well documented, student and parent perceptions of enrollment in coursework differ by gender and race. Rudasill and Callahan (2010) reported a strong correlation to enrollment in advanced courses and students' plans for their future and girls tended to take more humanities courses whereas boys tended to take more math and science classes.

Although the correlation to gender and the type of courses students enrolled in was important, Rudasill and Callahan (2010) emphasized the role of school personnel as a source of encouragement for students to enroll in advanced coursework. Regarding perceptions, Ellison et al. (2014) continued, noting that students' friends and family also played a large role in the students' plan to enroll in advanced coursework.

**Advanced coursework: Early College High School model.** Woodcock and Olson Beal (2013) cited a lack of narratives and voice in the research of the Early College High School model. Often the subject of quantitative research, this qualitative study by Woodcock and Olson Beal (2013) was based on narrative inquiry and focused on the social and academic experiences of students attending Early College High Schools. The authors contacted 18 Early College High Schools located in Texas, which yielded an initial sample of 25 graduates and was then narrowed to three students so that more in-depth narratives could be achieved. Students identified themselves as a Hispanic female,

White male, and an African American female; all were first-generation college students. Woodcock and Olson Beal (2013) used qualitative narrative inquiry via two-hour interviews using questions that were open-ended. Questions focused on their reasons to attend an Early College High School, number of credits earned, relational questions, and preparation questions. Woodcock and Olson Beal (2013) found, through the stories of the participants, a variety of common themes such as academic preparedness as a positive implication and lack of extracurricular opportunity in high school as a negative one. One area of additional research that the researchers proposed was a deeper look at the "academic, social, and financial costs and challenges" that students attending Early College High School programs face (Woodcock & Olson Beal, 2013, p. 74).

In their phenomenological study of perceived support, challenges, and experiences of Early College High School students, Saenz and Combs (2015) conducted focus group interviews of 17 students and individual interviews of five of the previously interviewed students who attended an Early College High School located in a low socioeconomic urban area. Almost 90% of students enrolled at the Early College High School were eligible for the federal free or reduced lunch program. Findings from Saenz and Combs (2015) included five major themes: "significance of an associate degree, importance of a positive school environment, establishment of identity and values, impact of family members, and necessity of support from peers and teachers" (p. 154). Students interviewed mentioned benefits of attending an Early College High School such as increased variety of classes, decreased cost to finish a bachelor's degree because they were obtaining their associate degree for free, and expanded college readiness skills such as time management. Saenz and Combs (2015) concluded that by students enrolling at the

Early College High School that predominately served student in poverty, there was an increase in equity and access to a college degree.

Howley, Howley, Howley, and Duncan (2013) studied the Early College High School model with a focus on the relationships between high school and college partnerships. Educators from eight high schools and three colleges, which formed a small group of dual enrollment programs, were interviewed over two school years. Howley et al. (2013) revealed that communication difficulties between the adults working at colleges and high schools result in a lack of common goals, thus creating potential roadblocks for students to succeed.

### **Summary**

In summary, a specific environment where enrollment in advanced coursework across the curricula by every student is the Early College High School model. This model offers students the ability to complete college level coursework while completing high school. Most Early College High School students simultaneously earn their high school diploma while also earning their associate's degree. Although the benefits of college preparedness, class variety, free obtainment of an associate's degree, and college readiness exist, students do give up their ability to participate in extracurricular activities (Howley et al., 2013; Saenz & Combs, 2015; Woodcock & Olson Beal, 2013). Across the literature, the theme of communication repeats: communication is important between the high school and community college (Howley et al., 2013) and communication is meaningful when sharing opportunities to earn a college degree while in high school (Saenz & Combs, 2015).

## CHAPTER III

### Method

The purpose of this Delphi study was to describe a consensus among selected high school guidance counselors about the most common barriers to advanced coursework opportunities experienced by high school students. Charged with maintaining personal graduation plans for all secondary school students, high school counselors are commissioned to help students choose the coursework best representative of the students' abilities and future plans. The counselor serves as an integral link between students' high school coursework choices and the impact those courses have with postsecondary planning.

Chapter III begins with a brief history of the Delphi technique and its tenants including the structure and importance of an expert panel. Instrumentation used in the study and the formation of a pilot study follow. The chapter concludes with an explanation of the data collection and analysis, commentary on consensus, and confirmation of the legitimization of the study.

### Research Design

The Delphi technique, developed by the RAND Corporation in the 1950s, combines multiple rounds of both open-ended and scaled questionnaires completed by a panel of experts in a particular field (Hsu & Sanders, 2007; Pollard & Pollard, 2008). Citing the earlier work of Delbecq, Van de Ven, and Gufstason (1975), Hsu and Sandford (2007) outlined five appropriate objectives of potential Delphi technique usage. These objectives included the following: "determining or developing alternatives to programs, exploring or exposing assumptions that lead to different judgements, seeking out

information that leads to consensus, multidisciplinary consensus, or educating a group about how multiple aspects of a topic are interrelated” (Hsu & Sandford, 2007, p. 1).

With the use of an expert panel comprised of high school counselors, concentration was placed on the second major objective of Delphi studies: “exploring or exposing assumptions that could potentially lead to different judgements” by the counselors about their roles in the equitable distribution of opportunities in advanced coursework (Hsu & Sandford, 2007, p. 1). Pollard and Pollard (2007) continued that using the Delphi technique is best used when “the problem does not lend itself to the precise analytical techniques but can benefit from subjective judgements on a collective basis” (p. 3117). Lindqvist and Nordanger (2007) concurred that the Delphi technique is not necessarily concerned with reaching an answer that could be deemed right or wrong but is used to conclude a “reasonably reliable estimation” (p. 1).

Sackman (1974) contended that Delphi is extremely different from simply trying to predict how people will respond. The author described Delphi “as the authentic embodiment of thoughtful concurred expert opinion wherever it is applied” (Sackman, 1974, p. 71). Dalkey (1969) stated in a summarization of Delphi that the three steps of “anonymous response, iteration and controlled feedback, and statistical group response” help reduce “biasing effects of dominant individuals, . . . irrelevant communication, . . . and group pressure” (p. 5) when working toward consensus.

Concerning anonymous response, Dalkey (1969) explained that RAND corporation’s multiple experiments led to the conclusion that in-person focus groups were subject to domination by one or a few participants, and members of face to face groups often felt the necessity to conform to others instead of forming their own opinions.

Dalkey (1969) believed that anonymous responses were typically more precise and allowed researchers to collect responses from each member of the group instead of the most dominant participants.

Iteration and controlled feedback refer to the second portion in the multiple rounds of questioning involved in Delphi. After initial responses are gathered anonymously from the panel of experts, the responses of all participants are shared with one another. At this time, the participants can add to or change their responses. Following this step, a researcher using Delphi would develop themes based on the responses of the panel. A second iteration or round of questions based on the developed themes are sent to the panel for commenting or ranking. A third iteration follows to delineate further the information into consensus of the group.

Dalkey (1969) addressed the third portion of Delphi, statistical group response, stating its importance as a “device to assure that the opinion of every member of the group is represented in the final response” (p. 16). The author continued with additional benefits of using the Delphi technique in research, which included how objectivity can be increased through multiple rounds of questions and anonymity. Dalkey (1969) reminded researchers that an additional benefit of conducting research using the Delphi technique is the simplicity of responding. The author stated that it was much easier to respond “to a well-designed questionnaire than, for example, to participate in a conference or write a paper” (p. 17).

Continuing with potential benefits of Delphi is the appeal of both qualitative and quantitative features of the technique. Lindqvist and Nordanger (2007) stated Delphi allows a researcher to “treat qualitative data in order to arrive at quantitative results” (p.

3) about a particular topic. Features such as participant anonymity and structure, mentioned by Hsu and Sandford (2010), are present in Delphi studies but are lacking in focus groups where dominant individuals can often sway the other participants. In the current study, a Delphi is proposed as the most appropriate design to answer the research question: The following research question was addressed in this study: What are the most common barriers to advanced coursework for high school students as viewed by high school counselors?

The Delphi has been used extensively in education research (Manning & Emmons, 2010; Kezar & Maxey, 2016; Rabina, 2013). For example, Manning and Emmons (2010) conducted a Delphi study to explore faculty perceptions and student persistence in blended courses. Manning and Emmons (2010) chose a panel of experts with experience in education who taught blended courses and conducted three rounds of data collection. Delphi was an appropriate method for this educational topic as the consensus drawn from the results would not have been as meaningful from non-experts.

### **Expert Panel Development**

A key feature of the Delphi method lies in the formation of an expert panel and multiple iterations of questioning to develop consensus about a topic, which was applied in my study. Skulmoski, Hartman, and Krahn (2007) suggested four basic requirements considered when deeming experts in a field: “knowledge and experience with the issues under investigation, capacity and willingness to participate, sufficient time to participate, . . . and effective communication skills” (p. 10). Regarding the number of participants on an expert panel, authors (e.g., Dalkey, 1969; Hsu & Sanders, 2007, Skulmoski et al.,

2007) agree that no perfect number of experts exist. In this study, there were 18 experts participating in at least one phrase of the study with seven completing all three rounds.

Green (2015) stated that Delphi allows for a “detailed critical examination and discussion” of a topic (p. 1). In the field of education, the use of the Delphi method can be impactful if the tenants of Delphi are followed (Green, 2015). Green continued that panel membership stability, short time between rounds of inquiry, clearly written questions, and feedback about consensus building throughout the process are crucial. Green (2015) interpreted Lincoln and Guba’s 1985 work, *Naturalistic Inquiry*, by stating that the Delphi method helps with the triangulation that Lincoln and Guba deemed crucial in research. Green (2015) indicated that the concepts of “credibility, transferability, dependability” are demonstrated through the choice of an expert panel followed by multiple iterations of questioning (p. 721).

The Houston Area Directors of Guidance (HADOG) is a group comprised of approximately 40 directors of guidance, lead counselors from small school districts, and district-level curriculum officials from Houston and the surrounding areas. Although there is not a formal membership process or required dues, this group formed out of the need to dialogue with colleagues in similar positions throughout the Houston area. The members of this organization are the highest ranking counseling official in their district and therefore have access to the high school counselors employed by their respective districts. The members of the Houston Area Directors of Guidance were asked for names of high school counselors they believed to be the best equipped to answer questions pertaining to the barriers that prevent students from enrolling in advanced coursework opportunities.

## **Instrumentation**

Dalkey (1969) explained the Delphi technique as a tool to gain consensus among a panel of experts. This process begins with open-ended questions to elicit a wide variety of responses. Skulmoski et al. (2007) concurred that the necessity for open-ended questions allows the researcher to “widely cast the research net [in order to collect] a broader range of responses” (p. 10). Open-ended questions produced a variety of responses that took substantial time to read and analyze. The second iteration of questions proposed to the panel of experts is based on the responses from the first round of open-ended questions. Typically, questions posed in the second round of Delphi were those responses that occurred in the middle 50% of the first round of question. Rounds 2 and 3 are usually comprised of Likert-scaled questions where the experts rank statements to achieve consensus.

Questions in Round 1 consisted of both closed demographic questions and literature-based open-ended questions. The demographic questions were used to describe the participants. The responses to the open-ended questions in Round 1 were used to develop the statements used in Rounds 2 and 3. The Round 1, 2, and 3 questions appear in Appendix A.

## **Pilot Study**

Johnson and Christensen (2012) stated that “a cardinal rule in research” includes piloting your questionnaire (p. 211). Including a pilot study allows feedback to be solicited about structure and clarity. The open-ended questions designed for Round 1 of the study were given to 12 counselors in one selected school district in the Houston area. These counselors critiqued the questions for clarity. I determined the average length of

time needed for responses. Seeking clarification from counselors who were similar to the expert panel allowed me to refine the instrument. Having access to pilot responses assisted in planning the analysis phase of the study. The pilot study consisted of 12 counselors from one school district. Of the 12 counselors, seven had the title academic counselors, whereas five had the title college and career counselor. All college and career counselors in the pilot study previously served as academic counselors. The counselors were sent the questions for Round 1. Following the completion of the survey, the counselors were asked to comment on the structure and order of the questions. This feedback was used to improve the instrument.

### **Data Collection and Analysis**

Following permission from the Institutional Review Board at Sam Houston State University (see Appendix D), the collection of data for this study began. In the first round of data collection, I administered an electronic open-ended questionnaire to collect responses from the panel. This questionnaire was designed based on the literature reviewed in Chapter II and with the guidance of other researchers on the dissertation committee. This open-ended questionnaire was piloted with a small group of counselors in one selected school district.

To gather data electronically, I used the Qualtrics Survey Platform, a secure product accessible to students and faculty at my institution. Qualtrics, as per their security statement, holds certifications from the U. S. government for federal level security measures and compliance with two health certifications including federal HIPPA guidelines. I used Qualtrics to house the questions for the three rounds of the study.

The questions for Round 1 of the survey were entered into the survey area of the Qualtrics dashboard. Each question was added independently. Qualtrics allows 17 types of questions to be entered and five different types of responses. I used the text entry for questions and the essay text box for response collection. The distribution feature of the dashboard allows for an email to be composed and sent to recipients, a single reusable link to be sent to a group of participants, or a link that can be tracked for each participant. I distributed the link to participants following approval from the Institutional Review Board.

After receiving the responses from Round 1, I employed the technique of thematic analysis to identify themes that summarize the responses of the counselors. I also recorded quantitative data such as frequency of particular responses. Results and analysis of the Round 1 data are documented in Chapter IV.

Thematic analysis was chosen as a technique as it allowed for “flexibility sorting and grouping initial findings” (Gerber et al., 2017, p. 115). Using literature-based open-ended questions in Round 1 allowed for the collection of large amounts of information from the participants. From the responses, themes were developed and categorized. Saldaña (2011) stated:

Category construction is our best attempt to cluster the most seemingly alike things into the most seemingly appropriate groups. Categorizing is organizing and ordering the vast array of data from a study because it is from this larger and meaning rich units that we can better grasp particular features of each one, and the categories’ possible interrelationships with one another. (pp. 91-92)

When using the Delphi technique, Rounds 2 and 3 require both a qualitative and quantitative approach to analysis. Greatorex and Dexter (2000) expressed the importance of using descriptive statistics in the Delphi. During these rounds, descriptive statistics were used to express the results of the ranking of categories. I reported results using descriptive statistics. Results from both additional iterations can be found in Chapter IV.

Initially, an email was sent to 58 directors of guidance in the Houston area requesting email addresses of counselors in each of their school districts considered to be experts at assuring students access to advanced coursework. A second email soliciting additional emails was sent 10 days after the initial email. The first email generated 17 email addresses from the directors of guidance. The second email generated an additional 26 email addresses for a total of 43 counselors' email addresses. All 43 counselors were sent the Round 1 questionnaire through an email.

After analyzing the results from the Round 1 survey, the Round 2 survey questions were created and sent to IRB for approval. During the time that IRB was determining the approval for the Round 2 questions, the COVID 19 pandemic began. I believe that the COVID 19 pandemic greatly affected the level of participation in this research. Round 1 participants numbered 18 whereas the Round 2 and Round 3 number decreased to approximately one half of the original group. As counselors on campuses were likely coordinating efforts to remotely educate and to provide services to students, the desire to complete any other activity not directly related to their jobs most likely declined.

To retain the anonymity of the participants, email addresses of the counselors who participated in the first round were not collected. Therefore, when the Round 2 questions

were distributed, they were sent to all 43 of the email addresses initially sent by the directors of guidance in the Houston Area Directors of Guidance Group. Round 2 participants were asked a question concerning their participation in Round 1. This question allowed me to ascertain the difference between those counselors participating in the initial panel and those participating only in Round 2. Additionally, in Round 3, participants were again asked about their participation in Rounds 1 and 2 and were asked to complete demographic information identical to that asked in Round 1.

### **Consensus**

As with most aspects of the Delphi technique, the specificity of consensus is not set at a particular percentage or ratio. Skulmoski et al. (2007) described concluding Delphi when “consensus is reached, theoretical saturation is achieved, or sufficient information has been exchanged” (p. 5). Several methodologists and educational researchers described consensus without a formal definition but used the phrases such as *achieve consensus*, *consensus is reached*, *consensus varied*, *high degree of consensus* (Davidson, 2013; Gabriel, 2005; Skulmoski et al., 2007).

The method of determining consensus appears to default to the researcher to set at their discretion. Keeney, Hasson, and McKenna (2011) stated “the definition of acceptable level of consensus to attain is contentious, and often this is an arbitrary figure stated post hoc or entirely omitted in many studies” (p. 27). Continuing, Keeney et al. (2011) provided four examples from previous research about how consensus could also be defined “aggregate the judgements of respondents, generating a pre-determined level of consensus, application of the subjective level of central tendency, and measuring the consistency of responses between successive rounds” (p. 27). A variety of examples were

noted by Keeney et al. (2011) that ranged from a simple majority of 51% agreement to 100% agreement among the panelists. With a small expert panel, I believed it was important to look at consensus as a simple majority or 51% of the opinions of the counselors on the panel. Using Likert-scaled questions and employing ranking of barriers allowed the outlying opinions to not skew the majority opinions of the panel. Consensus results of specific questions are shared in Chapter IV.

### **Legitimation**

Often referred to as a partial mixed methods approach, the Delphi technique combines qualitative inquiry with quantitative ranking (Skulmoski et al, 2007). Lindqvist and Nordanger (2007) stated that Delphi allows a researcher “to treat qualitative data in order to arrive at quantitative results in a systematic and structured way” (p. 2). No matter the choice of method of research, the research must be valid. Onwuegbuzie and Johnson (2006) suggested that “validity in mixed research be termed legitimation in order to use a bilingual nomenclature” as both qualitative and quantitative approaches are taken (p. 55). Onwuegbuzie, Johnson, and Collins (2011) offered nine different legitimation types when designing research from the approach of both qualitative and quantitative approaches: “sample integration, inside out, weakness minimization, sequential, conversion, paradigmatic mixing, commensurability, multiple validities, and political” (p. 1256). The authors continued by categorizing each of the nine types of legitimation using Greene’s (2006) domains of “philosophical assumptions and stances, inquiry logics, guidelines for research practice, and sociopolitical commitments,” each of which are important parts of social inquiry (p. 1257). To maintain legitimation, I focused on a single type of legitimation defined by Onwuegbuzie et al. (2011) in each of the domains

presented by Greene (2006). Table 1 presents each category of social inquiry, followed by the type of legitimation planned, and finally my actions to maintain legitimation.

Table 1

*Social Inquiry Domains and Legitimation Types Used in Delphi Study*

Domain	Legitimation Type	Planned Response
Philosophical assumptions and stances	Inside-outside	After receiving responses from the counselors who participated in the Delphi study, these responses were shared with all participants and included in the study.
Inquiry logics	Sample integration	Through the choice to conduct a Delphi study, a strong relationship between qualitative inquiry through open-ended questions and quantitative reporting of expert panel should produce high quality responses.
Guidelines for research practice	Conversion	Conversion requires quantitizing of qualitative data. I used conversion as I moved from the first to the second round of the Delphi study to produce a Likert-scaled choices for the second round.
Sociopolitical commitments	Political	Research needs to appeal to multiple stakeholders to fulfil political legitimation. Chapter V of this study contains applications for multiple stakeholders.

Onwuegbuzie, Leech, and Collins (2008) also stressed the importance of researcher debriefing so that bias could be avoided. Onwuegbuzie et al. (2008) described the two major types of bias as Bias A and Bias B: “the effects of the researcher on the study participants [Bias A] and the effects of the participants on the researcher [Bias B]” (p. 3). Throughout the study, I debriefed with my dissertation committee to ensure that I, as a counselor, was not influencing the outcomes of the study.

**Summary**

In summary, the focus of Chapter III was the method used, in particular, the Delphi technique. Chapter III began with a brief history of the Delphi technique and its origin, followed by an explanation of the expert panel—the crucial component of Delphi. Following information on the expert panel is the instrumentation section that covers the design of the first round of questions. The Round 1 questions of a Delphi study were open-ended to generate responses that became the choices for Likert-scaled responses in Rounds 2 and 3. Following the questions is the explanation of data collection and data analysis. Finally, legitimation is discussed. In the next chapter, findings are presented.

## CHAPTER IV

### Data Analysis and Results

#### Introduction

The purpose of this Delphi study was to describe a consensus among selected high school guidance counselors about the most common barriers to advanced coursework opportunities experienced by high school students. Developed in the 1950s, the Delphi technique sought to compile opinions of experts in a particular field in an effort to report consensus in research. Participants were selected based on their expertise about the barriers faced by students in enrolling in advanced coursework. These participants were recommended by their directors of guidance of their school districts and were recognized as experts on this subject.

As a point of context, data collection for this study took place during the COVID 19 pandemic in the spring of 2020. Through the use of electronic surveys, consensus opinion with a large number of experts in the field was a challenge. Confined to their homes with additional duties such as meal coordination, remote mental health counseling, and personal family concerns, participation in research was understandably not a priority for these educators. Therefore, descriptions of participants are provided in the data analysis to provide the background of the participants in Round 1 and Round 3. Round 1 descriptions were gathered with the hope that participants would participate in each subsequent round; Round 3 descriptions were gathered to create a description of the expert panel.

### **Demographics of Expert Panel**

As Skulmoski et al. (2007) indicated in their explanation of the Delphi technique, no set number of experts existed and consensus was the goal of the research. For this study the selection of the expert panel began by emailing the members of the Houston Area Directors of Guidance. Those 58 directors of guidance were asked to respond with the email addresses of high school counselors who they considered experts regarding the topic of advanced academics. The email to the Houston Area Directors of Guidance was sent twice, 10 days apart, to collect email addresses. Exactly 11 members of the Houston Area Directors of Guidance responded with 43 email addresses of counselors they considered experts in the field in regards to the barriers for students to advanced academics. Emails were sent to the 43 counselors suggested by the directors to both gain consent and distribute the survey.

**Round 1 panel description.** Of the 18 participants who completed the Round 1 questions, 17 were female and one was male. The 18 participants had an average of 12 years of experience as counselors, and an average of 19 years in education. All participants were currently employed by public high schools in the state of Texas. Of the 18 counselors, 16 worked at traditional high schools comprised of Grades 9-12, whereas two participants worked at traditional high schools comprised of Grades 10-12. High school counselors often have specific roles on their campus. The participants were asked to identify with one of five different types of counselors traditionally found on campuses: traditional academic/guidance (alpha separated), traditional academic/guidance (grade-level separated), crisis counselor, lead counselor, or college and career/college access counselor. Of the 18 counselors, almost half (eight) identified themselves as traditional

academic/guidance (alpha separated), six of the counselors identified as college and career/college access counselors, and five counselors identified as lead counselors.

School sizes ranged from 283 students to 4,000 students enrolled, with 16 of the 18 participants working at schools with more than 1,000 students. The average enrollment of the schools larger than 1,000 students was 2,524 students. High school lead counselors and college and career/college access counselors are not always assigned specific students in their caseload. Two participants who identified as lead counselors reported that they have small caseloads of students, typically one-third to one-half of that of the other counselors on their campus. The college and career counselors reported caseload sizes equal to the enrollment of their respective high schools. The average reported caseload size was 395 students.

**Round 2 and Round 3 panel description.** To retain the anonymity of the participants but to also determine the expert panel, Round 2 participants were asked if they completed the Round 1 survey. Round 2 participants were not asked to complete demographic questions. I did not believe that it was important to do so, as the participants who would ultimately complete all three rounds of questions would ultimately be described. Nine of the 10 participants of Round 2 participated in the Round 1 survey. Subsequently, during the Round 3 survey, in an effort to finalize the demographics of the true expert panel, participants were asked to indicate if they completed Round 1 and Round 2. All participants in the Round 3 Survey were also asked the same demographic questions that Round 1 participants were asked. Round 3 participants included 10 participants, and seven completed all rounds of the study.

**Expert panel determination.** Round 3 participants totaled 10 counselors, seven of whom completed both Round 1 and Round 2. Of the other three participants in Round 3, one completed the Round 1 survey but not Round 2, and the other two participants participated for the first time in Round 3. As the goal of using the Delphi technique is to reach consensus among a panel of experts, it is important to describe the final expert panel, which I considered as the seven counselors participating in all three rounds of the Delphi process.

In Table 2, demographic information of the seven members is presented. As noted, all but one counselor self-identified as female. The average years of experience as counselors ranged from 7 to 18 years with a mean of 11.8 years. The expert panel included three counselors who identified as college and career or college access counselors, two counselors who identified as lead counselors, and two counselors who identified as traditional counselors. The mean population of the high schools represented by the expert panel totaled over 2,000 students. Mean caseload size reported by the counselors who were assigned caseloads was slightly over 350 students per counselor. The three counselors who identified as college and career or college access counselors stated that they were assigned all students at their high school and therefore did not have a specific caseload size they were directly responsible for. All counselors reported that they worked at what could be described as traditional public high schools. Of the seven experts in this study, four were employed on traditional campuses with Grades 9-12 and three were employed on campuses with Grades 10-12.

Table 2

*Descriptive Statistics for Expert Panel*

Participant	Gender	Years in	Years in	Type of High	Enrollment	Caseload	Type of
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		Counseling	Education	School			Counselor
1	F	10	15	Trad 9-12	2,300	500	Traditional
2	M	17	21	Trad 9-12	1,200	380	Lead
3	F	15	18	Trad 10-12	3,000	All	College/Career
4	F	8	10	Trad 9-12	1,300	150	Lead
5	F	18	23	Trad 9-12	2,000	All	College/Career
6	F	8	11	Trad 10-12	3,400	400	Traditional
7	F	7	17	Trad 10-12	3,000	All	College/Career

### Round 1 Results

Round 1 consisted of five open-ended questions followed by five demographic questions, as shown in Appendix A. The five open-ended questions focused on the identification of campus barriers. Barriers were derived from various sources of literature mentioned in Chapter II.

Participants ( $n = 18$ ) were asked in Question 1 to indicate which if any of the 14 barriers were present on their campus. The 14 barriers offered as choices were created using literature about advanced coursework, high school counselors, and enrollment barriers. The barriers were defined and included caseload size, cost, course offerings, disconnectedness, fear, future plans, parents, peer pressure, performance, school personnel, school policy, time, transportation, and workload, as shown in Appendix B. Most of the barriers were chosen at least one time, with the exception of course offerings and transportation. Frequency of each choice is listed in Table 3.

Table 3

*Frequency of Barrier Choice in Round 1*

Barrier	frequency
Fear	14
Workload	12
Performance	11
Caseload Size	8
Disconnectedness	7
Future Plans	6
Cost	5
School Personnel	5
Peer Pressure	4
School Policy	4
Time	4
Parents	2
Course Offerings	0
Transportation	0

With regards to the frequency of barriers, the following five were cited most frequently by the expert panel in Round 1: Fear (14), Workload (12), Performance (11), Caseload Size (8), and Disconnectedness (7). Additionally, participants were then polled to answer the question “Now, using your expertise, which barriers to advanced coursework are MISSING from this list? What barriers to advanced coursework do your students face in addition to these?” Fourteen responses were generated and were then

thematically analyzed and offered as four new barriers as additional choices in the Round 2 questionnaire.

Creswell (2014) addressed the necessity of qualitative researchers to focus on multiple aspects of data analysis including both inductive and deductive data analysis, stating “researchers build their patterns, categories, and themes from the bottom up by organizing the data into increasingly more abstract units of information” (p. 186). During the analysis of the counselors’ responses, new barriers developed. The responses of the counselors were categorized thematically and included bias, college readiness, GPA/rank, and staffing. Because these newly developed barriers were not included with the initial choices in Round 1, the new barriers became additional choices during Round 2.

Definitions were created for each new barrier using phrasing from the participants.

For the barrier of bias, the description was as follows: teachers have bias against students who do not fit the stereotype of the students currently enrolled in advanced coursework and are therefore not encouraged to enroll. For the barrier of college readiness, the description created was as follows: due to a lack of exposure to more rigorous curriculum during lower grade levels, students are not prepared for advanced coursework in high school or cannot score the required scores to enroll in dual credit. The barrier of GPA/rank was described as follows: school policy does not weight advanced coursework any higher than level coursework and students, therefore, do not have any incentive to enroll. Finally the barrier of staffing was described as follows: schools struggle to find qualified teachers for advanced courses, especially dual credit, and can therefore not offer specific courses.

Additionally, participants were asked what counselors could do to minimize barriers to advanced coursework. The participants contributed 16 short responses ranging from one to six sentences each. These 16 responses contained both similarities and replication in some instances. For example one participant commented, “I think their [sic] needs to be more communication with parents about expectations, benefits . . . the message gets slightly altered when the student shares it . . . communication would ease a lot of tension with barriers.” A similar response from a different participant included phrasing such as “more parent involvement when we are relaying information about different levels of coursework” and a third response suggested that counselors “provide videos about the opportunities available to students.” Portions of those three responses were consolidated to a single statement: “Counselors could have more communication with parents through presentations, videos, newsletters, emails, etc. to convey importance of advanced coursework.” The eight statements were generated by searching for common language, themes, and suggestions of participants and were then used in Round 2. These statements are located in Appendix C.

The final two open-ended questions in Round 1 were very similar. First, counselors were asked to describe the students not enrolled in advanced coursework and next were asked why they believed these students experienced barriers to advanced coursework. Using the two different questions seemed to allow for responses that included both descriptions and possible new barriers.

The 15 responses regarding description of students were categorized into 10 descriptors to be used in Round 2. Saldaña (2011) stated “category construction is our best attempt to cluster the most seeming alike things” and continued that categorizing

allows researchers to organize data (p. 91). The process of category construction was used to generate categories based on the responses of the counselors. Because participants could enter more than one description in their response, many responses mentioned one or more category descriptors. For example, one response mentioned “academically not prepared for the rigor of advanced coursework, lack the commitment to the workload,” whereas another simply stated “minority, average, low SES.” Categories had to be concise enough to encompass a variety of descriptions, but broad enough to express the opinions of all of the counselors.

Question 5 responses appeared to confirm the literature used to create the initial barriers. For example, one participant stated that “teachers, administrators, and counselors, need to work better together to help identify and encourage kids to take advanced courses,” which reiterated the importance of counselors in the role of postsecondary planning (Belasco, 2013; Cholewa et al., 2015). Another counselor stated that students might “lack of connection with someone to notice their abilities and encourage them to challenge themselves,” which supported the findings of many researchers (e.g., Cholewa, Burkhardt, & Hull, 2015; Cross & Burney, 2005; Davis, 2018; and Holland, 2015), who reported the importance of relational building between counselors and students in their research. Furthermore, first-generation status and racial/ethnic minority backgrounds were mentioned by several counselors supporting the research of Slate and Moore (2008) and Clark et al. (2012), who addressed the lack of racial/ethnic minority students, first-generation students, and gender discrepancies in enrollment in advanced coursework.

## Round 2 Results

Ten participants responded in Round 2. Delphi Round 2 questions centered on moving toward consensus opinion of counselors in regard to advanced coursework enrollment. Questions posed in Round 2 located in Appendix A included ranking the five most frequently chosen barriers from Round 1, explaining which barrier counselors could most greatly impact, explaining which barrier to eliminate first, choosing from newly suggested barriers from Round 1, using a Likert scale to rank the feasibility of eight statements generated by the responses of counselors in Round 1, and describing students not enrolled in advanced courses.

With regard to the first question of Round 2, counselors were given a list of the five barriers most frequently chosen in Round 1. Counselors were asked to rank barriers in order from 1 to 5 with the most common (as a 1) to least common (as a 5). Johnson and Christensen (2012) stated “In descriptive statistics, the goal is to describe, summarize or make sense of a particular set of data” (p. 498). Furthermore, researchers Greatorex and Dexter (2000) expressed the importance of using descriptive statistics when using the Delphi technique. In Table 4, descriptive statistics of the barriers identified by the expert panel are expressed.

Table 4

### *Mean, Median, and Mode for Barrier Rankings in Round 2*

Barrier	<i>M</i>	<i>Mdn</i>	<i>Mode</i>
Caseload Size	2.75	2.5	1
Disconnectedness	3	3	2
Fear	3.43	3	5

Performance	3.45	3	5
Workload	2.56	3	4

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*Note.* Responses are from 10 participants using a scale of 1 to 5 with 1 being the most common barrier and a 5 being the least common barrier at their campuses.

Concentrating on the mode to determine the most repeated rank to express the responses of the counselors, most frequently selected was caseload size, followed by disconnectedness. Ranked third was workload, and finally a tie occurred for fourth and fifth place between the ideas of fear and performance.

Despite caseload size being ranked first, the idea of *disconnectedness* was the most repeated word in response to the second question, “Which barrier can counselors most greatly impact and why?” Counselors mentioned disconnectedness as a stand-alone response: “Students don’t see how all math and science relate to upper level STEM” and “I believe that if we provide parents and students with enough opportunities to understand why advanced coursework is critical, you will see enrollment impact.” One response mentioned that counselors “could most impact the disconnectedness between advanced coursework and postsecondary opportunities.” Disconnectedness was also a response in connection with other responses, such as “I could impact the disconnectedness if our caseloads were smaller, which is out of our hands” and with regard to fear of enrolling in an advanced course “if we can connect students to an adult who can talk to them about their academic potential, it makes a difference.” Caseload size not being mentioned as a barrier that a counselor could impact is explainable, as counselor caseload is determined by the principal or the district office. Counselors not

believing that they could have an impact on caseload size is simply a reflection of common practice in the field.

The focus of Question 3 shifted to “Which barrier should be eliminated first and why?” Responses from counselors focused predominately on caseload size, confirming the most frequent response. Participants mentioned “until counselors can have a manageable caseload, there won’t be anyone to dispel the myths of advanced courses.” Reiterated by other counselors, “as counselors, we cannot be truly effective to caseloads of 400+” and “It’s impossible to full help students with academic planning and social emotional needs with 1/500 ratios.” Disconnectedness was also mentioned specifically in regard to communication: “we need to find ways to better inform students about their options and the benefits,” and “I believe that disconnectedness needs to be eliminated first, as this is crucial for students to best make decisions early on in high school about course selection decisions that impact their post-secondary plans.”

Question 4 centered on if the participants believed that another barrier should be added to the list of most common barriers. In Round 1, participants were first asked to choose from a provided list of barriers developed from sources of literature. Counselors were asked to indicate the provided barriers happening at their campuses. Counselors were then asked if they believed other barriers were missing. They responded with statements that became four new barriers: bias, college readiness, GPA/rank and staffing. During Round 2, Question 4 allowed participants to choose which of the newly added barriers if any were present in their settings. The results of this particular question showed that 70% of the counselors cited college readiness as a barrier that was frequently experienced on their campuses. College readiness was defined as follows: due to a lack

of exposure to more rigorous curriculum during lower grade levels, students are not prepared for advanced coursework in high school or cannot score the required scores to enroll in dual credit.

Round 2, Question 5 was conceptualized based on the responses to a question from Round 1, which focused on what the participants believed they could do as counselors to reduce the barriers experienced on their campuses. Round 2, Question 5 provided eight statements created from the Round 1 responses that the counselor participants then measured in Round 2 using a Likert Scale. The Likert Scale, introduced in the 1930s, allows a researcher to use a 5-point scale “for measuring a series of attitude related propositions” (Chyung, Roberts, Swanson, & Hankinson, 2017, p. 15). In this use of the Likert Scale, the attitude being measured was feasibility.

Counselors participating in Round 2 were given these directions: “When asked what counselors can do to eliminate barriers to advanced coursework, several ideas were shared. Please use the scale below to measure the feasibility of each item as it pertains to your campus.” All but one participant cited that counselors working with teachers to identify students who should enroll in advanced coursework was either *feasible* or *very feasible*. In regard to the feasibility for using the AP Potential report provided by College Board, all participants rated this as *feasible*, with two thirds (7) of the participants rating it as *very feasible*. Participants were equally divided between *feasible* and *very feasible* for the suggestion that counselors could encourage all students to take advanced coursework with additional targeting of time with racial/ethnic minority students—one of the ten participants did not answer this question and one counselor chose the response neutral as their answer. Although four participating counselors stated that having

individual conferences with students concerning course selection was *very feasible*, two counselors cited that this would *not be feasible at all* on their campus. This question was the only one that received *not at all feasible* as a response. Almost all, 9 of 10 counselor participants considered the idea of having intentional conversations with racial/ethnic minority students about advanced course enrollment on the spectrum of feasibility. Although one participant considered this as only *somewhat possible*, two thirds or seven of the respondents considered this idea *feasible* or *very feasible*. In regard to the feasibility of using community resources, this suggestion proved to be at the bottom of the feasibility rankings of counselors as most survey participants rated this either *somewhat feasible* or *neutral*. All counselors agreed that at either a *feasible*, *somewhat feasible*, or *very feasible* level that more communication about advanced coursework at their campuses was doable. The most highly rated suggestion concerned the use of data to make a decision pertaining to advanced course placement. Two thirds of all counselors ( $n = 7$ ) responded that this was *very feasible*.

The final question of Round 2 allowed counselors who were participating to answer: *When asked to describe students NOT enrolled in advanced courses on your campus, many descriptors were given. Choose the 5 that BEST describe students NOT enrolled in advanced courses on your campus: first generation to college students, immigrant students, low socioeconomic students, students of color (Black, Hispanic), students who are not college-ready, students who are not willing to put forth effort, students who do not understand benefits of advanced coursework, students who lack confidence in their abilities, students without a support system, and unmotivated students.* Delineated in Table 5 are the results from all 10 participants. Although counselors were

asked to list the five statements that best described their students, there was a natural break after the most frequent three choices. The most frequently chosen descriptions were students without a support system, unmotivated students, and students not willing to put forth effort.

These categories were created based on the broad descriptive answers reported in Round 1. Counselors' responses varied widely, so categories were created. Examples of these responses include very specific responses such as "students on free/reduced lunch, students in poverty, students who are poor," which could be categorized into *Low Socioeconomic Students*. Other categories, such as *Students Without A Support System*, were created from more broad responses from counselors such as "students don't have proper support at home, the priority of some students' families is to go to work, some parents don't understand the school system so the students aren't getting educational support or encouragement from home." This broader category was shaped by the idea that certain students may not be encouraged to pursue advanced coursework, may not be able to obtain help on coursework, or may come from homes where the pursuit of a postsecondary education is not encouraged.

Table 5

*Students not Enrolled in Advanced Courses (n = 10)*

Description	Frequency
Students Without A Support System	8
Unmotivated Students	8
Students Not Willing To Put Forth Effort	8
First Generation to College Students	4

Low Socioeconomic Students	4
Students Who Do Not Understand Benefits of Advanced Coursework	4
Students Who Lack Confidence In Their Abilities	4
Students Who Are Not College Ready	3
Student of Color (Black/Hispanic)	2
Immigrant Students	1

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The expert panel responses resulted in interesting findings. First, the least frequently chosen description was *students who are not college ready*. This result is surprising as the same counselors chose the barrier of college readiness at a frequency of 70% during the same round. Instead, the three most frequently chosen descriptions of students not enrolled in advanced coursework as shown in Table 5 are very difficult to determine unless a relationship has developed between the counselor and their students. Whereas descriptors such as socioeconomic status, first generation status, and ethnicity are all attributes that take little time to discover, the most chosen descriptions of students would indicate that either the counselors had either developed a relationship with students and knew this information intimately from conversation, or the counselors are making assumptions about the students who are not enrolling.

### **Round 3 Results**

The goal of using the Delphi technique was to establish an expert panel in an effort to reach consensus opinion. The Round 3 data includes the responses of the seven expert panel members as these seven participated in all three rounds. The isolation of the responses from participants who completed all stages of the research allows for the

reporting of the consensus opinions of an expert panel whose opinions shaped all three surveys. Davidson (2013) explained in their definition of Delphi “two key elements” that included the use of a “panel of experts” and the goal “to arrive at a consensus on complex problems” (p. 54).

Question 1 of Round 3 provided participants the opportunity to choose between two groups of previous developed responses that had been broadly categorized into the heading of *barriers or descriptions*. The barriers category contained previously ranked general concepts found in literature and voted on by the participants in Round 1 and Round 2. These barriers included caseload size, college readiness, disconnectedness, fear, performance, and workload. These barriers were cited numerous times in literature as potential reasons or barriers that students might not enroll in advanced coursework opportunities such as Advanced Placement, International Baccalaureate, or dual credit courses. The second group of responses participants could choose from was labeled *descriptions*. The descriptions group contained descriptions of students not enrolled in advanced courses on the campuses of the participants. The descriptions included the phrases students not willing to put forth effort, students without support systems, and unmotivated students. Three participants cited that the barriers were a more significant obstacle in enrollment whereas four participants chose the descriptions as the more significant obstacle in enrollment.

I believe that a very significant result of this research was the split decision among the counselors on the expert panel with regard to the first question in Round 3. Of the seven expert panel members, their responses were split four to three on what description held more significance: a quantifiable barrier such as economic status or a

more qualitative barrier such as a lack of support (a lack of resources at home, encouragement, or understanding by their family) in the home. This lack of agreement among counselors working together could be a barrier to enrollment in advanced coursework on campuses, and perhaps the greatest barrier. If a group of counselors who work together on a campus prioritize differently when it comes to reducing barriers to enrollment, the question must be asked, will the barriers ever go away? Choosing to work together to determine the priority of a campus' barriers does not take away the individual practice styles of counselors.

Continuing with responses from the first question, the majority of the counselors (four of seven) stated that the descriptions of the students were a more significant obstacle to enrollment in advanced coursework compared to barriers such as caseload size or fear of enrollment. What is not understood from these responses is the level of relationship that has been developed by the counselor with the students. Do the counselors know their students so well that they can describe their students' support systems at home and motivation levels? The three descriptions ranked highest in the previous round (i.e., students' support systems at home, lack of motivation, and not willing to put forth the effort). If the relationship between the counselors and the students has not been developed, are the counselors making assumptions about the students who are not enrolling in advanced coursework? Is implicit bias perpetuating a lack of enrollment in advanced coursework?

Participants were then asked to explain their reasoning in choosing either barriers or descriptions. The three expert panelists who chose barriers as the more significant obstacle responded with counselor responsibility-based responses. Phrasing from the

participants were very similar: “it is our responsibility as counselors to inform the students about these things” or “it’s about the support” and “I think more of the burden falls on the school and counselors to encourage and give students the tools to be successful in advanced coursework.” Participants who chose the descriptions as the more significant obstacle responded with the theme of student-responsibility. Examples of these responses include: “I believe mindset is 100% changeable” and “many of our students lack the motivation or may not see the value in enrolling” or “I think support system is huge. Students need someone to push them to take the course and stick with it” and finally, “student descriptors are more deep rooted in students’ environmental and societal issues . . . the most challenging of these to overcome is the lack of a support system outside of school.” One participant did concede that “schools could establish those support systems.”

Next, the counselor participants were asked to rank all the barriers and descriptions as a single group from 1-8, with 1 being the most probable obstacle faced in enrollment in advanced coursework. Table 6 reveals the final rank chosen by the expert panel of all barriers and descriptions. As indicated, the expert panel ranked the description of *no support system* as the most significant obstacle in enrollment in advanced coursework.

Table 6

*Ranking of All Barriers/Descriptions in Round 3*

Barrier	<i>Rank</i>
Students Without A Support System	1
Fear	2

Workload	3
Performance	4
Unmotivated Students	5
College Readiness	6
Caseload Size	7
Disconnectedness	7
Students Not Willing To Put Forth Effort	8

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Subsequently, counselors were asked to explain why they chose the specific rank order. Counselors' responses varied, but many cited the connection between the descriptions and barriers. One counselor summarized eloquently:

I feel like how I arranged them is very cause and effect. If you don't have a support system, you may fear that level of work and disconnect. When you do that, your performance struggles and the workload gets overwhelming. . . Your counselor's caseload is huge so you don't go to her, you are unmotivated because of that disconnect and decide it's too much effort.

The other counselors who comprised the expert panel seemed to echo the sentiment that barriers and obstacles are connected: "the first few are a mix of barriers and descriptions because they are connected" and "I think more of the burden falls on educators, not the students. We have to address the characteristics that we can control for them." This consensus of connection between the barriers mentioned in literature and the description of students was apparent.

A final overarching question was asked of the expert panel: As counselors, what do you believe we should be paying more attention to when it comes to advanced coursework opportunities for students? Responses from the counselors varied. One mentioned the importance of counselors having the ability to “explain to each individual student the benefits of advanced coursework to help students overcome their fears and lack of information.” Another counselor cited the need to pay attention to “students’ resilience-their determination to overcome obstacles using appropriate coping skills, [and] reaching out to their resources.” One counselor answered with a simple “to our students” when asked what counselors should pay attention to. Regardless of the counselor who responded, the consensus was that attention must be focused on making that connection between the student and the benefit of advanced courses. A counselor on the expert panel connected the need for counselors to be versatile but remain focused on the needs of students with this comment:

I think that counselors could better use data (PSAT scores) to identify students who have the potential to succeed in advanced coursework, but who have not selected these courses. Paying attention to motivational issues in pursuing advanced coursework is also important. Is the student's college readiness an issue? Or are there other factors going on in the student's life that affect their motivation to persist with the rigor required to complete advanced coursework? If so, counselors can help students make the connection between their values and long-term goals and their daily actions (persisting with required studying to succeed at advanced coursework).

## **Summary of Research Findings**

The focus of this research centered on the question: What are the most common barriers to advanced coursework for high school students as viewed by high school counselors? Collection of data occurred from February through May of 2020. The Delphi method was used to gather data from an expert panel of high school counselors and utilized an online survey platform.

Beginning with Round 1, 18 counselors were asked to confirm existing research-based barriers from literature and to add to the list of barriers. After confirming barriers, counselors were asked what they believed they could do to impact these barriers. The frequency of certain barriers such as fear, workload, and performance were mentioned by the majority of the Round 1 panel. Counselors were also given the opportunity to add barriers they believed were missing from the list. Counselors added four additional barriers that were bias, college readiness, GPA/Rank, and staffing. Participants continued with suggestions as to how to best eliminate barriers and eight statements were developed. Finally, counselors were asked to describe the students at their schools who were not enrolled in advanced coursework and those responses were categorized into 10 descriptors of students.

Round 2 provided 10 counselors the opportunity to rank the five most frequently occurring barriers previously discussed in Round 1 in an effort to move toward consensus. Counselors chose to prioritize case load size as the top barrier, followed by disconnectedness and workload. Fear and performance were tied for fourth and fifth place. In addition, the newly added barrier of college readiness was cited frequently. Counselors agreed that the barrier that they could impact most was disconnectedness of

how advanced coursework could positively impact students' future success.

Additionally, counselors agreed that the elimination of excessive caseload size should be the barrier eliminated first.

Counselors were also asked in Round 2 to rank the feasibility of eight statements. These statements were generated from ideas resulting from the Round 1 question that focused on what counselors could do to eliminate barriers to advanced coursework. The statement ranked *most feasible* by the largest number of counselors centered on the use of data to help make decisions about who might be successful in advanced coursework.

When asked in Round 2 to prioritize the list of descriptions of students not enrolled in advanced courses on their campuses, the consensus of the counselors were as follows: students without a support system, unmotivated students, and students not willing to put forth effort. As noted, these results were very interesting as the more quantifiable descriptors such as socioeconomic status, first generation status, and ethnicity were not ranked as prominently as these descriptors, which can be more abstract and more difficult to quantify.

Round 3 focused on trying to reach consensus as to what the most common barrier to advanced coursework might be. With the hopes of consensus, the seven members of expert panel were asked to provide their opinions first in a broad question followed by a more specific question. Counselors' responses were divided when asked to choose between the more research-based barriers such as caseload size, fear, and disconnectedness and the descriptions of the students such as unmotivated or lacking a support system (a lack of resources at home, encouragement, or understanding by their family). In essence, the counselors were being asked to identify the more significant

barrier between these two: either who the student is (descriptions) or what the student does/has access to (fearful of the work load, too large of a caseload size). The results being divided raises the question of counselor prioritization. Counselors are likely to prioritize one over the other in practice. The group was almost evenly divided between these two choices, with four choosing descriptions as a more significant obstacle while three counselors chose more quantifiable barriers.

Round 3 also sought to achieve consensus by allowing counselors to rank the barriers and descriptions combined to determine the most significant obstacle. Although not every member of the expert panel agreed, by using a rank order scale, the counselors established a ranking of barriers. Students lacking a support system was the most frequent obstacle identified for student enrollment in advanced coursework. When asked to explain their choice, counselors agreed that there was a connection among all the barriers presented to them. Counselors believed that there was a clear connection between barriers such as support system and the disconnectedness that students may experience.

## CHAPTER V

### Discussion, Implications, and Recommendations

The Delphi technique employed throughout this study allowed an expert panel of counselors to render opinions on the topic of students' enrollment or lack of enrollment in advanced coursework. Citing the lack of support system at home (a lack of resources at home, encouragement, or understanding by their family) as the top barrier to enrollment, counselors indicated the connectedness between easily measured barriers such as caseload size and college readiness and less definable barriers such as lack of support and fear.

#### Discussion

Anchored by a resource-based framework developed by Gonzalez et al. (2001), this study focused on the role of the counselor as either a positive or negative source of social capital. An expert panel of counselors examined barriers developed through a review of literature and added additional barriers. The expert panel's journey through the process of consensus ranking of barriers demonstrated confirmation of current literature, revealed the divergent thoughts of the counselors' role in access to advanced coursework, and uncovered potential bias.

**Confirmation of literature.** Previous researchers (American Counseling Association, 2018; Kahnwiler, 1979) discussed the importance of caseload sizes in regard to the burdens placed on counselors. The expert panel concurred and cited a lack of time to meet with students individually as a barrier to accessing advanced coursework opportunities. With ever increasing caseloads, counselors struggle to meet the needs of their students academically and emotionally. With large caseload numbers, counselors

do not have time to build relationships and trust with students, which has been cited by researchers such as Holland (2015) and Belasco (2013). Both of these authors determined that trust and relationship building were necessary for counselors to encourage accessing postsecondary opportunities, specifically with racial/ethnic minority students.

With regard to the feasibility of increasing access to advanced coursework, the responses of the expert panel appeared to align with previous research. Tieken's (1996) study of rural student access to higher education specifically mentioned the role of trust building with families. Counselors in this study concurred and stated that efforts to strengthen communication with parents was important related to students' enrollment in advanced coursework.

Counselors also cited the role of college readiness and access to advanced coursework. The panel identified in Round 1 and Round 2 that students not being prepared through rigorous curriculum in lower grades made transitioning into advanced coursework such as Advanced Placement or dual credit difficult. These statements aligned with Mansell and Justice's (2014) recommendations that counselors explain the benefits and drawbacks to advanced coursework. Similarly, counselors also ranked students' fear of advanced coursework most frequently during Round 1, confirming Mansell and Justice's (2014) guidance to counselors to try to understand the fear of failure that students, especially those who identify as first generation to college, feel when choosing to participate in advanced coursework.

This study also documented that counselors are willing to work with current data such as the College Board provided AP Potential report. However, current literature does not provide models for counselors to work specifically with data. Dodson (2009), using

the American School Counselor Association Recognized Model for schools, concluded that the primary role of counselors was that of academic planner. The American School Counselor Association Recognized Model does state that the use of data is a best practice. However, the number of high schools across the country who employ these standards is small. For example there are more than 3,000 high schools in Texas in 2020, but only four high schools were certified through this specific program.

**Divergent thoughts of counselors.** Observed through the results of the study, counselors seem to differ on the whether easily measured barriers such as caseload size and college readiness or less definable barriers such as lack of support and fear of coursework were a more significant obstacle in enrollment of advanced coursework. With an average of more than a decade of experiences as counselors coupled with a variety of roles such as lead counselor, academic counselor, and college-access counselor, ultimately the personal beliefs and priorities of each individual member of the expert panel seemed to determine how the obstacles were viewed. Counselors agreed that barriers existed. There was no dissent that obstacles were preventing students from enrolling in advanced courses.

This divergence regarding access is seen in the literature as well. Research findings used to create the list of barriers to enrollment in advanced coursework seemed to fall in two categories—easily measured or difficult to define. There are many available studies on research pertaining to measurable barriers such as socioeconomic status ( Hill, 2017; Klugman, 2012; Wilson & Adelson, 2012) and the lack of participation in advanced coursework by students who are racially/ethnically diverse (Clark, Moore, & Slate, 2012; Combs et al., 2010; Moore & Slate, 2008). Conversely

there is research on the importance of trust and relationships (Cholewa et al., 2015; Holland, 2015, Park et al., 2014), although these barriers can be more challenging to identify.

**Potential bias.** During the course of the study, the expert panel was asked to describe students not enrolled in advanced coursework. Although the counselors listed descriptors that were confirmatory of state-level data such as race, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, and first generation to college status, the counselors also listed descriptions such as unmotivated and lacking a support system (a lack of resources at home, encouragement, or understanding by their family). This finding begs the question, were the descriptions of students not enrolled in advanced courses based on the cultivated relationship between the counselor and the student or were the descriptions based on the counselor's implicit bias? Counselors agree that their caseload size is too large based on results in both Round 1 and Round 2. Furthermore, counselors cited caseload size as the barrier to students accessing advanced coursework and as the barrier they would eliminate first. However, when describing students who were not enrolled in advanced courses, counselors ranked the descriptions of students without a support system, unmotivated students, and students not willing to put forth effort as the three highest descriptions. If counselors have large caseloads they cite as a barrier to reach students individually, how are the counselors learning details about these students that would allow them to know students as lacking a support system or being unmotivated? Are trust and relationships being built despite the lack of time available for counselors to build relationships, or are assumptions being made about the students not enrolling in advanced coursework? These would be questions for a future study.

Following this line of reasoning, how are counselors measuring the level of effort put forth by these students? If the relationship between the counselor and the student is well established, then the counselor may know the details of the student's life; however, if relationships are minimal, the descriptions are most likely based on assumptions and implicit bias toward students who generally do not enroll in advanced coursework on their campuses.

### **Implications and Recommendations for Practice**

Lambie and Williamson's (2004) extensive history of the role of a guidance counselor ended shortly after the turn of the century; nearly 20 years later the role of counselors continue to shift with the advent of social media, the rising cost of postsecondary education, and the emphasis placed nationally on accountability and funding of schools. Implications of the findings of this study could be put into practice in a multitude of ways, particularly with regard to caseload size, implicit bias training, campus consensus discussions, identification and encouragement of students, the addition of a counselor whose focus is postsecondary opportunities, and communication practices about postsecondary opportunities.

**Caseload size.** As early as the mid-1970s, the rising caseload size of counselors and the negative consequences to that phenomena have been cited (Kahnwiler, 1979). The expert panel agreed, citing caseload size as a predominant barrier in the results of Round 1. As the subsequent rounds of Delphi persisted, caseload size continued to remain present either directly through rank or indirectly through the responses of the counselors. Although the American Counseling Association (2018) recommended a caseload size of 250 students to each counselor, data reported by the expert panel showed

a clear divergence from this standard as their caseload sizes averaged over 350 students. Counselors repeated an inability to meet with all students as a barrier to enrollment in advanced coursework.

Counselor caseloads must be lowered. With the immense amount of mental health issues faced by students today coupled with the demands of the state such as 4-year planning, College Career Military Readiness, high school graduation plans with multiple endorsement trainings, and state and national standardized testing, counselors are constantly being pushed to their limits. Administrators must recognize and advocate at the district and state level that students' well-being hinges on the ability of counselors to have manageable case load sizes.

**Implicit bias training.** In pre-service counseling programs and district counselor trainings, the idea of implicit bias should be addressed. It was surprising that counselors did not rank higher the concrete and more easily measured descriptions of students not enrolled in coursework such as socioeconomic status, race, gender, or first-generation status compared to the more difficult to determine descriptions they chose. As statistical trends continue to show a lack of enrollment in advanced courses by Black and Hispanic students, school systems should address the barriers associated with systemic racism. Although an incredibly difficult topic to address, the idea that counselors described students not enrolling in advanced courses as unmotivated or lacking a support system may be an indication of implicit bias.

**Campus consensus discussions.** As seen in the data collected in this study, counselors, as any educator would, have personal beliefs and biases that they bring into practice. Larger high schools most likely have multiple counselors. For example, a

particular high school with 3,200 students might employ 11 counselors including one lead counselor, one college access counselor, and nine academic counselors. A staff of 11 will bring individual thoughts, experiences, biases, and differing opinions about how to eliminate barriers, how to select courses, and how to reach students not currently enrolling in advanced coursework opportunities. Group discussions should occur so the counseling team can decide the barriers existing at their school and the strategies to address these barriers. When barriers are discovered and agreed upon, plans could be put into place to prioritize the elimination of those barriers.

**Additional or a specialized counselor.** While counselors are currently facing increased caseload sizes and a greater need to provide mental health counseling, the additional task of communicating postsecondary opportunities could be placed on a specialized counselor. The addition of a counselor whose sole responsibility is to increase postsecondary opportunity awareness may help campuses where current enrollment in advanced coursework could be higher. This counselor could coordinate parent information nights, streamline processes to help counselors, and maintain a working knowledge of opportunities to help students. This counselor would most likely need a high level of comfort working with data, well developed communication skills with both parents and students, a proven history to be organized, and a keen ability to be focused on a multitude of postsecondary opportunities. Administrators should be aware, however, that all counselors should be involved in encouraging students and informing all stakeholders about postsecondary opportunities.

**Identification and encouragement of students.** Counselors were in consensus that the increased use of data to determine who should take advanced coursework was a

feasible option. Systematic use of programs such as the AP Potential program from College Board could be implemented with a team approach among counselors, teachers, and the campus AP Coordinator (if the campus has one). A plan to reach students not currently enrolling in advanced coursework could be developed based on the specific needs of the campus. Data such as course enrollment, results of statewide assessments, and conversations with teachers and students are readily available. If counselors do not feel comfortable with data analysis, they could consult with their math department or local college for assistance.

**Communication and postsecondary opportunities.** Regarding the importance of positive social capital brought forth by Gonzalez et al. (2001), a strategic and effective communication plan needs to be established to allow campus stakeholders, specifically counselors, to be positive agents of social capital. As the top barrier to advanced coursework opportunities identified by the expert panel, a lack of a support system at home could potentially be lessened through increased communication efforts. A communication plan must be designed to meet the needs of the population, respect the culture of the population targeted, and be specific as to how support will be measured and increased. Educators must first understand the primary method of communication that works best for parents. This action could be accomplished by a simple poll to see which methods would work best. Next, educators would need to understand the culture, without stereotyping, of the students who are being targeted. This action could be completed through a community audit of the primary attendance zone of the school as well as the development of a parent panel. Finally, educators in a school need to establish a definition of what support is needed by students. A panel of students who are currently

enrolled in advanced courses as well as a panel of targeted students could be convened and interviewed. With a predetermined definition of support, a system of measuring that support should also be established. Enrollment goals could be set. This increase in communication could impact support for students from their parents, potentially lessening the barrier. As agents of change, counselors could play a large role in limiting the impact of this particular barrier.

### **Limitations**

Green (2014) stated that “Delphi studies have been useful in education settings in forming guidelines, standards, and in predicting trends” (p. 2). A Delphi study does not attempt to create something concrete but rather is a “communication structure aimed at producing a detailed critical examination and discussion” (Green, 2014, p. 6). The greatest limitation to this study was the decline in responses after the first round, which led to a small expert panel. This Delphi study was conducted during the COVID 19 pandemic. Because of this situation, maintaining a large number of counselors on the expert panel during the three rounds was difficult. Although results with a larger panel might have yielded similar results, having only seven counselors who completed all three rounds of the surveys was a definite limitation to the study. Specific measures to address this limitation are located in recommendations for future research.

### **Recommendations for Future Research**

The role of a guidance counselor is difficult to narrow to a specific job description (Cholewa et al., 2015) and is ever shifting (Lambie & Williamson, 2004) as time progresses. Future research connecting the role of a guidance counselors and access to advanced coursework opportunities is necessary. Conducting research centered on how

counselors view the barriers to advanced coursework opportunities could be conducted in multiple ways.

**Pandemics and panelists.** One way to create and maintain a larger expert panel would be to target a statewide organization of counselors such as the Texas Counseling Association during their annual conference. If the Round 1 questionnaire was incorporated as part of the registration process to the conference, a large panel could be established. Including an additional question in Round 1 to incorporate the collection of email addresses so that the counselors who wanted to remain in the study could then be contacted at the conference and complete Round 2 would increase the size of the panel. Additionally, if the data from Round 2 were collected on the first day of the conference and analyzed quickly for patterns and themes, a final round of surveys could be distributed while counselors are still at the conference and a much larger panel achieving consensus might occur. Collecting data in this way might be helpful to counselors as it removes the necessity to complete the responses during their regular school day when they are often overburdened by other responsibilities.

The context of this study was centered on guidance counselors and their particular viewpoint of the barriers in accessing advanced coursework opportunities; in the future a different study could be conducted. Looking at barriers from multiple viewpoints such as teachers, administrators, and students might result in different perspectives. Patterns might develop within each subgroup that could provide direction for future action and research.

**Mixed Method Research.** Researchers could locate schools that have an above average enrollment of students not traditionally enrolled in advanced coursework and

study their methods. However, schools such as Early College High Schools where the entire population is enrolled at a local community college should be eliminated from that group. Specifically, a researcher could employ a “sequential, explanatory, mixed methodology” (Bowen, Rose, & Pilkington, 2017, p. 10). First, quantitative data about the students enrolled in advanced coursework, including demographic data, number of advanced courses, types of advanced courses, and entry into advanced courses could be gathered. Next, quantitative data about the counseling staff at each school such as caseload size, years of experience of counselors, educational background of the counseling staff, and personal data about the counseling staff could be collected. Quantitative data about race, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status of the students might be added. After the quantitative data were analyzed, a researcher could develop interview questions to gather strategies as to how these particular counselors or educators addressed the barriers present at other schools. This mixed method approach allows for what Bowen et al. (2017) described in their study: “this paper uses mixed methodology where findings from interviews helps explain findings from the questionnaire; findings that may not be identified if one approach was used alone” (p. 27).

**Gifted programming.** Discussed in their historical analysis of guidance and counseling, Lambie and Williamson (2004) referenced a national desire to identify students who showed a proclivity for math and science in the 1950s. This phenomenon led to the development of gifted programs through the National Defense Education Act of 1958. Gifted programming throughout K-12 education remains today. Typically, students are identified in early elementary school years through testing. Students identified as gifted are often tracked—meaning that they are directed to take courses in a

certain sequence toward an end goal. Future research around guidance counselors and the tracking of students is needed. Specifically, does identification and enrollment into gifted coursework serve as an opportunity, seen in the work of Gonzalez et al. (2001), or a barrier, mentioned in the work of Kolluri (2018).

### **Conclusion**

The findings of this study reiterate the crucial role of the counselor as a link between advanced coursework opportunities, students, and the barriers that might be present at a school. The expertise used by the panel to identify and prioritize the barriers on their respective campuses showed an understanding that obstacles are present for the students they interact with daily. The counselors involved in the study reiterated the interconnectedness of barriers and a need to work toward the elimination of the barriers so that more students can obtain access to advanced coursework opportunities.

There are several aspects of this study to highlight. First, counselors should be seen as integral source of data in schools. The primary role of a counselor on a campus is typically viewed as an individual academic planner as noted by Dodson (2009) and Mau et al. (2016). However, many counselors feel unprepared as to how to effectively guide postsecondary planning (Morgan et al., 2014). Counselors, who are most often responsible for course selection, can serve as a bridge between an administrative focus on accountability ratings and students seeking postsecondary opportunities. Counselors can be the agent of access or a gatekeeper. If counselors are informed about the correlation between enrollment in advanced coursework and attainment of positive postsecondary outcomes, and they know what existing barriers are present on their campus, it is my belief that counselors would work to eliminate those barriers as quickly as possible.

Comprising an expert panel about existing barriers to accessing advanced coursework opportunities allows for deeper discussion on campuses and within districts as to how best to eliminate those barriers. Counselors who comprised the expert panel in this study showed a clear understanding of how the barriers faced by many students are interconnected. The words of an expert panel member shows the value in the inclusion of counselor opinions in research. Their reiteration of the interconnectedness of barriers coupled with the need to approach education as a group of stakeholders (teachers, counselors, administrators, students, and parents) rather than individuals concludes this research succinctly:

While students can demonstrate resilience in order to succeed in advanced coursework, despite the described obstacles, this skill may be one that takes time and even more extensive counseling in order to develop. The most challenging of these descriptors to overcome is the lack of support system outside of school. With a support system at home, students will be more likely to overcome the motivation issues. While the barriers can be challenging to address, schools can establish strong support systems among teachers, counselors, and even peer groups to inform students about the advantages of Advanced Placement coursework and to support students through the sometimes scary decision to take on rigorous coursework and then to help them persist with the workload while taking these classes.

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## APPENDIX A

### Instruments-Questionnaires for Round 1, Round 2, and Round 3

#### Round 1 Questions

Some students face barriers to advanced coursework.

The focus of this study to understand their needs and challenges through your eyes as their counselors.

You were selected to participate in this study based on your reputation as an outstanding counselor. We want your expert opinion so that we can understand the barriers students face related to advanced coursework. Your answers to the questions in Round 1 will be combined to create the Round 2 questions. Thanks in advance for your interest!

The term “Advanced Coursework” encompasses AP, IB, and/or Dual Credit coursework.

1. The following alphabetized list contains barriers to advanced coursework identified by other counselors. Please choose all barriers that exist for your students at your school.

Caseload Size: Counselor caseloads are too large to monitor the enrollment of students in specific coursework outside of graduation requirements

Cost: AP or IB exam cost or cost to enroll in dual credit is prohibitive for student enrollment

Course Offerings: Not enough advanced courses are offered on campus, therefore students who might enroll do not have the opportunity to do so

Disconnectedness: Students do not understand the connection between Advanced Coursework and postsecondary opportunities

Fear: Students believe Advanced Coursework is too difficult for them and they will not be successful in the course

Future Plans: Students do not believe that Advanced Coursework aligns with their future plans

Parents: Parents do not want their student enrolled in Advanced Coursework

Peer Pressure: Students do not want to enroll in Advanced Coursework because their friends are not enrolled in those courses

Performance: Students do not believe that they can achieve the expectations set forth in Advanced Coursework

School Personnel: Counselors or teachers believe the student would not be a good fit for Advanced Coursework

School Policy: Enrollment in Advanced Coursework is restricted by previous grades, teacher decision, or previous course enrollment (such as Pre AP/Pre IB)

Time: Due to time constraints, counselors do not have time to consult individually with students about coursework choices

Transportation: The only advanced coursework opportunities for students require them to travel off campus, and transportation is not provided

Workload: Students cite the workload involved in advanced coursework as a reason to not enroll, stating that their need to work or be in extracurricular activities outweighs their desire to enroll.

2. Now, using your expertise, which barriers to advanced coursework are MISSING from this list? What barriers to advanced coursework do your students face in addition to these?

3. In your opinion, what can counselors do to minimize barriers to advanced coursework?

4. Think about the students at your school who do not enroll in advanced coursework. How would you describe these students?

5. Why do you believe these students experience barriers to advanced coursework?

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### **Demographic Questions**

1. Name of School
2. Gender of Participant
3. Total Years of Experience as a Counselor (include all settings, grade levels, types of schools and include the current school year in your total)
4. Total Years of Experience in Education (include all settings, grade levels, types of schools and include the current school year in your total)
5. Type of High School
  - a. Traditional High School 9-12
  - b. Traditional High School 10-12
  - c. Traditional High School 9<sup>th</sup> Grade Center
  - d. Magnet
  - e. Early College High School
  - f. PTECH High School
  - g. Other: \_\_\_\_\_
6. Approximate number of students enrolled at the high school where you work
7. Approximate number of students in your caseload
8. Type of Counselor (choose the one you most readily identify with)
  - a. Traditional Academic/Guidance (alpha separated)
  - b. Traditional Academic/Guidance (grade level separated)
  - c. Crisis Counselor
  - d. Lead Counselor
  - e. College and Career/College Access Counselor

## Round 2 Questions

The following five barriers, listed below in alphabetical order, were the most frequently chosen barriers in the previous survey:

- a. Caseload
  - b. Disconnectedness
  - c. Fear
  - d. Performance
  - e. Workload
1. Please rank them in order from most common to least common on your campus.
  2. Which barrier(s) listed above do you believe that counselors might be able to most greatly impact and why?
  3. Which barrier(s) listed above do you believe needs to be eliminated first, and why.

Several new barriers were suggested during the first survey.

4. Choose any barrier(s) below that students also face on your campus:
  - a. Bias-Teachers have bias against students who do not fit the stereotype of the students currently enrolled in advanced coursework and are therefore not encouraged to enroll.
  - b. College Readiness-Due to a lack of exposure to more rigorous curriculum during lower grade levels, students are not prepared for advanced coursework in high school or cannot score the required scores to enroll in dual credit.
  - c. GPA/Rank-School policy does not weigh advanced coursework any higher than level coursework and students, therefore, do not have any incentive to enroll.
  - d. Staffing-Schools struggle to find qualified teachers for advanced courses, especially dual credit, and can therefore not offer specific courses.

When asked what counselors can do to eliminate barriers to advanced coursework, several ideas were shared. Please use the scale below to measure the feasibility of each item as it pertains to your campus.

Not At All Feasible	Somewhat Feasible	Neutral	Feasible	Very Feasible
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5. Counselors could work with teachers to identify students who should take advanced courses as teachers spend time daily with students.

6. Counselors could use the AP Potential Report, provided by College Board after the PSAT, to identify students who may have an aptitude for AP courses.
7. Counselors could encourage all students to take advanced courses AND target minority students.
8. Counselors could encourage students to enroll by having an individual conference concerning course selection each year.
9. Counselors could have intentional conversations with minority students who should enroll in advanced courses.
10. Counselors could utilize community resources to help unemployed parents gain training and employment, and subsequently help their children see the connection between college and high school courses.
11. Counselors could have more communication with parents through presentations, videos, newsletters, emails, etc. to convey importance of advanced coursework.
12. Counselors could use available data on their campuses to help determine which students could be enrolling in advanced coursework.

When asked to describe students NOT enrolled in advanced courses on your campus, many descriptors were given.

13. Choose the 5 that BEST describe students NOT enrolled in advanced courses on your campus.
  - a. First Generation to College Students
  - b. Immigrant Students
  - c. Low Socioeconomic Students
  - d. Students of Color (Black, Hispanic)
  - e. Students Who Are Not College-Ready
  - f. Students Who Are Not Willing To Put Forth Effort
  - g. Students Who Do Not Understand Benefits of Advanced Coursework
  - h. Students Who Lack Confidence In Their Abilities
  - i. Students Without a Support System
  - j. Unmotivated Students

### Round 3 Questions

In Round 2, expert counselors were asked to rank a list of the most common five barriers to advanced coursework opportunities at their schools (chosen from Round 1), in rank order (from most common to least common). The results were as follows:

1. Caseload Size-Counselor caseloads are too large to monitor the enrollment of students in specific coursework outside of graduation requirements
2. Disconnectedness-Students do not understand the connection between Advanced Coursework and postsecondary opportunities
4. Fear-Students believe Advanced Coursework is too difficult for them and they will not be successful in the course
4. Workload-Students cite the workload involved in advanced coursework as a reason to not enroll, stating that their need to work or be in extracurricular activities outweighs their desire to enroll.
5. Performance- Students do not believe that they can achieve the expectations set forth in Advanced Coursework.

Additionally, expert counselors believed another barrier (not presented in Round 1) was also common at their school.

College Readiness-due to a lack of exposure to more rigorous curriculum during lower grade levels, students are not prepared for advanced coursework in high school or cannot score the required scores to enroll in dual credit

In the Round 1 survey, expert counselors provided descriptions of the students least likely to enroll in advanced coursework on their campus. The Round 2 survey asked counselors to narrow that list by choosing what they considered to be the best descriptors for students on their campuses not enrolling in advanced coursework. The three most frequently chosen descriptions were

1. Students without a support system
  2. Unmotivated students
  2. Students who are not willing to put forth effort
- A. Comparing the barriers identified by counselors and the descriptions of students, which set (barriers or descriptions) do you believe to be more significant obstacles in enrollment in advanced coursework?
  - B. Why did you choose either barriers or descriptions as the more significant obstacle to enrollment in advanced coursework?

- C. The alphabetized list below contains both barriers to advanced coursework and descriptions of students not enrolling in advanced coursework at the high schools of expert counselors. Arrange the list below from the most probable to least probable obstacle to enrollment in advanced coursework.
- D. Please explain why you chose to arrange the barriers and descriptions in that particular order.
- E. As counselors, what do you believe we should be paying more attention to when it comes to advanced coursework opportunities for students?

## APPENDIX B

### Definitions of Barriers

**Caseload Size:** Counselor caseloads are too large to monitor the enrollment of students in specific coursework outside of graduation requirements

**Cost:** AP or IB exam cost or cost to enroll in dual credit is prohibitive for student enrollment

**Course Offerings:** Not enough advanced courses are offered on campus, therefore students who might enroll do not have the opportunity to do so

**Disconnectedness:** Students do not understand the connection between Advanced Coursework and postsecondary opportunities

**Fear:** Students believe Advanced Coursework is too difficult for them and they will not be successful in the course

**Future Plans:** Students do not believe that Advanced Coursework aligns with their future plans

**Parents:** Parents do not want their student enrolled in Advanced Coursework

**Peer Pressure:** Students do not want to enroll in Advanced Coursework because their friends are not enrolled in those courses

**Performance:** Students do not believe that they can achieve the expectations set forth in Advanced Coursework

**School Personnel:** Counselors or teachers believe the student would not be a good fit for Advanced Coursework

**School Policy:** Enrollment in Advanced Coursework is restricted by previous grades, teacher decision, or previous course enrollment (such as Pre AP/Pre IB)

**Time:** Due to time constraints, counselors do not have time to consult individually with students about coursework choices

**Transportation:** The only advanced coursework opportunities for students require them to travel off campus, and transportation is not provided

**Workload:** Students cite the workload involved in advanced coursework as a reason to not enroll, stating that their need to work or be in extracurricular activities outweighs their desire to enroll.

**APPENDIX C**

## Eight Feasibility Statements Generated By Counselor Responses from Round 1

Counselors could work with teachers to identify students who should take advanced courses as teachers spend time daily with students.

Counselors could use the AP Potential Report, provided by College Board after the PSAT, to identify students who may have an aptitude for AP courses.

Counselors could encourage all students to take advanced courses, AND target minority students.

Counselors could encourage students to enroll by having an individual conference concerning course selection each year.

Counselors could have intentional conversations with minority students who should enroll in advanced courses.

Counselors could utilize community resources to help unemployed parents gain training and employment, and subsequently help their children see the connection between college and high school courses.

Counselors could have more communication with parents through presentations, videos, newsletters, emails, etc. to convey importance of advanced coursework.

Counselors could use available data on their campuses to help determine which students could be enrolling in advanced coursework.

## APPENDIX D

### IRB Approval

**Debra D. Creel**

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**From:** Miles, Sharla <sharla\_miles@shsu.edu>  
**Sent:** Friday, February 21, 2020 9:03 AM  
**To:** Creel, Debra; Combs, Julie  
**Cc:** Miles, Sharla  
**Subject:** [External] IRB-2019-389 - Initial: Exempt from IRB Review

**Caution:** Do not click links or open attachments unless you know the sender and that the content is safe. Forward suspicious emails to [security@conroeisd.net](mailto:security@conroeisd.net).



Date: Feb 21, 2020 9:02 AM CST

TO: Debra Creel Julie Combs  
 FROM: SHSU IRB  
 PROJECT TITLE: High School Counselors and Advanced Coursework Opportunities: A Delphi Study  
 PROTOCOL #: IRB-2019-389  
 SUBMISSION TYPE: Initial  
 ACTION: Exempt  
 DECISION DATE: February 17, 2020  
 EXEMPT REVIEW CATEGORY: Category 2.(i). Research that only includes interactions involving educational tests (cognitive, diagnostic, aptitude, achievement), survey procedures, interview procedures, or observation of public behavior (including visual or auditory recording).  
 The information obtained is recorded by the investigator in such a manner that the identity of the human subjects cannot readily be ascertained, directly or through identifiers linked to the subjects.

Greetings,

Thank you for your submission of Initial Review materials for this project. The Sam Houston State University (SHSU) IRB has determined this project is EXEMPT FROM IRB REVIEW according to federal regulations.

**Since Cayuse IRB does not currently possess the ability to provide a "stamp of approval" on any recruitment or consent documentation, it is the strong recommendation of this office to please include the following approval language in the footer of those recruitment and consent documents: IRB-2019-389/February 17, 2020.**

We will retain a copy of this correspondence within our records.

**\* What should investigators do when considering changes to an exempt study that could make it nonexempt?**

It is the PI's responsibility to consult with the IRB whenever questions arise about whether planned changes to an exempt study might make that study nonexempt human subjects research.

In this case, please make available sufficient information to the IRB so it can make a correct determination.

## VITA

**Debra D. Creel**

### **Academic Degrees Earned**

Doctorate of Education, Educational Leadership, Sam Houston State University  
Master of Education (Counseling) University of North Texas  
Bachelor of Arts (History) University of Mary Hardin-Baylor

### **Professional Licensure and Certifications**

Texas State Board of Educator Certifications:

School Counselor EC-12

Special Education EC-12

Classroom Teacher Secondary Speech Communication 6-12

Principal as Instructional Leader EC-12 (pending)

### **Professional Experience**

The Woodlands College Park High School, Conroe Independent School District  
College and Career Counselor

Elsik High School, Alief Independent School District, Academic Counselor

Edward S. Marcus High School, Lewisville Independent School District, Speech and  
Debate Teacher

C. H. Yoe High School, Cameron Independent School District, Speech, Debate, and  
Theater Arts Teacher

### **Publications**

Creel, D. D., & Combs, J. P. (2018). What school leaders can do to support first-generation college students. *Texas Study* 27(2), 14-15.

Creel, D. D., & Slate, J. R. (2019). Differences in advanced course enrollment percentages in Texas as a function of economic status: A multiyear, statewide analysis. In J.R. Slate (Ed.). *Exemplars of conducting archival data analyses: A collection of K-12 and Higher Education Studies*.

### **Recent Presentations**

Creel, D. D. (July, 2018) *College admissions counseling calendar*. Admissions and College Counseling Institute, Houston, TX.

Creel, D. D. & Beckham, J. (April, 2018). *Love your juniors: A large public high school's best practices for college planning in the junior year*. Texas Association College Admissions Counseling, Galveston, TX.

Creel, D. D. (January, 2018). *Texas on course and rural schools*. ESC Region VI Counselor Colloquium, Huntsville, TX.