



Low College Credit Plus Enrollment in a Dropout Recovery School: Qualitative Study¹

Melinda Moos²

Abstract

Purpose: College Credit Plus (CCP) is a program for high school students to take college courses while still in high school. The program can be a tremendous advantage to any student. Despite the incentives, CCP enrollment at a Midwest urban dropout recovery school is low and has been so for a decade. The purpose of this study is to use a qualitative approach to determine common root causes for the low enrollment, as well as generate possible solutions.

Method: This study was designed in 2021. This study utilized qualitative methods for action research. Because the study is in student interest, it is vital that student voices remain the focal point. I suspect that one of the underlying causes may be internalization of outward negative, racialized student expectations.

Findings: Current literature details the benefits of CCP enrollment, especially for underrepresented students, as well as the low enrollment of those same students. However, there is a gap in the literature where actual student voices are missing. Without their directly quoted, first-person contributions, the data is incomplete. Underrepresented students are primary stakeholders as they are missing out on educational opportunities that could alter their quality of life significantly.

Implications for Research and Practice: These findings are useful for teachers, school administrators, students, and their families. Further interviews would be beneficial to address the variety in student responses.

Keywords: College, credit, enrollment, recovery

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² English Department Chair Early College Academy, Columbus, USA, moosm1@udayton.edu

Introduction

College Credit Plus (CCP) is a program for high school students to take college courses while still in high school. The program can be a tremendous advantage to any student, but particularly for students with financial or other types of life constraints. City Achievement Academy (CAA) is a non-profit, urban charter school in the Midwest for students aged 16-22 who have previously dropped out of high school or are otherwise considered “at-risk.” CAA is partnered with Midwest Community College to offer CCP courses to students at no cost to students. Tuition and books are paid for by CAA. Furthermore, as dually enrolled students, each CCP class counts towards both high school credit, as well as college credit. Any student who obtains the appropriate placement testing score or who holds a 3.0 GPA or higher may take CCP classes at CAA.

Despite the incentives, CCP enrollment at CAA is low and has been so for a decade. According to a report by Selikson (2021), CAA’s EMIS coordinator, total CCP enrollment in 2017 was 20 (13 % of student population); by the year 2020, total enrollment had dropped to three (0.02% of student population); currently in the Fall 2021 semester, the number is zero. The reduced enrollment cannot be solely attributed to the coronavirus pandemic because yearly enrollment in 2018 and 2019 (pre-pandemic) were nine and ten, respectively (0.06 % and 0.09 % of student population). Furthermore, of those students who enrolled, approximately 50 % withdrew from the course before the college withdraw date.

Midwest Community College has recently set a policy where each CCP English course must have a minimum of eight students per semester to operate independently. Until CAA can regularly meet this enrollment benchmark, independent CCP English classes at CAA will no longer be possible. The purpose of this study is to use a qualitative approach to determine common root causes for the low enrollment, as well as generate possibilities for solutions. The aim is to contribute to current studies regarding CCP enrollment, particularly for underrepresented students, while also employing actionable steps to improve real-time CCP enrollment at City Achievement Academy. Student voices are currently missing from the research literature, so I hope to take a step towards filling that void.

The theoretical framework for this study is the critical, postmodern lens. The missing link in previous studies is actual student voices. Many critical theorists advocate incorporating the voices of those underrepresented in education (Freire, 1998; Ghosh, 2019; Tinto, 2017); however, such voices remain difficult to find. The CAA student population is composed of a majority underrepresented, Black, male students (Henderson, 2020); therefore, the focus of the research structure is those students’ voices.

Tinto (2004, 2017) has written numerous articles regarding college student retention. He explains the necessity of exploring and examining students’ perspectives, and he further details the need for expanded research. The frustration is that while student retention and success are widely researched and written about, and while access to college has increased, actual success rates have shown little or no improvement and we still have many unknowns (Tinto, 2006-2007). Furthermore, what we do know- namely that student motivation can be manipulated via improving self-efficacy, sense of belonging, and perceptions of the curriculum- is not being translated from theory to action (Tinto, 2017). Of great concern is the lack of college success for low-income students (Tinto 2006-2007, 2017), who are less likely to participate in CCP coursework (Karp, 2015; Taylor, 2015), hence of interest in the critical postmodern paradigm. Tinto (2017) wrote that low self-efficacy has a magnified effect on underrepresented groups as the result of negative stereotypes others hold of them. To improve the situation, Tinto writes that we need to investigate student experiences in college and how those experiences contribute to retention (2006-2007). He recommends looking into student goals, persistence as motivation, self-efficacy, sense of belonging, and perceptions of the curriculum (2017).

Freire (1998) wrote that education is a means of liberation (Shor, 1993). He added that teaching is an ethical responsibility and discrimination of any kind is immoral (Freire, 1998). Freire valued critical thinking, democratic classrooms employing bottom-up organization, and he wrote that learning means recreating how we see ourselves (Freire, 1998; Shor, 1993). He describes what sounds like learned helplessness, a fatalistic view, among students, and the need to maintain hope (Freire, 1998). Freire’s

work has shown “time and again that students and their families are capable of high levels of achievement if they are taught how to learn, provided with resources to learn, and given a reason to believe that they can control their own destinies” (Lindsey et. al, 2019, p. 70).

Gandhi likewise wrote of education as a means of liberation and of hope for oppressed people (Ghosh, 2019). Furthermore, he similarly wrote that education is a method of student self-transformation (Ghosh, 2019). Gandhi saw the individual and society at large as inseparable. What is good for individuals need not be inseparable from what is good for society/communities/institutions (Nadkarni, 2014). CCP coursework has been proven beneficial to not only individuals but society as well (Karp, 2015).

Benefits of CCP Enrollment

CCP stands for College Credit Plus, meaning that students take college courses while they are still in high school. Children from marginalized groups are severely underrepresented in advanced coursework in high schools (Lindsey et. al, 2019). Although there is limited literature focused specifically on dropout recovery schools, previous studies do reveal detailed explanations of the benefits of CCP enrollment in general: Karp (2015) explained how dual enrollment can be used to improve individual lives, as well as improve the nation as a whole. By connecting high schools to colleges, communication is improved, bridges are built, gaps are more sealed, and the educational process is streamlined. Karp (2015) further elaborated that CCP classes are vital to bridge the gap between high school and college. Some of the main challenges, according to Karp (2015), are college eligibility, transportation, and funding. CCP classes should play a much larger role than mere enrichment for students who are already doing well; they should be utilized for the greater good to improve the nation.

Additional benefits of CCP enrollment to students are detailed by Coates and Webb (2013): higher SAT scores, higher rates of continued college, and stronger standardized test scores. Mangan (2019) confirms that CCP students have higher college retention and graduation rates.

CCP Benefits Specific to Community Colleges

Community colleges and Career Technical Education have a particular role to play in improving individual circumstances as well as the collective (Karp, 2015). They are more accessible to students, particularly “at-risk” students, and the benefits are mutual. Community college enrollment has been on a downward spiral since 2010, whereas CCP high school students sometimes comprise as much as a third of the total community college student population and continues to grow (Mangan, 2019). Meanwhile, students benefit from the community colleges in return. For one thing, community colleges are more likely to offer Career Technical Education certifications that would fill the employment hole of available, good-paying trade jobs that employers are struggling to fill (Barnett, et al., 2015; Hatch & Toner, 2020).

One subgroup that benefits the most from community colleges is student mothers. Women comprise the majority of all college students and more women attend community colleges than four-year schools (Hatch & Toner, 2020). One in every four community college students is a parent and of those students, over 70% are women (Hatch & Toner, 2020). This is due in part to the lower costs and more part-time options of community colleges, which are also more likely than four-year schools to reach out to student parents with additional support (Hatch & Toner, 2020). Student mothers who hold associate's degrees are half as likely to live in poverty and on average, earn \$329,498 more in a lifetime than student mothers with only a high school diploma (Hatch & Toner, 2020). The cost of investments into the college supports are more than paid for by the increased tax revenues from student mother earners after they receive their degrees and the nation as a whole benefits because those mother's children are then more likely to attend college, chipping away at generational poverty (Hatch & Toner, 2020).

“At-Risk” CCP Students

Singleton recommended “acceleration in place of remediation” to help underrepresented students achieve academic excellence (Singleton, 2015, p. 45). Students who are considered “at-risk” seem to

have the most to gain from CCP classes. Yet, Karp (2015) cited a nearly 30% gap in college enrollment between students with higher-income families and students with lower-income families. The gap is about the same for white students and students of color (Karp, 2015). Interestingly, Indiana Commission for Higher Education (2016) found contradictory results in that CCP students were *more* likely to be lower-income than higher income. However, one area of agreement is that CCP coursework proves beneficiary to “at-risk” students when they do enroll. Coates and Webb (2013), as well as Barnett, et al. (2015) echo the benefits for underrepresented students, such as increased college graduation rates and higher incomes.

College enrollment rates for male students are lower than enrollment rates for female students (Karp, 2015). Male enrollment is even lower for African American students (Tolliver, et al., 2019). Without specific interventions put in place to support African American male CCP enrollment, it is likely that the disparity will continue to grow (Tolliver, et al., 2019). This would lead to less financial stability, less healthy lifestyle choices, poorer health, increased mortality rates, and increased incarceration for African American men (Tolliver, et al., 2019). As a first step, Singleton (2015) recommends beginning with direct conversations with students in dually enrolled classes about why they succeed or don’t succeed.

Potential Solutions

Coates and Webb (2013) list a large number of potential solutions for improving CCP enrollment and success rates. These include: close communication and coordination between college and high school partners, early student assessments to identify areas of need, professional development for staff, incorporating research-based methods of teaching, extensive personalized student supports, increasing student access to technology, college field trips, academic acceleration, forging community partnerships, funding from the colleges, summer programs designed to increase student social and college cultural capital, authentic assessments, student-centered instruction, giving students college readiness grades, formative assessment, bottom-up organizational structures, high student expectations, computer-based support programs such as AVID and MyFoundationsLab, tutors provided by the college, fundraising, administrator commitment, etc. Also, the physical designs of the schools should be unique, involve frequent and prominent references to the school mottos, and be in alignment with the college culture (Coates & Webb, 2013). Not included on this lengthy list, contrary to findings by Tolliver, et al. (2019), are extra-curricular activities as Coates and Webb (2013) did not find them a priority. Barnett, et al. (2015) recommend nearly identical solutions to Coates and Webb, but without mentioning extra-curriculars. Tinto (2006-7, 2017) recommended more research on student experiences. The primary research question for this study is: how can CAA increase our CCP population?

Method

Qualitative Research Design

This case study utilized qualitative methods for action research. Action research is a paradigm that requires a process of constant inquiry of problems and taking action to solve them. The process is highly reflexive and continuous (Pine, 2009). The goal was to first discover the main causes of low CCP enrollment, then devise potential solutions. Qualitative research provides a “unique grounding position” that focuses on asking questions in a particular way to reach towards social understandings. Qualitative research values subjective and multiple perspectives (Hesse-Biber, 2017, p. 4). The primarily qualitative nature of the study allowed for the variety of voices to be heard in greater detail. Because the study was in student interest, it was vital that student voices remained the focal point. Therefore, semi-structured student interviews were used.

Semi-Structured Interviews

The semi-structured interviews consisted of six main questions, with several sub questions and the flexibility to add and change questions as I felt needed. Polkinghorne (2005) wrote that “Because of the individual differences of interviewees and the unpredictable flow of research conversation,

qualitative interviewing cannot be reduced to a set of techniques or instructions, rather, it relies on the skilled judgement of the interviewer to move the conversation along” (p. 143). I did not deviate from the main questions often, but I did add a few probing sub questions when answers were vague or led to further inquiry. Questions and sub questions were as follows: 1. Tell me about your educational journey that led to where you are today. 2. Have you considered CCP coursework/If a graduate, did you consider CCP coursework? Why or why not? 3. What do you see as the benefits of CCP coursework? If you took them, how did they help you? 4. What do you see as the challenges of CCP coursework? If you took them, what was the worst part? 5. What, if anything, makes you nervous about the future? What, if anything, makes you nervous about college/trade school? 6. What would encourage you to take CCP courses? If you did take them, what would have made your experience better? What could CAA do to encourage you or other students to take CCP classes?

Setting

City Achievement Academy (CAA) is a public, non-profit, dropout recovery charter school in the Midwest. Total enrollment at CAA is currently 136 students; however, this is our lowest enrollment on record (presumably due to the COVID-19 pandemic). The student population is usually closer to 200 students (Selikson, 2021). There are eight teachers: two English, two Math, two History, one Science, and a Physical Education/Health teacher. Over 90% of CAA students are African American, 7.8% Latinx, and 2% white. Approximately 9% of CAA students surveyed are homeless. 56.3% of students report they have lost a close friend due to gun violence, 51.8% say they are affiliated with local gangs, nearly 70% have an incarcerated family member, approximately one out of every four students state that they feel unwelcome at their home (Henderson, 2020).

Participants

To ensure that student voices were heard, participants were CAA students or former CAA students, who are above the age of 18. Three students participated in the interviews. They were chosen based on high attendance rates to increase communication opportunities. The three students were all enrolled at CAA for at least three months. Students were from underrepresented populations. All three participants were male, although that was unplanned and merely the result of female students’ challenging schedules. I made many attempts to secure interviews with female students, who expressed an interest in participation, but none of them had availability after school during the weeks of the interviews.

The first student was Stephen. Stephen graduated in 2016 and he was successful in the CCP program prior to graduation. He is currently close to graduating from college. The second student was Ibrahim. Ibrahim is a current student and the newest to CAA, having been enrolled for about four months. He is not interested in the CCP program. The final student was Nathaniel, who is also a current student and has been enrolled at CAA for approximately three years. He is interested, but not committed to, the CCP program. All three participants are Black; again, this was not planned but not surprising given the student population. Pseudonyms have been used throughout this paper for the school, location, and participants, with the exception of two participants who requested that their real names be used.

Researcher’s Lens/Positionality Statement

Information on how the researcher positioned herself is given below.

Identifications: Due to the multiple roles I play in this study, I cannot objectively separate myself from the study. I am the researcher, doctoral student, high school teacher, and College Credit Plus teacher, which means that I am also a volunteer adjunct at our partner college, cited in the study. My personal roles are interwoven in the study. As the first step in an action research plan, this intimacy was intentional; still, transparency is required.

Epistemology is a theory about knowledge: how we know what we know and what types of knowledge are valid (Walliman, 2011). Of the two main types of epistemology, empiricism and rationalism, I categorize myself more as empirical, although I do think that both categories offer value and various contextual questions may cause shifts between one and the other. I view myself primarily

as empirical because I tend to use my senses to gain knowledge, as opposed to using deductive reasoning. I believe that it is human nature to do so.

Ontology deals with the question of social reality (Hesse-Biber, 2017). Although the most common academic ontological affiliation is positivism, I am more drawn between either relativism or emancipatory. I believe that there is not just one Truth; many different truths can exist simultaneously depending on various perspectives. As my cohort of doctoral students proceeds through the EdD program, I have seen the following quote in the readings in nearly every class: "...man is an animal suspended in webs of significance he himself has spun" (Geertz, 1973, p. 5). I agree with this quote because much (but not all) of our social reality is constructed. I am also drawn to emancipatory views-how power dynamics are used- and ideologies to decrease oppression.

Axiology refers to the question of what is valuable (Olive, 2021). Of relevance to my study are the ethics involved. I find ethics to be of high value and will have to tread carefully in some areas, especially given my multiple roles.

Paradigm

Given these identifications, I fluctuate between paradigms of relativism and emancipatory. Every individual story has its own truth, depending on the context. Power dynamics are an important factor in shaping one's truth. Therefore, I am also in support of mixed methods approaches to research. Although I value the clarity and foundation of quantitative research, qualitative research is also necessary to flesh out the bigger picture.

Demographics: I identify as a white, heterosexual female. I am married and a (step) parent to one child, whom I raised. I teach English and communication courses and electives at the high school and college levels. I hold an Ed.M and my nationality is American. I do not currently have any religious affiliations, but I do have democratic political affiliations. I was raised working class but am currently middle class. I have lived in rural, urban, and suburban locations.

Mitigation: Bias and power dynamics are both potential issues that will require mitigation. Potential bias conflicts include the possibility of me projecting my own thoughts and experiences onto the participants. Because the participants and I share similar socioeconomic upbringings, I may consciously or subconsciously project connections whereas our stories are bound to be different.

I am a teacher at the case study school; therefore, power dynamics could also be a challenge, even if I am not a direct teacher of the student participants. Additionally, students new to the school may experience questions of trust. Even students who know me may experience trust questions via the consent form because not all students are comfortable signing forms or talking about personal issues. I will mitigate these challenges via transparency and repeated references to confidentiality and the option to withdraw at any point.

Data Collection

All interviews were audio-recorded. Student interviews were conducted in the student lounge area of the school building for student comfort or through Zoom. Students were given informed consent papers to review prior to the interviews via email and/or hard copies. Prior to the interviews, each student was reminded that he was at no obligation to proceed, could withdraw at any time, and the interview had no relationship to his grades. Each of the three participants was interviewed once. Students were asked six main questions with follow-up questions as needed. The duration of the interviews varied per student, depending on the length of their answers. One interview was transcribed with Transcribe Me, one with Rev, and one with Google voice.

Data Analysis

Information on how the research data were organized, validity and reliability are given below.

Public Documents: Public documents and unpublished CAA documents were analyzed for baseline data. This included demographic information, the Midwest Community College faculty handbook, and

the CAA website. Other (unpublished) documents, such as surveys conducted by the school social work interns and EMIS coordinator were also analyzed.

Interviews: Interviews were transcribed using software and then hand-coded for themes. The themes were then analyzed to discover common root causes of lack of CCP enrollment, common student interests and concerns, and student ideas for solutions. Three main themes were identified as well as several subthemes.

Trustworthiness: All study participants operated under informed consent. The study and its purpose were clearly articulated both verbally and in written form. Participants had the option to decline participation at any point in the study. Participants had the option to remain anonymous; pseudonyms were used for students who preferred such.

Dependability: Shenton (2004) recommends using in-depth descriptions of the methodology to assist study repetition. Although the results of repeated studies are unlikely to be the same due to contextual differences, the details would allow a sort of how-to guide for future research (Shelton, 2004).

Confirmability: There are a number of useful techniques to aid confirmability. As per Shenton, I employed reflexivity and a detailed audit trail whenever possible. Researcher reflexivity allowed for constant questioning and reflection regarding procedures, outcomes, and accuracy.

Credibility: Because I have been engaged with the school culture for approximately ten years, my prolonged experience aids credibility. Prolonged engagement in the field allows for an improved cultural and structural understanding of the school and CCP organizations. I also employed peer review, member checks, and thick descriptions (Shenton, 2004). Peer review was done in the qualitative research class of my doctoral studies, and I also shared this paper with CAA administration for review. Member checking was accomplished via emailing a draft of this paper to participants to review. Participants were all provided a copy of their transcribed interviews/this paper to check for accuracy and to ensure that their intended meanings are properly conveyed. No changes were made after member checking. Thick descriptions were added to the findings section. Thick descriptions from interviews help readers see and comprehend the bigger picture as this is a multifaceted issue under study. Participants had varying perspectives and ideas that require detailed descriptions. Results varied among participants; however, this does not mean that the results are untrustworthy, as variation was expected (Shenton, 2004).

Transferability: Comparisons can be made via the above-mentioned thick descriptions and detailed explanation of methodology, including information about the type of setting, restrictions, participants, data collection and sessions, and the time period involved (Shenton, 2004).

Findings and Discussion

The findings obtained as a result of the research are given below under three headings in line with the purpose of the research.

CCP Benefits

All three participants outlined similar, specific benefits they saw to participation in CCP programs. Stephen, having been through the program, referred to the CCP program as “a very big advantage”, “an opportunity”, “a head start”, “ahead of the game”, and “a door for many opportunities and looks good on your resume.” He said that he “thank[s] God for CAA.” He recommends the program for current and future students, especially those interested in “a lighter load in college” because they can complete core classes while still in high school. Stephen made particular reference to the potential benefits of CCP coursework for “young men...that were only for the streets.” This reference spoke to points made by Karp (2015), Hatch & Toner (2020), and Tolliver et al. (2019) regarding a smaller college and CCP male population than female population. Stephen made frequent use of the term “push them” in a positive manner, meaning to encourage students and hold them to a high standard, reminiscent of suggestions for high standards made by Coates & Webb (2013).

Although Ibrahim is not interested in the CCP program for himself, he does recommend it for other students. He said, "If they want to take less classes in college, or just get ahead of the curve, basically, or if I'm seeing they're really good at school, in general, and motivated, I'd probably recommend it then." He also said that the "learning experience you get from it" is a benefit. Ibrahim made frequent use of references to independence from parents as both motivating factors to enroll and not to enroll in the program. This portion of Ibrahim's interview spoke to Tinto's (2006-7) point that we need more research into student motivation.

Nathaniel said that he feels the program is a good idea "just to get a feel for college, and what I'm looking forward to, if that's what I choose to go down." Nathaniel's interview answers were by far the briefest and he simply said "mmhhh" and shook his head no when asked if he would like to elaborate or had anything else he would like to add regarding the "feel for college."

CCP Challenges

The challenges the three students saw to enrollment showed more variety than the benefits. Stephen said that he did not have challenges; however, he speculated on challenges that other students might face. For one thing, he feels that the lack of classroom management/discipline in the schools that students attended prior to CAA has done harm to their current educational beliefs. He continued, "the public schools always have a deficit in their learning...I think that's really what harms a lot of young people because they don't get all the information that they need to succeed, so therefore, it becomes a battle- the more they progressed, the more we go forward in our education, we have to fight even more as we've come from middle school to high school. We have to fight more for more information because we're expected to go into high school knowing so much but a lot of the times the kids don't know what is expected because the system that they were in did not." He also mentioned that not all parents/guardians encourage college and that not all students have "the mindset" for it.

Ibrahim was blunt about his own lack of effort or desire in academia. Although he spoke in the past tense in reference to his previous school, he is currently a student at CAA. When I asked him if he is considering CCP courses, he said, "Not really. I was just trying to get by. My first year, I got, like two credits. And then I was like 'Okay, there's no way I'm taking college classes during high school.'...I was just slacking." When I inquired the cause of what he termed as slacking, he said, "I don't know. I honestly don't know. I was just lazy. Even some days, I'd come to school late because I'd slept in, and my rides would leave me." Again here, Tinto's (2017) point about the need for more research on student motivation is apparent. Ibrahim's interview also brought up an interesting idea that I had not considered- I noticed that his descriptions of college, while somewhat accurate, were a bit distorted, at least from the college experiences that I am familiar with. He referenced professors who do not check-in with students and said that all of the classes are taught in lecture halls with "a couple hundred people at once." This is true for some classes, of course, but I believe that the environment he described is less common than he thinks. Similarly, he said that college is "a lot of note-taking, because that is the first thing that came to my head when I heard CCP. You're going to have to take a lot of notes." I teach the CCP classes at CAA, so I am familiar with the curriculum and there is actually very little, if any, note-taking. Tinto (2017) wrote about student perceptions of curriculum, which appears to indeed be an issue for enrollment for at least one CAA student. Other challenges Ibrahim listed include "uncertainty" and "anxiety." This may or may not be relevant to Tinto's (2017) points about self-efficacy. More in-depth interviews would be needed.

Nathaniel echoed what I feel are exaggerated concerns about the academic requirements. He said, "probably math is my biggest thing. And the whole, like I say, I would have to write 16-page papers. I feel like I couldn't write that much. They say you have to write a 16-page paper." The Midwest Community College CCP classes we teach at CAA have a five-page maximum, so this was also a surprising comment to me. This brings to mind both Tinto's (2017) points about self-efficacy and also his point about student perceptions of the curriculum. Nathaniel also said that he hadn't yet enrolled in CCP courses because "I've only heard about it once or twice," which was interesting to me because I had Nathaniel in class last year and I brought up the CCP courses almost every day. My impression was that Nathaniel genuinely believed that he had only been told about it only once or twice. Finally, Nathaniel cited his nervousness about choosing a career as a holdback.

Potential Solutions- Student-Generated

Stephen, both directly and indirectly, offered a wide range of suggestions that could help improve CCP enrollment. First, indirectly I noticed that Stephen made frequent references to what I would call his support system. This includes many references to his parents, his friends, his church, his “village,” his “team,” and his “circle.” It was clear that Stephen has a large group of people who encourage him and want the best for him. He included his church in the list of what I term his support system, a common point with Tolliver et al. (2019). Tinto (2017) wrote that social support is important for student success, especially for low-income and first-generation college students.

Stephen also made frequent references to his environment. He mentioned the strengths he has gained from diversity in his environment at least seven times in an hour-long interview. He explicitly spoke of gratitude for the diversity in his life, all sorts of diversity including race, ethnicity, economic, nationality, school environments, personality types, the “spectrum of kids” in his life, etc. He said, “I knew how to deal with all these different types of groups of people so now that I am older and I’m now in the workforce and also in school, I know how to deal with different people in the workforce and different people in adult school [college].” In a way, this could resemble Coates & Webb’s (2013) point about setting students up with sufficient cultural capital. Tinto (2017) likewise wrote that institutions would do well to provide a diversity of social organizations. Another environmental reference was his preference for schools that “narrow things down; their education is specified to help you pass to get to college.” This made me think again about Tinto’s (2017) section on student perceptions of the curriculum. Stephen was speaking about CAA and charter schools in general, which he feels are more individually tailored. A final significant point he made about the environment is schools that focus on learning and not just discipline, while “pushing” students.

Besides being supported, Stephen also brought up his desire to support other students through helping to build the CCP program so that younger CAA students would have the opportunity. He talked about me sitting a group of students down; I cannot remember if this was something that really happened or if he was speaking hypothetically, but he said that I sat them down and said, “if you do enter this program, you have to pass, like you have to. Or we are never going to get this opportunity again.” His reaction was, “I can’t be the one who lollygags and didn’t do my work. That would be considered a negative thing when it comes to the school year and you’re about to damage the school’s reputation; you’re about to damage the school’s opportunities because you decided not to take advantage of this. You decided lollygagging...and about to destroy a program that could be very useful to somebody that might actually need it. So I guess that is something that really sticks with me, not to waste opportunities.”

In addition to his environment, Stephen made indirect points regarding what I would categorize as his long-term planning. He spoke about working hard now with the goal of retiring early. I contrast this with Ibrahim’s statements about wanting to “get by; that’s all,” which I consider short-term planning. Stephen also made indirect reference to perseverance with a story about overcoming a bullying incident. Perseverance was an area of interest for Tinto (2017).

I believe that Stephen indirectly made reference to a sense of belonging as well. He spoke about CAA’s administrative assistant, who welcomes students into the building in the morning. He said, “I came to see Mrs. Williams, but you know, I’m here now, and you have teachers like yourself and ...” he then listed a number of other teachers in the school and said that we are all welcoming and alluded to a sense of being welcomed as a reason to succeed. Regarding the college, he referenced his college/CCP student ID and how he enjoyed using it on the college campus, especially the library, where he remembers well sitting in the “comfortable chairs.” I compare this to comments I have heard other students say on field trips to the college campus about feeling like people were looking at them and that they didn’t belong. Tinto (2017) listed a sense of belonging as a strong motivating factor in college retention.

Stephen directly, but briefly, mentioned an idea to have “weekly talks” with students for motivation, and the idea of going for trade jobs in addition to longer college programs. He said to talk to the students “with the part about college, you definitely have to give them some, you know, talking to, so

they can get it into their mind ‘I think college is for me. I think college is something I need to do in order to better myself, in order to make a better future for myself’ just to give that push and once they see the light of college then you go, ‘Okay, here we have some tools that you can use for while you’re here for college’, those being the classes and the test and stuff like that.” “The test” he was referring to is the Accuplacer college placement test, for which I tutor students. He said that students will realize “I need a different life than what I’ve been into.” Both Freire (1998) and Ghosh (2019)-citing Gandhi-wrote about education as self-transformation. Freire (1998) considered learning a means of recreating how we see ourselves. Ghosh (2019) explained that Gandhi saw education as a self-transformation that helps both the individual as well as society. Stephen’s comments seem to support these ideas.

Ibrahim’s advice for building the program was “it’s like a lot of people don’t know what they’re doing. You could help guide them to what they want to do. Make them realize what they might want to do when they grow, and then remind them, ‘Oh, you can take these classes right now and get ahead’...help them find what career type.” Both Stephen and Ibrahim mentioned not pressuring students too much, though.

Nathaniel’s advice was similar to Ibrahim’s regarding career exploration. When I asked for advice on how to increase CCP enrollment, he referenced a career exploration field trip I had taken him on two years prior as being beneficial. Field trips were a suggestion by Coates & Webb (2013) for increasing CCP enrollment. Nathaniel said that we should “probably have certain programs around certain majors just so I can get a feel and see how well I like it...not necessarily a program, but we could have a guest come in and talk about it...Give examples.” Tinto (2017) wrote about similar points: that institutions should “ensure that all students find themselves in a field of study appropriate to their needs and interests...the issue of relevance is also a function of advising in helping students locate that field of study” (Tinto, 2017, p. 262-263).

Conclusions, Implications, and Reflection

The research question asked what CAA can do to improve CCP enrollment. Based on these very early findings, some potential improvements could be made by increasing career exploration, giving students a more accurate image of college expectations and options, helping students to build a stronger and wider support system along with a team or cohort approach (implied by Stephen), direct instruction on diverse environments and diversity in general, and direct instruction in long term planning.

More interviews are needed to account for the variety in student responses. In the future, I would like to get female voices and as much representation of diverse groups as possible to allow more voices to be heard. I would also like to seek IRB approval to interview underage students, as they make up a large proportion of our new student population. My current IRB approval is only for students aged 18 and above. Greater diversity of participants should generate more ideas for potential solutions.

As a dropout recovery school, our student population faces many challenges outside of academics. Most of our students work before or after school, often grueling hours. Many of our students are themselves parents with young children to care for. Therefore, finding times for interviews outside of school hours proved quite difficult and for continued research, it would be beneficial to navigate a solution for the timing challenges.

Along with a greater quantity of interviews, I would also like to improve the quality of the interviews. Based on student answers, I have added some questions, including asking students how they would describe a typical college class, to see if skewed perceptions are common. I also added questions about personal demographic information, changed the introduction question to something more personal, inquired about out-of-school responsibilities, and added a question asking participants how they would describe themselves as students to see if anything comes up that pertains to self-efficacy that may shed some light onto root causes for low enrollment.

A quantitative survey and focus group may also be helpful. The quantitative survey could give a more accurate count of student interest in the CCP courses, as well as identify students from whom to seek

an interview. A focus group could help students both to discover subconscious causes as well as to generate more potential solutions. Tinto (2017) made a number of observations that seem logical but were not directly mentioned by the students I interviewed. I would like to see if further interviews might touch on these topics, which include cohort learning, authentic assessment, and cross-curricular studies. The limitations of the study include the small sample size and the preliminary nature of the research. Although I would like to continue with purposeful sampling, a larger sample size would be better.

I found that I quite enjoyed interviewing students and they seemed to enjoy it as well. One student said that it was “an honor.” However, it was very difficult to book the interviewing times. When I ask students in person if they would be interested in participating, they are very responsive. Unfortunately, recruitment via email was not as successful. I also intentionally tried to recruit female students once I realized that I had only male students. All of the female students I asked said that they wanted to participate, but their work schedules made it too difficult to do so at this time. I can see this remaining a large challenge in the future. I was also not able to interview any students who started the program and withdrew. I thought that they would be able to shed a lot of light on enrollment and retention. The students I asked said that they wanted to be interviewed, but then they did not schedule a time and I didn’t want to remind them or push the interview in any way because even though they are former students, I feel that the power dynamic is still a risk and no one should be pushed into interviewing.

Another challenge is that we have an unusually young group of students at CAA this year. I plan to seek IRB approval for my DIP to include minors for interviewing. I think that if I could get that approval, I would have much higher participation and more variety. I feel like three students is not enough yet to seek out common themes.

Employing the triple roles of student, teacher, and researcher created a dynamic where I was extremely invested in the research process. I believe that through this experience, I became even more of an insider into the case study and have a stronger understanding of it. Yet, I leave with more questions than answers and I suppose that is normal for action research. I look forward to applying improvements to this study and expanding on it soon.

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