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Opportunity and Access: High School Coursework and its Impact on Student Self-Perceptions

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High School Coursework and its Impact on Student Self-Perceptions

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Signature Sheet

This thesis, written under the direction of the candidate's thesis advisor and approved by the Chair of the Master's program, has been presented to and accepted by the Faculty of Education in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Science. The content and research methodologies presented in this work represent the work of the candidate alone.

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Abstract

The skills taught and the courses offered to the United States' public high school students have changed drastically over the past 20 years. Career-based electives have given way to college preparatory classes. Gone are the auto shops, construction and home economics classes—courses that many view as outdated, dangerous or unnecessary at the high school level. Arts and humanities-based courses have also disappeared; even courses that can train students to enter the robust fields of healthcare or technology are diminishing (Dare, 2006).

The communities in which many of these courses are disappearing are often diverse and economically disadvantaged. This "second-generation segregation" which materializes as differentiated course offerings for students from various backgrounds may lend some insight into explaining the current inequities in student achievement (Southworth & Mickelson, 2007, p. 498). Perhaps students are disconnecting from their public education due to the loss of access to varied learning opportunities.

The purpose of this mixed-method research study is to examine the impact of high school coursework on students' perception of their post-secondary options. Current high school students and their school counselor are interviewed in an effort to determine if particular coursework, for better or worse, has any effect at all on a student's self-perception and what they see as a feasible option for their future.

Chapter 1 Introduction

He looks at me and says, "I hate school. I hate everything about it." I nod and convey that I understand before responding with a very teacher-like question: "Okay, well what *do* you like?" He does not hesitate a moment before stating very emphatically that he has always wanted to be a chef. I mentally scan the courses my school site offers and I come up empty-handed. There is simply nothing in our current course catalog that is going to hook this kid back into school. For a young man of color with a huge number of obstacles already stacked up before him such as low income, low literacy skills, and low academic confidence, I am incredibly frustrated by my inability to help him. Why can't my publicly funded, comprehensive high school offer a student like Armando (a pseudonym) support that moves him towards his dream in pursuing the culinary arts? If he could only see how biology and algebra could help get him to this "dream future," I sincerely believe that he would be far more successful and less likely to stop attending school—a choice he eventually made.

As my career as a high school English teacher has evolved, so has my passion for educational equity. I initially believed that all students should be pushed towards college entry, then I came to see the value of career and technical education courses. Now, I believe that the two pathways have the potential to coexist in a way that can allow for the greatest possible impact on student achievement. After all, I myself am a product of meaningful and diverse coursework: Advanced Placement English and a cadet teaching experience in high school led me towards pursuing a career in English education.

Varied course offerings at the high school level can offer students the opportunity to engage with different career paths and make sense of what they are being asked to do every day, regardless of whether they perceive themselves as on a college or career "track." This is a matter

of opportunity and access: giving every student meaningful experience with the disciplines and skills they think they will love.

Statement of Problem

Many comprehensive high schools are not offering a range of courses that encourage experiential learning that can increase and expand student options for their postsecondary lives. This can be due to a lack of funding or perhaps an emerging focus on exclusively college preparatory coursework. Does this "College Prep for All" model engage or exclude more students, in particular, traditionally underrepresented or disadvantaged students (Mulroy, 2011)? By offering students the option to access courses that interest them, the possibility for greater success and increasingly positive self-perception becomes possible.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this mixed-method study is to examine the impact of high school courses on students' perceptions of their postsecondary options. Traditionally, students select their coursework by meeting with a school counselor who assists them in selecting an academic plan from what is offered each year at their particular school site. This is typically based on one, maybe two, brief conversations students have with their counselor, a counselor who has met with hundreds of other students in a truncated time frame. Unless a student is intrinsically motivated to seek additional guidance or has a firm grasp on their postsecondary options, they select a class schedule each year that may or may not suit their particular interests. With very limited information, many students are making decisions that will impact their future long after high school.

Research Question

What impact does high school coursework have on a student's self-perception and perceived postsecondary options?

Keywords

High school coursework: This refers to the coursework completed by most high school students, accounting for variance amongst states, in order to receive a diploma.

Student perceptions of postsecondary options: This refers to the stated beliefs a student has about their choices following their high school graduation. For the purpose of this study, student responses are focused on college entrance, technical education, or enrollment in the military.

A-G: This denotes the courses required by California's state colleges, primarily the University of California (UC) system and the California State University (CSU) system.

CTE: This acronym represents Career Technical Education. These courses aim to give students training and instruction in a particular career field like: agriculture, business, or construction trades.

Theoretical Rationale

Allowing students multiple opportunities to access knowledge and skills in a variety of ways can first be linked to Bandura's social cognitive theory. Bandura (1977) finds that through direct observation human beings can acquire new skills and information. This is often referred to as "observational learning." Bandura's research into the power of observation proves that humans learn best by being social, engaging with other people, and participating in hands-on activities. By interacting with others and a specific task, students are able to self-regulate their own education. This self-regulated learning can lead to a positive increase in one's self-efficacy beliefs and a student's sense of autonomy. Academic self-efficacy is noted as increasing a

student's engagement with what they are learning; giving them the opportunity to collaborate with peers will further augment a student's ability to master complex tasks (Erlich & Russ-Eft, 2011).

Elements of Bandura's theory speak to a need to educate by using diverse techniques because students possess varying modalities and diverse prior knowledge. Therefore, Bandura's theory can be linked with the Civil Rights Act of 1964, which ensures equal educational opportunities and aims to restrict a child's future from being pre-determined by their race, gender, or class (PR, 2014). Because the Civil Rights Act protects all people from being denied benefits under any program receiving Federal financial assistance, equitable public education became both a legal and moral obligation (Aiken, Salmon, & Hanges, 2013).

Assumptions

The researcher assumes that by offering more high school course options, at varying grade and ability levels, there will be an increase in student confidence about their options following high school graduation. By appealing to individual students' postsecondary goals and current interests, students may opt to access information about the knowledge and skills necessary for entering particular fields of study or work. It is also assumed that this could impact student achievement while enrolled in high school.

Background and Need

The National Center for Education Statistics (2009) states students from low-income families are ten times more likely to dropout of high school. In that same year, Chapman, Laird & KewalRamani (2009) find that 8% of 18-24 years olds who have dropped out of high school are not currently enrolled in a degree completion program. These statistics are transformed into larger contextual issues when Cham, Hughes, West and Im (2014) observe that those without

high school diplomas are more likely to experience periodic and persistent unemployment, rely on government assistance, or cycle "in and out of prison" (p. 642). Clearly, the need for more successful high school graduates impacts more than just the student.

Data points collected by Lee and Ready (2009) imply that making college-prep coursework the norm for all students as an effort to increase graduation rates is not necessarily the answer to the dropout problem as seen by the increasing number of students being retained, primarily those of color, who eventually choose to withdraw from school. Placing students on particular pathways (college, career, etc…) also comes with its own assortment of issues. Students on a college-prep track often receive a higher quality of teaching; so, if a student persists in spite of retention or opts for a career pathways, they are exposed to less breadth and depth in terms of curriculum covered (Southworth & Mickelson, 2007). Furthermore, Sen (2000) states that high school pathways merely perpetuate the differences in varying groups because inherent entitlements are never eliminated; therefore, tracking only furthers existing social inequities.

Summary

Students who perceive themselves as eligible for enrollment in a university directly after high school are likely to have a more complete and positive view of their career options. Students who are disengaged from school curriculum often repeat coursework or must complete additional semesters of coursework. This may cause them to struggle with envisioning a successful future for themselves. This study aims to explore these scenarios and examine the possible impacts a student's coursework may have on their perceptions of their postsecondary options.

Chapter 2 Review of the Literature

Introduction

This section is an examination of the research literature models of the impact of secondary learning options on students' self-concept. Information has been gathered from academic library searches using online resources. Three main themes have emerged in this process: access to key courses, dropout rates as linked to student motivation, and the impacts of college-prep versus career-technical curriculum.

Access

U.S. Department of Education for Civil Rights (2014) states that high school students of color are not being served equitably, particularly when it comes to enrollment in advanced placement courses, as well as other courses leading to college entrance. For example, algebra is a critical course that prepares students for college and career pathways; yet, 25% of the high schools with the highest percentage of black and Latino students are not even offering Algebra II at their site. Nationally only 59% of high schools offer calculus and a mere quarter of the students who take gifted and talented courses are Latino or Black (p. 1). At the state level, only 62% of California high schools offer Algebra II and only 53% offer chemistry (p.13). Both are required for entrance into the state's university system.

In terms of career-technical education course offerings, the California Department of Education's (2013) recent report of CTE programs states that there has been a dramatic increase in the number of CTE courses offered that meet the University of California system's "A-G" requirements. However, only 23% of the over 42,000 such courses offered across the state during the 2012-2013 school year are UC approved. This all speaks to the access of key courses that predetermine college and career options.

Dropout Rates and Student Motivation

At grade 9, 6% of students are retained across the nation's high schools (U.S. Department of Education, 2014, p.5). This retention can directly impact student motivation, a key factor in deciding whether to dropout or remain in high school (Hardre & Reeve, 2003). Khalkhali, Sharifi, and Nikyar (2013) question 318 Iranian ninth graders about their "perceived competence" and "intention to persist in high school." The results confirm that internal motivation, as impacted by self-perception of competence, is one the key indicators in a student's decision to persist in, versus dropout of high school. The results also confirm that one of the best ways to ensure a student maintains their internal motivation is to directly engage them in their courses and other school activities (p. 281). If a student is retained the first year of high school, it is likely that their sense of competence will be directly impacted and will lead to "formulating dropout intentions" (p. 287). Furthermore, the importance of offering varied choices to students demonstrates an interest in students' own competencies, lives, and ultimate goals (p. 288).

These findings are echoed in a study by Wouters, Germeijs, Colpin, and Verschueren (2011) that examines the indicators and effects of a student's academic self-concept. Five hundred twelfth graders in Flanders are observed in a longitudinal study that finds there is a direct, positive correlation with a student's academic self-concept and their success in higher education (p. 589). In fact, self-concept proves to be a more powerful indicator of success than academic achievement while in high school. This is assessed via the researcher's continued tracking of the students through their first two years of postsecondary schooling and the results support the notion that a student's self-concept is paramount in their ability to persist in and be successful in their postsecondary lives.

A student's self-concept can be directly affected by the level of their engagement with their courses and the quality of their relationship with their teachers. Whannell and Allen (2011) investigate the reasons for students' decision to dropout of high school and find that a low level of emotional engagement with school and poor relationships with teachers accounts for school attrition more than wider social issues such as family dysfunction or low socioeconomic status (p. 22). Furthermore, the results of this study conclude that negative "classroom experiences" are connected to lower attendance and that an inability to "cope with curriculum complexity" impacts students' relationship with their teachers (p. 31). Ultimately, Whannell and Allen observe that a student who feels engaged by their courses and connected to their teachers have a higher rate of high school completion.

College-Prep and Career Technical Education Curriculum

A study published in 2011 aims to examine the recent focus on college-prep level curriculum as a requirement for high school graduation (Mulroy, 2011). This national movement found an inception in Chicago in the late 1980s as a response to President Reagan's Secretary of Education's criticism of the Chicago school system and the publication of the seminal report, *A Nation at Risk* (Lee & Ready, 2009, p. 139). The hope was that by increasing rigor and implementing higher expectations more students would rise to the challenge. As a result, by the late 1990s, Chicago schools were requiring "The New Basics: a minimum of four years of English, three years of mathematics, science, and social science" for a high school diploma (Lee & Ready, 2009, 139). This systematic approach to high school graduation requirements spread quickly and soon many other states began implementing similar college-prep only programs. After more than a decade of running such a system, the Illinois State Board of Education reports in 2001-2002 that Chicago's dropout rate increased to 17.5% as opposed to 16% in 1995-1996

(around the time the program began). The dropout rate for African-American students in particular is noted at 20.2% for the 2001-2002 school year (Mulroy, 2011, p. 661). Many students, especially those the program is designed to target, are still unprepared to tackle these required college-prep classes.

Encouraging students to look at career technical coursework in addition to or in lieu of college-prep coursework was also once popular. CTE courses such as automotive technology and agricultural education were once seen as an important component of all students' high school coursework before becoming an alternative pathway for students who were not planning to attend college (Dare, 2006). However, CTE is no longer seen as suitable for students who hope to one day enroll in college, though career-technical education curricula is noted as promoting a student's ability to smoothly transition from high school to their career (Dare, 2006). In particular, schools that offer advanced academic skills within these CTE classes allow students to enter "college-level technical and professional studies" much more readily (Dare, 2006, p. 73). These results imply that participation in rigorous college-prep curriculum combined with CTE courses not only impact students' standardized math and reading scores, but also debunks the long-held notion that CTE courses are not sufficient at preparing students for high education (Dare, 2006, p. 74). Some critics are still not convinced and continue to maintain a staunch belief in "the New Basics" (Lee & Ready, 2009).

A possible compromise for the two sides of this debate is reported in an article on the impact of secondary-postsecondary learning options, otherwise known as SPLOs (Lerner & Brand, 2007). Many high schools have begun offering college classes, with accompanying college credit, to their students. Lerner and Brand state that this allows students the ability to not only "try out college-level classes" but also helps to "demystify the college experience."

Accomplishing these two goals allow students to increase their academic self-confidence as college-goers (Lerner & Brand, 2007, p. 27).

While SPLOs may offer students a taste of academia, when combined with specific CTE curricula it has been established that a student's sense of autonomy is enhanced, positive student-teacher relationships are fostered, students' shared interests are encouraged, and a mastery of relevant content became possible (Gentry, Peters, & Mann, 2007, p. 373). CTE programs have also been shown to increase a student's National Assessment of Education Progress scores and Plank's 2001 study finds that "a balance of one CTE credit to every two academic credits […] minimizes risk of dropping out of high school (Gentry, Peters, & Mann, 373).

Chapter 3 Method

Research Approach

The purpose of this study is to examine the possible relationship between a student's coursework and their academic self-perception and view of their postsecondary options. The research information relies on the voluntary participation of students who complete an online survey. This survey intends to elicit responses about the students' current coursework, its impact on their postsecondary plans and the role peers and school staff play in building their academic self-confidence.

Two separate groups of students are used in this study: Advanced Placement juniors, and sophomores enrolled in an academic advisory program. Advanced Placement is a title given to courses that furnish students with the opportunity to complete college coursework while in still high school. The academic advisory program is designed to support students who possess the lowest grade point averages of their class and who are at risk of retention. The student surveys are examined for correlations and themes. In addition to student responses, a school counselor is interviewed about his observations of student motivation to persist in school and the correlations that may exist between that and academic coursework. This mixed-methods research study combines these questionnaires, the personal interview, and the researcher's direct observation.

Ethical Standards

This paper adheres to the ethical standards for protection of human subjects of the American Psychological Association (2010). Additionally a research proposal was submitted and reviewed by the Dominican University of California Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects (IRBPHS), approved and assigned number 10252.

Sample and Site

The participants in the study include students enrolled in the researcher's high school classes: 29 juniors from an Advanced Placement Language and Composition course and 11 students from sophomore academic advisory. The student sample is made up of 19 males and 21 females ranging in ages from 15-18. Student race/ethnicity is as follows: 30% African-American, 20% Latino, 29% Asian/Pacific-Islander, 20% White, 1% African or Middle-Eastern. The demographics of the participants in this study mirror the demographics at the larger school site. The socio-economic status of each student is unknown due to confidentiality restrictions. An online tool is used to collect responses to 10 questions.

A counselor at this particular school site is also interviewed. R (a pseudonym) works with students ranging in grades 9-12 most of whom possess a 504 plan, are designated as English learners, are at risk of retention, or who enter the school as International students. R has been working at this site for seven years and holds a Master's degree in School Counseling. His expertise is sought due to his close proximity to students, their academic needs, and post-secondary plans. The interview conducted with R explores possible correlations between a student's academic performance, their motivation to persist, and the impact both of these factors have on their post-secondary plans.

Access and Permissions

The researcher, a credentialed teacher, acquired the permission of the site principal and the students' parents to engage the students in this study during a standard class day. Student participation was entirely voluntary. R, the school counselor, was interviewed at the school site also with the permission of the site's administrators.

Data Gathering Procedures

Student data were obtained using an online survey consisting of ten questions. The surveys were all anonymous and completed by students in each class simultaneously and at individual computer workstations. The private interview was conducted within the counselor's office and data from this interview was gathered through the researcher's own note-taking.

Data Analysis Approach

Qualitative data gathered from the online survey and personal interview was analyzed for commonalities and major themes. Recurring themes were noted; similarities and differences were compiled in an effort to better understand the possible correlations between student coursework and their perceptions about their post-secondary options.

This section examines the data gathered from 40 student surveys and 1 personal interview with a counselor, all of who are located at the researcher's school site in the greater San Francisco Bay Area. 11 of the students are sophomores and 29 are juniors. Student responses should be read as follows: "Always" denotes 100% agreement with the provided statement, "Often" denotes 75% agreement, "Sometimes" indicates less than 50% agreement, and "Never" implies 0% agreement with the statement. The data includes the researcher's notes and is ultimately marshaled into three categories: Access, Self-Perception, and External Influences.

Survey Questions and Student Responses

1. **I feel like I am academically successful in school.**

AP Juniors	Sophomore Advisory
Always: 15% Often: 50% Sometimes: 28% Never:7%	Always: 3% Often: 64% Sometimes: 33% Never: 0%

Researcher's Note: In this first question, the Advanced Placement juniors report feeling academically unsuccessful more often than the advisory students. The AP students have higher grade point averages than the sophomore advisory students.

2.   **Overall, my high school coursework has challenged me and feels rigorous. I believe I am ready to compete with students from other schools across the nation in terms of college and/or career applications.**

AP Juniors	Sophomore Advisory
Always: 32% Often: 18% Sometimes: 50% Never: 0%	Always: 0% Often: 27% Sometimes: 36% Never: 37%

3.   **I believe that the courses offered at my school suit my individual interests and needs. This coursework makes me feel prepared for entrance into the ideal career of my choice.**

AP Juniors	Sophomore Advisory
Always: 0% Often: 48% Sometimes: 50% Never: 2%	Always: 0% Often: 27% Sometimes: 36% Never: 37%

4.   **The elective courses (Foreign Language, Visual/Performing Art, Career-Technical Education) offered at my school are varied. There are many to choose from and they align with my individual interests.**

AP Juniors	Sophomore Advisory
Always: 20% Often: 39% Sometimes: 36% Never: 5%	Always: 0% Often: 27% Sometimes: 45% Never: 28%

Researcher's Note: The responses to questions #2-4 imply that the sophomore advisory students

feel less connected to their academic coursework than the AP juniors. By answering "Never"

37%, 37%, and 28% of the time respectively, the sophomores express lower levels of

engagement and interest in their academic and elective courses.

5. **I believe that my teachers see me as a scholar; for example, I have been approached by an adult on staff about enrolling in HP or AP courses.**

AP Juniors	Sophomore Advisory
Always: 32% Often: 21% Sometimes: 32% Never: 15%	Always: 0% Often: 6% Sometimes: 31% Never: 63%

Researcher's Note: In question #5 the sophomore advisory students are more likely to disagree

with the statement that their teachers view them as capable of rigorous coursework.

6. **I plan to enroll in a junior college program or 4 year college/university directly after high school graduation.**

AP Juniors	Sophomore Advisory
Always: 82% Often: 7% Sometimes: 7% Never: 4%	Always: 73% Often: 18% Sometimes: 9% Never: 0%

7. **Instead of college, I plan to directly enter the workforce in a specific trade or a branch of the military immediately after high school graduation.**

AP Juniors	Sophomore Advisory
Always: 3% Often: 3% Sometimes: 19% Never: 75%	Always: 7% Often: 2% Sometimes: 18% Never: 73%%

8. **I don't really know what my career options are for after high school graduation.**

AP Juniors	Sophomore Advisory
Always: 1% Often: 14% Sometimes: 30% Never: 55%	Always: 9% Often: 36% Sometimes: 55% Never: 0%

Researcher's Note: In questions #6-8 the AP students report feeling more informed about their post-secondary options. However, both groups report that they plan to enroll in a college level program at similar rates: 89% (AP) and 91% (advisory). Again, the AP students have higher grade point averages and have completed more A-G requirements than the advisory students.

9. **Family and friends often have positive conversations with me about my specific postsecondary plans.**

AP Juniors	Sophomore Advisory
Always: 24% Often: 38% Sometimes: 28% Never: 10%	Always: 27% Often: 36% Sometimes: 28% Never: 9%

10. **The way I perceive myself as a student is similar to the way other people (teachers, family, friends, and other students) perceive me.**

AP Juniors	Sophomore Advisory
Always: 36% Often: 43% Sometimes: 14% Never: 7%	Always: 5% Often: 36% Sometimes: 39% Never: 20%

Researcher's Note: Both groups of students respond similarly to question #9, which inquires about their interactions with others about postsecondary options. However, the sophomore group indicates feeling that their self-perception is less aligned with others' perceptions of their academic ability.

Interview with an Expert

1. **Describe your observations of student work completion and their level of motivation to pursue rigorous coursework.**

The level of work completion by students varies greatly depending on the student. As a counselor I can really only speak to "quantity" of work completion as opposed to "quality" because students do not turn work into me. I find that the students who complete all of their work on a regular basis see school and their grades as a very high priority and are usually (though not always) higher skilled than those who do not complete work regularly. They usually have a good routine in place, like a consistent time and place to complete homework, and are motivated to complete their work. Students who struggle with work completion often present as students who are more interested in non-academic pursuits like socializing and/or students who struggle with schoolwork. Also, students with organizational difficulties or medical issues like ADHD struggle with work completion more often.

Like work completion, there is a wide array of differences in motivation to pursue rigorous coursework. I think that students' levels of motivation to pursue rigorous coursework depends on their skills, their own perceptions of their skills, grade level, post-secondary goals, level of parental involvement in their education, educational level of parents, students' race/ethnicity. Students who pursue more rigorous coursework often (again, though not always) are higher skilled, earn better grades, come from families where parents are highly involved in their education and place a high value on doing well in school. These students are more often white and Asian, are planning on going to a four year college, see themselves as capable students, and place a high value on doing well in school.

2. **Have you observed any themes between a student being UC/CSU eligible and their perceptions of their post-secondary career options? What about the perceptions of student who are not on track for an on-time graduation?**

I find that many of our students are unsure about what their post-secondary career options are, especially those who come from lower income households. Those who are college eligible have more ideas about career options than those who are not. They are usually thinking about which major to choose when they select their courses, which is also directly linked to their career goals. Students who are planning on attending community college have less of an idea of their options. I think that their socioeconomic status play a big part of this. They do not have a close network of family and friends who have careers requiring a bachelor's degree or higher and therefore have a limited view into options for themselves. As a school, we do not educate students in this area, so there is a lack of exposure to options for these students.

3. **Do you see any other themes in the course work students pursue and their perceptions of post-secondary career options?**

When a student has an idea of what they want to pursue as a career, it is highly influential in their choice of classes. Many students (who have an idea of career/major) choose courses that

will prepare them. Extra math for engineering, psychology for those interested in working with kids, physiology for those interested in health careers, animation for those interested in animating. Unfortunately, at our school many of our college prep electives and career tech classes have been canceled. High school has an extremely vital role to play in allowing students the chance to explore their interests through taking a class where the risk is relatively low. Students who do better in school and/or are CSU/UC eligible often put a lot of thought into the classes they choose. They select certain teachers, classes, or adjust their schedule if possible to get just the right balance.

4. **Have you observed a verbalized student need for courses not currently offered at the school site? If so, what are those?**

I wish that we had more CTE courses and non-HP/AP academic electives like public speaking and creative writing. I have verbalized and sent emails to administration several times. The rational is usually "we don't have a teacher who can teach the course" or "there is not enough student interest." While these seem to be rational explanations, many of our CTE courses were full when we offered them (woodshop, child development, auto shop, to name a few). And there are many other high schools with CTE programs/classes so the ability to find a teacher doesn't seem to hold a lot of weight. If it was made a priority, I think we could find teachers for these courses. We push AP and honors courses and offer a lot of options for students who are on a four-year college track but not nearly as much for everyone else.

Chapter 5 Discussion /Analysis

Summary of Major Findings

After examining the student surveys and completing the interview with an expert, the following themes are identified: access to varied curriculum and course information, student self-perception, and external influences on a student's post-secondary options.

Access

All data collected indicates that access to a variety of courses plays a significant role in increasing student engagement with curriculum, informing students of their college and career options, and augmenting student self-confidence. Students who engage more frequently with their coursework, due to an intrinsic interest, possess increased rates of academic success. Furthermore, students who had access to rigorous coursework, like the AP juniors, report higher levels of autonomy and awareness of their post-secondary options.

Student Self-Perceptions

Students with lower levels of academic success (as measured by their grades and course completion) report a higher level of academic self-confidence, which struck the researcher as anomalous. However, this could be attributed to this particular group of students' lack of information about what qualifies a student for college or career entrance. Again, varied course access impacts a student's awareness of college and career requirements and lower level students, such as the sophomore advisees, may not have a complete and accurate comprehension of their viability as candidates for college matriculation.

External Influences

Both the data collected and literature reviewed support the belief that a student's socioeconomic status and level of family engagement are not necessarily significant factors in a student's ability to persist in their high school coursework. However, the wider implications of such issues can often manifest in a student's interaction with others in an academic setting and therefore, their academic self-perception. For example, the advisory students report feeling that their own academic self-perception is less aligned with the way others view them. Furthermore, the data suggests that students with less academic success are often unaware of their post-secondary options and the coursework necessary for college and career entrance.

Comparison of Findings to the Literature

The study reinforces what much of the research literature already states. There is undoubtedly a connection between a student's access to meaningful coursework and their academic self-perception. Self-perception is also observed, in both the study and the literature, as being linked to a student's motivation to persist in high school and explore varied postsecondary options. The one divergence in the study and literature is that the lower achieving students demonstrate higher self-confidence in terms of their own academic success. This anomaly may be attributed to bravado, ignorance, or something more meaningful; this researcher remains unclear.

Limitations/Gaps in the Research

The student sample size of this study is small and limited to one, brief questionnaire. Students could have been confused by some of the questions or apathetic in their responses. Some student responses indicate an uncertainty about how to answer, which leads to contradictions in their answers. The information garnered from the expert interview is also the observation of one

person's experience. To create a more complete study of this issue, more time, a larger sample size, and more in-depth questioning would be needed.

Implications for Future Research

Currently, many public high schools are not offering enough variance, support, or postsecondary information in their curriculum. Students are continuing to display disengagement with, and the inability to persist in, their high school coursework. This has led to many students opting to drop out of high school or requiring further remediation in order to graduate. Further research is needed to determine how to best integrate rigorous college-prep coursework with career-technical curriculum so that students might succeed at higher rates while in high school.

Overall Significance of the Study

For a country to be economically viable there must be an educated citizenry capable of entering the workforce. For this to happen, the U.S. must reexamine the way public high school curriculum is structured. It is clear that all students must be given the opportunity to access varied coursework that aligns with their individual interests and strengths; by doing so everyone will benefit.

At a time when more and more young people, particularly those of color, are struggling in their postsecondary lives, the need to educate everyone equitably has become more important than ever. In a recent *Time* article, Foroohar (2014) reported that only 5% of black male high school graduates looking for a job found one. For a country that is becoming increasingly diverse, this is an obvious problem and the need to reorganize the traditional secondary school structure is pressing. When President Obama calls for a new 21st century workforce in his State of the Union address (2014), he doesn't just mean a better-skilled one, but also, a "more diverse

and inclusive one" (Foroohar, 2014, p. 24). Until the country's schools become more diverse and inclusive in their curriculum, this workforce will be little more than a political ideal. It would seem that American author James Baldwin's words have never truer: "For these are all our children. We will all profit by, or pay for what they become" (Okun, 2013).

About the Author

The researcher has been teaching English-Language Arts for ten years. She has worked in schools in Indiana, North Carolina, southwest England, and currently lives and works in the San Francisco Bay Area. She is deeply interested in working with students at risk of retention and is passionate about educational access and equity for all students, particularly those groups who have been traditionally underrepresented at the collegiate level. There are few things more important to her than giving every person the opportunity to flourish in their own unique way.

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