

CHAPTER FIVE

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to provide an in-depth investigation into the perceptions of college freshmen enrolled in developmental and regular English courses on their preparation for college. In Chapter Five, the results across gender, race, and type of course are summarized and conclusions are drawn as to how the findings relate to college preparedness. Implications and recommendations for future practices and research are described. The chapter concludes by drawing together themes and concepts that emerged from the study and recommending changes that might be made to better prepare students for the academic rigors of college level work.

Discussion of the Results

The first research question posed in this study explored whether there are significant differences by gender, race and type of course in the role that high school teachers played in preparing students for college. The results suggest that males rated the role of high school teachers more positively than did females, and minority students rated the role of high school teachers more positively than their majority counterparts. Additionally, high school teachers were rated more positively by students enrolled in regular English courses than by students enrolled in developmental classes.

One possible explanation for the findings related to gender is that male students might feel more support and encouragement from high school teachers. Male students might perceive that teachers are helping them advance their educational aspirations to attend college. They might believe they were encouraged in high school to take advanced classes that would support their college ambitions. Male students also might perceive that teachers are more willing to assist them in reaching this college goal.

Minority students also reported they received more support than majority students from their high school teachers. Minority students might have believed they were encouraged to perform better in the classroom and received encouragement to develop their academic skills. The minority students might have believed teachers were holding them accountable for high academic expectations and encouraging them to attend college.

There has been an increased emphasis in recent years on promoting participation in higher education by minorities. Teachers have become more sensitive to the role they play in promoting higher education aspirations among minority students and it is possible that they paid more attention to the minority participants in this study when those participants were in high school. If so, this might have explained the findings that minority students rated the role of their high school teachers in preparing them for college more highly than their majority counterparts.

Students enrolled in regular college English courses perceived their high school teachers better prepared them for college level work. This finding may suggest a correlation between high school preparation and college course enrollment. It would be reasonable to assume that these

students believed that high school teachers provided them with the preparation skills needed for college level work since they subsequently enrolled in regular versus developmental college English classes.

The results also indicated that male minority students in developmental courses perceived the role of high school teachers more favorably than did any of their counterparts. This raises the question as to whether male minorities are encouraged to attend college because it may increase their status in society rather than because they possess the appropriate academic skills. High school teachers may be encouraging male minority students to attend college without regard to the students' academic skills. As a result, the students are required to take developmental English in college, but may have rated their high school teachers more highly because of the encouragement they received from those teachers.

The second research question posed in this study investigated the differences by gender, race, and type of course that high school guidance counselors played in preparing students for college. Male students, minority students and students in developmental English classes perceived the role of the high school counselor more favorably than their counterparts. There are several possible explanations for these findings. Part of the role of the high school guidance counselor is to direct students to continue their education past high school in an effort to advance their employability. Guidance counselors may be influenced by tradition and by societal demands. For example, traditional wisdom holds that male students are the "breadwinners" in the American household and that minority students comprise an under-represented group in higher education. These assumptions may have prompted high school guidance counselors to work more closely with male and minority students to encourage them to attend college to expand their career options. If this occurred, male and minority participants may have rated the role their high school counselors played in preparing them for college more favorably than other groups in the study.

The results on the interaction between gender and race indicated that male minority students perceived the role of the guidance counselor more positively than their counterparts. This sample group accounts for an under-represented population in college and might be encouraged to enroll in college regardless of their preparation. Conversely, female minority students perceived the role of the guidance counselor least favorably. It is possible that guidance counselors are responding to the dramatically decreasing numbers of minority males in higher education and focusing more energies on this population at the expense of attention to female minorities whose numbers in higher education are increasing annually.

Students in developmental English courses also rated counselors more favorably than their counterparts in regular English classes. This is an interesting finding in that it might be expected that students in developmental English would feel they did not receive appropriate guidance in high school. This unexpected finding may have occurred because developmental students felt the same towards counselors as minority students. That is, encouraging students to advance their skills for improved employability drives many students to enroll in college even though they may not possess the skills needed to succeed in college. If counselors promoted college to students without appropriate skills, and those students ended up in developmental classes, it may be that students were reacting to the encouragement they received from high school counselors rather

than recognizing the gaps in their skills that those same counselors might have addressed with them while they were in high school.

Guidance counselors have a propensity to encourage students by the nature of their profession; therefore, it is possible they provided advice that sounded more positive than was realistically attainable. Guidance counselors may encourage students to take classes to graduate from high school and meet minimum requirements for college admission without conducting an in-depth analysis of students' academic skills. Therefore, the specific information needed to determine a student's strengths and weakness may be overlooked at the expense of a high school diploma and college admission.

Guidance counselors are the link between high school and college for most students, and they should direct students accordingly. If guidance counselors look at high school course titles and college entrance requirements as the connection between high school and college, they may continue to perpetuate the pattern of underprepared students enrolling in college. In many cases, the guidance counselor relies on the use of course grades and cumulative grade point averages for decision making purposes. This places the student at a disadvantage in receiving appropriate academic direction from the guidance counselor.

The third research question explored in the study focused on the role that parents played in the student's preparation for college. Results yielded one significant difference in the interaction effect of gender and race. The results suggest that male minority students believed that their parents played a more positive role in their college preparation than other participants in the study. This result may reflect a cultural influence. That is, male minority students may be encouraged to earn a college education to improve their status in society. Parents of male minority students may be more likely than majority parents to believe a college education is the best way to advance economic and cultural status. Attaining a college education can be a key factor in raising a person's standard of living. Therefore, male minority students may be responding to the encouragement and support they received from their parents to enter college and fulfill parental expectations.

The final research question investigated differences by gender, race, and type of class of the student's self-efficacy in their preparation for college. The results suggest that there were significant differences by race and the interaction between race and gender. Minority students in general perceived that they were more influential in their own preparation for college, and male minority students reported this specifically.

There seems to be added pressure on minority students compared to majority students to attend college after high school. Therefore, their self-direction to seek post-secondary education may be due to extrinsic pressures. Unfortunately, the skills needed to succeed in college may be overlooked as minority students strive to meet society's expectations. This may explain why half of the minority participants in this study were enrolled in developmental English classes.

The results suggest that male minority students perceive their own role in preparing for college as important. This finding is consistent with other findings in the study. That is, male minorities rated each factor (teacher, counselor, parent and self) more favorably than their counterparts. If teachers, guidance counselors and parents encourage such students to attend college they may develop a sense of confidence that they are actually prepared for college. If so, this might explain why male minority participants rated their own role in preparing for college so highly.

In comparing the data across the four factors (teacher, counselors, parents, self) in relationship to gender, race, and courses, the findings are also interesting. All groups rated the role of the guidance counselor as the least influential in preparing them for college. The role of high school teachers was the second least influential factor in preparing students for college among all groups. Self-efficacy and parents were perceived as the most or second most influential factors in preparing students for college by all groups.

These findings provide the impression that college preparation is highly influenced by parents and students themselves and least influenced by trained education professionals: teachers and guidance counselors. This also supports the contention that parents and students may be receiving inadequate information from the educational system on how best to prepare for college. Parents and students are relying on grades, grade point averages, and course titles as measures of college preparation. Yet half the participants in the study were assigned to developmental English classes upon matriculating to college. Greater emphasis needs to be placed on developing mechanisms that provide a more accurate means to convey student performance levels to the parents and students themselves, and therefore to improve decision- making skills for students about college preparation and college readiness.

Relationship of the Findings to Prior Research

The findings of the present study support the results of previous research in some instances and contradict the results of prior studies in other respects. For example, prior research indicated that college preparation courses do not focus on the specific skills required to prepare students for college (Fenske, et al. 1997; Southard & Collier, 1997). The results of this study revealed that 53% of the participants completing a college preparatory curriculum in high school were enrolled in regular English courses, but the other 47% were enrolled in developmental English. This finding would suggest that the completion of a college preparation course of study in high school was not a necessarily related to enrollment in a regular English course.

Likewise, Teel et al. (1998) and Kagan (1993) found that the most effective teachers were those who expected an analysis of skill performance over grades, provided diversity in instruction, encouraged decision making skills and focused on student centered activities. The current study supports their findings in that students who were enrolled in regular English courses perceived their teachers required high academic performance, provided opportunities for decision making and utilized class discussion, reading and writing skills as performance standards. Therefore, they felt the teachers were a positive influence in their college preparation.

The present study also supported previous findings regarding minority students. Mathews (1998) found that minorities were discouraged from enrolling in advanced classes while in high school. In this study, only 52% of the minority sample group had completed a college preparation curriculum while in high school.

Foy's (1994) research found that a positive relationship between the teacher and the students increased the students' learning curve. The results of this study reinforce this finding. All groups of students perceived the role of the teacher less favorably than the roles parents and they themselves played in preparing for college. This finding suggests that teachers may not be providing the atmosphere in the high school classroom that encourages strong teacher-student relationships. The participants in this study reported that they did not have a very positive perception of the role of the high school teachers in preparing them for college. This may have had an effect on the student's perception of their readiness for college.

The lack of clearly stated academic requisites for college is one reason why high school students are not prepared for college (Bandy, 1985; State Higher Education Executive Officers and Education Commission of the States, 1995). Guidance counselors assume the role of advising students about the courses needed for college preparation, yet this study yielded results that indicated guidance counselors have the least positive influence on students' college preparation. This might suggest that guidance counselors are not clearly communicating requisites for college, similar to what others have reported.

Fellers (1994) and Stringfield (1997) found that the skills of the guidance counselor are not used to the fullest extent possible. The results of this study support such contentions. It appears that the low rating of counselors may be related to their lack of direct involvement with students outside of supplying them with applications for college admission and financial aid forms. This study also supported the findings of Monahan (1993) who found that guidance counselors play an important role in increasing the awareness of post-secondary options for African-American students. Minority students perceived the role of the guidance counselor as a more positive influence on their college preparation than did majority students.

Results from this study indicated that parents play an important role in their student's college preparation. These findings are congruent with previous research by Herbert (1996) and findings from the Consumer Information Center report (1996). The Consumer Information Center report (1996) and the study by Birrell and Ross (1996) went on to indicate that parents underestimated the use of school information when dealing with preparation of their student for college. This was also illustrated in the present study when it was found that parents might not be well informed of their student's academic skill levels. That is, despite the high rating of the influence of parents in preparing students for college, half the participants were enrolled in developmental English classes.

Finally, the present study also supports Hamilton's (1992) findings on the relationship between taking a course or participating in assessments in high school and admission into

credited college classes. Hamilton suggested that there was no relationship and the findings of this study suggest

that nearly half of those participants who completed a college preparatory curriculum in high school were required to complete developmental English classes in college.

Some of the findings in this study contradict the findings of previous studies. In the findings of Henriksen & Soule (1995), minorities were less motivated by teachers, and fewer minorities were enrolled in college preparation curricula. The findings in this study indicated that minorities perceived the role of the teacher and guidance counselor in preparing them for college more favorably than did majority students. These results also revealed that the percentage of minorities enrolled in college preparatory curricula was similar to that of the majority group.

On a related note, Stringfield (1997) found that minority students are twice as likely as White students to be low achievers. However, the results from this study found that the percentage of minority and majority students enrolled in developmental English courses were relatively the same.

One of the major roles of the high school guidance counselor is to provide students assistance in analyzing their self-knowledge and educational aspirations (Fellers, 1994). This study yielded results that indicate this may be a missing element in the role of guidance counselors. All groups rated the role of the guidance counselor as the least effective in preparing them for college.

Previous research has shown a high correlation between parental involvement and positive school achievement (Schickedanz, 1995; Valery, et al. 1997). Research from Necessary and Parish (1996) found that parents are the preferred source of support for students and that parents are influential in the college success of their students. A composite analysis of the results of this study indicate students hold a positive perception of the role parents play; however, students in regular English courses did not report a significantly higher mean score on parental influence than those in the developmental courses. This suggests that while the influence of parents may be positive, it is equally as positive for students in both types of English classes.

Research by Monahan (1993) revealed that African-American students and their parents demonstrate an increased awareness of postsecondary opportunities as a result of participating in a pre-collegiate program. Even though the results for minority students in this study showed a positive perception of the role of parents, and that they felt support and encouragement from their teachers and guidance counselors, minority students were not better prepared for enrollment in regular English courses than the other groups studied.

In previous studies on self-efficacy, results indicated that student perceptions are different than those of parents and teachers (Gorman & Millette, 1997; Stone, 1997; Wambach, 1993). This research revealed that self-efficacy was perceived as a positive role in the student's college preparation. However, self-perceptions may be poor indicators of college readiness. Nearly half the participants were enrolled in developmental English classes, suggesting that they might not have had a realistic understanding of their academic skills.

Implications for Future Practices

This study suggests many implications for future professional practices. Each group involved with the preparation of college bound students can benefit from these findings.

High school teachers can benefit from these results in several ways. Teachers need to review their relations with students. The present findings suggest that the roles teachers play in preparing students for college are rated lower by female and majority students. As a result, teachers may want to spend more time with female and majority students talking about college plans and analyzing what information would be most useful to them.

Teachers also need to analyze the methods they use in the classroom. They may need to rely more on academic activities that allow students to increase their written expression skills and place less emphasis on the memorization of facts. Teachers need to encourage class discussions to elicit and to assess student knowledge. Classroom strategies need to be employed that will use test results, both classroom and standardized tests, as teaching tools and reporting devices.

The results of this study also reinforce the need for teachers to utilize methods other than grades to convey student performance to parents and students. Skill-based testing related to course content, exit course testing or criterion reference testing may be more accurate indicators of student performance than letter grades and percentages. The present findings suggest that letter grades did not necessarily relate to whether students were assigned to developmental English classes. Perhaps other forms of evaluation in high school will lead to a diminished need for remediation in college.

Previous research has shown that guidance counselors play a beneficial role in the preparation of students for college (Herbert, 1996). However, in this study, their role was rated as the least important in preparing participants for college. Though the results imply that guidance counselors need to make a concerted effort to work with female students and majority students on college selection and preparation, the results also suggest that guidance counselors need to assist all students in developing the skills needed to analyze their own academic profiles. For example, guidance counselors need to help students recognize their strengths and weaknesses and develop plans to strengthen their weaknesses and to capitalize on their strengths. Guidance counselors should also assist students and parents to increase their understanding of the student's academic skills so that students are better prepared for college level work.

Guidance counselors may also need to work with staff at colleges beyond understanding the admission standards. They should begin to concentrate on identifying the skills needed for college course preparedness. Guidance counselors can be instrumental in going beyond the current practice of reporting grade point averages and standardized test scores to communicate students' progress to parents, students, and colleges.

The results of this study indicated that parents are one of the two most highly rated influences for all groups in terms of college preparation. Unfortunately, their encouragement and support may not generalize to adequate college preparation as many students are still required to take remedial classes upon matriculating to college. Parental understanding of college may be influenced by society and by school personnel. Society portrays a college education as an attainable goal for all students and a necessity for adult success. School personnel may relay similar messages to parents via grades, grade point averages and course titles. In order for parents to be adequately prepared to help their student make college decisions, school personnel must provide them with skill performance information that is confirmed through the type of classes in which the student is placed when enrolled in college (developmental v. regular).

The results of the study revealed that self-efficacy plays a highly influential role in college preparation. Self-efficacy was one of the two most highly rated factors for all groups in the study. Students reported they are aware of their skill levels, are motivated to improve, and have set goals for college; however, this high level of self-efficacy does not seem to relate to actual understanding of the skills needed for college success. Nearly half the participants were enrolled in developmental classes. This is an indication that students may understand pre-college course requirements but lack a realistic perception of the skills required to succeed in college. In order to diminish this gap between perceptions and reality, students need to be more proactive in analyzing the skills they develop through their high school classes and what standardized test results mean in terms of actual academic skills.

The results of this study also provide direction for school superintendents and boards of education. School systems need to develop alternate means of conveying student progress to parents and students beyond the report-card. Criterion reference tests or course exit exams might be stronger indicators of student achievement than current educational practices. School systems may also need to look at course content in terms of quality versus quantity. Students should be presented with information that is essential for future use (i.e. college or work), and receive the necessary skill development to achieve their individual aspirations. Curricula should be aligned with skill accomplishments instead of the current practice of course completion, and teachers should be providing instruction accordingly.

Boards of Education may need to review the total education system and encourage the development of seamless curricula for each grade level that would culminate with students being prepared to enter college. The seamless curriculum should be expanded to incorporate the K-16 concept; elementary through college. The lack of clearly stated academic requirements by colleges prompts high school programs to be disconnected from the objective of preparing students for college. An improved working relationship between high school and college personnel would provide a framework for the development of curriculums that address the necessary skill development needed for college readiness. Boards of Education must also examine the courses and programs offered to their twelfth grade students. Often the current offerings have not resulted in adequate preparation of students for college. A senior-level program that specializes in increasing student skill development, providing opportunities for students to concentrate on skill deficiencies and providing seminars on post-high school activities may enhance the students' readiness for postsecondary endeavors. The educational

system could accomplish one of the practices by increasing the number of secondary guidance counselors. Hiring more counselors would decrease the caseload of each counselor, allowing all counselors to increase the time they devoted to assisting students on improving their skills. It would also provide the time needed to coordinate the academic skill training from the high school curriculum with the prerequisites required for enrollment in a regular college English course.

Recommendations for Future Research

The present study has implications for future research as well as for future practice. Future research is needed to examine the various factors that contribute to the under-preparedness of the high school graduate. The present study examined students in developmental and regular college English courses. Future scholars might conduct a study on students in regular versus developmental mathematics or regular versus developmental reading classes. Such a study might provide additional information about students who take developmental classes in college.

Additional studies might concentrate on a closer analysis of the skills that are produced from a high school class. For instance, the use of exit testing in high school English classes and how such testing relates to placement in regular or developmental college English courses needs to be explored.

The present study revealed that a similar number of students were enrolled in developmental and regular English classes regardless of the type of high school preparation curriculum they completed (college preparatory or general). Therefore, future researchers may want to explore the specific classes involved in these two types of high school programs to see what skills each is designed to produce.

Further research also is needed to examine why students rate the roles of high school teachers and guidance counselors as limited in preparing them for college. The present study revealed that those two sources of preparation were rated as low, but did not explore the reasons for such perceptions among students.

Other scholars may want to explore the disconnection between the high school curriculum and college English admission requirements. Studies that concentrate on a seamless curriculum between the high school and college may assist in addressing concerns over the number of students who require remediation in college. Such research may also be needed in areas of math and reading preparation in high school.

Further studies should be conducted to examine the differences between the private school and public school college preparation programs. Further research may provide insight as to why a higher percentage of private school students were enrolled in regular English courses.

To provide insight into the type of student who is attending college, students' socio economic status (SES) and their parents' educational background may be added as covariates to future studies.

Finally, ethnographic studies could be conducted to analyze the concerns of minority student preparation for college. Previous studies along with the current study provide data that profile a disproportionate percentage of minority students who are underprepared when they enter college. A follow-up study could explore the social influences minority students experience with respect to attending college.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the findings of the present study indicate that there are significant differences by race, gender, and type of course on the perceptions of college students about the roles that high school teachers, guidance counselors, parents and they themselves play in preparing students for college. In this case, parents and students themselves were perceived as having the most positive influence on college preparation. Conversely, the two groups that might be considered as most influential in preparing students for college, high school guidance counselors and teachers, had the least amount of influence.

The results may send a resounding alarm to school personnel that they are not perceived as preparing students adequately for college. It would seem reasonable to suggest that teachers and guidance counselors who work with high school students need to change some of the strategies they use in preparing students for college.

There are those who argue that no student should graduate from high school underprepared for college. The findings of this study suggest that large numbers of students continue to require remediation, at least in English, upon matriculation to college. Clearly, better preparation in high school might alleviate this problem and greater efforts are needed to adequately prepare students for the rigors of academic work at the college level.