

# Creating College Advising Connections: Comparing Motivational Beliefs of Early College High School Students to Traditional First-Year University Students

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*Early college high schools (ECHSs) are partnerships between high schools and colleges or universities designed to enhance college readiness and completion, particularly among students traditionally underrepresented in higher education. We compared the self-reported motivational profiles of ECHS students to traditional first-year university students to explore the different college advising and support services each group may require. We found differences between the two groups in academic motivation, coping skills, and receptivity to support services. ECHS students also reported significantly higher levels of educational stress. Findings are of particular importance to advisors and support personnel who plan and program appropriate support services for incoming students. Implications of these findings are discussed.*

**KEY WORDS:** adjustment to college, freshman motivational profiles, student retention, student success

While a great deal of effort is currently focused on closing the gaps between the achievement of underrepresented student populations (low income and minority students) and their White/Anglo peers in U.S. higher education, the challenge to administrators, advisors, and educators remains formidable. Many first-generation students experience difficulty adjusting to the college environment. The results of several studies indicate that the large discrepancy in drop-out rates is not fully explained by traditional indicators of academic preparation such as high school grades and SAT scores (Fuertes & Sedlacek, 1994). Researchers have placed considerable effort on exploring the impact of noncognitive and social factors related to adjustment that influence successful transition to a university setting (DeBerard, Spielmans, & Julka, 2004; Dunwoody & Frank, 1995; Isaak, Graves, & Mayers, 2006).

For a successful transition to college, an indi-

vidual must actively negotiate a challenging set of cognitive and socioemotional demands and environmental circumstances that may seem foreign to the high school experience. Many students make the transition more easily when exposed to deliberate efforts to *get ready* and *get in*, which collectively address attitudes, experiences, and behaviors before and after matriculation to college. Getting ready encompasses the background and preparatory experiences of students. These experiences instill college attendance expectations, shape students' ideas about college life, and create beliefs and attitudes about behaviors that lead to college success. Getting in includes postmatriculation behaviors students devise to adjust to the college environment (Attinasi, 1989).

Several qualitative studies provide consensus (e.g., see Clark, 2005; Padilla, Trevino, Gonzalez, & Trevino, 1997) that these challenges are especially formidable for first-generation minority students. In these studies, successful students recognized and took advantage of opportunities to receive the support and mentoring they needed to flourish in the new environment. These students demonstrated this proficiency by finding certain activities in the school's curriculum and ecocultural environment that were inherently satisfying. The reward for engaging in these activities was the enjoyment, fascination, and inspiration of the activity itself as well as the comfort such activities provided in terms of making the university a less scary place. Successful students took specific actions to receive nurturing, which included creating a sense of family either by establishing relationships with people on campus or by involving their own families in their college lives. These students typically pursued nurturing relationships through ethnic organizations and activities, institutional resources, and support programs. They also sought out nurturing persons regardless of ethnicity, such as friends, faculty members, staff, or other students.

College requires a degree of independence unfa-

miliar to many incoming students. Becoming a self-regulated learner is a significant challenge for many students who have been under the close supervision of family during their primary and secondary scholastic experiences. Many students have not had opportunities to independently choose self-directed activities and set goals of the type they will need immediately upon entering the collegiate milieu (Pintrich, 2000). Significant adjustment challenges during the freshman year, poor performance, and drop-out rates may be related, in part, to a lack of awareness of how to get the support they need to survive in college. One approach to addressing the unique challenges of underrepresented student populations is the Early College High School Initiative (ECHSI).

### Early College High School Initiative

The ECHSI, begun in 2002, is one of the major projects funded by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation for the purpose of increasing college readiness, high school graduation, and college entrance and completion rates, particularly for low-income, African American, and Hispanic students. For students with poor academic preparation, whose parents have no college education, or who are otherwise at risk, early college high school (ECHS) holds promise as a significant support for earning a college education.

In ECHSs, students participate in an accelerated high-school education program that offers courses to prepare them for the rigor of college. In the first 2 years of the program, students complete their required high-school courses to prepare them to take courses at the university level. During this transitional period, the ECHS professionals closely monitor each student's academic progress while continuing to provide support and guidance throughout the start of college course work. In this way, ECHSs make higher education more accessible, affordable, and attractive by bridging the divide between high school and college (Jobs for the Future, 2008).

As of the 2007-2008 school year, 160 established schools were operating and plans were in place to have 250 schools operational by 2011 (Jobs for the Future, 2008). Because ECHS is a relatively new construction, information about outcomes or characteristics of the students, faculty members, and parents involved is limited. However, preliminary data from the American Institutes for Research in collaboration with SRI International (2007), collected from 2002 onward, confirm that ECHSs are serving students from typically under-

represented populations in postsecondary institutions. Furthermore, these data suggest preliminary evidence for strong test scores, high attendance rates, and more access for underserved students (The Early College High School Initiative, 2008). In another study, Roberts (2007) found that ECHS students demonstrated high levels of motivational, cognitive, and behavioral engagement. Former at-risk ECHS students earned school academic and standardized test levels comparable to their counterparts across the state in which the study was conducted. These students had high attendance rates and low behavioral misconduct.

Not all reports are as positive. A study conducted by Born (2006) indicates some potential difficulties for some ECHS students when they begin college classes. In this investigation of middle and early college students, Born reported that students were motivated to enroll in such programs, not surprisingly, to lessen the burden of college tuition and to accelerate and complete college early. Many students admitted that college presented challenges for which they were unprepared and that they experienced shock when first attending class. The challenges of these students might be minimized by proactive mechanisms to screen and address both their desires and their need for guidance and support services.

### Coordinating High School and Collegiate Advising and Support Services

The ECHSI is founded on alliances between high schools and colleges or universities. Advising personnel centered at both entities have a vested interest in determining the programs that work for first-time university students. As college and university stakeholders continue to look for ways to enhance retention, academic success, and completion rates among students, the partnering entities share a role in monitoring students' motivational beliefs and need for support. With the shared vision to address the empirically validated indicators of student success, ECHS personnel typically provide guidance activities at the high school, which serves as a secure base from which students can venture and return from the university environment. At the university, advising, counseling, and transition centers are available for students throughout their academic careers so they can seek out needed services such as personal counseling and tutoring (Kramer & Spencer, 1989). Based on empirical work that shows that academic success depends on many factors, partners understand that students will need to access guidance and support to progress

successfully throughout their collegiate careers. Much of the available data focuses on risk factors and obstacles rather than protective factors and resources for students, though other factors, such as educational expectations, academic preparation, and parental involvement, are also known to play a role. Peer influences independently affect graduates' likelihood of enrolling in a 4-year institution of higher learning as well (Horn & Zahn, 2001).

First-generation students often stand at the edge of two cultures, that of their friends and family and the one envisioned as part of their college aspirations (Zalaquett, 1999). In a preliminary study of an ECHS, Harvard researchers found that students valued the chance to create an educational identity, appreciated continuous support and commitment from faculty and staff, and benefited from a challenging learning environment and opportunities to construct knowledge (Wolk, 2005).

By proactively striving to understand the ECHS student experience in college course work, higher education advisors and their ECHS partners can plan more effective success-oriented initiatives. Specifically, they can target difficulties typically associated with the transition to the university environment.

## Purpose

In this study, our goal was to enhance understanding among university-based advisors and support staff of incoming ECHS students' characteristics. We specifically focused on examining the similarities and differences in empirically validated motivational variables related to academic success between ECHS students and first-year university students. Successful retention and eventual graduation rates of ECHS students have not been established, and this lack of data means that universities attempting to increase success rates of underrepresented student populations do not have enough information to resolve their concerns. In previous research, Harris (1999) used student responses on the College Student Inventory (CSI) to examine pre-enrollment attributes and motivational factors designed to predict the academic success and persistence of university students. The Harris study revealed that significant differences in a variety of attributes, such as drop-out proneness, study habits, and receptivity to help, were predictive of academic success and persistence. One of the conclusions stated that the CSI can be a useful tool in the delivery of effective retention programs for at-risk students enrolled in colleges and universities, and it can be a predictor of student success, as measured

by grade-point average (GPA), and persistence, as measured by enrollment status over time.

In this study, we specifically address the extent to which CSI profiles of ECHS students match those of first-year university students. In the results, we focus on the ways that student profiles might inform partners (university and ECHS personnel) about meeting the immediate programming and advisory needs of students during their earliest exposure to the university environment. In doing so, we also provide important baseline information against which ongoing persistence rates of ECHS students during their subsequent college years may be evaluated.

## Method

To understand similarities and differences between ECHS students and university freshmen on a variety of variables related to academic success, ECHS students were administered the College Student Inventory, Form B (CSI-B) (Stratil, 1998). We chose this instrument because it is routinely administered to incoming university freshmen at the partnering university. We analyzed the scores of the ECHS students and university freshmen with SPSS.

Historically, the CSI has been used for retention management on college campuses. Based on research interests in the area of academic and social motivation, Stratil (1998) designed it especially for incoming first-year students. The initial goals for the CSI consisted of understanding human motivation and identifying specific motivational variables that most closely related to persistence and academic success in college.

First published in 1998, the CSI-B features a 100-item inventory that takes approximately 30 minutes to complete. A number of scales within the inventory, when taken in combination, form the main categories of academic motivation, general coping ability, receptivity to support services, and internal validity. The category of academic motivation includes scales measuring study habits, intellectual interests, verbal confidence, math and science confidence, desire to finish college, and attitude toward educators. General coping ability includes family emotional support, sense of financial security, opinion tolerance, career closure, and sociability. Receptivity to support services is measured with items related to academic assistance, personal counseling, social enhancement, career counseling, and financial guidance. In addition, the CSI provides measures of drop-out proneness and educational stress (Stratil, 1998).

**Participants**

One hundred and eleven freshmen and sophomores enrolled in an ECHS during the 2007-2008 academic year completed the CSI-B late in the spring semester. All college freshmen at the partner university regularly take the CSI-B during orientation for the fall semester. Eight hundred and forty-six entering freshmen completed the CSI-B during the Fall 2007 freshman orientation. The CSI-B contains several items designed as an internal validity check, such as “Enter a ‘2’ for this item” (Stratil, 1998). Of those who took the assessment, eight 9th and 10th graders and eight college freshmen failed to meet the validity check and their data were removed from the sample. This resulted in a final sample of 103 ECHS students and 838 college freshmen.

Student characteristics for both groups are included in Tables 1 and 2. The groups are similar in terms of gender, race, ethnicity, and parental education levels. In this ECHS, all 9th and 10th graders attended classes on the ECHS campus, which is located separately from the university campus, unlike some ECHS programs.

**Results**

Table 3 shows the means and standard deviations for CSI scores of ECHS and first-year university students. We submitted the scores from the CSI inventory to a one-way multiple analysis of variance (MANOVA) with group (ECHS vs. first-year university students) as the independent variable and CSI profile variables as dependent variables. We used Wilks’ lambda as the test statistic. The analysis revealed significant differences in the scores of ECHS and first-year students with a large effect size and strong power ( $\lambda = .807$ ;  $F = 7.532$ ;  $df = 29.000$ ;  $p < .001$ ;  $\eta^2 = .193$ ). The results of focused univariate follow-up analyses on the dependent variables, as shown in Table 3, demonstrate that ECHS and first-year freshmen differed significantly on 56% (13/23) of the focused comparisons.

*Comparing Early College High School and First-Year University Students*

*Academic motivation.* We found significant differences in four of the six scales comprising Academic Motivation, including attitude toward

**Table 1.** Race, ethnicity, and gender of college freshmen and ECHS students (%)

| Race/Ethnicity                 | Freshmen<br>(N = 838) |      | Early College High School<br>(N = 103) |      |
|--------------------------------|-----------------------|------|--|------|
|                                | Female                | Male | Female                                 | Male |
| Black/African American         | 6.3                   | 5.2  | 1.7                                    | 4.6  |
| American Indian/Alaskan Native | 0.4                   | 0.9  | 0.0                                    | 0.0  |
| Asian or Pacific Islander      | 2.7                   | 3.2  | 5.0                                    | 9.3  |
| White/Caucasian                | 45.5                  | 49.4 | 48.3                                   | 53.5 |
| Hispanic or Latino/a           | 39.4                  | 37.9 | 31.7                                   | 25.6 |
| Other                          | 3.5                   | 2.6  | 13.3                                   | 2.3  |
| Prefer not to respond          | 2.2                   | 0.9  | 0.0                                    | 4.6  |
| All ethnicities                | 58.5                  | 41.5 | 58.2                                   | 41.8 |

*Note.* Participants included, in total, 550 females and 391 males. The values represent the percentages of students representing each ethnicity. Values may not add to 100% due to rounding.

**Table 2.** Parental level of education for college freshmen and ECHS students (%)

| Highest level         | Freshmen<br>(N = 838) |        | Early College High School<br>(N = 103) |        |
|-----------------------|-----------------------|--------|--|--------|
|                       | Father                | Mother | Father                                 | Mother |
| Some grade school     | 9.9                   | 8.8    | 18.4                                   | 2.9    |
| High school diploma   | 30.4                  | 32.7   | 22.3                                   | 28.2   |
| Some college          | 26.2                  | 27.5   | 21.4                                   | 27.2   |
| Bachelor’s degree     | 19.1                  | 19.7   | 13.6                                   | 18.4   |
| Graduate degree       | 11.6                  | 9.4    | 15.6                                   | 15.5   |
| Prefer not to respond | 2.8                   | 1.9    | 8.7                                    | 7.8    |

*Note.* The values represent the percentage of students whose parents achieved the education level.

educators, desire to finish college, math and science confidence, and study habits. College freshmen were less likely to have a poor attitude or be independent or arrogant, expressed a stronger desire to finish college, and were more willing to make sacrifices to achieve. In an interesting finding, the high school group expressed more math and science confidence than did the college freshmen. We found no significant differences in intellectual interests or verbal confidence.

*Coping ability.* We found significant differences in two of the five scales comprising General Coping Ability: sense of financial security and sociability. College freshmen indicated that they were more social, while high school students reported a

stronger sense of financial security. Neither group indicated significant differences in their level of career closure, which refers to definition of or commitment to a career goal, and we found no significant differences in family emotional support or opinion tolerance.

*Receptivity to support services.* The Receptivity to Support Services category includes academic assistance, personal counseling, social enhancement, career counseling, and financial guidance. On all scales except personal counseling, where we found no significant difference, college freshmen scored significantly higher, indicating more desire to receive skill-specific tutoring, a greater likelihood of discussing college finances, more desire

**Table 3.** College student inventory results for college freshmen and ECHS students

| Variable                               | Freshmen<br>(N = 838) |       | Early College High School<br>(N = 103) |        | p      |
|--|-----------------------|-------|--|--------|--------|
|  | M                     | SD    | M                                      | SD     |        |
| <b>Academic Motivation</b>             |                       |       |  |        |        |
| Attitude toward educators              | 8.22                  | 5.35  | 6.99                                   | 8.09   | 0.039* |
| Desire to finish college               | 17.45                 | 6.65  | 13.23                                  | 9.26   | 0.001* |
| Intellectual interests                 | 0.84                  | 6.33  | 1.37                                   | 7.29   | 0.433  |
| Math and science confidence            | 0.17                  | 7.86  | 2.54                                   | 8.35   | 0.004* |
| Study habits                           | 4.09                  | 7.19  | 2.45                                   | 8.13   | 0.031* |
| Verbal confidence                      | 4.46                  | 7.42  | 5.75                                   | 7.73   | 0.098  |
| <b>General Coping Ability</b>          |                       |       |  |        |        |
| Career closure                         | 4.78                  | 6.46  | 3.73                                   | 5.92   | 0.091  |
| Family emotional support               | 6.90                  | 5.36  | 6.33                                   | 5.76   | 0.316  |
| Opinion tolerance                      | 7.27                  | 5.95  | 6.46                                   | 6.02   | 0.193  |
| Sense of financial security            | 1.83                  | 6.75  | 4.14                                   | 5.82   | 0.001* |
| Sociability                            | 6.44                  | 4.86  | 5.27                                   | 5.27   | 0.023* |
| <b>Receptivity to Support Services</b> |                       |       |  |        |        |
| Academic assistance                    | 28.42                 | 7.32  | 22.84                                  | 8.45   | 0.001* |
| Career counseling                      | 26.51                 | 6.43  | 23.21                                  | 8.41   | 0.001* |
| Financial guidance                     | 18.41                 | 6.05  | 17.05                                  | 5.75   | 0.031* |
| Personal counseling                    | 11.42                 | 6.55  | 12.42                                  | 7.70   | 0.154  |
| Social enrichment                      | 21.71                 | 5.05  | 18.06                                  | 5.95   | 0.001* |
| <b>Student Background Information</b>  |                       |       |  |        |        |
| Highest degree desired                 | 4.88                  | 0.84  | 5.14                                   | 0.89   | 0.003* |
| Plans to work                          | 2.80                  | 1.09  | 2.69                                   | 1.50   | 0.356  |
| Prepared for college                   | 1.77                  | 1.52  | 2.06                                   | 1.96   | 0.082  |
| <b>Advising Report Constructs</b>      |                       |       |  |        |        |
| Drop-out proneness                     | -20.04                | 6.96  | -18.86                                 | 8.58   | 0.116  |
| Educational stress                     | 221.45                | 93.01 | 256.34                                 | 104.01 | 0.001* |
| Predicted academic difficulty          | -25.46                | 12.79 | -27.49                                 | 15.03  | 0.136  |
| Receptivity to institutional help      | 312.27                | 90.44 | 249.31                                 | 104.58 | 0.001* |

Note. \*p < .05.

to meet others and engage in group activities, and more interest in receiving help for selecting majors or careers.

#### *Comparison of Student Background Information*

Scores comprising student background information were similar on two of the three variables. Plans for employment while in college and self-perceptions of college readiness were similar between groups. ECHS students indicated a statistically significant higher overall desire to achieve a higher level of education, though this may only be an indication of acceptance of their goals by parents and educators.

#### *Comparison of Advisor and Counselor Reports*

In addition to the scales comprising the three main categories of Academic Motivation, General Coping Ability, and Receptivity to Support Services, the CSI-B includes an advisor/counselor report that provides an assessment of drop-out proneness, predicted academic difficulty, educational stress, and receptivity to institutional help. Each of these is a summary scale.

*Drop-out proneness.* Students who score high on the drop-out proneness construct will not necessarily drop out, though the predictiveness of the scale increases over the length of time students are in school. High scoring students endorse traits on the CSI-B that are loosely associated with dropping out. We found no significant differences between high school students and college freshmen on this measure.

*Predicted academic difficulty.* The predicted academic difficulty score is intended to predict those most likely to have low grades in college, and includes factors of “study habits, verbal confidence, math and science confidence, desire to finish college, attitude toward educators, and high school GPA” (Noel-Levitz, 2008, p. 12-B). We found no significant differences between high school students and college freshmen on predicted academic difficulty.

*Educational stress.* The educational stress scale relates to general distress in the context of college. Factors considered include feelings of dissatisfaction with teachers in general based on earlier experiences, low desire to finish college, lower than average study habits, lower than average sense of family emotional support, and relatively high expressed interest in receiving counseling. The author and publisher consider this scale to be the “CSI-B’s primary indicator of the student’s need for personal counseling” (Noel-Levitz, 2008, p. 12-B).

However, the CSI-B is not an indicator of mental health or illness. We found significant difference in educational stress, with high school students expressing the most stress.

*Receptivity to institutional help.* Finally, the receptivity-to-institutional-help construct involves a student’s responsiveness to intervention. High scores indicate strong expressed desires for help in a variety of areas, including career and personal counseling, social enrichment, academic assistance, and financial guidance. In general, high scores “imply the advisability of intervention” (Noel-Levitz, 2008, p. 12-B). The college freshmen were significantly more likely to be receptive to institutional help than were high school students.

Some of the discrepancies are likely attributable to developmental, stage of life differences. For instance, most high school students live at home supported by their parents, while college freshmen are more likely to be living away from home and be at least partially responsible for providing some of their finances. College freshmen may also be more interested in learning about prospective career paths than high school freshmen and sophomores.

### **Implications for Creating Advising Connections**

The results suggest that ECHS students may have a qualitatively different perspective compared to their first-year counterparts that may influence their ability to realistically and flexibly appraise the challenges inherent and resources available on the college campus. While this result may be largely expected because the ECHS students are 2 years younger on average, these results suggest that advisors may need to increase the intensity and specificity of their outreach and involvement with these students, many of whom may not think they need help (Kirk-Kuwaye & Nishida, 1995). In this respect, university advisors need to maintain an awareness that ECHS students may react differently than typical college freshmen to intervention efforts. For example, advisors need to anticipate that ECHS students may think that they are well prepared when they are not and may indicate unrealistic ideas about their own abilities. In addition, they may express strong interest in obtaining a degree but may be unaware of the sacrifice and time management skills needed to achieve these goals. In addition, they may be unwilling to make those sacrifices. They may not realize that they have much to learn about success on a postsecondary campus and thus not accept assistance that is offered or seek assistance that is available.

In addition, because ECHS students are moving from one environment to another, they may have insufficient information about college and university culture, even in terms of needing help to understand course catalogs and prerequisites, that college freshmen generally pick up from peers as much as from formal contact with advisors and faculty members. They may need information about higher education professors and how they may differ from high school teachers. Compared to their traditional counterparts, ECHS students indicated more feelings of dissatisfaction with teachers in general. They may not recognize that many and perhaps most higher-education faculty members will work with students who actively seek assistance, but may not push assistance not initiated by students. Differences between high school and college in terms of grading, testing, attendance policies, and expectations of project completion by deadlines on the syllabus may be a new concept and in need of explanation. In addition, while ECHS students are often technologically savvy, for many of them technology has been primarily a social platform as opposed to a business or educational tool.

College and university advisors may benefit from finding ways to assess ECHS students and gather information regarding their possible needs either prior to or early in their first semester of higher education classes. Identification of student needs, understanding of how these students may differ from other college freshmen, and sensitivity to possible developmental differences in ECHS students may aid in programming designed to enhance retention. For example, designing programs that engage these students in developing career-related interests and information and in more fully demonstrating the ways education can make a difference in their lives may increase student persistence. Intrinsic motivation is enhanced when students place personal value in their education. Providing students with experiences that make education personally meaningful, such as by relating education to career information, may serve as one way to support the value of education to these students. In addition, ECHS students taking college- and university-level classes may have almost no interaction with the college or university environment apart from the classes they take, and they will be unlikely to develop a strong college identity if the primary interaction remains through the ECHS.

Finding ways to encourage ECHS students to connect to the college and university environment and to develop a college identity may have long-term benefits both in terms of retention and im-

mediate academic success. For instance, providing an opportunity for ECHS students to meet advisors and mentors from the college or university might be followed by advisors forming E-mentoring teams with ECHS students. Developing a mechanism for delivering multiple E-mails to these students may be a way to both provide these students with concrete and repetitious information about a variety of topics important to college and university life and assist in the development of connections to the wider campus.

## Conclusions

Greater understanding of ECHS students can help college and university advisors and student development personnel provide services that may enhance student academic success and college persistence. Attention to student needs, understanding developmental differences, and creating strategies based on sound knowledge about this population is critical to development of relevant programming. While academically advanced students have matriculated into college and university campuses for a number of years, ECHS students are generally academically at risk and may benefit from a different array of services and options than those currently offered. Specifically, strategies that address gaps in ECHS student knowledge about themselves and about the college environment, as well as strategies that encourage ECHS student engagement with the college or university, may prove essential in assisting these students to persist in their educational endeavors.

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