

A PHENOMENOLOGY OF STUDENT PERCEPTIONS ABOUT THE IMPACT OF  
PARTICIPATION IN THE ADVANCED PLACEMENT PROGRAM ON COLLEGE  
READINESS

by

Leah Kliewer

Liberty University

A Dissertation Presented in Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Education

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### **Abstract**

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to understand college undergraduate perceptions about preparedness to meet the demands and expectations of college-level coursework based on their experiences with the AP program in high school. Previous quantitative research regarding the AP program has shown students who participated in AP courses in high school do have an edge in college admissions. However, through this study the researcher sought to qualitatively understand the level of confidence and preparedness that former AP students feel when encountering college-level coursework during their undergraduate college experience, using Schlossberg's transition theory for theoretical guidance. This phenomenological qualitative study interviewed 13 college undergraduates who attended one of three private high schools in southwest Florida and successfully completed a minimum of two AP courses in high school. This study's data collection included individual interviews, focus group interviews, and a narrative reflection to investigate the following central research question: What are the perceptions of college undergraduates who have participated in their high school's AP program regarding their preparedness to meet the demands and expectations of college-level coursework? Memoing, coding, and phenomenological reduction were used for data analysis to develop rich descriptions of participants' experiences with the AP programs in their respective high schools. From these descriptions, three key themes emerged: the participants' motivation for taking AP courses was varied and impacted by personal benefits, participants see a need for more autonomy being granted in the high school setting, and participants have strong opinions about the specific needs of a successful AP program.

*Keywords:* academic tenacity, Advanced Placement, college readiness, educational inequality, transition theory

**Copyright Page**

### **Dedication**

From the beginning, this journey has been about my students. With every class, paper, and, eventually, interviews during the research process, my main desire has been to discover ways to make their classroom experiences more meaningful. I have been inspired by students every year in teaching, and it is my hope that I can inspire each student who enters my classroom to find their innate curiosity and spark a lifelong desire for learning. To my students past, present, and future, never stop reading, learning, and growing!

## Acknowledgments

It has been said it takes a village to raise a child; is it possible it also takes that to graduate a doctoral student? For me, this could not be more accurate! When I began this degree program, I was already overwhelmingly busy: wife, mom to 3 boys, full-time teacher, drama director, yearbook advisor, and Key Club advisor. While I am certain more people have shown me grace throughout this process than I could ever name, there are a few people who absolutely deserve recognition. My husband and kids have had to deal with a stressed, overextended wife and mom for too many years now, and I'm thankful for their constant love and encouragement. Here's to having nights and weekends free again! My English partner-in-crime has been an ever-faithful listening ear and one of my biggest cheerleaders. Teaching with her has been one of the sweetest joys of my professional life. My dissertation chair has also been extremely patient with me and never failed to offer encouraging words and helpful advice. I'm so glad my search for a committee chair led me to her! Finally, I am so thankful to serve a God who loves me so much that He has continually directed my steps to follow His will and given me confident trust in His plan for my life.

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**List of Abbreviations**

Advanced Placement (AP)

American College Testing (ACT)

Grade Point Average (GPA)

International Baccalaureate (IB)

Scholastic Assessment Test (SAT)

Socioeconomic Status (SES)

## **CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION**

### **Overview**

Blazoned in bold font across the frontpage on College Board's Advanced Placement (AP) Student website is the command: "Get ahead with AP" (The College Board, 2019). Indeed, many students believe they are improving their chances for college admission when they enroll in an AP course, hoping to pass the difficult end-of-course exam and earn potential college credits (Warne, 2017; Kolluri, 2018). With competitive college admissions requirements, many high school students enroll in AP courses in hopes of obtaining early credit requirements for their desired degree program while also attempting to maximize the curriculum that their secondary school offers (Bastedo et al., 2016; Gagnon & Mattingly, 2016). Unfortunately, these measures can impede student success rather than promote it (Bastedo et al., 2016). The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study is to describe college undergraduate's perceptions about preparedness to meet the demands and expectations of college-level coursework based on their experiences with the AP program in high school. This chapter will inform readers of important background on the AP program before acknowledging my own philosophical assumptions as a researcher and my personal worldview. The problem and purpose statements will follow this information, preceding the significance of the study. A discussion of the study's research questions and pertinent definitions will conclude this chapter.

### **Background**

The AP program has long promised participating high school students they can earn college credits, look more attractive to college admissions counselors, and save time and money on their journey to college success (The College Board, 2019). Because of the program's popularity and promise of benefits, its validity and effectiveness has naturally been questioned.

John Tierney, a writer for *The Atlantic* and former college professor and AP history high school teacher, is outspoken in his critique of the program, emphasizing that students in these courses are often only receiving a broad overview of the subject matter instead of the depth of knowledge found in a college classroom (Dimaria, 2013). Tierney is not alone in his criticism as colleges and universities across the country have repeatedly altered their exam score acceptance policies. Similarly, Camp and Walters (2016) expressed concerns regarding the quality of AP coursework given the lack of training many high school teachers have received to provide engaging college-level instruction. Furthermore, there is a question as to whether high school students even possess the requisite maturity needed to complete college-level coursework (Camp & Walters, 2016). The historical, social, and theoretical context for the AP program will offer valuable insight into the impacts of College Board's AP program.

### **Historical**

The AP program originated from a pilot study of the Fund for the Advancement of Education in 1954 (McCammon, 2018). The purpose of this pilot study was to determine students' preparedness for college-level coursework and whether the schools at the time were effective with this preparation. Educators sought to help academically advanced students avoid wasting time in coursework that was repetitive and unnecessary given the students' academic abilities (McCammon, 2018). The pilot study was deemed a success, and by 1955 the College Board had taken over the study's program. Although many originally viewed it as a program for gifted students, AP was never intended for gifted students but rather as an indicator of college readiness (McCammon, 2018). Thus, using AP program involvement and exam scores as an indicator of college preparedness has historical precedent.

The AP program has seen tremendous growth over the years and is now prevalent in over 70% of America's public high schools (Malkus, 2016). Further, a plethora of private schools offer AP courses as well. The AP program now boasts 38 course options, all of which carry the opportunity for earned college credit if students pass an end-of-year exam with a score of three, four, or five (The College Board, 2019). In a world of highly competitive college admissions, students often take several AP courses to basically pad their academic transcripts with advanced coursework and GPA boosters (Bastedo et al., 2016).

### **Social**

After the structured and prescribed schedule that is required of them in high school, new college students are eager to experience greater freedom with their educational choices and scheduling of time. In terms of academic excellence, social pressures, and financial independence, the stressors that many students feel to perform well can be overwhelming (Evans, 2019). The AP program promises assistance with several of these concerns, and past studies have shown positive correlations between AP program participation and college success. Warne (2017) noted that college students who obtained college credit through programs such as AP while in high school also earned higher GPAs during their first year in college. Results such as these prompt students to find success with AP classes, believing they will free up time and money during their first year of college (Evans, 2019). Yet there is little research giving voice to former AP students' experiences in their high school AP programs and their perceptions of preparedness for college-level coursework. The proposed research study will provide an important opportunity for students to share their experiences, informing future AP students, AP teachers, and the College Board with valuable insight into the AP student experience.

## **Theoretical**

Dweck, Walton, and Cohen (2014) discussed the concept of academic tenacity, which focuses on the mindset and skills a student needs to academically succeed beyond academic ability. The learned skills and experiences of students in the AP program can have an impact on students' long-term academic success. Furthermore, in both small and large schools alike, many AP students find themselves in the same groups of students within their AP classes. The familiarity this promotes can have a strong impact on the students' success in the AP classroom as well as their own self-efficacy. Much research has been conducted regarding academic self-efficacy and the implications it has on a student's future academic success and confidence. Students who have a higher level of self-efficacy in the classroom are more likely to find academic success (Galos & Aldridge, 2020). Schlossberg (1981) discussed the concept of transition for adults who have experienced change, resulting in "new networks of relationships, new behaviors, and new self-perceptions" (p. 2). As indicated by Schlossberg (1981), characteristics of the transition, the individual's environment before and after the transition, and the individual himself can have an enormous impact on the individual's success or failure in transitioning to the new environment. Thus, a student's involvement in AP courses in high school (the environment before the transition) can have an impact on the student's ability to transition to college-level coursework (the environment after the transition). Transition theory identifies the significance of interpersonal support systems, institutional supports, and physical setting for an individual's ability to successfully adapt to change (Schlossberg, 1981). This indicates that the AP program itself, individual school settings, and cohort of AP students all play an important role in preparing AP students for college-level coursework.

### **Situation to Self**

Four philosophical assumptions led to my choices in the research design: ontological, epistemological, axiological, and methodological. Creswell and Poth (2018) have emphasized the need for researchers to identify their own values and beliefs in conjunction with the previously named philosophical assumptions to illuminate a researcher's understandings about the topic of study, recognizing that such assumptions provide direction for the researcher.

Ontological studies acknowledge that realities change dependent upon multiple perspectives (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Because I will be interviewing several participants to discover their experiences with the AP program, multiple realities about AP will be described.

Epistemologically, this study's analysis will rely on quotes from the participants, some of whom may be my former AP students. It is essential for the researcher to get as close as possible to the participants who are being studied (Creswell & Poth, 2018); as an AP teacher at one of the site schools for 13 years and a member of the community where all three sites are located for 14 years, I have a strong understanding of the student population and what opportunities they are afforded. Creswell and Poth (2018) stated the axiological significance of the study by iterating the importance of "positionality" in relation to the context and setting of the research (p. 21). As an experienced AP teacher and AP Reader for College Board, I must recognize my own beliefs about the AP program and communicate these clearly. Likewise, the methodological assumption recognizes that research questions may change throughout the course of the study because of emerging trends in participant responses (Creswell & Poth, 2018). While there is a list of prescribed questions for the interviews, the interviews when conducted may veer off script if I feel another avenue should be explored. Further, the formation of focus groups will not happen until individual interviews are complete as information from the interview will determine focus

group placement. Through each of these considerations, I want to discover if the AP courses that my colleagues and I have been investing in are genuinely preparing students for success in the college classroom.

Social constructivism will be the guiding interpretive framework for this study. Researchers ascribing to social constructivism are investigating complex views regarding a specific subject or phenomenon, recognizing the impact of background and environment on the participant's overall experience (Creswell & Poth, 2018). In this study, I will be exploring the experiences of current college freshmen or sophomores who have previously participated in the AP programs at their private high schools. I have vested interest in this topic as both an AP teacher and AP parent. Although my own experiences with the AP program will impact my interpretation of the data, these experiences will also help create a more vivid description of the participants' experiences with the phenomenon, the AP program.

I am currently a high school English teacher at a private Christian school in Florida. Over the last 20 years, I have taught nearly every grade level with most of my experience being at the high school level. I have been at my current position for eleven years and have taught AP English Language and Composition for ten years and AP Research for one year. In addition to my experience as an AP teacher, I have attended several AP national conferences and have served as an AP exam reader on the English Language and Composition exam for five years. Over the last ten years of immersion into the AP program, I have seen student successes and failures alike. Often some of my brightest students do well in the class but perform poorly on the exam. Likewise, I have had students who rarely engaged in AP classwork yet earned a passing score (and by extension college credit) for the course. Although criticism for AP at my high school has increased over the years, student participation in the program has grown

exponentially. This has prompted me to wonder about the overall effectiveness of the AP program in preparing students for college-level coursework.

Finally, my worldview is Biblical and based on the premise that teachers should make every effort to expertly instruct students and prepare them for their future educational and occupational endeavors. As a Christian educator, I believe in the importance of preparing my students for the future with an emphasis on integrity and dignity. Titus 2:7-8 (New American Standard Bible, 2020) states: “In all things show yourself to be an example of good deeds, with purity in doctrine, dignified, sound in speech which is beyond reproach, so that the opponent will be put to shame, having nothing bad to say about us.” I strive to teach my students with honesty and excellence in not only my field but also in life lessons, recognizing that a quality education is often about more than just traditional subject disciplines.

### **Problem Statement**

Because the AP program has become increasingly popular and controversial, it is necessary to study the program’s effectiveness in preparing high school students for college success. This problem is an important one to study as competitiveness in college admissions has driven many high achieving students to drastic measures in order to earn a coveted acceptance letter to the college of their dreams. Efforts to boost high school GPAs while also adding a plethora of activities to their student profiles have led to stressed out students who are anxious about their futures (Basted et al., 2016).

The College Board intends for these courses to effectively prepare high school students for the rigor they can expect to find in college-level coursework, thus improving their chances of success in college (The College Board, 2019). Unfortunately, the expectations for students, course load, and requirements for AP courses vary widely. Not every student has access to AP

courses (Gilroy, 2015); nor is every student capable of meeting the expectations set forth in such courses (Klugman, 2013). Consequently, students may find themselves either well-equipped or ill-prepared to meet the needs of college-level coursework when they enter their freshman year of college (Woods et al., 2018). Thus, competitive college admissions lead to an even more deleterious consequence: the surprising and disheartening struggle of students who believed they were adequately prepared for success in the college classroom. Despite several quantitative studies focused on AP, there is currently little qualitative research that gives voice to students' own perceptions about their experiences with the AP program, especially in its value as a means of college preparedness. The problem is a lack of preparedness among AP students who believe they are ready for college-level work but often find themselves unprepared for a successful transition to the college classroom.

### **Purpose Statement**

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study is to understand college undergraduate perceptions about preparedness to meet the demands and expectations of college-level coursework based on thirteen participants' experiences with the AP program at one of three selected southwest Florida private high schools. At this stage of the research, the AP program will generally be defined as Advanced Placement courses approved by The College Board that are offered by the three site schools in southwest Florida. The theory guiding this study is Schlossberg's (1981) transition theory, as the research seeks to describe the impacts of the AP program on college freshmen once they have begun college-level coursework. Numerous quantitative studies have been conducted analyzing relationships between AP exam scores, college GPA, and other college admissions tests (Shaw et al., 2012; Warne et al., 2015; Woods et al., 2018; Suldo, Shaunessy-Dedrick et al., 2018). However, students' performance on

assessment measures often do not accurately reflect their attitudes or determinations about how prepared they feel to engage in college-level coursework. This study will provide an alternative view of the AP program by giving voice to students' AP classroom experiences. The AP program "enables willing and academically prepared students to pursue college-level studies—with the opportunity to earn college credit, advanced placement, or both—while still in high school" (The College Board, 2016, p. 12). By conducting individual and focus group interviews, as well as a reflective writing prompt, a broad picture may be gained that illustrates former AP students' experiences in high school AP courses and subsequent confidence in the college classroom.

### **Significance of the Study**

As the AP program continues to grow and more high school students seek measures to give them a competitive edge in college (Warne, 2017; Kolluri, 2018), the experiences studied through the proposed study are both timely and vital. The proposed study contains empirical, theoretical, and practical significance, as detailed below. Each of these considerations provide sound rationale for the study's significance, emphasizing its importance and relevance in educational research.

#### **Empirical**

Open inquiry interviews yield descriptions of AP students' shared experiences with the AP program, which may be used to inform future research on AP courses and college readiness (Warne, 2017). Themes and patterns that may be found within this study can lead to related future studies on both AP courses and college readiness. The description of participants' experiences with the AP program will further enhance understanding of the program's impact on high school students as well as assist AP stakeholders in review and restructuring of the program.

Analysis and reflection on students' experiences can inform AP teachers and administrators in cooperation with the College Board on how to better construct AP classes to ensure AP students are truly being prepared for college-level coursework and content. The College Board is continually seeking ways to improve upon, build, and enhance the AP curriculum for each of the AP subjects (The College Board, 2019); this study can contribute to such developments.

### **Theoretical**

The study has theoretical significance with the idea of academic tenacity (the mindset and skills a student needs to academically succeed beyond only his or her academic ability) and its impact on students' long-term academic success, a concept explored by Dweck et al. (2014). With College Board's open enrollment policy in mind (The College Board, 2019), this study can provide students' insight to the AP classroom experience of both gifted students and those who have participated in AP classes through open enrollment. Each of these high school environments provide an important context to study students' transitions to college from high school and the AP program. Schlossberg's (1981) transition theory provides a meaningful theoretical base from which this study further explores students' adjustment to the high school/college transition. Transition theory provides a valid theoretical base for studying AP students' transitions from high school to college as Schlossberg (1981) emphasized the influence a person's environment has both before and after a transition, in this case the high school environment before the transition and the college environment after the transition.

### **Practical**

Insight gained from AP student perceptions about the program can lead administrators, AP teachers, and College Board officials to more effectively align AP standards with college standards in hopes of improving the overall AP experience and program effectiveness for future

students. This practical significance is perhaps the most important aspect of the study as students' real experiences are significant indicators of what is actually happening in the classroom versus targeted objectives and the curriculum. From these students' experiences, a more vivid description of college preparedness may be obtained, thus illuminating program effectiveness from the students' perspectives. Most importantly, directly from AP students' voices, AP stakeholders—especially current and prospective AP students—may better assess the perceived benefits of participating in the AP program and its suggested utility in college preparedness. In light of the increasing competitiveness in college admissions (Bastedo et al., 2016; Gagnon & Mattingly, 2016), a more discerning evaluation of actual AP students' experiences with the transition to college-level coursework from their respective AP programs will be both informative and valuable to prospective college students.

### **Research Questions**

The following research questions guide the researcher to more fully understand the essence of the participants' experiences with the studied phenomenon, in this case the AP program. Moustakas (1994) identified this trait of qualitative research questions, recognizing the significance of the participants' involvement with the phenomenon. Denoted by Moustakas (1994) as a quality of phenomenological research questions, the questions do not attempt to predict causal relationships.

### **Central Question**

What are the perceptions of college undergraduates who have participated in their high school's AP program regarding their preparedness to meet the demands and expectations of college-level coursework? Rowland and Shircliffe (2016) emphasized the need for high schools to adequately prepare all students for college, whether participants in AP programs or not.

Because most high school students believe that AP courses do effectively prepare them for college (Gagnon & Mattingly, 2016; Bastedo et al., 2016), this question provides an important platform for current college freshmen to describe their own experiences with AP courses and the effect, if any, the program has had on college preparedness. This question asks participants to reflect on their environment during the AP program and how that has impacted their new environment in college, thus considering the role one environment has played and how it has influenced the new environment, an important consideration in transition theory.

### **Sub-question 1**

What are participant perceptions of the challenges they encounter while transitioning to college-level coursework from a high school curriculum? Inequity in access to honors, AP, or other college preparatory courses has prompted many to question the consistency of college preparation across schools (Rowland & Shircliffe, 2016). While the AP program's parent organization promises increased preparedness for college (The College Board, 2019), critics have argued that increasing access to AP is not necessarily equivocated to increased levels of college preparedness (Koch et al., 2016). This question addresses the concept of the resources-deficits ratio as discussed by Schlossberg (1984), focusing more heavily on the potential deficits perceived about participation in the AP program.

### **Sub-question 2**

What aspects of the AP program do the participants perceive as being the most influential during their transition to college from high school? Allen and Mattern (2019) reported strong academic performance in college from former AP students, though discrepancies do exist regarding whether or not course participation or passing the AP exam are greater indicators of potential college success. This question centers more on the resources portion of the resources-

deficits ratio, prompting participants to reflect on beneficial skills gained during participation in the AP program.

### **Definitions**

1. *Academic tenacity*—Academic tenacity is the mindset and skills a student needs to academically succeed beyond academic ability (Dweck et al., 2014).
2. *Advanced Placement*—Advanced Placement courses are courses that high school students may take in hopes of earning college credit while still in high school (The College Board, 2019).
3. *Preparedness*—Preparedness is a combination of students’ academic ability, test scores, and academic maturity to engage in college-level coursework (Holles, 2016).
4. *Transition*—Any event or non-event that results in changed relationships, routines, assumptions, and roles as perceived by the individual experiencing it (Schlossberg, 1981).

### **Summary**

The AP program is a prevalent program in high schools all over the world (Warne, 2017). Students have participated in AP courses for decades in hopes of earning college credit while in high school, saving them time and money in college (Austin, 2020; Bastedo et al., 2016; Evans, 2019; Shaw et al., 2012). Additionally, students believe that participating in AP courses will make them more attractive to college admissions counselors. However, not all students have access to all AP courses (Brown & Wishney, 2017; Gagnon & Mattingly, 2016; Gilroy, 2015; Klugman, 2013), nor do all AP teachers prepare their students with the same degree of success (Kolluri, 2018; Ross, 2019). This creates a problem of college preparedness for students enrolled in AP classes (Adams, 2014; Korn, 2014; . Students believe they are being prepared for college-

level coursework, but this may or may not happen (Bastedo et al., 2016). The proposed study seeks to understand the experiences of students in the AP program at three private high schools in southwest Florida and describe their perceptions of preparedness to meet the demands of college-level coursework. The following chapter will review the theoretical framework of the study and related literature.

## **CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **Overview**

The opinions and beliefs about the AP program are diverse and even controversial at times. Because of the continuing popularity of the AP program and its impact on students and their future academic endeavors, a review of the current literature centered upon AP is essential for informed educators. This chapter will begin with a focus on the theoretical framework for the proposed study before diving into the important literature related to the AP program. The literature review will begin with a close look at the current state of college preparedness ventures and pressures of increased competitiveness in college admissions, with a specific focus on gifted education options for college readiness, educational inequality in curriculum, college enhancement strategies, and the rise of dual enrollment. At this point, the discussion will turn to AP programs in high school, with emphasis on AP program consistency and college readiness in honors/AP students. The College Board's commitment to equity and access for all students will then be discussed. The literature review will end with the perceived impacts of the AP program, noting indicators of positive AP effects for college-bound students. The chapter will then conclude with a concise summary of the research.

### **Theoretical Framework**

This literature review focuses on College Board's AP program, examining a phenomenon (AP courses) that many students have experienced in schools across the country. According to Patton (2015), qualitative research designs must be theoretically strong. To approach this study on the impact of the AP program and college preparedness, the research will be viewed through a transition theory lens. Transition theory, a concept first introduced by Schlossberg (1981), built upon previous research on adult development. The intention of transition theory is to discover

means by which understanding and assistance may be offered to adults as they go through life's transitions, both predictable and unpredictable (Schlossberg, 1981). The theory identifies three factors that consistently influence an individual's adaptation to transition, or change: the nature of the transition, the nature of the individual's environments both before and after the transition, and the inherent nature of the individual (Schlossberg, 1981). Nicholson (1990) expanded upon these factors with his idea of a transition cycle which recognized the vital role preparation plays in a person's transition experience. Expectations, motives, knowledge, and skills are all impacted by a person's preparation for the impending transition (Nicholson, 1990). Thus, an individual's ability to adapt to a transition is dependent upon his balance of strengths and weaknesses (Schlossberg, 1981).

The resources and deficits for an incoming college student could be viewed as their level of preparedness based upon the challenging coursework (such as AP classes) that a student has or has not taken. Schlossberg (1981) acknowledged that adults handle transitions differently at different points in their lives. This is a result of the resources-deficits ratio, as circumstances and experiences impact this balance. Examples of such circumstances and experiences are found in the person's own strengths and weaknesses, the very nature of the transition itself, the person's avenues for support, and the person's ability to cope with the transition (Schlossberg, 1984). Chickering and Schlossberg (1998) discussed the mnemonic four *s*'s to remember four key factors that influence an individual's resources—situation, self, support, and strategies. Thus, a student's participation in AP courses could impact the resources-deficits ratio for the student prior to entering college.

An increasing amount of educational research has selected transition theory for its theoretical framework. Ward (2020) grounded his research on veterans returning to civilian

employment and daily life on transition theory. Key factors that negatively impacted their ability to assimilate back into civilian life were starkly reminiscent of several transition theory principles: a lack of support, inadequate skill set for new tasks, and disabilities due to their time in service (Ward, 2020). Adewale et al. (2018) investigated the transition for international students enrolled in an American university. Participants in the study noted their relationships with peers and faculty as well as a willingness to adapt to cultural differences greatly impacted their social integration into American culture (Adewale et al., 2018). Adewale et al. (2018) noted that the international student participants identified themselves differently dependent upon their audience. This draws an interesting parallel to the proposed study as the experiences of AP students will vary dependent upon classroom situation, fellow classmates, and instructors. Transition theory was also used by Kearney (2019) as a basis for development of a new rural transition theory to better equip faculty and staff on college campuses when helping their new rural students, who often feel disconnected from the collegiate atmosphere, more successfully adapt to the college environment. Rall (2016) utilized transition theory as the framework for her study of lower income racial/ethnic minority students in the summer between high school graduation and college matriculation. Results from the study indicated a need for counseling intervention plans to help students avoid the summer slump that often negatively impacts these students and their plans for college (Rall, 2016). The Rall (2016) study has specific relationship to the proposed study as the focus centers upon student's preparation for college, albeit the proposed study centers primarily on advanced college preparation.

### **Related Literature**

Students today face much pressure to achieve success during high school, and many teenagers will enroll in more rigorous courses, spend countless hours in service clubs, and

participate tirelessly in sports with hopes of standing out in the college admissions process and building meaningful experiences they hope will positively impact their futures. Yet this preparation can often lead to busy schedules without authentic preparation for the next stage of the student's educational journey.

### **Stakeholder Concerns about College Preparedness**

The desire for a college degree has become an objective for many of today's high school students (Shaw et al., 2012), and college enrollment numbers have steadily increased over the last several decades (Bastedo et al., 2016). However, as the drive for excellence and a discernible high school career has increased, parents, educators, and business community members have become increasingly concerned with whether graduating students are adequately prepared for life after high school, be it college or the workforce (Klein, 2019; MacIver et al., 2019). It is disheartening that many students who enter college will never graduate with a degree; as many as 44% of undergraduate students and 70% of graduate students will not earn a degree despite beginning a degree program (English et al., 2017; McFarland et al., 2018). Research has suggested that parents can play a large role in fostering college readiness, and efforts to encourage stronger partnerships between families and schools can have great positive impacts on a student's future college readiness (Mwangi et al., 2019). In addition to greater parental involvement, there is also a need for better understanding a student's college readiness prior to embarking on postsecondary education. Across the United States, states have a variety of methods for gauging college readiness, and some are beginning to employ means of work-place preparedness as well (Klein, 2019). However, these methods are not universal; thus, the implications of such initiatives may not be viable indicators of student preparedness at this point.

Kolluri and Tierney (2020) addressed this area of concern in their evaluation of California's Early Assessment Program (EAP), a program that seeks to assess students' current educational status and likelihood of postsecondary enrollment and completion. Cultural integrity, or recognizing the relevance of culturally nonbiased curriculum and assessments, is of utmost importance in adequate college preparation for all students (Kolluri & Tierney, 2020). This concept, coupled with an increased interest in vocational courses and other work study experiences has gained traction as a feasible method for improving college and careers preparedness (Klein, 2019). Although some critics may believe vocational courses are not for college preparatory students, Kreisman and Stange (2019) emphasized the significance vocational courses can have on students' future academic endeavors, career choices, and eventual salaries. Students and teachers alike have called for more authentic learning experiences that are tailored to career-related situations, whether these be in an academic or vocational setting (Lindstrom et al., 2020). It is evident that primary stakeholders in secondary education are concerned with the level of college and careers preparedness of today's high school students.

### ***Gifted Education Offerings for College Readiness***

As emphasis on college and career readiness has taken center stage in many educational circles, with hopes of increasing competency and college-ready skills for all students, one group of students has often been shortchanged the challenging academic coursework they deserve: gifted students. Callahan et al. (2017) noted a one-size-fits-all approach to gifted education in many school that has not produced positive gains for the gifted students it services. In fact, there is an increasing trend of underachievement among gifted students, possibly due in part to varied funding for gifted programs (most have seen drastic cuts or completely been removed) as well as a general lack of motivation from gifted students who feel underchallenged and bored with slow

moving classrooms that try to teach to the average student in the class (Yeung, 2014).

Consequently, many gifted students are simply given more work than the other students in the class, not necessarily work that is appropriately enriching; this quantity over quality approach for gifted education students often frustrates gifted students instead of challenging them (Young & Balli, 2014). Gifted students need instruction that is tailored to their needs the same as students who are struggling have instruction differentiated for them (Young & Balli, 2014). Additionally, older gifted students in secondary school realize greater social pressures to conform to their classmates, thus sacrificing their classroom performance to better fit in with their peers (Yeung, 2014).

Pullout enrichment programs are much more commonplace for gifted elementary students, while secondary students are often left with few enrichment programs to better challenge their minds. Callahan et al. (2017) studied the programming offered for elementary, middle, and high school students identified as gifted, noting few clear program goals or curriculum for elementary and middle schools while high schools often opt for easy implementation of AP courses for their gifted secondary students. If gifted students are still meeting grade level standards, their performance is not a cause for concern with administrators focused on bridging the achievement gap; yet the gifted students are actually often underachieving (Young & Balli, 2014). Similarly, Brown and Wishney (2017) discussed the frustrating reality for many gifted students and their parents: gifted students have been essentially removed from the exceptionality label that encompasses their peers who are struggling to meet grade level standards. As a result, gifted students often do not receive appropriate testing to determine their academic needs (Brown & Wishney, 2017). This should be a cause for concern amongst stakeholders focused on college preparedness as well—gifted

students have much to offer society (Yeung, 2014). McClarty (2015) noted the United States' consistent efforts to play catch-up with academic achievement in the global picture and asserted the need for appropriate instructional support for gifted students that lays the groundwork for their success in advanced college classwork. Young and Balli (2014) related the cry of gifted parents for state legislators to lobby for more funding for gifted programs, noting that gifted students are "our future leaders and that policy decisions must be made to provide for gifted students' educational needs" (p. 244). College preparedness looks different for all students, and schools need to strive to provide this preparation for all student abilities.

### **Educational Inequality**

Furthermore, the perceived educational inequality that exists in the nation's schools increases the gap between higher and lower socioeconomic status (SES) students. Rowland and Shircliffe (2016) underscored the importance of schools ensuring that all students, regardless of race or SES, can meet high academic standards and are ready for college, if they so choose to attend a postsecondary institution. Unfortunately, this disparity in schools is often not met. Often students of lower SES attend schools with less resources, have less parental encouragement, and simply are not given access to more rigorous curriculum or academic preparation materials (Bastedo et al., 2016; Klugman, 2013; Rowland & Shircliffe, 2016; Wolniak et al., 2016).

One resource that is being given much more attention in current research is a personal one: teacher quality and effectiveness of a teacher's instruction. Ross (2019) boldly acknowledged teacher quality as the "single most important contributor to students' immediate academic outcomes and long-term achievement" (p. 20). The Education Trust (2019) further expounded on the lack of quality school personnel, emphasizing the lack of access that low-

income students have to school counselors who can be extremely important in guiding students through decisions related to postsecondary education. Sadly, many low-income and minority students attend schools staffed by inexperienced or ineffective teachers (Ross, 2019). By reviewing data from standardized testing and other quality control measures, Ross (2019) called for state education policy makers to not only recognize this growing problem but to take steps to do something about the increasing discrepancy in access to quality teachers.

### *Educational Choices for Minorities*

Additionally concerning is the reality that many minority students do not choose to enroll in challenging academic coursework such as honors or AP courses. In fact, it has been realized that qualified Black students actually opt out of taking AP, even when they have been identified as students with solid AP potential (Rodriguez & McGuire, 2019). Likewise, Kettler & Hurst (2017) found the largest academic gaps within suburban Texas high schools to exist between Black and White students. Rodriguez and McGuire (2019) corroborated this gap, noting that offering more AP classes can, in fact, increase the Black-White achievement gap because simply offering more classes does not necessarily mean more participation from underachieving students. When considering the gap between Hispanic and White students, researchers have found that ethnicity of the schools' faculties (proportion of minority faculty to minority student population) had the largest impact (Kettler & Hurst, 2017).

Perhaps one of the greatest contributors to the White-Minority achievement gap is found in the perceptions of minority students themselves. While the achievement gap between white and non-white students continues to grow and has been a topic of much concern for administrators, teachers, and parents for years, few solutions to this problem have been adequately addressed (Szymanski, 2021). While minority students are now just as likely to be

enrolled in high schools that offer AP courses, they are also more likely to be enrolled in high schools that offer fewer AP courses than predominantly white schools (Rodriguez & McGuire, 2019). It is an unfortunate reality that non-white students are less likely to enroll in honors, AP, or IB courses, even when there are AP course options available (Rodriguez & McGuire, 2019). Syzmanski (2021) identified several potential factors that lead to enrollment decisions by non-white students in advanced coursework: family input, influence from teachers and friends, and the difficulty of finding a work/life balance for students who often must find part-time jobs to help make ends meet. To better understand the ongoing disparity of minority students' enrollment in AP classes, Syzmanski (2021) qualitatively studied the challenges and stressors of qualified minority students who acknowledge the necessity of completing advanced coursework and participating in numerous extracurriculars while also maintaining employment to assist their families with living expenses. These students desperately want to succeed and attend college, but they are often overwhelmed with the demands from their families, whether explicit or implied, and this can hamper their success or desire to participate in advanced courses such as AP (Syzmanski, 2021).

### ***Resource Deprivation***

Klugman (2013) discussed the concept of resource deprivation—perceived inequalities for students because of a lack in funding or academic preparation to meet more rigorous coursework. Klugman's (2013) study examined the efforts made in California to combat educational inequalities for disadvantaged students after a 1999 lawsuit in Inglewood, California that alleged unfair access to Advanced Placement courses in a district comprised predominantly of minority students. Results from this study found that while there was an increase in AP enrollment, the educational inequalities between lower and higher SES students remained. This

is due, in part, to the reality that as lower SES students engage in behavior that makes them more academically attractive, higher SES students will do the same (Klugman, 2013; Bastedo et al., 2016; Wolniak et al., 2016). Xu and Solanski (2020) indicated the need for school administrators at the elementary and middle school levels to recognize the role early college acceleration programs can have on eventual secondary academic success; such programs are often lacking in schools that service minority and lower SES students. Rodriguez and McGuire (2019) discussed the concept of “opportunity hoarding,” meaning that one group benefits from increased opportunities for a specific resource (in this case AP courses) while a different group continues to believe the resource is not for them (p. 650). Similarly, Kolluri (2018) postulated that simply updating policies to make the program more diverse does little to combat the issue of ineffective preparation that characterizes many students from lower socioeconomic (SES) or minority families.

### ***Equity and Access***

The recent push for more equity and access to honors and AP courses may have inadvertently weakened such program’s effectiveness, leading to a downward spiral as ill-prepared students face courses that fail to “reap the advertised benefits of AP participation” (Kolluri, 2018, p. 700). Koch et al. (2016) ardently agreed with this sentiment, believing that increased equity and access to more rigorous coursework such as AP is a waste of money that could be better delegated towards adequate preparation for advanced coursework or support once students are in higher-level courses. This assertion is further corroborated by the hefty price tag per AP student in Mayor Bloomberg and New York City’s “AP Expansion” campaign; Finn and Scanlan (2019) reported the perceived cost of \$11,000 per qualifying (passing) AP exam score after the increase in New York City high school students’ AP exam participation and comparison

to program implementation costs were calculated. Although educational inequality is recognized in today's schools, recent attempts to lessen the gap between students of lower and higher SES have had mixed impact.

In fact, curriculum is a major source of frustration in the fight for greater educational equity. Dixson et al. (2018) acknowledged the impact of whiteness as property in the curriculum on students' coursework which emphasizes white culture over that of minority groups. Critical race theory has been increasingly studied in the field of education to confront this idea of whiteness as property (Amiot et al., 2020). Sleeter (2017) iterated a sentiment felt by many students, parents, and school staff: most white teachers support educational equity for all students, but the support often does not reach the implementation stage. Unfortunately, rationalizations are often made to explain the obvious achievement gap found between minority and lower SES students and their white, higher SES peers. Kohli et al. (2017) identified evaded racism, anti-racist racism, and every-day racism as potential rationalizations for the achievement gap; sadly, these ideas almost blame minorities for their educational gaps because of a lack of support and resources. Amiot et al. (2020) related the need for educators to raise expectations for all students, regardless of race or SES, as a means of motivating and supporting future educational goals and achievement. Similarly, teachers of minority and lower SES students must begin to change their perspectives on parents and community, striving to elicit more family and community support (Amiot et al., 2020). Xu and Solanki (2020) identified the racial disparities that even homogenous grouping of gifted students at the elementary or middle school level can have on the secondary school community's picture of what constitutes a student who is capable of completing more challenging coursework such as AP classes or dual enrollment. Such a shift in thinking can strengthen student engagement and stakeholder involvement, promoting positive

change in curriculum, teacher-student relationships, and eventual education outcomes such as postsecondary education (Amiot et al., 2020).

### **The Pressures of Increased Competitiveness in College Admissions**

The students themselves, however, are most concerned with gaining acceptance to the university of their choice. As noted by Klugman (2013), today's high school students are facing stiff competition in the college application process. Because more students today recognize a correlation between a college education and financial success, the number of students applying for admission at four-year universities has significantly increased, and their likelihood of being accepted to more selective four-year institutions is impacted by participation in programs such as AP or dual enrollment (Beard et al., 2019). However, the number of students accepted at these universities has not increased proportionally, creating a simple case of high supply with lower demand. As a result, gaining acceptance to the student's college of choice has become a much more difficult endeavor.

### ***Stress, Anxiety, and Scandal in College Admissions***

For some students, the overwhelming pressure to attend a prestigious college or university has had deleterious consequences resulting in scandal and shame. In other cases, it is parents who have succumbed to the desire to ensure their kids meet their own high standards, all in the name of competitiveness and teaching high work ethic to hopefully result in academic and professional success for their children (Davis, 2021). Numerous celebrities, university officials, coaches, and wealthy donors have consistently been in the news because of admissions bribery charges linked to some of the country's most elite postsecondary institutions (Ellis, 2019).

Although the scandals at first seemed to be focused on student-athletes, further investigation has illuminated unfair advantages for wealthy students or children of alumni as well as falsification

of admissions tests scores and high school transcripts (Ellis, 2019; Stripling, 2019). Ellis (2019) detailed comments from several elite-college admissions deans regarding their undergraduate admissions policies and stance on potential admissions reform. A majority of those contacted insisted their admissions process is thorough, fair, and focused on a holistic evaluation of the applicant (Ellis, 2019). While this is certainly the desired response, Stripling (2019) questioned the true impact of money and power on college admissions, noting that colleges do view admissions from a business standpoint, even if they are hesitant to admit it. What this means is that sometimes more academically qualified students are overlooked to allow admission to less academically qualified but more socioeconomically connected students (Stripling, 2019). This unfortunate reality is what leads to an admissions “back door”, the pathway followed by those involved in recent admissions scandals (Stripling, 2019).

Because of such scandal and the consistent stress involved with college admissions, many college and university officials are encouraging reform in the college admissions process for all schools, not just those considered academically elite (Ellis, 2019). Ellis (2019) quoted Stuart Schmill, dean of admissions and student financial services at Massachusetts Institute of Technology: “We have been an early and consistent endorser... of the ‘Turning the Tide’ report... [which] highlights the negative effects on students of the pressures placed upon them to gain admission to highly selective schools” (p. A21). This report, an initiative of the Making Caring Common Project, has three key goals for the college admissions process: promote genuine and meaningful involvement with community service; consider prospective students’ responsibilities to family and community in light of racial, socioeconomic, and educational differences; and reduce excessive pressure to achieve by redefining achievement (Harvard Graduate School of Education, 2016). Those involved with the project hope to inspire veritable

reform of the college admissions process by emphasizing quality experiences over quantity of activities (including extracurricular activities and advanced academic coursework), reducing pressure surrounding American College Testing (ACT)/Scholastic Assessment Test (SAT) test scores, and redefining prospective students' ideas about what makes a college a good college (Harvard Graduate School of Education, 2016).

### ***College Enhancement Strategies***

Despite such measures, the desire to stand out from the multitude of college applicants has resulted in increased efforts to maximize the curriculum offered in today's high schools (Bastedo et al., 2016; Evans, 2019; Wolniak et al., 2016). An increase in the number of honors, Advanced Placement (AP), International Baccalaureate (IB), and dual enrollment courses partners with emphasis on test preparation for SAT and ACT tests and increased time spent volunteering or on extra-curricular opportunities to pad students' resumes and college applications (Wolniak et al., 2016). Unfortunately, such intense pressure to take an increasing number of challenging classes such as AP in an effort to measure up to an academically competitive class has often led many students to experience significant stress that can become detrimental (Gray, 2021). However, while research has had mixed reviews regarding the benefits of maximizing curriculum, Wolniak et al. (2016) found that students' participation in leadership opportunities through extra-curricular activities and increased enrollment in AP courses did have correlation to enrollment in a four-year college or university. Likewise, Shaw et al. (2012) noted a students' participation in AP courses yields a positive effect on college attendance, college GPA, enrollment in selected college major, and eventual graduation. In contrast, Bastedo et al. (2016) found that students' attempts to maximize curriculum had little effect on college admission. Overall, higher SES White and Asian students are the most likely to engage in such

college enhancement strategies, a reality that further increases the gap in educational equality (Bastedo et al., 2016; Gilroy, 2015; Klugman, 2013; Wolniak et al., 2016). This is one of the major reasons for the College Board's push to increase equity and access for all students. This campaign has not necessarily been welcomed by educators, a dilemma explored by Rowland and Shircliffe (2016).

### ***The Rise of Dual Enrollment***

Given the supposed educational inequality that exists for our student population and its implications for students' future educational success, numerous methods of closing this gap have been implemented in schools across the country. Over the last 40 years, one such program that has gained much attention is dual enrollment. Dual enrollment began as a means for high-achieving students who had either completed all high school graduation requirements or simply needed more of a challenge to experience college-level coursework while still being enrolled in high school (Bailey et al., 2002). Thus, the program originated in most locations as a means for high-achieving students to begin earning college credits prior to high school graduation. Project Advance, a concurrent enrollment program that began at Syracuse University in 1972, has seen much success for its students (Edmonds & Squires, 2016). Gerald Edmonds, the current director of Project Advance, emphasized the need for such programs to consider the program's overall purpose, target student age/ability level, teacher selection and qualification, and general oversight for successful maintenance (Edmonds & Squires, 2016).

However, as colleges and universities refine their dual enrollment practices, more educators are realizing the potential benefits that dual enrollment can offer to students of all ability levels (Bailey et al., 2002; An, 2013). An (2013) sought to determine the impact of dual enrollment courses on students' first year GPA in college and need for remedial coursework,

studying such differences as socioeconomic status, gender, and educational level attained by students' parents. In summary, An (2013) discovered that dual enrollment courses do positively impact participants' overall GPA for their first year in college and result in a decreased need for remedial coursework. An (2013) cautioned, however, that further research needs to be conducted on the varied impact that method of delivery of dual enrollment coursework can have on participants, particularly whether there is more of a benefit for students to participate in dual enrollment coursework on an actual college campus instead of courses taught at their respective high schools.

Overall, research on the effects of dual enrollment programs has been positive, and many students who may not otherwise have been eligible to participate in honors courses have embraced the benefits of dual enrollment (Bailey et al., 2002). One unforeseen benefit to dual enrollment has even been its unwitting use as a recruitment tool as research has shown support for many dual enrollment students to choose to continue their postsecondary education at the college or university where they completed dual enrollment courses during high school (Jagesic et al., 2021). Gagnon and Mattingly (2016) specifically addressed the potential of dual enrollment courses for students in rural areas at schools with limited or nonexistent access to AP courses. Students seeking to increase their chances of gaining that coveted college acceptance letter have recognized how dual enrollment can assist them. Edmonds iterates a similar theme for educators, noting that "Project Advance is expanding rapidly as educators realize the importance of a rigorous transition from high school to college" (Edmonds & Squires, 2016, p.12).

### *State Involvement to Increase College Enrollment*

Numerous state education departments and public university systems have become involved in the college admissions game. Because of the popularity of dual enrollment courses, several states have implemented programs with similar intent and rewards. In addition to the Syracuse University Project Advance initiative discussed previously (Edmonds & Squires, 2016), the state of Ohio has also introduced a plethora of early college credit options over the last few decades. In the late 80's, Ohio began a program coined Post Secondary Enrollment Options (PSEO) which was then followed in 2008 with the inaugural year of the governor's Seniors to Sophomores (STS) plan (Malek & Micciche, 2015). Although these endeavors met some success, ultimately the programs went under, replaced now with Ohio's College Credit Plus (CCP) program (Malek & Micciche, 2015). Campaigns such as Project Advance and Ohio's repeated attempts to assist high school students' attainment of early college credits are but a small sample of the programs that can be found nationwide. As a result of such programs, states have begun to mandate dual enrollment credit policies; for example, by 2014 as many as 22 states had passed measures to ensure credit acceptance at state colleges and universities (Adams, 2014). Adams (2014) cautioned, however, that since such policies are rather transitory between institutions, parents and students alike have begun to question the long-term efficacy of dual enrollment courses. Yet research has supported an increase in postsecondary graduation rates for students who began college with dual enrollment credits (Adams, 2014).

Clearly, state education boards and university administrators alike have realized the appeal for students to earn college credit while in high school. If students earn credits before graduating high school, thereby potentially decreasing their time to degree attainment and tuition costs, it stands to reason those students may have an increased desire to pursue postsecondary

education. As a result, many states have also adopted state level merit-aid policies. Merit-aid, in contrast to need-based aid, promises students scholarship money based on their performance in high school. Kramer (2016) studied the impacts of merit-aid programs on secondary school performance, differentiating between state programs that determine recipients based solely on GPA versus state programs that award aid based on a combination of GPA and standardized testing measures. Although there are critics of merit-aid scholarship programs who believe recipients are often higher SES students who do not need aid as much as other disadvantaged students, merit-aid policies have had an impact on student enrollment in honors or AP courses since these courses tend to weight GPAs, thus resulting in a higher GPA for more increased levels of reward in the merit-aid program (Kramer, 2016). As previously discussed, Rodriguez and McGuire's (2019) concept of opportunity hoarding is certainly a concern with merit-aid programs, yet supporters for these initiatives insist they are at least motivators for students to work hard and challenge themselves with more advanced coursework (Kramer, 2016).

### **Advanced Placement in High School**

For many students, dual enrollment or other early college credit options do not hold as much appeal as the promises of the Advanced Placement program. According to the AP Student page on College Board's website, there are more than 30 AP courses available, depending upon a student's school or district (College Board, 2019). Students typically enroll in and complete an AP course and then sit for a course exam in the spring of each school year. Earning a passing score on this exam (a three, four, or five) can earn an AP student college credits or allow them to skip introductory courses during their freshmen year of college (College Board, 2019). The website also insists that students will build important college readiness skills that are needed for success (College Board, 2019). Beard et al. (2019) noted the increasing trend of students who

have completed AP courses, identifying over 50 percent of graduates from class years 2009, 2011, and 2012 had participated in one to six AP classes and exams. It was also reported that a little over 10 percent of the same graduating class populations completed seven or more AP classes and exams (Beard et al., 2019). With this level of involvement from high school students, the potential to stand out in the college admissions process and improve likelihood of success in college-level coursework is paramount (Beard et al., 2019). Students have begun to believe that completing more AP exams, at least by appearance, places them in the top percentages of their graduating class, thus improving their chances of admission to their choice universities (Bastedo et al., 2016; Gagnon & Mattingly, 2016). Moreover, Finn and Scanlan (2019) identified that AP courses not only benefit the college admissions process but also “boost disadvantaged youngsters who never considered college or experienced college-level academics” (para. 2), a concept that motivates many schools to invest in the AP program.

### ***Advanced Placement as a Gifted Education Program Choice***

As schools across the country have steadily poured more money into special education programs in an attempt to increase standardized test scores and meet national standards, gifted education programs have seen budgets slashed or eliminated completely (Plucker & Callahan, 2020). As a result, there is often a complete lack of specific programming for gifted students. Plucker and Callahan (2020) recognized this gap particularly for secondary schools, noting that many elementary schools participate in initiatives such as Odyssey of the Mind or other such enrichment programs while secondary schools are devoid of similar enrichment programs. To combat this issue, secondary schools have relied on programs such as dual enrollment, International Baccalaureate (IB), and AP (Callahan et al., 2017).

The original intention for AP was to adequately prepare high school students for success in the college classroom (McCammon, 2018), yet its appeal as a relatively low-cost gifted education program option has been too tempting for penny-pinching school administrators (Gallagher, 2009). The financial aspect has been especially appealing for schools that have fewer financial and personnel resources, and many states offer additional funding for AP-sponsored tutoring, workshops, and exam waiver fees (Gagnon & Mattingly, 2016). These financial perks encourage many districts seeking an easy, low-cost option for gifted education to commit to building strong AP programs. Although gifted education may not have been the original intent of AP, research does support its effectiveness as a gifted education alternative (Callahan, 2017).

### ***Growth of Advanced Placement***

Because of its appeal for gifted students as well as a multitude of other purported benefits, the AP program has seen unprecedented growth over the last 20 years (Judson, 2016). Consequently, Judson (2016) sought to determine why such growth was taking place, particularly in the area of STEM-based AP classes compared to non-STEM AP classes. Judson (2016) found that the number of AP exams taken increased for both non-STEM and STEM-based AP classes. Warne (2017) and Belcher (2017) concurred that AP programs are often expanded to increase rigor and access to high-standard curriculum for minority students. The desire to achieve early college credit has undoubtedly made the program attractive to college-bound high school students (Evans, 2019; Kolluri, 2018; Warne, 2017).

Unfortunately, the growth of the program has also been plagued with consequences as well. As the number of students completing AP courses and taking AP exams has significantly increased (the number of students taking an AP exam grew by more than 500 percent between 1992 to 2012), the actual passing rate on several of these exams has declined (Judson, 2016).

Suggested rationale for the reported decrease in scores may be attributed to students who were simply not prepared to take such an advanced level class but were recruited to increase enrollment or the fact that the enrolled students represented more of an underclassmen population who is just not academically mature enough to complete more rigorous coursework at this stage of their education (Judson, 2016). Likewise, New York City, like many other cities across the nation, saw increasing AP participation rates that unfortunately did not translate to higher passing rates on exams, despite a push for more AP offerings in schools across the city (Finn & Scanlan, 2019). Numerous detractors of the AP program have long questioned the courses' abilities to teach in-depth knowledge about their subject discipline (Dimaria, 2013; McCammon, 2018; Warne et al., 2015). These concerns establish precedent for further research on the ever-expanding program.

At the same time, it is commendable that research supports schools have begun to combat the inconsistencies in access to AP courses that has continued to exist between white and minority students (Judson, 2016). Some research has indicated the potential benefits of participating in AP classes despite exam outcome; one New York City AP teacher noted the victory of even having a student earn a 2, arguing that such a score does indicate that something beneficial happened for the student despite not earning a qualifying/passing exam score (Finn & Scanlan, 2019). These educators see the increasing need for high school students to be better prepared for college and are interested in evaluating what programs and opportunities are a best fit for their environments (Adzima, 2017; Arce-Trigattie, 2018; Belcher, 2017; Rowland & Shircliffe, 2016). The question remains, however; how many AP courses would a student need to complete to gain the desired college-level experience that so many AP supporters profess?

Clearly, there are strong opinions on both sides of the AP paradox, yet the growth of the program cannot be ignored or denied.

### ***Advanced Placement Program Consistency***

While the purported benefits of the AP program are tempting, it is necessary to consider program consistency. Dimaria (2013) informed readers that AP courses are modeled after existing college courses and standards. However, concerns about the program have become more prevalent as many are concerned the program has become too much about gaining college acceptance and less on actual learning (Gilroy, 2015). John Tierney, a professional columnist and former teacher, warned parents and students of the lack of depth in AP courses, iterating that rapid growth in the program has led to a decline in quality (Dimaria, 2013). This concern is shared by several critics; many believe the courses are too focused on memorization of information without a clear understanding of concepts (Walsh, 2016). As noted by Judson (2017), the existence of AP classes in a school's curriculum does not necessarily mean excellence in curriculum. Likewise, it is natural to conclude that AP classes at a school with more resources may significantly differ from AP classes in a school that lacks resources, both in terms of available resources and interactions with teachers and classmates (Austin, 2020). Finn and Scanlan (2019) emphasized the need for a total commitment and buy-in of a school's administration and teaching staff; a successful AP program requires school leaders and AP teachers who are willing to intentionally train and persevere through a more rigorous teaching environment, one that often requires a major shift in perspective.

**Concerns About Readiness amongst College and University Professors.** Tierney's concerns are shared with an increasing number of college and university professors. Malek and Micciche (2015) expressed serious reservations regarding an Ohio Board of Regents adoption of

new cut-off scores for students enrolling in state universities with AP exam credits. The new policy lowered the cut-off score for AP student exams from a 4 to a 3. This change in policy could save new students at Ohio public universities anywhere from \$1,377 to \$26,334 depending upon their tuition status (in-state or out-of-state) and number of successful AP exams (Malek & Micciche, 2015). While the economic benefits for students are undeniable, university educators are gravely concerned about potential academic consequences for these students. It has been suggested that colleges and universities may need to adapt their AP credit acceptance policies to encompass a combination of both the AP exam score and student's final grade in the course (Sadler et al., 2016). The College Board (2019) includes an AP Score Scale Table which assigns potential letter grade equivalents for comparable college courses as aligned with scores on AP exams. According to this table, a 5 on an AP exam is comparable to an A or A+ in a similar college course; a 4 is comparable to a B, B+, or A-; and a 3 is comparable to a C, C+, or B- (The College Board, 2019). There is a definite difference in performance and ability for a student who earns a C versus a B in a college level course; thus, it is easy to understand why college professors are frustrated regarding adoption of lower cut-off scores for course credit. These professors see potential detriment for students who earn credit for courses but lack necessary skills in the academic discipline for which they received credit (Korn, 2017; Malek & Micciche, 2015). In fact, Sadler et al. (2016) emphasized that while AP classes often do benefit students, they can be ineffective replacements for the intended collegiate introductory level course. In some universities, students who intended to skip introductory chemistry and biology courses because of earned AP credits found themselves ill-prepared to meet the demands of upper-level chemistry and biology courses (Korn, 2017). Adams (2014) also acknowledged this concern and noted the desire amongst many college and university professors for new college students to

experience coursework in their own university classrooms rather than in a dual enrollment, AP, or IB program. In fact, postsecondary faculty who ascribe to this mentality often direct students to enroll in the same courses in which they may have earned credit prior to college matriculation (Adams, 2014).

Margaret Walsh (2016), sociology professor at Keene State College, also questioned the preparation AP students receive for college level coursework, indicating many AP classrooms are dominated by a mentality that teaches to the test instead of quality curriculum that provides in depth education experiences. Consequently, Walsh (2016) stated the overwhelming need for new college students to change their perspectives about their education to one that seeks new opportunities to grow in their knowledge rather than options to excuse coursework simply to meet degree requirements. The unfortunate conclusion many higher education professors understand is a distressing change in perspective: “students as customers and education as commodity” (Malek & Micciche, 2015, p. 79). This push to complete more coursework before even entering college can unintentionally mar the greater college experience. Korn (2017) indicated the sense of loss many college faculties worry about for their undergraduate students; with so many courses being completed prior to starting college, the communal undergraduate experience has begun to suffer.

**The College Board’s Response to Criticism.** Because of criticism towards the AP program, the College Board has sought to improve its AP courses by engaging more inquiry-based learning opportunities, especially in AP science and math courses (Long et al., 2019). Yet research has shown that AP exams are carefully designed with the highest of standards, utilizing cutting-edge testing research as a basis (Warne, 2017). Unlike honors or gifted courses, AP course curriculum is carefully designed to follow comparative college-level courses (Arce-

Trigatti, 2018). Schools that wish to offer AP courses are encouraged to send their prospective AP teachers to College Board approved training and professional development opportunities, such as the summer institute options (Long et al., 2019). Additionally, AP teachers must submit their AP course syllabi to College Board for approval (Long et al., 2019). Although differences in incentives, availability, course content, and requirements will understandably exist amongst high schools participating in the AP program (Warne, 2017), with effective teacher training and an administration that both supports teachers with feasible incentives and holds them accountable to the highest standards, the AP program can be a successful program for college-bound high school students. Furthermore, Warne (2017) communicated the need for AP teachers to maintain the integrity of college-level coursework while also providing differentiation and real-world application of content to continue to make the course material meaningful.

### ***College Readiness in Honors/AP Students***

While most of the research previously conducted on the AP program has been conducted by the College Board, other researchers have begun to delve into the benefits of students' participation in AP courses and program impact on college readiness. In California, AP enrollment is often used to determine college readiness (Adzima, 2017). Warne (2017) found that AP students generally outperform non-AP students in several areas, including a more favorable attitude towards academic endeavors. Allen and Mattern (2019) discovered that AP students were both less likely to need remedial education courses after enrolling in college and typically earned higher GPA's during their first year in college, reporting that students who completed AP coursework in social studies, English, and foreign languages typically earn higher GPAs in their first year of college. It is important to remember, however, that success on an AP exam can be an indicator of academic achievement in college, but it is certainly not a guarantee

of success in the college classroom (Smith et al., 2017). AP students must understand that their participation in AP courses has given them potential benefits that should be invested wisely.

Additionally, students participating in AP courses, regardless of exam performance, increasingly exhibit important college readiness skills, although the greatest impact on college performance has been shown in students who did receive a passing score (a three, four, or five) on the AP exam (Warne et al., 2015). Groves (2019) echoed this sentiment when acknowledging that many of today's students are unprepared for college due to a lack of rigor in the typical high school curriculum, yet AP courses can help bridge this gap. Research continues to support the long-term educational benefits of participation in the AP program and its impact on college readiness.

### ***The AP Capstone Program***

In 2014, the College Board initiated a new AP program to meet the pressing concerns of college preparedness amongst high school students: AP Capstone (Jagesic et al., 2020). The AP Capstone program consists of two courses (AP Seminar and AP Research) that are designed to teach high school students college-level academic research skills while incorporating critical thinking and analysis skills in a variety of disciplinary genres. Students who successfully pass the end of course AP exams for both AP Seminar and AP Research are eligible for an AP Capstone Certificate; if the student also passes four additional AP course exams, they will receive the AP Capstone Diploma.

Mathews (2019) emphasized the overwhelming need for such a program, recognizing that many students graduate high school without ever having finished a long research writing project. The similarities between the AP Capstone program and the established International Baccalaureate program are significant and indicate potential program success for the newer AP

Capstone program (Mathews, 2019). Jagesic et al. (2020) reported similar benefits as students who participate in the AP Seminar and Research courses are provided with more specific critical thinking, research, and collaborative learning skills that will better prepare them for success in the college classroom. The program has been well received thus far; in fact, AP Capstone executive director Rushi Sheth estimates a potential 30,000 individual AP Research courses by 2022 (Mathews, 2019).

Early research conducted by the College Board itself indicated a greater success rate on future AP exams taken by students who have also participated in AP Seminar (Jagesic et al., 2020). When investigating relationships between AP Capstone Diploma students and students who have successfully passed a comparable number of AP exams (at least six total), initial research does not show a significant difference in impact to performance in first year college coursework grades. However, students who earn the AP Capstone Diploma are significantly more likely to earn internships and research opportunities at their respective colleges over other students, including those who have passed a comparable number of AP course exams (at least six total). In light of this initial positive research on the program, the AP Capstone program appears to deliver on its promises of advanced research and writing instruction. The students who enroll in such courses are motivated to prepare themselves for college success and have been provided opportunities to engage in educational learning opportunities with experts in their desired fields as well as potential opportunities to publish student scholarly work (Mathews, 2019).

### ***College Board's Equity and Access Pledge***

In recent years, the College Board has been committed to increasing AP access to all high school students (The College Board, 2019). This focus on increased access has been met with mixed reception from a variety of sources. Arce-Trigatti (2018) concluded that state-mandated

AP programs have not necessarily yielded positive results from increased access and enrollment, yet they have not harmed students either. New York City's "AP Expansion" and "AP for All" programs have increased both the number of public high schools offering AP courses and number of students participating in such programs, a process made even more successful through partnerships with groups such as the National Math and Science Initiative and Equal Opportunity Schools (Finn & Scanlan, 2019). However, Koch et al. (2016) emphasized that increased equity and access is a waste of time and money if students are not prepared for success in the courses or provided with adequate support services. Long et al. (2019) found similar sentiment from AP science teachers who noted the difficulty of teaching an inquiry-based learning course to students who lacked the preparation to successfully engage in such a course. Similarly, Gagnon and Mattingly (2016) noted deficient success rates for high school students participating in AP courses in rural areas that had more limited access to resources for assistance and support. Rowland and Shircliffe (2016) described the College Board's open enrollment policy for AP classes as a "sink-or-swim approach" that will "likely continue to produce inconsistent results for students and teachers" (p. 418). Despite these concerns, however, there have been many success stories because of AP and the program continues to thrive in many schools across the country.

### **Perceived Impacts of AP**

As AP participation has continued to increase over the last several years, educational stakeholders are increasingly interested in the overall impact an Advanced Placement program can have on today's students. College Board's equity policy statement from 2002 has dramatically impacted the number of students taking AP courses as well as the overall demographic picture of the AP student population (Koch et al., 2016). This has raised many red flags regarding the sustained longevity of the program's adherence to college readiness. Koch et

al. (2016) noted increased participation in AP courses by underrepresented Hispanic students in California, Texas, and Arizona. While the number of students who passed AP exams did improve for each state, the numbers of earned qualifying scores are disproportionate to the increased number of examinees (Koch et al., 2016). This illustrates a growing concern over lack of preparation to complete AP coursework transitioning into a lack of preparation for actual college classes. In a comparative study, Woods et al. (2018) found improvements in successful completion of college-level courses after participation in AP programs; however, the researchers found that students who participated in AP English courses in high school only had an 86.2% likelihood of passing an introductory college English course. Although this percentage may seem high, it is troubling that even students who are purported to be prepared for college are not passing at a higher rate. In addition to these concerns, many educators have questioned whether the money reallocated for AP programs is worth the lack of money funneled into vocational or technical programs, recognizing that as some students are given valuable opportunities to earn college credit other students are robbed of important trade skills classes (Rowland & Shircliffe, 2016; Arce-Trigatti, 2018). Yet the positive effects of AP continue to be supported in research.

### ***Indicators of Positive AP Effects for College-Bound Students***

The original intent of AP courses was to allow high school students an opportunity to earn college credits for courses that would be rather repetitive in nature to already mastered high school curriculum (College Board, 2019). This advertising initiative promised two positives: avoidance of repetitive work and saved money on college tuition costs. Nearly 70 years from the program's beginnings, the attractiveness of those two qualities is still important for today's college-bound students. Adams (2014) noted College Board's stance that successful participation in AP coursework often leads to faster degree attainment or the freedom to pursue a

double major and possibly even study abroad. However, research has shown that other important benefits exist for participants of AP. Warne et al. (2015) found that Advanced Placement students from Utah who had success in passing AP exams also earned higher ACT scores. Because ACT scores are used primarily as college entrance tests, these higher scores can lead to college acceptance or scholarship opportunities (Kettler & Hurst, 2017; Warne, 2017). AP students are also exposed to more degree and career options, an experience that can lead to greater interest in obtaining an undergraduate or graduate degree (Evans, 2019; Warne et al., 2015). In the AP classroom, the AP teacher's higher student expectations and emphasis on accountability have led to improved performance in the classroom and long-term impacts on college preparedness (Jeffries & Silvernail, 2017). Unfortunately, the inverse of this has also been found to be true; if the classroom teacher does not set expectations high and deems students unlikely to succeed in the class or eventual AP exam, students have faced difficulty with the course (Belcher, 2017). Thus, an experienced and motivating AP teacher can inspire vigorous work ethic and a desire to succeed.

Because the College Board is not the institution awarding college credit but rather students' individual postsecondary educational institutions are, the issue of what students have gained or been rewarded with for their passing AP exam scores varies dependent upon the students' needs. This AP credit reward is also subject to the college or university's own AP credit policy; schools may elect to reward credit for specific graduation requirements, only as electives, or simply as a means to skip prerequisite courses needed for more advanced coursework (Korn, 2017). Evans (2019) referenced several noteworthy trends regarding the usage of earned AP college credits. One out of every five students who have earned at least 10 AP credits is likely to graduate a semester early, translating into an average savings of \$1,000 in

student loans (Evans, 2019). Although researchers have been suspicious that students who earned AP credits would be more likely to take fewer courses during their first year of college, research has shown otherwise; instead, a trend towards more challenging classes has been found with AP students in their first year of college (Evans, 2019; Warne et al., 2015). Many of these additional classes have been focused on advanced laboratory sciences or more advanced math (Evans, 2019). Furthermore, the flexibility in scheduling due to previously earned college credits has led to many AP students choosing to double major in college, making them marketable upon finishing college (Evans, 2019). It is clear that many AP students, when appropriately challenged, strive to even higher academic success and continually pursue more advanced learning to achieve their potential (Warne, 2017); Evans (2019) relayed an incredible 60% higher likelihood for students who have participated in AP to pursue a graduate degree later in their educational journey. Current research literature displays a variety of positive and negatives for College Board's Advanced Placement program, but the perceived benefits published to date do outweigh the negatives.

### **Summary**

The AP program has enjoyed much success since its inception in the 1950's, and its longevity can be attributed to its promises of early college credit, saving students time and money in college. The program has grown from a simple pilot study to investigate college readiness to a comprehensive program offering more than 30 unique AP courses (College Board, 2019). Not originally intended to be a substitute for gifted education, AP has become a standard alternative to more expensive gifted programs, particularly in schools and districts lacking adequate resources and personnel. While critics question the consistency of the program's curriculum across school districts, an increasing number of students enroll in AP courses and sit

for the end-of-course AP exams, hoping to receive a passing score. The College Board has attempted to improve course reliability by offering professional development opportunities and restrictions on course syllabi. These measures seek to improve the integrity of the program, insisting that students are engaging in college-level coursework that is preparing them for work at the postsecondary level. Qualitative research in this area has indicated positive correlations among AP course GPA, college GPA, and passing AP exam scores. However, there is some discrepancy as to whether the benefits lie only in participating in the course or earning a passing score on the end-of-course AP exam. There is little research that gives voice to students' own perceptions about their participation in the AP program. This study will provide an opportunity for students to describe their experiences in AP, reflecting on its impact on their college experience thus far.

## CHAPTER THREE: METHODS

### Overview

The steady growth of College Board's AP program has caused many educators to question the effectiveness of the program in adequately preparing students for college-level coursework (Dimaria, 2013; Warne, 2017). Although much quantitative research has been conducted on AP courses, there is little research that focuses on students' own perceptions about the AP program and its promise to prepare them for college (Shaw et al., 2012; Suldo et al., 2018; Warne et al., 2015; Woods et al., 2018). The problem is that expectations for students, course load, and requirements for AP courses vary widely. The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study is to understand undergraduate students' lived experiences regarding their preparedness to meet the demands and expectations of college-level coursework based on their experiences with the AP program in high school. Schlossberg's (1981) transition theory provides a meaningful theoretical base from which this study further explores students' adjustment to the high school/college transition. Additionally, open inquiry interviews yield descriptions of AP students' shared experiences with the AP program which may be used to inform future research on Advanced Placement courses and college readiness. This insight gained from AP student perceptions about the program can lead administrators, AP teachers, and College Board officials to more effectively align AP standards with college standards in hopes of improving the overall AP experience and program effectiveness for future students. This chapter will inform readers of the employed research design and questions before detailing pertinent information regarding the setting and participants for the study. The study's procedures will be clearly identified and explained prior to an examination of the role of the researcher. Data

collection methods and data analysis procedures will be described in detail before finishing the chapter with a discussion on the study's trustworthiness and ethical considerations.

### **Design**

While much quantitative research has been levied on the AP program's effectiveness and impact on college GPAs or degree completion, there is a lack of depth in qualitative research about AP and its impact on college success. Thus, more qualitative study was necessary to explore the experiences and perceptions of past AP students. Transcendental phenomenological qualitative research was ideal for this study because I sought to discover common experiences or perspectives among all participants (Moustakas, 1994), in this case investigating the perceptions of freshmen college students regarding their level of preparedness for college after participating in AP coursework in high school. Phenomenological approaches to qualitative research focus on the lived experience of participants, discovering such experience through open, in-depth interviews and understanding how the participants' experiences impact their understandings of the world around them (Moustakas, 1994; Patton, 2015). The participants in my study were all enrolled in at least two AP courses during high school. The consistency and accountability measures dictated by College Board are meant to standardized the baseline AP experience for each student enrolled in the same AP courses (College Board, 2019). This promotes the common experience shared by the phenomenon's participants.

Additionally, the transcendental approach to phenomenological research places a heavy emphasis on textural and structural descriptions of the participants' experiences with the phenomenon being studied (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Moustakas, 1994). These descriptions yielded important information about the participants' experiences but were not be used to imply any type of explanation or evaluation of the AP programs at participants' schools. Moustakas

(1994) further identified the relationship between the textural and structural descriptions, noting that these descriptions combine to create a “fullness in understanding of the phenomenon” (p. 79). This is a key feature of phenomenological research. I wanted to understand the participants’ perceptions of their experiences, report them accurately through synthesis of the textural and structural descriptions, and arrive at a rich description of the essence of the phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994). In the present study, the phenomenon was the AP program’s impacts on college readiness. As the researcher, I sought to describe what the participants experienced and how it has impacted their postsecondary education experience. These rich descriptions compiled from interview data will provide educators with a vivid depiction of students’ lived experiences with AP courses.

### **Research Questions**

Through this study, I explored the impact of the AP program for selected participants through the narrowed focus of the following research questions.

#### **Central Question**

What are the perceptions of college undergraduates who have participated in their high school’s AP program regarding their preparedness to meet the demands and expectations of college-level coursework?

#### **Sub-Question 1**

What are participant perceptions of the challenges they encounter while transitioning to college-level coursework from a high school curriculum?

#### **Sub-Question 2**

What aspects of the AP program do the participants perceive as being the most influential during their transition to college from high school?

### Setting

This study focused on the shared lived experiences of high school students who attended three private, college-preparatory secondary schools in southwest Florida. The selected private schools included West Coast Christian School, West Coast Catholic School, and West Coast Episcopal School (pseudonyms). All the schools that were involved in the study are private, secondary schools with college-preparatory programs and similar student enrollment. Two of the schools are faith-based schools and one is an independent private school. The three selected schools for this study are near each other and service the same demographic in students with a consistent level of rigor and relevance in the classroom. Each of the schools offers a comparable number of AP courses (15, 17, and 20, respectively) and has seen consistent success with students' AP scores, college acceptances, and scholarship recognition (West Coast Christian School, 2019; West Coast Episcopal School, 2019; West Coast Catholic School, 2019). The student body for each of the schools is governed by a board of trustees (West Coast Episcopal School, 2019; West Coast Catholic School, 2019) or school board (West Coast Christian School, 2019) and superintendent/head of school who oversee a building principal in each of the elementary, middle, and high schools. The board of trustees is elected by the school community while the superintendent and building principals are hired by the board. The superintendent and building principals have hiring power for the school faculty and personnel. All three schools have only one campus, with all buildings residing on one property. One of the schools (West Coast Catholic School) has only a secondary student population of grades 9-12.

Furthermore, the Education Commission of the States (2019) compiled data regarding AP program implementation, success, and evaluation for each state. Florida has a high number of students participating in AP exams and offers its public school students the opportunity to take

AP exams for free. Florida is consistently among the top states in the nation for AP enrollment and success (Education Commission of the States, 2019). With these data in mind, studying college students from Florida who were enrolled in AP courses in high school can yield valuable information for AP teachers, prospective students, and the College Board. Although the selected schools were not public schools, the AP programs at each of the sites are strong and boast a large student enrollment in AP courses with a wealth of AP course offerings available to students and comparable to AP course offerings found at local public schools (West Coast Christian School, 2019; West Coast Episcopal School, 2019; West Coast Catholic School, 2019). These private schools were chosen because of the selective nature of students allowed to enroll in AP courses. Students who take AP courses at these schools are admitted into the courses on the basis of teacher recommendations and successful completion of prerequisite coursework, thus providing a group of participants who were collegiately motivated.

### **Participants**

The 13 participants in this study were all selected by criterion-based, purposeful sampling. Criterion-based sampling was appropriate for this study because it was important to explore the experiences common to those who have shared in the AP experience, which was the most important predetermined criterion (Patton, 2015). Additionally, Creswell and Poth (2018) surmised that a group of 10-15 participants provides a strong participant base for a phenomenological study. I individually contacted the guidance counselors from each of the participating private schools and explained the purpose of my study and data collection methods. I provided the guidance counselor with an informational consent form (see Appendix A) for prospective participants. These guidance counselors then communicated with school alumni who met the criteria for the study and provided my contact information and a copy of the consent

form. Prospective participants contacted me to show interest in the study. This feature of participant selection was essential as phenomenological research participants must be willing to participate in the interview process (Moustakas, 1994).

All participants were current college students. There were four participants each from West Coast Catholic School and West Coast Episcopal School; there were five participants from West Coast Christian School. Each participant was enrolled in a minimum of two AP courses during high school, with 10 being the highest number of AP courses taken by any participant. Participants had all completed at least one semester of undergraduate college coursework. After the prospective individuals contacted me and showed interest in participating in the study, participants were chosen based on established criteria of enrollment in and successful completion of a minimum of two AP courses in high school (a passing score on the AP exam was not required) and length of time in college courses (at least one semester of college coursework completed). Additionally, participants were selected to represent a broader variety of AP courses. These qualifications were aligned with utilization-focused sampling methods (Patton, 2015). The careful selection of participants through this purposeful sampling strategy can better influence AP administrators and educators with participants who represent a wide variety of AP subject disciplines and classroom experiences from which future program changes may be evaluated. Because of the time commitment involved to complete the individual interview, focus group interview, and reflective writing prompt, all participants received a \$20 gift card to their choice of Starbucks, Chipotle, or Amazon.

### **Procedures**

Prior to soliciting participants or collecting any data, I obtained IRB approval to begin the study (See Appendix B for approval letter). This was an important first step because human

participants were involved in the study (Patton, 2015). Once IRB approval was granted, I contacted guidance counselors from each of the selected private schools to begin the participant selection process (See Appendix C). In this study, purposeful sampling that was criterion-based was used to better align with the purpose of the research (Patton, 2015). Once participants were selected via the process described in the previous section, I obtained consent forms from participants to meet IRB guidelines (see Appendix A). All participants were assigned pseudonyms to ensure confidentiality (Moustakas, 1994).

Prior to data collection, pilot testing of the individual interview questions, focus group interview questions, and reflective writing prompt occurred to ensure clarity in wording and focus of the selected data collection methods. Data collection commenced with the individual interviews at a neutral site selected by each participant or via video conferencing due to COVID-19 restrictions. This was an important consideration for the qualitative interview that allowed for more openness by participants in the interviews. Interviews were recorded and transcribed for ease of data analysis. I personally transcribed the interview myself instead of hiring a transcriptionist to better internalize the participants' responses during the interview. Once individual interviews were complete, I reviewed data from the individual interviews to place participants in focus groups. These focus groups were grouped according to the participants' selected college majors. At this point, the focus group interviews occurred, allowing me the opportunity to observe spontaneous interactions among participants (Gundumogula, 2020). Focus group interviews, similar to the individual interviews, were also recorded and transcribed in the same manner as the individual interviews. Zoom conference calls were used for all focus group interviews because of scheduling constraints and the varied proximity of participants to each other (some were out of state and could not meet face-to-face for focus group interviews).

The final data collection method (the reflective writing prompt) was distributed via email to all participants once all individual and focus group interviews were complete. Participants had a designated time period to finish the written reflection. Once all interviews and writing prompts were complete, participants were thanked for their time in completing the interview and reflective prompt and then granted their selected gift card as gratitude for participation in the study.

The data analysis for each of the data collection methods began when collection began and continued throughout and after the collection process. Memoing of potential themes, patterns, and ideas occurred concurrently with data collection to allow for fluidity of my thought processes about the information gleaned (Kalpokaite & Radivojevic, 2019). Coding of the data occurred once all data was collected. After coding was complete, I utilized phenomenological reduction to organize patterns and themes into textual descriptions that helped me write compelling rich descriptions of data findings (Moustakas, 1994).

Once vivid textual and structural descriptions were complete, I used member checks with the participants to ensure accuracy of interpretations from interview data (Moustakas, 1994). I then called upon colleagues to assist with expert review of the study and its findings (Patton, 2015). Each of these methods helped to ensure the study's trustworthiness.

### **The Researcher's Role**

As a qualitative researcher, I was the primary instrument of data collection (Patton, 2015). As a result, it was important to identify my own connection with the site as well as any biases I had regarding the research topic. I have taught AP English Language and Composition and AP Research at one of the three selected schools (West Coast Christian School) for the past 12 years. A few of the participants were former students of mine; however, these students

completed AP courses with other teachers at the school as well. Although I had no direct relationship with the other two selected private schools, I have lived in the community where these schools reside for 13 years. Additionally, I have been an AP exam reader for the College Board for the last six years. Because of my experiences as both an AP teacher and AP exam reader, I realized that my experiences needed to be bracketed for meaningful interpretation and description of the participants' experiences with the AP program (Patton, 2015). My preceding belief was that AP has been a meaningful experience for most students who have participated in the program. As with many other educational opportunities, the amount of effort a student puts into an AP class inherently effects their success in the class. Consequently, the experience may be different for each student, yet I believe participation in AP courses can have positive long-term impact for students as they transition to the college setting.

By the process of phenomenological reduction and member checking (Moustakas, 1994), I consistently sought to produce an accurate description of the participants' experiences with the AP program. However, because of my experiences with AP English thus far, I was initially biased in favor of the AP English program. By selecting participants who have participated in a variety of AP courses, I obtained a more accurate picture of students' experiences with all potential AP courses. This helped alleviate the bias towards one particular discipline or experience. Moustakas (1994) ascertained the need for researchers to set aside personal bias and preconceptions about research topics as well as employ differing means of data analysis. These traits are what set transcendental phenomenological research apart from other qualitative design models and was an important aspect for this study.

## **Data Collection**

Data for this study was collected through three methods. Participants were first interviewed in a one-on-one setting at a site chosen by each of the participants or via video conferencing. After the one-on-one interviews, participants were placed in focus groups based upon the participants' selected college majors. Upon focus group assembly, the focus group interviews were conducted in a Zoom video conference call because of complications of assembling all participants due to geographic restraints. Finally, participants responded to a personal, reflective writing prompt based upon their own experiences and recommendations.

### **Individual Interviews**

The most prevalent form of data collection in qualitative research is through in-depth interviews (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Moustakas, 1994; Patton, 2015). Open-ended interview questions allow researchers the opportunity for in-depth examination of participants' experiences and perceptions (Patton, 2015). Participants were interviewed at the onset of the study either in a one-on-one setting at a site selected by the participant or via video conferencing. Therefore, the site for each interview varied by participants, allowing each participant to choose a neutral site that allowed them to feel comfortable. Interviews were recorded to allow me to place full attention on the participant and to aid in transcription after the interview was completed. The questions were designed to address each of the previously stated research questions. Table 1 lists the individual questions that were used for the interview (also see Appendix D).

**Table 1***Individual Interview Questions*

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1. What has been your favorite change from high school to college? (rapport-building)
2. In which AP courses were you enrolled throughout high school? (background)
3. On AP exams in which you earned a passing score, why do you think you were successful? (SQ2)
4. Which AP courses do you feel assigned the most homework? (SQ2)
5. Describe your homework and study habits for AP classes. (SQ1)
6. How often were you absent from AP courses? (SQ1)
7. What differences did you see between AP courses and honors courses? Between AP courses and non-honors courses? (SQ1 and SQ2)
8. To what extent did your AP teachers use lecture-style instruction in the classroom? (CQ, SQ1, and SQ2)
9. What types of resources (textbooks, apps, etc.) were used on a regular basis in your AP classes? (CQ and SQ2)
10. Describe the types of assessments used in your AP courses. (CQ, SQ1, and SQ2)
11. How were assignments graded in your AP courses? (CQ, SQ1, and SQ2)
12. What was your motivation for taking the AP courses offered at your school? (CQ)
13. How often do you feel AP teachers spent time “teaching to the test”? (CQ, SQ1, and SQ2)
14. How prepared did you feel to take the AP exam at the end of the school year? (CQ)

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15. If you were to live through high school again, what advice would you give yourself regarding enrollment in AP classes? (CQ, SQ1, and SQ2)
  16. Which AP course offerings do you wish your high school had provided? (CQ and SQ1)
  17. If you participated in either of the AP Capstone courses (AP Seminar and AP Research), how well did these courses prepare you for academic research and writing at the collegiate level? (CQ and SQ2)
  18. When you registered for college courses, how did your experience in AP courses in high school impact your decisions on which courses to take? (CQ and SQ2)
  19. How prepared for success did you feel during your first week of college courses? (CQ)
  20. At the end of your first college semester, how prepared do you believe your high school AP courses left you? (CQ)
  21. What advice would you give to a current high school AP student who is planning for college? (CQ, SQ1, and SQ2)
  22. What would you like your former AP teachers to understand about your college experience thus far? (CQ, SQ1, and SQ2)
- 

Question one was used to establish rapport with each of the participants and to encourage free, open inquiry during the interview (Patton, 2015). By starting the interview with a reflection question on the participants' favorite qualities of college in comparison to high school, the interview began with a focus on the participants' personal emotions about his or her current situation.

Questions two through six and eight through 11 provided important background information on the participants' enrollment and participation in Advanced Placement courses

(addressing the central research question). Much research has been conducted regarding the impact of passing AP exam scores on potential college success (Allen & Mattern, 2019; Warne, 2017; Warne et al., 2015). These questions, however, examined the actual AP classroom experience and how prepared students in these classes felt towards assessment for the classes. Moustakas (1994) described the interview process in phenomenological research as one that provides a “comprehensive account of the person’s experience of the phenomenon” (p. 114). The data gained from this set of questions helped to establish a more detailed picture of the participants’ experience with AP.

Questions seven and 12 through 14 were evaluative questions in which participants were asked to make judgmental evaluations of their experiences in the AP classroom and of their AP teachers and materials that were used (addressing the central research question). These questions further explored the AP classroom environment. Patton (2015) related the importance of these feeling questions, emphasizing their focus on participants’ emotions about the phenomenon rather than on actual behaviors.

Questions 15 and 16 asked participants to reflect on their experiences (addressing the central research question). Opinion and values questions were helpful in establishing participants’ “goals, intentions, desires, and expectations” about the phenomenon (Patton, 2015, p. 444). Evans (2019) studied the usage of earned college credits through AP exams and found mostly positive gains for students who passed AP exams. These questions explored the perceptions former AP students have on AP program participation now that they can reflect on the impact of the experience.

Questions 17 through 20 provided feedback regarding participants perceptions about their level of preparedness to complete college-level coursework (addressing both the central research

question and sub-question 1). Such sensory questions were key in accurately ascertaining the participants' full sensory experience with the phenomenon (Patton, 2015). The College Board has long advertised the program's beneficial impact on student performance in college (The College Board, 2019), and many have researched the academic benefits for participation in the AP program (Arce-Trigatti, 2018; Warne, 2017; Warne et al., 2015). Most of this research, however, is quantitative in nature and does not discuss students' perceptions about their preparedness for college-level coursework; these questions addressed this gap.

Questions 21 and 22 allowed participants the opportunity to give advice to both current AP students and AP teachers (addressing sub-question 2). These two questions were also opinion and values questions (Patton, 2015), but they allowed the participants to provide advice to others experiencing the same phenomenon.

The progression of questions allowed for participants to tell the story of their experience with the AP program at each of their high schools; this line of questioning was aligned with effective qualitative interview techniques (Moustakas, 1994).

### **Focus Group Interviews**

Focus group interviews are an effective means of capturing participants' experiences in a social setting that allows for discussion, debate, or commentary about the studied phenomenon (Patton, 2015). In this study, participants were divided into groups (identified by the participants' selected college majors) to take part in focus group interviews. By grouping participants based upon selected college majors, I was able to encourage discussion and elaboration on experiences in the different AP subject disciplines. These interviews had to be conducted via Zoom video conference calls because of geographical constraints with participants

often in a variety of states. Table 2 provides the questions that were used for the focus group interviews (also see Appendix E):

**Table 2**

*Focus Group Interview Questions*

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1. How has your experience in the AP program effected your study habits in college? (CQ and SQ2)
  2. What experiences in the AP classroom have been of most use in preparing for college-level coursework? (CQ and SQ2)
  3. What experiences in the AP classroom have been of least value in preparing for college-level coursework? (CQ and SQ1)
  4. How has your experience with the AP program at a private secondary school prepared you for college-level coursework at a (public/private) university? (CQ)
  5. During your first semester of college, what comparisons or observations have you made between yourself as a high school student completing college-level coursework versus yourself as a college student completing work in the college classroom? (CQ, SQ1, and SQ2)
  6. What suggestions do you have for high school teachers or the College Board about how to improve the AP program's impact on college preparedness? (CQ, SQ1, and SQ2)
- 

Questions one through four provided an opportunity for members of each focus group to reflect and expound upon their own experiences in college after participating in an AP program in high school (addressing sub-question 2). By asking these questions in a focus group setting,

participants were able to respond and interact with their peers about their experiences, allowing for more diverse perspectives on their experiences with AP while in high school (Gundumogula, 2020).

Question five allowed participants to evaluate their own performance in college thus far in comparison to their performance in high school AP classes (addressing the central research question, sub-question 1, and sub-question 2). Woods et al. (2018) concluded that high school counselors need to promote enrollment in courses that may improve success in college. By ascertaining students' views on their performance in high school as compared to college, valuable insight was gained about the impact of course load on potential college success. This reflective question tapped into the participants' feelings about the phenomenon being studied and how the phenomenon has impacted them (Patton, 2015).

Question six was an important opportunity for these former AP students to speak to the organization that administrates the AP program and provide constructive feedback to benefit the future of the program (addressing sub-question 2). This opinion and values question allowed participants to express their own opinion for future consideration of the phenomenon (Patton, 2015). Rowland and Shircliffe (2016) gained teachers' perspectives on the AP program; this question allowed students to vocalize their overall perspectives on the AP program as well, communicating suggestions to AP teachers and administrators.

The line of questioning was appropriate for focus group interaction and undoubtedly yielded more diverse perspectives about the phenomenon (Patton, 2015). The participants were interested in what each other had to say and often another participant's response triggered an additional response from others who either agreed or disagreed with what was being said.

### **Reflective Writing Prompt**

Reflective writing prompts may be a successful method for obtaining participants' personal feelings and emotions about the studied phenomenon (Cohen et al., 2018). Participants individually responded to the following reflective writing prompt, which was distributed via email (also see Appendix F):

As you began your first semester of college, describe your confidence in beginning your studies. Were there certain aspects of college that had you more anxious than others? How did this anxiety increase or decrease over the course of the semester? How much do you feel your AP courses contributed to your confidence in the college classroom?

Participants respond to this prompt after completing individual interviews and focus group interviews. All participants chose to reply with typed responses submitted via email. Written communications are one of the three acceptable forms of qualitative data as described by Patton (2015).

### **Data Analysis**

Prior to data collection, during the data collection process, and after data collection was complete, I engaged in reflexive journaling to better set aside my own biases and experiences with the phenomenon (Meyer & Willis, 2019). This process allowed me to better reflect on the data collected from individual and focus group interviews and the writing prompt, while bracketing my own experiences as an experienced AP teacher and Reader for College Board. Data collected from the one-on-one interviews and focus groups was personally transcribed, and these transcriptions along with participants' responses to the reflective writing prompt were analyzed for patterns and themes through horizontalization of significant statements and coding to identify clusters and themes from the identified significant statements (Moustakas, 1994). I

personally transcribed the data to allow for deeper internalization of the data collected from interview and focus groups. Data saturation was met through the cooperation of 13 participants, meeting Creswell and Poth's (2018) recommendation of 5-25 participants in phenomenological qualitative research. After analysis was completed, comprehensive descriptions of the participants' lived experiences (textural and structural) were written (Moustakas, 1994).

### **Memoing**

To begin analyzing the data from individual interviews, focus group interviews, and reflective writing prompts, I used memoing to create a descriptive synthesis of the data separated into short phrases, ideas, or key concepts (Kalpokaite & Radivojevic, 2019). This process was done throughout the data collection and analysis process. A system of organization for the memoes (conceptual headings) was used to assist in memo retrieval. This process allowed me to concurrently read the data and formulate ideas, questions, and observations about the data. Kalpokaite and Radivojevic (2019) emphasized the importance of memoing all ideas that come to mind during analysis of data transcripts and documents as this can increase generation of potential themes and patterns that may emerge and encourage critical thinking about the data. Moustakas (1994) described the process of epoche, or bracketing, when analyzing data. This was an important step throughout memoing as my own experiences and biases had to be set aside while creating this descriptive synthesis.

### **Coding**

To better conceptualize repetitive patterns or occurrences, a process known as coding was employed to divide collected data into several categories that was eventually settled into themes (Creswell & Poth, 2018). I utilized code classification to cluster collected data into meaningful themes of information, thus allowing the discovery of patterns found in the memoing of collected

data. Moustakas (1994) related the significance of the noema and noesis, asserting that the unification of these two will enable researchers to find the essence of a phenomenon. The process of coding helped achieve this unification.

### **Phenomenological Reduction**

Using the coded data, themes, and patterns discovered during coding, I then employed phenomenological reduction to organize themes and develop individual textural and structural descriptions of the data for each participant (Moustakas, 1994). Because of my experiences with the AP program, this was an important step in the data analysis process that considered bracketing of personal bias and interpretation of theme analysis (Patton, 2015). These textural and structural descriptions were supported with quoted segments from the transcribed individual and focus group interviews, as well as written responses to the reflective prompt. Individual textural and structural descriptions were then synthesized into composite textural and structural descriptions to better encompass the experiences of participants with the phenomenon: participation in the AP program and its impact on college readiness.

### **Trustworthiness**

A study's trustworthiness is of utmost importance for the results or findings to be serviceable. Patton (2015) stresses the researcher's responsibility to remain transparent in all aspects of study design, data collection, analysis, and report of findings. The study's credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability are of paramount concern.

### **Credibility**

Credibility was assured as participants reviewed my descriptions and themes for accurate representation of data. This technique increased the credibility of the study because the participants had more input into the discovered themes found in the data, thereby increasing the

likelihood of a more accurate interpretation of data (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This method, known as member checking, strives to decrease the likelihood of an incorrect depiction of data from the researcher, thereby making the study's results more credible (Moustakas, 1994).

### **Dependability and Confirmability**

The utilization of student self-reported AP course and exam scores during the individual interviews provided meaningful data that added depth to the qualitative responses from interviews, focus groups, and a reflective writing prompt. This indicated the participants' level of involvement and preparation for both the course and test. This approach can "provide cross-data consistency checks," strengthening the dependability of the study (Patton, 2015, p. 168). Additionally, I enlisted the help of colleagues and student reviewers to provide a critical expert review of composite descriptions and themes (Moustakas, 1994). This technique increased the confirmability of the study because the insight from the peer reviewer may serve as devil's advocate by questioning the researcher's methods and descriptions (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

### **Transferability**

I provided vivid textural and structural descriptions, thereby yielding a more thorough composite description. This technique increased the reliability of the study because the more comprehensive descriptions and identified similarities allowed the reader to make decisions regarding the transferability of the data (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Patton (2015) relayed the importance of thick descriptions in qualitative research, recognizing that such descriptions lead to stronger connections from smaller cases to larger issues. This enhanced the transferability of the study's findings.

### **Ethical Considerations**

This study maintained steps to account for anonymity and bias. Participant confidentiality was addressed by using pseudonyms for both individual's names as well as the names of each of the schools included in the study. Moustakas (1994) related the significance of maintaining participant's anonymity and confidentiality. Additionally, to counterbalance potentially biased feedback from participants, the participants' AP course and exam grades were viewed (when provided) in conjunction with collected data responses. Because poor performance on an AP exam could cause bitterness towards the course and the overall AP experience, this quantitative data was an important consideration. Furthermore, to ensure nonbiased interpretation of the collected data, my experiences as an AP teacher and exam reader were bracketed. Patton (2015) relayed the importance of bracketing to ensure that data is identified in "pure form" (p.575), presenting the most unprejudiced exposition of the study's data. Finally, the study obtained IRB approval and aligned ethical practices established by the IRB to most conscientiously implement the data collection and analysis required by the study (Patton, 2015). All interviews were kept confidential and data was stored securely; only myself as the researcher had access to interviews, transcripts, and participant information.

### **Summary**

In this transcendental phenomenological study, I explored the shared lived classroom experiences of high school students in three private, secondary schools in southwest Florida. Four or five participants from each of the three chosen schools were selected; participants were enrolled as either college students at the time of the study and had completed a minimum of one semester in college. Individual interviews, focus group interviews, and a reflective writing prompt were all used to collect data on the participants' experiences with the AP programs at

their respective schools. My own experiences as an AP teacher and exam reader were bracketed as analysis involved memoing, coding, and phenomenological reduction of collected data.

Through this analysis, reoccurring themes and patterns were identified and communicated in vivid descriptions of the participants' perceptions about their experiences in AP classes while in high school. A description of the study's participants and research findings may be found in the following chapter.

## **CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS**

### **Overview**

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study is to describe college undergraduates' perceptions about preparedness to meet the demands and expectations of college-level coursework based on their experiences with the AP program in high school. This chapter will begin with a description of the participants who engaged in each of the data collection methods for the study. After participant information is conveyed, results from the individual interviews, focus group interviews, and reflective writing prompt will be presented based upon three emergent themes: students' motivations for enrolling in AP courses is varied, high school students need more autonomy over their time and academics to better prepare for college coursework, and AP courses' curriculum should focus more on course content specific to the discipline and its context in the bigger academic picture. Following results on each of these themes will be a description of outlier findings from the data collection methods. The chapter will conclude with responses to each of the three research questions identified for the study.

### **Participants**

After contacting the guidance counselors at each of the site schools regarding alumni who met the criteria for the study, the following participants (see Table 3) indicated interest in participating in the study and completed consent forms giving their assent for all three data collection methods: individual interviews, focus group interviews, and reflective writing prompt. Interviews were conducted in one of three ways—in person, via video chat, or via Google Meets. All reflective writing prompts were submitted via email. Interviews were personally transcribed to allow for more internalization of the responses and provide more interaction with information gained during the data collection process.

**Table 3***Undergraduate Student Participants*

College Student Participant	Participant's High School	Number of Completed AP Courses	College Classification	College Major
Beth	West Coast Catholic	2	Freshman	Nursing
Illiana	West Coast Christian	6	Sophomore	English
Landon	West Coast Episcopal	7	Senior	Computer Science; Religion
Lisa	West Coast Catholic	4	Sophomore	Behavioral Science
Maddux	West Coast Christian	10	Sophomore	Political Science
Marshall	West Coast Episcopal	2	Senior	Marketing/Business Analytics
Mason	West Coast Christian	2	Junior	Psychology
Matthew	West Coast Catholic	10	Freshman	Biology
Nathan	West Coast Episcopal	3	Sophomore	Business Management
Peter	West Coast Episcopal	7	Senior	Business
Rebecca	West Coast Christian	8	Junior	Health Sciences
Samuel	West Coast Catholic	3	Sophomore	Civil Engineering
Stephanie	West Coast Christian	7	Sophomore	Kinesiology

The participant goal of four or five participants from each site school was met, with five participants from West Coast Christian School and four participants each from West Coast Episcopal School and West Coast Catholic School. Following are descriptive portraits of each participant in the study based upon their responses to the individual and focus group interviews as well as the descriptive writing prompts.

**Beth**

This participant is a freshmen nursing major at a large public university about three hours from her hometown. While attending West Coast Catholic School, Beth took both AP English classes. It was clear from her interviews that she enjoyed AP Language more and felt better prepared for this class's AP exam, due mostly in part to her teacher and the amount of time the class spent preparing for the exam early on and until the end of the year. Her experience with the two AP classes was mostly positive, however, and she does wish she had attempted other AP classes as well, noting in particular that she wishes she had challenged herself with AP Spanish and AP Biology. As a nursing major in college, Beth feels she would have been better prepared for some of her required major classes if she had taken AP Biology while in high school. Although she did point out that AP classes are very different from their college counterparts, she does admit that they were helpful in providing insight into how her college courses would be planned and what her professor's expectations might be for work, tests, and writing. Despite being anxious about the academic work ahead of her because of a tough nursing program, Beth has had a fairly smooth transition to college and readily praises her high school teachers—whether AP or regular classes—for preparing her well.

**Illiana**

This participant is a sophomore English major at a private four-year university about an hour from her high school alma mater, West Coast Christian School. While in high school, she completed six AP courses and is very proud of the fact that she only chose AP courses based on her interests. She came from a highly motivated and competitive class but did not succumb to the pressure of taking as many AP classes as possible just to keep up with the rest of her classmates. Illiana was very complimentary of her high school teachers and expressed her gratitude for their

role in preparing her well for college courses. She noted that her experience in AP classes often helps her prepare better for tests in college, which was a concern she had before starting college. However, she also acknowledged that sometimes she does struggle with learning the actual content as opposed to learning how to simply test well on the material. Overall, she has had a positive and productive transition to the university setting and credits her high school with helping her in this life change.

### **Landon**

This participant is a senior double majoring in computer science and religion at a small private four-year college in the northeastern United States. The seven AP courses he took at West Coast Episcopal School were important to him as he knew he wanted to attend a prestigious school for college, and many admissions officers will look to see if a student has taken the most rigorous courses available to them at their high school. Landon took a wide variety of AP courses, sampling from his school's English, history, math, and science AP course options. This experience helped him learn which subject matter he preferred over others and in which he tended to excel. The biggest benefit Landon feels he received from his high school experience, especially with AP, is access to a strong English department that prepared him well for academic writing and research. This challenging experience in high school led to high performance with college writing and helped him find much success in his college-level coursework. While his college did not grant him credit for any of his passing AP exam scores (including those on which he received a 5), he was allowed to skip basic courses and move on to more challenging ones, a benefit he says was perfect for him in his pursuit of continued academic excellence. Landon's transition to college seems to have been an easy one with minimal anxiety or frustrations.

**Lisa**

This participant is a sophomore behavioral sciences major at one of the largest public universities in the United States. Lisa completed four AP courses during her time at West Coast Catholic School, and she is extremely grateful for the experience in each one of these classes. She is very proud to acknowledge her passing score on each of the four exams she took, and these passing scores translated into 12 semester credits when she entered college. While Lisa admits that her high school was much tougher than other high schools in all classes—regular, honors, and AP—she believes she benefitted the most from her AP classes. In fact, her workload was so heavy in some of these classes that she worried her college experience would be much tougher than it has been; her college workload thus far has had much less homework by comparison. Lisa believes AP was instrumental with teaching her better study habits and fine-tuning her writing skills. Despite anxiety over the transition to college, especially with Covid protocols in place, she has had a successful first two years in college. Lisa emphasized how her approach to higher-level classes has changed; she used to be primarily concerned with getting a high grade and keeping her GPA secure, but now her focus has shifted to truly understand the topics and material in her classes, knowing that this information will make her more successful in her future career.

**Maddux**

This participant is a sophomore political science major from West Coast Christian School. Maddux took one of the highest numbers of AP courses while in high school (10). He performed well in each of the classes but did not receive a passing score on many of the AP exams. He believes this is attributed to two things: he was diagnosed with dysgraphia late in his senior year, and he also did not care so much about or prepare as heavily for the AP exams. For

Maddux, making a good grade in the class and getting the eventual GPA boost were the most important things. Reflecting on his experience, he questioned whether this was a healthy approach to education. He did become salutatorian for his graduating class, but he does not feel he gained much other than that recognition. Although he does acknowledge that Covid has played a major role in his college experience thus far, his transition to college and time on campus has not been particularly easy or pleasant. Maddux knows he has the skills to succeed academically based on his performance in high school, but for him the college environment has been so different and at times overwhelming that he has not enjoyed the last few years much at all. He was worried about just becoming a number when he transitioned to the mid-sized university about an hour from home, and he realizes now how much he appreciated the smaller environment of his private Christian high school. However, Maddux is hopeful for his future despite his current frustrations and has a persistent mindset that he will succeed in his further academic endeavors.

### **Marshall**

This participant is a senior marketing and business analytics major at a large four-year public university about two hours away from his hometown. While in high school, he took two AP courses and self-reported a passing score on one of these exams. In addition to academics, he was a wrestler in high school and acknowledged the added stress that being a student athlete can create. Marshall noted that AP courses did not play a huge role in his high school experience and that he would not have approached it any other way. He took the AP classes he did because he was interested in the subject and recognized that his initial interest in the subject matter is likely what helped him be successful in the classes. Marshall was complimentary of his high school alma mater (West Coast Episcopal School) and their contribution to his preparation for academic

success at the next level. Like several of the other participants, however, he also struggled initially with the immense amount of autonomy over his time and responsibilities. Marshall was reflective and recognized that sometimes a person is just not mature enough to handle certain situations when they arise, and this had a major impact on his beginning college experience. He was also adamant in communicating the need for future college students to not become so overwhelmed by the prestige or reputation of prospective universities. He is proud of his decision to attend a university that best fits his personality and goals, and he believes this is ultimately what helped him get back on track for a successful college experience.

### **Mason**

This participant is a junior psychology major who graduated high school from West Coast Christian School. While he now attends a large public university close to his hometown, he originally started college at a small private Christian college in Georgia. Mason took both AP English classes in high school, mainly due to his love of reading and writing and because those teachers were his favorite ones at the school. Mason does not think of himself as the typical AP student and admitted that he would probably not have even taken those two AP classes if it were not for the encouragement from the teachers. However, he did affirm that the idea of taking more challenging classes and surrounding himself with peers who were equally up for the challenge was a strong motivator for taking the courses. Mason entered college feeling ready for the challenge and particularly confident in his writing ability. Unfortunately, he had a very rough transition his first year and even transferred to another school after the first two semesters. Academically he was able to hold his own, but he was not ready for the growing number of changes in all other aspects of the college experience—something that eventually impacted his academic success as well. Mason is a firm believer in students broadening their horizons and

challenging themselves in new ways, and he ultimately believes this can help make students more well-rounded and better able to handle stress. His time in AP classes was positive in the moment, but he does not believe they impacted him long term.

### **Matthew**

This participant is a freshmen biology major at a large public university about three hours from his alma mater, West Coast Catholic School. Matthew took one of the highest numbers of AP courses while in high school (10), and he mostly enjoyed his experiences with these classes. He is a positive and motivated student who has research aspirations, so he especially appreciated the AP Capstone classes his high school offered. While he believes the writing instruction in other AP classes (including the English ones) was not as helpful for college, he spoke very highly of his AP Seminar and Research teachers, noting how impactful their instruction and feedback has been on his college experience. Interestingly, Matthew stated that if he were to live through high school again, he would prefer to take dual enrollment classes instead of AP classes, mostly because then a true college professor is teaching the class. He is thankful for his experiences in AP as they helped shape him into the student he is today, but he believes the AP environment is fairly disconnected compared to actual college courses. Even though this realization shocked and worried him at first, he affirms that this reality was more hopeful because he recognized that the amount of preparation he put into the class was ultimately what led to his success in the course, regardless of AP experiences.

### **Nathan**

This participant is a sophomore business management major attending a four-year private university about two hours from his hometown. He chose this college when he was awarded a scholarship to be on the school's golf team. Nathan is a unique participant in that he attended two

of the study's site schools (West Coast Christian School and West Coast Episcopal School) for two years each, ultimately graduating from West Coast Episcopal School. During his high school experience, Nathan took three AP courses—two history courses and one science course. His experience with the history courses was positive while the science course was one of his least favorite classes in all high school. While he did earn a passing score on two of the exams, he did not receive any credit from his university. Unsurprisingly, then, he does not view AP as a major benefit for college other than potentially helping a student in the college admissions process. In fact, he noted that if he were to live through his high school experience again, he would likely not participate in AP classes as he feels they are too stressful. However, he did admit that it would be smart to approach AP class decisions based upon interests, something he did not do. Despite his lackluster attitude towards AP, Nathan felt prepared for his college experience and only worried for a short time about professor expectations. He has had a fairly easy transition into college and found both academic and social success thus far in his college experience.

### **Peter**

This participant is a senior business major attending a public four-year university on the west coast of the United States. While attending West Coast Episcopal School, he was a dedicated student athlete, participating each year in football and wrestling. Peter completed seven AP courses in high school and self-reported that he passed all his AP exams. He was a motivated student who sought every means possible to help him stand out in the college admissions process, knowing that he wanted to get into a good school and, hopefully, enroll with a handful of college credits to his name. Peter felt very prepared going into college but was admittedly shocked by the change of environment and accountability. He related that he was academically prepared for college but the newfound social distractions and lack of accountability

in his schedule wreaked havoc on his first-year academic success. He attributed some of this difficulty to his experience in a small private school and its obvious contrast to a large public university but noted that his own lack of balance in successfully managing his time was also a significant factor in his freshmen year struggles. He is thankful to be back on track and is highly motivated to finish strong, having just completed a constructive internship in his major.

### **Rebecca**

This participant is a junior majoring in health sciences at a public four-year university about an hour away from her high school, West Coast Christian School. She completed eight AP courses during high school and received college credit for most of them. When reflecting on her college experience thus far, she noted that she looks back on high school now and believes her teachers almost overprepared her for college. She explained that she has much less homework now than she did in high school and often feels ahead of other classmates when participating in group projects or discussion boards. Because her high school was so focused on its college preparatory curriculum, everything from her “regular” classes to AP were geared towards helping students excel in college. Rebecca was one of four participants who completed the AP Capstone program at her school, and she noted the extreme benefit of the program and its contribution to her writing and research capabilities as well as her overall stamina to finish longer academic projects. She did, however, recognize that she did not have as strong a background in STEM courses and wishes there had been more emphasis on this in her high school. That concern aside, her initial anxiety over the college transition quickly dissipated as she found the work to be not only manageable but even easy in some instances. Her close proximity to home allows her the comfort of seeing family and old friends whenever she chooses, and this has helped make her transition to college life rather seamless.

**Samuel**

This participant is a sophomore civil engineering major at a large four-year public university in southern Florida. Samuel, who graduated from West Coast Catholic School, felt very prepared to tackle college-level coursework and has been very successful in doing so thus far in his college experience. He acknowledged the rigorous expectations placed upon him in his three AP classes in high school and emphasized that these did more to help prepare him for success than any of his other courses. He placed great emphasis on the need for high school students to learn time management skills while in high school, recognizing that being skilled in time management can make or break a student's college experience in terms of both academic and social environments. While other participants in the study have admitted their shortcomings in effective time management at the beginning of their college careers, Samuel related that his practice in this area during high school is what helped him establish a firm foundation from day one in college. He believes this is a needed area of development in all high schools as he sees others who have struggled and is thankful to have been given such a worthwhile and productive academic background from his high school.

**Stephanie**

This participant is a sophomore kinesiology major at a large public four-year university in central Florida. Although she completed seven AP classes in high school and did well in each class, she was frustrated that she only passed three of the exams and did not get any subsequent college credit for even the three exams she did pass. Stephanie was one of the four participants who did participate in the AP Capstone program at her high school, West Coast Christian School. This was one of the few complimentary aspects of AP for Stephanie; in her opinion, the AP capstone classes of Seminar and Research are the two courses that have helped her the most

with her college coursework. She was quick to divulge that she should have taken more AP science courses since she knew this was her desired area of study in college. She believes that if she had taken more advanced courses in her future major that her high school education would have been much more beneficial to her in college than it has been so far. Stephanie was most worried about study habits and if she was truly prepared to tackle college-level coursework. This proved to be a legitimate concern as she did not do as well in her first college semester as she would have liked. However, she also realized that the primarily online educational environment because of Covid likely contributed to some of her frustrations. Overall, she is now thriving academically with her college classes and feels she has found an effective and beneficial approach to studying that has impacted her success.

### **Results**

Data collected through participant's individual interviews, focus group interviews, and reflective writing prompts yielded much valuable information regarding the perceptions these participants have about their participation in the AP programs at their high school alma maters. As the data were transcribed and analyzed, three clear themes began to emerge from the responses: the participants' motivation for taking AP courses was varied and impacted by personal benefits, participants see a need for more autonomy being granted in the high school setting, and participants have strong opinions about the specific needs of a successful AP program. Each of these themes was then divided into sub-themes to better represent the participants' experiences with the phenomenon and perceptions of the impact AP courses had on their transition to the college setting (see Table 4).

**Table 4***Themes and Sub-Themes*

<b>Themes</b>	<b>Sub-Themes</b>	<b>Related Research Question</b>	<b>Evidence from Data</b>
Motivations for Participation in AP Courses is Varied	-College Admissions -GPA Boost -Genuine Interest in Course Content	SQ2	“It was kind of like Pokemon, I just wanted to catch all of them and take as many as I can and it kind of, I don’t know if it was a healthy way to approach education. I was really focused on the tournament-based setting, you know, and that was getting the highest GPA credit in classes and doing the best I can in them. I wish I didn’t approach it like that, but that’s how I did it.”
Student Autonomy	-Time Management -Academics	SQ1	“I think one of the biggest things is to let them manage themselves to a certain extent. Obviously you can’t give them all the freedom to do whatever they want...I feel like that responsibility is one of the most important things because you’re on your own and you have to be to where teachers are not reminding you that you have to do this or

			that. And if you don't, it's your fault. You have to get a sense of how to manage yourself."
AP Course Curriculum	-Course Content over Exam Prep -Writing Instruction	CQ	"I honestly feel like the entire course not only prepared me for college but the entire time it was always something covered... There was always something related to the exam, simultaneously trying to help you prepare for college while helping you prepare for the exam."

### **Motivations for Participation in AP Courses is Varied**

Throughout the data collection process, it became clear that the motivation these participants had for taking AP classes was varied and linked mostly to personal benefits, though not the typical reasons advertised by College Board (2019). Illiana stated, "Just to save time and money in college by getting credits is pretty good motivation." While this is the premier benefit advertised by College Board (2019), this was only a small aspect in the decision by these participants to enroll in AP classes. The ability to stand out in the college admissions process, receiving a boost in their GPA, and taking courses they were genuinely interested in were larger factors playing into the former high school students' decisions to take AP classes at their high schools.

### ***College Admissions***

Most of the participants indicated they took AP courses to be able to stand out in the college admissions process and earn acceptance letters from their dream schools. They all recognized that AP classes are almost a rite of passage for any high school student wanting to be competitive in the college admissions game. Landon admitted, “I knew I wanted to get into a prestigious school...the only way to do that was to take the hardest classes offered.” Nathan concurred with this statement, noting that he took AP classes “mostly to make my resume look better than most.” Similarly, Beth stated that she enrolled in AP classes when school staff suggested them: “the guidance counselors were talking about college and stuff and about how good APs would look on your transcripts.” In nearly every participant’s experience, the desire to be distinct on their college admissions applications was of supreme importance.

### ***GPA Boost***

While not all schools offer a GPA boost for AP classes, each of the site schools in this study did. This became a big attractor for many students who, as related in the previous sub-theme, wanted to stand out in college admissions. One aspect of that is a higher weighted GPA. Matthew stated, “It’s a good GPA boost.” Similarly, this was important to Maddux as well: “I was really focused on the tournament-based setting, you know, and that was getting that highest GPA credit in classes and doing the best I can in them.” With each of the site schools boasting a college preparatory curriculum, the participants saw the best way to increase their GPA in competitive student body populations was to take the AP courses and get the boost in their GPA from doing well in weighted classes.

### ***Genuine Interest in Course Content***

Not all motivations for taking AP courses were tied to college admissions and competition. In fact, nearly all participants expressed the importance of taking AP classes based on their own interests. This interest-based approach yielded numerous benefits for the participants, from more enjoyment in the class to a better score on the AP exam. Illiana asserted that she was “super proud of the fact that I didn’t force myself to take classes that I wasn’t interested in.” This sentiment was echoed by many of the participants. Marshall noted, “I have just always been interested in history.” Stephanie and Lisa expressed similar reflections when discussing why they believed they passed certain exams. “I liked the material a little bit more,” explained Stephanie. Lisa concurred, “I really enjoyed the classes so much...so I think that was a lot better of an incentive to want to do well on the exams.” When considering what he wishes he had done differently in his approach to AP classes, Maddux lamented, “There were classes that I definitely should have taken just out of my own curiosity and maybe even some academic maturity that probably would have helped.” Clearly, a genuine interest in the class itself was imperative for these participants. They felt more engaged in the content and naturally wanted to achieve success in the class. In most cases, this led to a better score on the AP exam.

### **Student Autonomy**

The response by participants about their favorite change from high school to college was overwhelmingly the increased flexibility afforded college students, whether it be flexibility in time, schedule, or academic pursuits. “I like being in charge of what I do and when I can do it. And it’s helped me get better with my own priorities,” claimed Samuel. Each of the participants discussed how ready they were to make decisions on their own about how and on what they spent their time. Several expanded on this to emphasize the need for AP teachers to begin

allowing students to practice more autonomy in AP classes while in high school. Matthew suggested, “Kind of have a let kids sink or swim approach. They will have to do it on their own in college, so they need to practice that now.” It was clear from each interview that participants would appreciate more involvement in decisions over scheduling, time management, and academic decisions, and that several also view this as a much-needed change in AP classrooms.

### ***Time Management***

High school students are used to being told what to do and when to do it, with school, extra-curriculars, and even free time. Until they transition to college, they have very little self-government of their time. Most all participants expressed appreciation for their newly found autonomy of their schedules. Landon said, “The big thing that I didn’t love about high school that I really liked going to college was the amount of unstructured time. I’m sort of good at learning on my own and structure my own time well, so I just thrived on that sort of flexibility.” Similarly, Rebecca appreciated the freedom to set her own schedule: “I like that I can plan the days as I want and still have a lot of free time and make different plans for it.” Almost unanimously, the students appreciated the ability to make choices about how they spent their time, recognizing that this should be discussed and even practiced with AP students while they are in high school. “I feel like that responsibility [time management] is one of the most important things because you’re on your own...you have to get a sense of how to manage yourself,” insisted Samuel.

### ***Academics***

Participants also appreciate having more involvement in their academic choices now that they are in college, and many saw this as a needed change for AP students still in high school.

This autonomy in academic choices could manifest itself in several areas, from more input on which courses to take to more decisions about types of assignments or time to complete them. Peter explained, “Keep in mind that the students leaving [high school] are going to get a college syllabus which outlines your entire year and expects you to plan accordingly.” Samuel agreed, explaining that “you have to be to where teachers are not reminding you that you have to do this or that.” In most cases, the participants’ experiences in AP classes helped prepare them well for the workload and rigor they found in their college classes. Maddux noted, “AP classes really did increase intensity and expectations.” Homework assigned for AP classes was higher than what was assigned for honors or regular courses for all participants. In some cases, participants even noted that their workload in AP classes was much higher than what they have been assigned in college. “Half of my classes [in college] had less work than my high school classes,” admits Lisa. The AP workload helped these participants have a better understanding of the types of assignments they could expect in college and begin to gain an appreciation of the amount of time and effort needed to complete them successfully. Beth summed up this appreciation regarding autonomy in academics well: “With class, you choose how much time and effort you put into it versus with high school you are sort of forced to do it. I like the independence.”

### **AP Course Curriculum**

While most of the participants had much success on their AP exams, all of them had several things to say about the AP program itself and ways to improve upon it and make it a more meaningful experience for future students. Nathan asserted, “Understand that the way you [a high school teacher] teach is going to be different than a college professor. All the picky habits that get graded on are not necessarily going to help you with college classes.” This feeling was shared by several of the participants who saw a need for improved instruction that more

accurately reflects a college curriculum and expectations. Many of my participants stated they would participate in AP classes again, but they do see needed changes, such as a greater focus on the content of the class and less on the exam. Likewise, many noted the valuable writing instruction gained from AP courses and emphasized the significance of continuing such instruction and even taking it a step further.

### ***Course Content over Exam Preparation***

Almost all the participants in the study felt they were very prepared for the AP exam at the end of each class, and this is likely attributed to the fact that most of their AP teachers spent a great deal of class time preparing for the test. In fact, when asked about how much class time was devoted to this endeavor, Matthew responded, “From day one! Literally not a second that they taught us was it something that wasn’t on the test. It was all about that!” The participants were split on their attitude towards so much time spent on teaching to the test; a little over half felt this was a necessary task to get students prepared while the rest of the group was rather frustrated that so much time was spent on how to take the test well and please College Board readers. Both groups, however, sympathized with their teachers, recognizing that passing scores reflect not only on the students but also on the teachers and, to a lesser extent, on the school as a whole. As a result, most assessments in the classes mirrored the eventual AP exam. “Pretty much all of them [class assessments] mimicked the format of the AP exam for the class, with multiple choice sections and then the different types of essays,” stated Lisa.

According to this group of participants, they would like to see a change in AP course curriculum that does a better job of reflecting an actual college classroom and focuses more on the actual content, establishing it in the bigger academic picture and making connections across disciplines. One aspect of this is the method of delivery in each classroom. While many of the

participants stated they do not particularly enjoy lecture-style instruction, they were quick to admit that more of this style being used in high school AP classrooms would be a benefit for students as this is the primary mode of delivery at the college level. “My AP teachers used a lot of lecturing—so much that it really felt like a college class. And that really helped with the transition to college because that’s what most of it is here,” explained Samuel. In addition to lecturing, these participants believe there should be more of a focus on effective study skills for more advanced material. “My study skills—they didn’t transfer. I didn’t know how to prepare for the tests,” stated Stephanie. This sentiment was felt by other participants as well who believed they spent so much time preparing to take an AP test but not necessarily a test over advanced content in a designated subject area. This frustration also manifested itself in terms of how content was presented more in isolation than as a part of a larger reality. Several of the participants acknowledged their appreciation for teachers who create more interdisciplinary lessons that enhance their knowledge on a variety of topics. Landon offered, “I always appreciated when teachers tried to bring in disciplines outside the sort of four basic high school subjects. Teachers encouraging exploring those other fields is just kind of a cool thing.” Illiana agreed, noting that teachers should “incorporate useful information and resources that are not relevant to the AP exam but that may help in the future and generally broaden students’ knowledge of the subject.” These participants believe that more emphasis should be placed on content knowledge in AP classes and less on exam preparation itself.

### ***Emphasis on Writing Instruction***

While the majority of the participants had strong opinions on improvements needed in the AP classroom, all of them equally were complimentary about the writing instruction they received in AP courses, acknowledging that this was a particularly beneficial aspect to their

participation in AP courses. Specifically, the four participants who completed the AP Capstone program in their schools were adamant that these courses were especially helpful in terms of writing instruction. “These classes absolutely prepared me the best for college! Everything I know about college writing and research came from these classes,” exclaimed Matthew. However, even the students who did not participate in the Capstone courses had positive things to say about their writing instruction in AP classes. “AP classes were more writing intensive,” explained Nathan. This was true for all participants, and they appreciated the amount of feedback they would get from their AP teachers about their writing, particularly in the English, history, and psychology classes. Landon emphasized, “High school gave me a good footing in terms of writing—that’s the big one. I had the experience of a really good English department and that was a big factor in preparing me [for college].” Lisa agreed, stating that “if I had to do a writing assignment at any time [in college], I was like, okay, I can do this.” This group of participants recognized the blessing they received with writing instruction in AP classes and believe this should be an essential part of all AP classes.

### **Outlier Data and Findings**

Throughout the data collection, there were three outlier findings from individual participants who posed noteworthy commentary that did not align with other participants’ responses. Conversely, while these responses were not shared by the group of participants, they do offer insightful considerations on the phenomenon of AP courses and their impact on college students.

#### ***Outlier Finding #1***

While most feedback regarding AP courses was positive, Matthew (who took one of the highest numbers of AP courses during high school) stated that, in hindsight, he would have

rather taken dual enrollment courses instead since these would have been a more certain possibility of college credit and would have been courses with genuine college professors instead of high school teachers. Because Matthew participated in so many AP courses and was successful on the exam for all of them, his response was genuinely surprising. Matthew admitted, “I’m a big believer that you can’t live in the past, but honestly? I would do dual enrollment instead. Then you’re actually taking classes with real college professors. It just makes more sense.” As discussed in the Literature Review, Bailey et al. (2002) and An (2013) have both iterated the benefits dual enrollment has had on students of all ability levels, not just those who are enrolled in more gifted or challenging courses; Matthew would likely agree with this sentiment.

### ***Outlier Finding #2***

College Board (2019) boasts that participation in AP courses and a successful score on the subsequent AP exam can earn a student college credit, helping them place out of college courses. This was certainly viewed as a benefit by most participants, but Peter introduced an idea I had not even considered: placing out of courses because of a passing AP score means that a student is placing out of courses in which they likely have the most confidence and possibly more interest. When adjusting to a new environment in the college setting, a schedule of classes that does not contain any within the student’s comfort zone could eventually bring more stress for the student and negatively impact their confidence towards academic work. “The classes that I knew I did well on with APs, unfortunately I didn’t get to do those again because they knocked out my GEs [general education classes]—it was pretty much a lot of stuff with the GEs that I knew I wasn’t good at going in,” conceded Peter.

### ***Outlier Finding #3***

An increasing number of high school students are enrolling in AP courses for the benefit of standing out in college admissions and the subsequent improved chance of success when enrolling in college courses (Beard et al., 2019). Illiana expressed doubts about AP courses being a better alternative to college courses; she recognized this piece of advice: “Sometimes taking the basic college course version of a subject is easier than taking its high school AP version.” There are, of course, many factors that play into this assertion, but the suggestion is a valid one to consider. Perhaps some students would be better off skipping the AP version of a course in high school and would benefit more from participation in the course’s counterpart on an actual college campus.

### **Research Question Responses**

Based upon participant responses to the individual interview questions, focus group interview questions, and reflective writing prompt, the following narrative answers are offered for each of my previously identified research questions.

#### **Central Research Question**

What are the perceptions of college undergraduates who have participated in their high school’s AP program regarding their preparedness to meet the demands and expectations of college-level coursework? The participants in this study felt very prepared to meet the demands and expectations of college-level coursework. The AP courses represented and college majors selected from this participant group are varied, yet the feeling of satisfaction and preparation with their high school AP experience is consistent. Beth explained, “My AP courses in high school definitely gave me this confidence in the classroom because of how challenging and time

consuming they were. Even though AP courses are different than most college courses, it kind of gave me insight into what my college courses would be like.”

### **Sub-Question 1**

What are participant perceptions of the challenges they encounter while transitioning to college-level coursework from a high school curriculum? While the way in which this challenge was expressed was varied, the typical response from the participants was the fear of the unknown in the college environment. The unknown could be related to social distractions upon their academic studies or, most often, tied to uncertainties about college professor’s expectations and grading styles. Maddux related, “Class sizes were going to be bigger than I had ever experienced, the interpersonal relationship with teachers, for the most part, would cease to exist, and there is an even smaller amount of room for mistakes. Despite the confidence that AP classes provided me with high school, I feel as though they quickly dissipated with the pressure of a new frontier.”

### **Sub-Question 2**

What aspects of the AP program do the participants perceive as being the most influential during their transition to college from high school? The participants unanimously expressed their appreciation for the writing instruction they gained in AP courses, emphasizing that both the frequency and challenge of more difficult writing assignments has greatly enhanced their ability to succeed in the college classroom. The instruction on how to write academically and the informative feedback provided by their AP teachers has proven invaluable to their college experience. Rebecca summarized, “The demanding amount of writing necessary for my AP courses improved my confidence by well preparing me for college writing requirements.

Alongside the lengthy writing demands, the particular styles and formats of AP writing improved my personal writing abilities which also gave me more confidence.”

### **Summary**

The participants’ experience with the AP programs in their high schools were mostly positive experiences for each of them. As data collected through the individual interviews, focus group interviews, and reflective writing prompt were transcribed and analyzed, the appearance of three themes began to emerge: the motivation for participating in AP courses is varied and personal, there is a greater need for student autonomy in the AP classroom, and AP curriculum should reflect a stronger sense of the subject material and continue to enhance students’ writing abilities. While the College Board (2019) consistently advertises the benefits of receiving college credit from successfully passing AP exams, the participants emphasized the importance of choosing AP courses based upon natural interests or potential college majors, acknowledging that doing so often yields a more positive experience in the class and a higher likelihood of passing the AP exam. Completing AP classes in high school did help these participants feel prepared for college, especially when completing writing assignments. College is unknown territory for high school students, and the experience with College Board’s AP program at each of their high schools has helped them enter this transitional time with a greater sense of accomplishment and confidence.

## **CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSION**

### **Overview**

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to understand college undergraduate perceptions about preparedness to meet the demands and expectations of college-level coursework based on their experiences with the AP program in high school. By conducting individual and focus group interviews, as well as a reflective writing prompt, a broad picture has been gained that illustrates former AP students' experiences in high school AP courses and subsequent confidence in the college classroom. This chapter begins with a close look at the interpretation of findings from the three data collection methods, based upon the thematic findings gleaned during data analysis. Following this interpretation of findings is a discussion regarding the implications for policy and practice of College Board's Advanced Placement program in high schools, particularly in a private school setting like the site schools used in this study. Attention then shifts to theoretical and empirical implications of the study, referencing Schlossberg's (1981) transition theory as well as the impact of the findings for all AP stakeholders. This chapter concludes with an overview of limitations recognized at completion of the study as well as recommendations for future research about the AP program and its stakeholders.

### **Discussion**

This phenomenological research study used individual interviews, focus group interviews, and a reflective writing prompt to discover the lived experiences of former AP students who participated in a minimum of two AP courses during their high school experiences at three selected private religious schools in southwest Florida. Through the process of phenomenological reduction, three clear themes emerged from the data: the participants'

motivation for taking AP courses was varied and impacted by personal benefits, participants see a need for more autonomy being granted in the high school setting, and participants have strong opinions about the specific needs of a successful AP program. After careful consideration of participants' candid responses during data collection, each of these themes yielded thought-provoking insight regarding the lived AP experiences of these participants, leading to the following interpretations.

### **Interpretation of Findings**

As an experienced AP teacher myself, the opportunity to listen to former AP students' experiences with the AP program at their high schools has been invaluable. The predominating information that is currently available on the AP program for AP students, parents, and educators deals primarily with quantitative data that illuminates the impact the program has on college admissions, student GPAs, and eventual college degree completion. There is little insight into students' own perceptions of the program's impact on their preparedness for college-level coursework. Through this study, participants have shared their lived experiences and indicated four clear interpretations about their perspectives about AP and its impact on them. While bracketing my own encounters with the AP program as an AP teacher and AP exam reader to maintain transparency, these four interpretations are meaningful for AP stakeholders to consider.

### ***Summary of Thematic Findings***

Based upon the three themes identified in the results found in Chapter Four, there are four unique interpretations regarding the phenomenon of AP classes: (1) AP classes are completed primarily for college acceptance rather than for the educational benefits such advanced coursework can afford; (2) student academic autonomy must be introduced and practiced as an important college preparedness skill for a successful transition from high school to college; (3)

students value course content as the primary focus in an AP class over test preparation; and (4) advanced writing instruction is the most important academic skill to better prepare high school students for success in college-level academics.

**AP primarily for college acceptance.** Although the original intention behind AP was to prepare academically ready high school students for success in the college classroom with a means to test out of classes in which they had already shown a mastery of skills (McCammon, 2018), the desire to stand out in the college admissions process was of greater importance to the participants in this study. This idea is not new; much research has previously been conducted on the concept of “maximizing the curriculum” in high school to better a student’s chances of being accepted to the college of their choice (Bastedo et al., 2016; Evans, 2019; Wolniak et al., 2016). However, the concerning reality expressed by nearly all the participants is that the academic experience of being in an AP class—increased expectations, increased workload, exposure to more difficult topics, experience with higher-level learning activities, and college preparation—means little to most students. According to the interview responses, what was of utmost concern was simply completing the class with some measure of success so that the GPA boost would enhance their high school transcripts and, hopefully, help earn them a spot at their dream college. Wolniak et al. (2016) did find a correlation between acceptances to selective four-year postsecondary institutions and the amount of AP or dual enrollment courses the approved applicants had taken, so it appears that the participants’ belief that AP is necessary for admittance to more judicious universities is not completely unfounded.

While it is not unexpected that students would be interested in these benefits of AP, or even surprising that it would be a leading factor in their interest to take AP courses, it appears that most of the participants view AP as a sort of necessary evil in the college admissions game.

Because the students in the study are all alumni from private, college preparatory schools, the criteria for being granted enrollment in an AP class includes a combination of teacher recommendations, previous course grades, and standardized test scores. Thus, the participants were all allowed to take AP classes because of their demonstration of academic readiness and success in the classroom. It is, therefore, concerning that such students labeled academically advanced or ready for college-level coursework are not particularly interested in or concerned with the academic benefits the classes can bring. This echoes the concerns of Malek and Micciche (2015) who worried that too much of a shift in education practices has left “students as customers and education as a commodity” (p. 79). If students are primarily focused on AP as a means to gain college acceptance and not on the educational benefits the classes can yield, they are merely meeting a list of predetermined items on a college to-do list rather than approaching the class as a genuine learning opportunity to broaden their knowledge and hone their skills. This does not mean that those who enroll in AP solely for the boost it provides in the college admissions process will not experience the more important educational benefits. Yet attitude can certainly impact the amount of effort and investment students will contribute towards the class, and a lack of motivation to fully engage in the coursework could inhibit the original intention and effectiveness of the AP class.

**Student academic autonomy is the greatest college preparedness skill.** Each of the study’s participants was complimentary to their high school and the academic preparation they received while in high school. Even when a student did not particularly appreciate the class or teacher, they were still willing to recognize that their schools had lived up to their college preparatory expectations in terms of academics. However, the responses were not as positive related to effective time management and other self-government skills needed to better transition

to the college lifestyle. In nearly all participants' experiences thus far in college, there was a transitional time in their first semester or even first year of college that caused major stress and frustration related to a lack of readiness to self-manage their schedules, academic decisions, and academic concerns. For several of the participants, this manifested itself in poor academic performance—something with which the former AP students were unaccustomed and ill-equipped to handle successfully on their own without significant consequences. Particularly for these students from small private schools with highly involved parents, teachers, and administrators making most of their previous decisions, the unfamiliar ability to spend their time and efforts however they wanted proved to be a tantalizing temptation—one that often left them struggling in classes that should not have been difficult. As mentioned in the answer to Research Sub-Question 1, the participants noted that the most influential perceived challenge in their transition was a fear of the unknown—autonomy over time, uncertainty over professors' expectations, and general anxiety over being just a number in a large student body.

Given these concerns from the participants, students must be given more of an opportunity to practice autonomy over their academic careers before beginning the unfamiliar college environment. A greater sense of involvement and ownership in their learning process while still in the familiar territory of high school while at home with family is a needed change for college-bound students, whether involved in AP or not. If AP curriculum is truly modeled after college courses more so than their honors or gifted counterparts, a notion discussed by Arce-Trigatti (2018), then it makes sense that the freedom granted to college students in similar classes should at least be introduced at a scaled-level for students in comparable AP courses in high school. One participant—Samuel—noted how important this experience in autonomy was for him while in his high school AP classes, emphasizing how much it has made all the

difference for him thus far in his college experience. With this in mind, it is important to note that AP teachers must be willing to make this change in their approach to education as well. Ross (2019) related the significant impact of teacher quality on long-term achievement for students. Teachers who are willing to engage students in the decisions related to their education are imparting valuable skills that are clearly needed for even the most academically gifted and prepared students to find greater success in the college classroom. Experienced and motivated AP teachers can inspire the work ethic needed to successfully navigate the college experience (Jeffries & Silvernail, 2017; Belcher, 2017); through the reflective responses from the participants in this study, this is clearly a change needed in AP classrooms.

**Course content is greater than test-taking skills.** AP classes are designed to culminate in an end-of-course exam that hopefully leads to college credit for the student (College Board, 2019). It may seem impossible to separate the AP class from the eventual AP test, but it is clear that students desire a deeper, more meaningful, and lasting experience with the course material. Simply passing the exam and even earning the college credit does not necessarily provide this more enriching experience. For students who decide to major in courses related to prior AP courses, this would be an important aspect of the course curriculum, possibly improving their related course involvement in college. McCammon (2018) and Warne et al. (2015) have both questioned AP's ability to teach in-depth knowledge about the subject material presented in the classes, criticizing it as too broad and concerned only with increasing the number of students who have passed the test. Likewise, Walsh (2016) worried about AP teachers who spend too much time teaching to the test and not enough on actual curriculum. After hearing the concerns from many of the participants with a similar theme, such doubts about AP and its much-debated end-of-course exams are not necessarily unsubstantiated.

These former AP students were craving more of a “bigger picture” approach to the AP subjects—understanding how the course material units related to each other and to the greater concept of the discipline as a whole. It is important to remember that these are still high school students, but if a student is receiving college credit, then calls for a more well-rounded approach are warranted. Smith et al. (2017) cautioned a reminder that success on AP exams shows potential for success in college, but it is not a guarantee for that success. If content in AP classes is more tailored to making interdisciplinary connections that students find meaningful in their studies, their subsequent experiences in college-level classes will provide richer learning environments.

**Academic writing instruction is the most influential academic skill for college preparedness.** When discussing their experiences with the AP programs at their school, it was almost immediately clear that all participants completed a heavy amount of writing in their AP classes. When comparing AP classes to their schools’ regular and even honors courses, both the length and intensity of writing assignments increased. It was acknowledged that writing instruction was most influential in the AP English, history, capstone, and psychology classes, which fits with the nature of each of those subjects. Those who had participated in the AP Capstone courses of Seminar and Research were particularly emphatic that writing instruction in AP has made a monumental positive impact on their success in college. From being more confident when assigned essays or other writing assignments to even investigating academic research and writing opportunities on their college campuses, these former AP students recognized the invaluable instruction received regarding college-level writing. Because much of the assigned work in college is either writing or a test, this boost in confidence is key in promoting a more successful transition to college-level coursework. In some instances, the

participants were singled out by professors for their exceptional writing ability, and none had to participate in a remedial writing lab or hire a writing tutor. It is clear that writing instruction must continue to be a focused and integral part of the AP classroom.

### **Implications for Policy or Practice**

When considering the thematic findings discussed previously, there are implications for policy and practice that must ensue. AP stakeholders can gain valuable insight from the participants' perceptions about their experiences and determine proactive steps moving forward for both AP policy makers and practitioners.

### ***Implications for Policy***

The College Board and its AP program have enjoyed a long and profitable partnership with secondary schools across the globe. In its effort to assist capable high school students in obtaining college credit while still in high school, it has been successful for many students. However, as with any organization that works both with and for people, as times change it must change as well. This cannot be any more relevant than for educational organizations. Everchanging technology and demands of the new workforce have caused schools to revitalize means of delivering instruction. This must happen with AP as well. A growing number of postsecondary institutions are becoming test optional for admissions; it stands to reason that standardized test scores for AP exams may be impacted by this as well. Many college professors do not use multiple choice platforms, which is a hallmark for half of almost all AP exams. The introduction of the AP Capstone program utilizes a more portfolio-based assessment like AP Studio Art. The reception to such portfolio-based assessment is a worthy consideration for College Board moving forward.

Additionally, as evidenced by the participants in this study, not all students do receive college credit for their passing exam scores. For example, while some schools will grant credit for a score of 3 on an exam, another school may only grant credit for a score of 4 or higher on the same exam. This can be a frustrating experience for AP students and their parents as they navigate the college admissions and course registration process. There should be a greater effort among postsecondary institutions to equalize exam credit policies. The College Board would be wise to investigate options for encouraging a more unified approach to exam score acceptance requirements. Similarly, a stronger focus on AP teacher calibration could be key to convincing colleges and universities to grant credit equally. Although College Board does provide teacher training opportunities and encourages teachers to participate in these professional development seminars, it is not required for most AP subject areas. The two AP Capstone courses—Seminar and Research—are the only two that College Board requires teachers to receive training for prior to teaching, and this is only before the initial year of teaching the class. Just as medical professionals are required to stay up-to-date annually on CPR and first aid skills, AP teachers should also be required to participate in yearly continued education. This helps to promote efficacy and best practices for an everchanging field.

### ***Implications for Practice***

The participants in this study all attended one of three private, college preparatory religious schools in southwest Florida. The policies at each school maintain that students should meet certain criteria to enroll in AP classes at their school. As such, these are former high school students who have demonstrated success in the classroom prior to participation in AP classes. While most of them did acknowledge mostly positive experiences with their AP classes, there was a reoccurring theme of students choosing AP classes based on interest. As a result, it is

suggested for guidance counselors and teachers at the site schools to make a more concerted effort to gauge student interest in different subject areas and encourage this as a consideration for enrollment in AP courses as well. Instead of recommending for students to take AP classes as a means to improve their high school transcripts or to boost their GPAs, focus more on the potential college and careers counseling aspect, assisting students in discovering where their interests lie and showing them pathways to learn more about those interests.

Likewise, potential AP students and their families must also be better educated about the benefits of AP beyond the time and money saving benefits that are typically promoted. Too often schools resort to touting these qualities as students and parents alike are certainly enamored with the prospects of reducing college tuition fees or finishing college more quickly. This can greatly inhibit the discussion of other more altruistic benefits of participation in AP classes. By educating students and their families more about the college process and the transitional period it entails, as well as more access to discussions from college faculty about the college experience and expectations, more attention can be given to other AP qualities that can enhance the college experience after high school graduation.

Finally, AP teachers at the site schools—and perhaps AP teachers in other high schools as well—should begin to investigate and eventually incorporate a scaffolded approach to student autonomy in the classroom. It was clear from these participants that one of the biggest shocks upon transitioning to the college environment was being given more authority over and responsibility for their academic decisions, success, and progress. This can be accomplished when school administrators mandate more consistent professional development opportunities that focus primarily on this subject. This can certainly be a scary idea for educators who are used to more control in their classrooms, but it does not have to be this way. If we as AP teachers are

genuinely going to model our AP classes after their similar college counterpart, we must begin to allow more ownership for the students in their academic decisions—knowing that doing so may cause them to falter at times but can eventually lead to important lifelong learning skills.

### **Theoretical and Empirical Implications**

This research study was approached through a focus on Schlossberg's (1981) transition theory, which seeks to understand and offer assistance to adults as they go through transitional stages in life. As high school students leave their homes and venture new environments in a college setting, they are encountering one of their first significant transitions in their adult lives. The nature of this transition can leave young adults anxious as they navigate a new living environment while also learning how to more independently manage themselves and meet a variety of new influential figures in their lives. Schlossberg (1981) identified three factors that significantly influence a person's adaptation to change: the nature of the transition, the nature of the environments before and after the transition, and the nature of the individual. The information gained in this study sheds light on valuable information regarding the second factor—the students' environments before and after the transition.

College Board's Advanced Placement program boasts promises of better college preparedness for students who participate in AP classes (2019). However, as can be evidenced through the individual interview, focus group interview, and reflective writing prompt responses, the high school AP environment is often very different from an actual college class setting. With this contrast in mind, it is not surprising, then, that many of the high performing AP students who participated in this study and believed they were ready to meet challenging coursework were initially a bit overwhelmed with the drastic environmental changes a college campus provides. In most cases, the participants were undoubtedly prepared for the academic aspect of college-level

coursework. It was the sudden change in living environments, introduction to new teachers and expectations, and autonomy over all aspects of their schedule that became an issue for several of the participants. They noted differences in transitioning from a small private religious high school to a larger and usually secular university campus. This aligns with Schlossberg's (1981) theory as it emphasizes the role that environment plays in a person's adaptation to change. Nicholson (1990) expanded upon the original transition theory by describing a transition cycle based upon a person's expectations, motives, knowledge, and skills. AP classes do provide students with knowledge of the specific content areas and some do venture into expectations and skills, but it is not likely that such classes can truly prepare students for the drastic changes in environment that college affords.

While this may be perceived as a lack of ability for AP to adequately prepare students for college-level coursework, this may not be true. Chickering and Schlossberg (1998) discussed the resources-deficits ratio and its significance in a person's ability to successfully navigate transitional stages in life. Essentially, this resources-deficits ratio indicates a balance or disproportioned alignment of a person's strengths and weaknesses (the impact of their circumstances, experiences, and knowledge) to handle the situation. The "four S's" to consider—situation, self, support, and strategies—all impact this resources-deficits ratio (Chickering & Schlossberg, 1998). This ratio is naturally variable as people handle transitions differently at different stages of life (Schlossberg, 1981). Focusing on former AP students who are transitioning to a college setting, it is imperative to recognize that while AP may not prepare students completely for the change they are about to enter, it does provide certain circumstances, experiences, and knowledge that can positively impact the students' resources-deficits ratio, yielding a positive influence on the overall transition period.

The results of this study do indicate a mostly positive impact from AP on a college student's transition to the college classroom. The benefit of placing out of general education credits and potentially saving money and time in the process of obtaining a degree has been a pleasant experience for several of this study's participants. This corroborates the findings of Evans (2019) who noted a decrease in student loan amounts and time to degree completion in college students who obtained credits from AP classes taken in high school. Likewise, most of the participants acknowledged the advantages of having AP teachers who held them to high expectations in AP coursework, motivating them to pursue more challenging degree programs or the potential of a double major. Warne (2017) reported a similar assessment that students who are appropriately challenged are more likely to pursue advanced learning. Evans (2019) indicated that successful AP students are 60% more likely to pursue a graduate degree in their field. The experience with AP curriculum and well-trained AP teachers was shown through my participants to be a major contributor to both their successes on the end-of-course exam and their eventual college degree selection.

While the perceived benefits of their participation in the AP program are dominant in this study's findings, there was also a general attitude that often AP classes can spend too much time focusing on the test and not enough on the discipline's content, a topic of concern for many college professors as well (Walsh, 2016). Some of the participants in my study indicated a desire for their AP teachers to provide more of a well-rounded, all-encompassing approach to the subject matter, opting to include cross-discipline activities whenever possible. They believed that when teachers did this it provided them with a greater base of knowledge in the subject and, whether beneficial for the test or not, prepared them better for further coursework in this subject area. Likewise, Korn (2017) and Malek and Micciche (2015) suggested this gap in AP

curriculum and ruminated about the detriments this could bring for students as they progressed further in their studies.

Overall, the positive impact of participation in the AP program is well documented through numerous quantitative studies. This research study provided further conversation on the positive impacts former AP students perceive from their experiences with AP classes in high school.

### **Limitations and Delimitations**

The data collection phase of this research study came at an interesting time for many of these college students: the Covid pandemic. In fact, for some of the participants who took their AP exams during the 2019-2020 school year, the AP exams culminating their year in AP classes were abbreviated versions of their previous and future counterparts. The participants who were still in high school during this academic year received a unique education experience for the entire last quarter of the year as all three of the site schools transitioned to online learning only. Even in the 2020-2021 school year, a hybrid approach to education was often used because of quarantine guidelines. Therefore, the differences between the instruction and testing for participants in high school prior to the Covid pandemic are a potential limitation for the study.

As I approached this study from a transcendental phenomenological lens, I made certain choices to use participants who attended only private schools in the area where certain advanced academic criteria must be met to enroll in AP classes. This decision was made to ensure I was obtaining the experiences of students who were the most likely to be college bound and, in theory, more academically prepared for college-level work than public high school students who enroll in AP due to College Board's equity and access program. Because public schools in

Florida allow any students to enroll in AP classes, I was not guaranteed to have participants who were most likely to be college bound or ready for advanced level academic work.

Participants in the study only needed to meet the criteria of having completed one semester of college coursework, have completed a minimum of two AP classes while in high school, and have graduated from one of the site schools. Because I did not ask for specifics of which AP classes were taken, only a small portion of the full amount of AP classes College Board offers are represented. To get a greater sense of the experiences of AP students at the site schools, greater detail could have been placed on ensuring participants were secured representing all AP subjects. However, the purpose of this study was to share the lived experiences of participants with the phenomenon of AP and how it has impacted their preparedness for college-level coursework, so the type of AP classes represented is not of significant importance.

### **Recommendations for Future Research**

As mentioned in the Limitations, several of my participants' AP experiences were impacted by the Covid pandemic. Many students had online only instruction for a large portion of their AP academic experience, and for some the end-of-year exam was impacted as well. With the growing number of online classes in today's high schools, future research on AP should be focused on the distinction between AP classes taught online versus in-person. It would be important to know which setting seems to be more impactful for the students and which AP classes could be taught successfully in this way.

There was also a consistent reoccurrence of the concept of dual enrollment, both in my research of related literature and in eventual interview responses from my participants. A potential future research study could discover and compare the experiences of students who participate in dual enrollment versus AP classes and what that means for their transition to

college. A few of my participants (notably two who took many AP classes and passed exams for all of them) stated they wished they had participated in dual enrollment classes instead. This stood out to me because these are college students who did receive college credit for their passing exam scores and have reaped the benefits of saving time and money, yet they are somewhat regretful over not enrolling instead in dual enrollment courses.

### **Conclusion**

Through the individual interview, focus group interview, and reflective writing prompt responses, a meaningful interpretation has been gained of this study's participants' experiences with AP classes at their high schools. Much quantitative research has been conducted regarding the impact of the AP program on high school students, both in the high school and college settings. This study provides important insight into former students' own perceptions and attitudes towards a program that has played such a significant part of many high school students' lives for decades. Largely, the participants indicated a positive experience during AP classes and reflected on the benefits such participation has had on their transition to college and subsequent success in college. Although many took the classes to simply achieve more favorable attention during the college admissions process, the AP classes have resulted in a better preparation for college coursework, specifically in the area of advanced writing expectations in college. Furthermore, the college credit gained by many of the participants has, in fact, saved them time and money in their pursuit of a degree. Unfortunately, the participants also indicated concern and crisis over how to better manage time in both academic and personal pursuits. This unforeseen indicator of lack of preparation for the college environment begs educators to place a greater priority on helping high school students in skills designed to increase autonomy. Viewing these conclusions in light of Schlossberg's (1981) transition theory, it is fair to appraise the AP

program as a mostly successful option for students to improve their chances of success in college-level coursework.

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**APPENDIX A—Consent Form**  
**INFORMED CONSENT**

**Study Title:** Student perceptions about the impact of participation in the AP program  
**Principal Investigator:** Leah Klierer

This consent form will give you the information you will need to understand why this research study is being done and why you are being invited to participate. It will also describe what you will need to do to participate as well as any known risks, inconveniences or discomforts that you may have while participating. We encourage you to ask questions at any time. If you decide to participate, you will be asked to sign this form and it will be a record of your agreement to participate. You will be given a copy of this form to keep.

➤ **PURPOSE AND BACKGROUND**

The purpose of this study is to determine former AP students' perceptions about preparedness to meet the demands and expectations of college-level coursework at both public and private universities. You are being asked to participate because you are a college student who was enrolled in and completed at least two AP courses during high school.

➤ **PROCEDURES**

If you agree to be in this study, you will participate in the following:

- One individual interview.
- One focus group interview.
- One individual questionnaire.
- One reflective writing prompt.

➤ **RISKS**

We will make every effort to protect participants' confidentiality. However, if you are uncomfortable answering any of these questions, you may leave them blank.

In the unlikely event that some of the questionnaire or interview questions make you uncomfortable or upset, you are always free to decline to answer or to stop your participation at any time.

**BENEFITS**

There will be no direct benefit to you from participating in this study. However, the information that you provide may help develop improved AP course preparation amongst AP instructors.

**EXTENT OF CONFIDENTIALITY**

Reasonable efforts will be made to keep the personal information in your research record private and confidential. Any identifiable information obtained in connection with this study will remain confidential and will be disclosed only with your permission or as required by law. The members of the research team may access the data.

Your name will not be used in any written reports or publications which result from this

research, unless you have given explicit permission for us to do this. Data will be kept for three years (per federal regulations) after the study is complete and then destroyed.

➤ **PAYMENT**

At the completion of data collection, each participant will receive a \$20 gift card to their choice of Starbucks, Chipotle, or Panera.

➤ **PARTICIPATION IS VOLUNTARY**

You do not have to be in this study if you do not want to. You may also refuse to answer any questions you do not want to answer. If you volunteer to be in this study, you may withdraw from it at any time without consequences of any kind or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled.

➤ **QUESTIONS**

If you have any questions or concerns about your participation in this study, you may contact the Principal Investigator, Mrs. Leah Kliewer: XXX-XXX-XXXX or email address.

**DOCUMENTATION OF CONSENT**

I have read this form and decided that I will participate in the project described above. Its general purposes, the particulars of involvement and possible risks have been explained to my satisfaction. I understand I can withdraw at any time.

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**Printed Name** of Study Participant

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**Signature** of Study Participant

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Date

---

Signature of Person Obtaining Consent

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Date

## APPENDIX B—IRB Approval Letter

IRB #: IRB-FY20-21-737

Title: A Phenomenology of Student Perceptions about the Impact of Participation in the Advanced Placement Program on College Readiness

Creation Date: 3-22-2021

End Date:

Status: Approved

Principal Investigator: Leah Kliewer

Review Board: Research Ethics Office

Sponsor:

### Study History

Submission Type Initial	Review Type Exempt	Decision Exempt
Submission Type Modification	Review Type Exempt	Decision Exempt

### Key Study Contacts

Member Rebecca Lunde	Role Co-Principal Investigator	Contact
Member Leah Kliewer	Role Principal Investigator	Contact
Member Leah Kliewer	Role Primary Contact	Contact

**APPENDIX C—Informational Letter to School Guidance Counselors**

<Date>

Dear <Counselor Name>,

I am writing to seek your assistance in finding potential research participants for an informative qualitative study focusing on the level of preparedness felt amongst college students who have previously participated in Advanced Placement (AP) courses during high school. This important study will consist of interviews and a reflective writing prompt in which former AP students can articulate their experiences with College Board's AP program, identifying the impact it has had on their preparation for and success in college-level coursework.

Potential participants need to be high school graduates who have completed at least two AP courses while in high school. Additionally, participants need to have finished at least one semester in college. Students' grades in the course or on the exam are not needed for the study and will only be provided voluntarily if the participant chooses to communicate this information. Likewise, a student's GPA and/or college grades are also not needed. Because of the qualitative nature of this study, I am most interested in the students' perceptions of the AP program and how it has impacted their college coursework experiences. All participants' responses will remain anonymous as will the participants themselves.

I am an experienced high school English teacher with 11 years of experience teaching AP courses. In culmination of my doctoral degree at Liberty University, I have focused my research on the AP program and its impact on high school students. Essentially, I hope to investigate further the effectiveness of College Board's AP program to better inform administrators, AP teachers, and future AP students about the implications of participation in the program.

The AP program is unique in the state of Florida; because of state involvement in AP, the numbers of AP students in Florida have steadily increased. College Board's open enrollment and equitable access policies have increased the number of students enrolling in AP courses who may not necessarily be prepared for such advanced coursework. As a result, I am focusing my study on private schools with a reputation for academic success. Your school has demonstrated a commitment to academic excellence and is, therefore, an excellent background pool from which to draw participants. For the purposes of this study, I need four or five graduates from your school who completed at least two AP courses during high school. At the commencement of data collection, the participants must have finished at least one semester of college. The time commitment needed for this study is approximately two hours total time spent (individual interview, focus group interview, and reflective writing prompt), and participants will receive a gift card at the completion of the study to thank them for their time invested.

Would you be willing to help me with this important venture? Please forward my contact information to any graduates from your school who meet the criteria and might be interested in being a participant in the study. Please do not hesitate to reach out with any questions or concerns regarding this study. I am happy to discuss my research project further and look forward to your help!

Sincerely,  
Leah Kliewer

**APPENDIX D—Individual Interview Questions**

1. What has been your favorite change from high school to college?
2. In which AP courses were you enrolled throughout high school?
3. On AP exams in which you earned a passing score, why do you think you were successful?
4. Which AP courses do you feel assigned the most homework?
5. Describe your homework and study habits for AP classes.
6. How often were you absent from AP courses?
7. What differences did you see between AP courses and honors courses? Between AP courses and non-honors courses?
8. To what extent did your AP teachers use lecture-style instruction in the classroom?
9. What types of resources (textbooks, apps, etc.) were used on a regular basis in your AP classes?
10. Describe the types of assessments used in your AP courses.
11. How were assignments graded in your AP courses?
12. What was your motivation for taking the AP courses offered at your school?
13. How often do you feel AP teachers spent time “teaching to the test”?
14. How prepared did you feel to take the AP exam at the end of the school year?
15. If you were to live through high school again, what advice would you give yourself regarding AP classes?
16. Which AP course offerings do you wish your high school had provided?
17. If you participated in either of the AP Capstone courses (AP Seminar and AP Research), how well did these courses prepare you for academic research and writing at the collegiate level?

18. When you registered for college courses, how did your experience in AP courses in high school impact your decisions on which courses to take?
19. How prepared for success did you feel during your first week of college courses?
20. At the end of your first college semester, how prepared do you believe your high school courses left you?
21. What advice would you give to a current high school AP student who is planning for college?
22. What would you like your former AP teachers to understand about your college experience thus far?

**APPENDIX E—Focus Group Interview Questions**

1. How has your experience in the AP program effected your study habits in college?
2. What experiences in the AP classroom have been of most use in preparing for college-level coursework?
3. What experiences in the AP classroom have been of least value in preparing for college-level coursework?
4. How has your experience with the AP program at a private Christian school prepared you for college-level coursework at a (public/private) university?
5. During your first semester of college, what comparisons or observations have you made between yourself as a high school student completing college-level coursework versus yourself as a college student completing work in the college classroom?
6. What suggestions do you have for high school teachers or the College Board about how to improve the AP program's impact on college preparedness?

**APPENDIX F—Reflective Writing Prompt**

Respond to the following prompt with either a typed or handwritten response:

As you began your first semester of college, describe your confidence in beginning your studies. Were there certain aspects of college that had you more anxious than others?

How did this anxiety increase or decrease over the course of the semester? How much do you feel your AP courses contributed to your confidence in the college classroom?