

**ACCESS TO ACADEMIC EXCELLENCE:  
SCHOOL PERSONNEL'S PERCEPTIONS AND PRACTICES OF STUDENT  
PARTICIPATION IN ADVANCED PLACEMENT PROGRAMS IN A  
PREDOMINATELY MINORITY HIGH SCHOOL**

A Dissertation by

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The following faculty members have examined the final copy of this dissertation for form and content, and recommend that it be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirement for the degree of Doctor of Education with a major in Educational Leadership.

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## Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated to my amazing children, Hausten and Hayden; and my extremely supportive husband John Irving Jr. Thank you for your unconditional love, encouragement and flexibility during this journey.

Education is the most powerful weapon which you can use to change the world.

Nelson Mandela

## **Acknowledgments**

As I reflected on where I am and the paths I traveled, I acknowledge I am truly blessed. I grew up as the high risk child that statistics would want you to believe that my chance of academic success was almost not attainable. I grew up in poverty, raised by a single, teenage mother. I am grateful for my mom, Ms. Vivica Snype. It was through her perseverance to further her education to provide a quality life for my siblings and me that I developed a zest for learning and the appreciation of education. In addition, my village of aunts, uncles, and grandparents had a presence in my upbringing and I'm thankful for their guidance.

I have been fortunate to accomplish many milestones in education and my career; yet the most important role I have had is the mother to Hausten and Hayden. They bring me joy. They both are extremely talented, caring individuals and I am proud of how their gifts are used to better themselves and help others. It is through my role as their parent and number one advocate that I was inspired to conduct research on education equality for all students. I love them dearly and I am honored to be called their mom.

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## ABSTRACT

The Advanced Placement (AP) program allows students to participate in college preparatory coursework while in high school as well as the option of earning college credit. It is presumed enrollment policies provide students with equal opportunities to access AP. Yet, African American and Hispanic students from poverty are underrepresented student groups participating in the AP program. The purpose of this study was to examine perceptions of personnel working at a high poverty, predominately minority high school (HS) on policies and practices that determine minority and low-income student enrollment in to the AP program.

A qualitative study was conducted at a high poverty, predominately minority school located in Midwestern, United States. Data collection included interviews with school personnel; review of school artifacts, and policies from the school, the local district, the state department of education and the College Board. This study concluded policies are critical for consistent student placement practices by enrollment gatekeepers. However, policies alone will not provide equitable access and opportunity for all students. Traditional HS practices influenced by staff biases, beliefs, and master schedules create barriers, preventing some students from being identified and prepared for rigorous, college preparatory courses (DeLany, 1991; Taliaferro DeVance & DeCuir-Gunby, 2008). Strong leadership focused on implementing and monitoring reforms to create a cultural competent learning environment is necessary to combat deficit viewpoints and low expectations by staff of poor and minority students.



## TABLE OF CONTENTS

<b>Chapter</b>	<b>Page</b>
<b>CHAPTER 1</b> .....	<b>1</b>
<b>Problem Statement</b> .....	<b>2</b>
Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA).....	5
CDA Applied to Educational Policies and Practices .....	7
<b>Purpose of Study</b> .....	<b>11</b>
<b>Research Questions</b> .....	<b>11</b>
<b>CHAPTER 2</b> .....	<b>12</b>
<b>Review of Literature</b> .....	<b>12</b>
Minority Representation in Advanced Placement Courses .....	12
AP Enrollment Practices.....	14
Educational Policies Related to AP Courses .....	18
<b>CHAPTER 3</b> .....	<b>22</b>
<b>Research Design and Methodology</b> .....	<b>22</b>
<b>Methodology</b> .....	<b>22</b>
Critical Inquiry .....	24
Research Site and Participants .....	24
Participant Selection.....	25
Data Collection Plan.....	28
Individual interviews .....	29
Document review .....	30
Data Analysis and Interpretation.....	31
Research Positionality .....	33
Research Quality .....	35
<b>CHAPTER 4</b> .....	<b>38</b>
<b>Findings</b> .....	<b>38</b>
<b>Lincoln High School</b> .....	<b>38</b>
<b>Policies for Student Enrollment into AP Courses</b> .....	<b>39</b>
The College Board .....	39
State Policies .....	42
District Policies .....	44
College and Career Preparedness Grant .....	48
Lincoln High School Policies .....	51
<b>Staff Perceptions about Criteria for Student Placement into AP Program</b> .....	<b>52</b>

**TABLE OF CONTENTS (continued)**

<b>Chapter</b>	<b>Page</b>
Core Teachers’ Perceptions .....	53
Advanced Placement Teachers’ Perceptions .....	55
Counselors’ Perceptions .....	56
Administrators’ Perceptions .....	59
<b>Implementation of AP Placement Policies and School Practices.....</b>	<b>60</b>
Changes in Leadership .....	60
Highly Mobile Teaching Force.....	62
Academic Sanctions .....	63
Lack of Preparation .....	64
Perceptions of AP Success: Peer and Parent Support Network.....	65
Varied AP Guidelines.....	67
Gatekeeping Limits Student Access.....	72
<b>CHAPTER 5.....</b>	<b>77</b>
<b>Conclusions and Implications.....</b>	<b>77</b>
<b>Vague Policies.....</b>	<b>77</b>
<b>Discourse of Practices .....</b>	<b>80</b>
Exceptions to Open Enrollment .....	81
<b>Inconsistent Implementation .....</b>	<b>85</b>
Varied Enrollment Processes .....	86
<b>Implications of the Research .....</b>	<b>87</b>
Establish Student Placement Policies.....	88
Gatekeepers Promote a Culture of High Expectations and College Paths .....	90
Create a Culturally Competent Learning Environment.....	92
Implementation of Student Support Initiatives .....	94
Monitor Expectations of Advanced Placement Initiatives .....	96
<b>REFERENCES.....</b>	<b>100</b>
<b>APPENDIXES.....</b>	<b>109</b>
A. Consent Form.....	110
B. Building Administrator and Counselor Interview Protocol .....	112
C. Teacher Focus Group Protocol.....	114
D. Member Check Form.....	116

## LIST OF TABLES

<b>Table</b>	<b>Page</b>
1. Lincoln Teacher Participants .....	27
2. Teaching Experience of Participants .....	28

## CHAPTER 1

The Advanced Placement (AP) program has its origins in the 1950s in a college preparatory program that was piloted to address the issue of students repeating classes during their first years of college that were completed while in high school (Andrews, 2004). A committee of high school teachers, college professors, and representatives from the Educational Testing Service (ETS) established two initiatives to address college preparation opportunities for high school students. First, the committee recommended that students have the opportunity to earn college credit while attending high school. Second, the committee developed syllabi, created assessments based on the objectives, and organized conferences and workshops for teachers. The College Board, an organization founded in 1900 for the purpose of increasing access to higher education through shared entrance exams, assumed ownership of the program in 1955 when it became known as the Advanced Placement Program.

According to the College Board's website, in 2014 Advanced Placement (AP) had over 34 college content courses that high schools can choose to offer. Mathematics, chemistry, economics, foreign languages, and music theory are a few of the AP courses high school students can experience. The College Board provides the syllabi, course guidelines, standardized curriculum, and offers summer trainings for AP teachers. High schools with AP programs are expected to assign highly qualified, trained staff to instruct the rigorous college content courses.

During the 1960s, The College Board retained ETS to govern the design and grading of AP assessments (Santoli, 2002). Students who have taken AP courses are eligible to take the Advanced Placement exam in the spring. The College Board's website (2012b) identifies 22 different AP exams available in multiple subject areas that students can take to earn college credit hours. Advanced Placement exams are scored from one to five. A five on an exam is

equivalent to receiving an A on a similar college test. A four on an AP exam is equivalent to receiving a B in college coursework. A score of three or above on an AP exam is often deemed qualified to receive college credit. A student receiving a two or below on AP exams does not qualify for college credit.

### **Problem Statement**

Advanced Placement course completion expands a student's college options, provides financial benefits, allows students to earn college credits while in high school, and impacts career selections (Klopfenstein & Thomas, 2010; Ndura, Robinson, & Ochs, 2003). Completion of Advanced Placement courses carries considerable weight in university admission decisions. A study conducted by the National Research Council on 264 universities concluded that deans perceived AP courses were a good screening tool for identifying qualified college prospects (Geiser & Santelices, 2004). If a student took advantage of college preparation programs while in high school, universities felt it was a strong predictor of his or her commitment to confront academic challenges at the college level (Gamoran & Hannigan, 2000; Geiser & Santelices; Yonezawa, 1997). In addition to being used as criteria for admission, nearly 3500 universities in the United States give college credit to students who score high on AP exams.

It is presumed enrollment and course assignment policies provide students with equal opportunities and access to AP programs. However, high school AP classrooms and exam takers are not equally represented by all student groups with the potential to succeed in the AP program. The College Board's *AP Equity Policy Statement* encourages school administration to make "every effort to ensure that their AP classes reflect the diversity of their student population" and "all students who are willing to accept the challenge of a rigorous academic curriculum should be considered for admission to AP courses" (The College Board, 2012b, para

3). Despite this stated commitment to diversity and equity, AP courses are not a reality for many minority and low-income students. Many minority and low income students with the potential to successfully participate in AP coursework are not enrolled in the program (The College Board, 2012a). According to the College Board (2012a), 62% of all 2012 high school graduates had the potential to be successful in AP courses, but were not enrolled. Data collected on nearly two million 10<sup>th</sup> and 11<sup>th</sup> grade public school students who took the Preliminary Scholastic Aptitude Test/National Merit Scholarship Qualifying Test (PSAT/NMSQT) indicated 60% of low income students with high potential to succeed in AP programs were never enrolled (The College Board, 2013). African American and Latino students are the least represented ethnic student groups in AP courses and exam takers (Ndura et al., 2003; Solorzano & Ornelas, 2002, 2004; The College Board, 2012a).

The disproportionate number of minority and poor students in AP classrooms perpetuates inequality. Critical theorists have argued that traditional educational practices and structures are a camouflage for oppressing some student groups from excelling and being equal to their peers (Solórzano & Ornelas, 2002). The process of sorting students into differential academic tracks has a long history in the United States. Identifying students for AP assignment is one example of selecting students for differentiated tracking (Oakes & Guiton, 1995).

At each high school, teachers, counselors, and administrators are charged with the responsibility for implementing the College Board's guidelines; including identifying students that have "potential to be successful" (The College Board, 2012a). However, the disparity in AP classrooms indicates a gap in how organizational enrollment processes align with policies that promote equity and accessibility to educational programs. Course placements are influenced by traditional enrollment processes, gatekeepers who determine student assignments, and high

stakes assessments (Oakes, Sharpiro, & Purpel, 1998). High school teachers, counselors, and administrators all have gatekeeping roles in the AP placement process.

Critical theorists have argued that lack of opportunity and access to educational programs marginalizes students and creates a system where some students will always have the advantage (Solorzano & Ornelas, 2002). Indeed, the Advanced Placement program was established to address the academic needs of a specific group of students. In 1952, Advanced Placement Director Dudley proclaimed “all students are not created equal” and the purpose of the program was to select the most prestigious, high performing students from top high schools to participate in the AP program (Schneider, 2009, p. 817). During the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, there has been a shift in educational philosophy and creation of policies that promote equity in the classroom. That shift can be seen in AP official documents published in recent years. To illustrate, according to *The AP Equity Policy Statement*, “all students deserve an opportunity to participate in rigorous and academically challenging courses and Programs,” and The College Board “encourages the elimination of barriers that restrict... students from ethnic, racial, and socioeconomic groups that have been traditionally excluded from the program” (The College Board, 2012a, para. 3). Establishment of this policy was intended to overturn old practices that created one race classrooms. Despite the push to add racial and economic diversity to the AP program, the disparity of who is represented in the classrooms has exacerbated inequality (Ndura et al., 2003; Solórzano & Ornelas, 2002).

### **Theoretical Framework**

The function of a theoretical framework is to explain the factors and variables to be studied while utilizing models of previous research (Maxwell, 2004). The researcher uses the model selected as a guide to study the research problem (S. Merriam, 2009) and “it provides a

tentative theory of what is happening and why” (Marshall & Gerstl-Pepin, 2005, p. 222). I used Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) as a framework to examine policies related to student placement in the AP program and how school personnel interpret and implement these policies. Using a critical approach to analyze policy is an avenue to bring attention to institutional practices that influence power and injustices related to social class, race, gender, and religion of individuals within the organization. Ozga (2000) referred to policy analysis as social analysis because it is rooted in social sciences, historical events, and draws on qualitative research. CDA falls under the umbrella of critical social science research, which “includes an overt political struggle against oppressive structures” (Tronya, 1987, p. 72). The critical analyst aims to gain an understanding of what is occurring and promotes change, and discourse driven social change is an approach to critically address problems and issues. Foucault’s (1969) research on discourse has provided a foundation for the theories of many researchers including Fairclough’s (Fairclough, 2001a, 2001b) studies showing the linkage between practices and social issues related to power and injustices.

### **Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA)**

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) seeks to gain an understanding of the relationship between organization practices and social issues, such as curriculum and programs that are predominately accessed by white, middle class students. Researchers using CDA desire to advocate change while identifying the barriers. Fairclough (2001b) stressed textual analysis of policy always must be seen as part of social change on a broader level. Therefore, those who draw upon CDA are motivated to enact change through research that reveals injustices encountered by the less privileged. The findings of such research often reveals historical patterns of fundamental causes, conditions, and consequences of such issues (Fairclough,



2001b). Research using CDA has provided a critique of institutions responsible for sustaining inequities involving power relations between groups (Van Dijk, 1993).

Discourse has multiple meanings, however Bacchi's (2000) description of it as conceptual schema connected to historical, institutional, and cultural contexts, while bringing attention to power relationships relates to this study's examination of school policies and structures that determine accessibility to programs. Discourses are not a result of a few individuals but are a product of historical beliefs and practices. The everyday operation of a school maintains traditional, time-honored practices that are not questioned and have created dominate structures among social classes, ethnic groups, genders, and even religions. Invoking discourse draws attention to inequities that may be present in an organization and its discourse. Discourse analysis is an opportunity to make meaning of educational policies and their implementation, which create and sustain inequitable access to school programs.

According to Fairclough (Fairclough, 2001a, 2001b), the process of using discourse theory to analyze policy implementation includes investigating the written, spoken, and abstract communication which explains the repeatable relations between language and organizational structures. Policy language has different meanings to its implementers and organizational practices often mirror injustices that are present in society.

Discourse theories have enhanced critical policy analysis through their use in exploration of policy processes and implementation (Taylor, 1997, 2004). Policy analysis of the past focused primarily on commentary review of policies and provided little research from empirical studies on the application and social impact of policies (Ball, 1990). Recent approaches to analyzing policies have been influenced by discourse theory and its emphasis on change related to inequitable social conditions. Disparities in access to education, employment, and housing are

examples of societal issues critical discourse analysis can address. Although there are several strands within discourse theory, the central focus of the theories are on text and meaning, specifically how the language of the policy is interpreted and implemented. The desire to find meaning in language and text of policies and organizational implementation and practice has led to an increase in the use of discourse analysis when analyzing policies (Taylor, 2004).

### **CDA Applied to Educational Policies and Practices**

Critical Discourse Analysis is an appropriate guide for analyzing educational policies because of its critique of the relationship of language to other social processes and how language works within power relations. The process of CDA was used in this study to examine how high school gatekeepers used their power to interpret policy and determine which students should be assigned to college preparatory courses. CDA provided a framework for a systematic analysis (Van Dijk, 1993) such as how the College Board and school policies were interpreted to promote access for all students to participate in AP courses. The framework emphasized discursive practices of policies as well as cultural structures and processes (Fairclough, 2001a, 2001b). Traditional high school enrollment practices and course recommendations are institutional and cultural structures used to determine who will have access to AP programs.

**Power and dominance.** Cohen and Ball (1990) emphasized the meaning of discourse focuses primarily on the power of organizational practices, social hierarchies, and relationships. School organizations implement policies and practices that can influence power relations between student groups, school personnel, and parents. Social classes are influential in creating dominance and decisions on who should have access to specific curriculum, teachers, and courses. Power and dominance can be overt such as witnessed police brutality against a suspect, but it also occurs subtly in everyday routines and procedures. Traditional enrollment practices

in high schools are an example of where those without power, most often minority and poor students, are not accessing educational programs like other student groups (Solórzano & Ornelas, 2002; Solorzano & Yosso, 2001). Oakes (2000) argued the subtle use of power has established school structures with pathways of advanced and honors courses accessed by limited student groups. Unequal power relations are present in many forms, such as between males and females; ethnic groups, most often white and minority; and socioeconomic status of wealthy and poor. Those with the most power have privileges that allow them to dominate access to socially valued resources such as income, position, group membership, and education.

The exclusion of poor and minority students can be a natural occurrence in a school organization, especially when there has been a long history of beliefs and presumptions of who should have access to certain educational programs and curriculum (Larson C. & Ovando, 2001). Access to college preparatory and honors courses have been taken for granted by those with power and often not challenged by those who lack accessibility (Auerbach, 2002; Oakes & Guiton, 1995).

Critical Discourse Analysis has influenced a critical review of educational policies and practices that had been taken for granted in the past. Historically, schools have played a role in creating dominance through inequitable access and opportunity to participate in rigorous programs and classrooms (Giroux, 1980; Oakes & Guiton, 1995; Oakes et al., 1998). The routine of tracking some students into honors and academic advanced courses is an integral practice of high school culture. Most school gatekeepers presume their school functions equitably benefit all students. According to Foucault (1969), education systems are a means for maintaining or modifying the appropriation of discourses, along with the knowledge and power

they carry. Critical Discourse Analysis explores the relationship between policy implementation and the discourse structures of policies and practices that support power within schools.

**Policy implementation.** A critical approach to analyzing policy implementation seeks to examine equitable access and opportunity of programs implemented by school personnel (Elmore & McLaughlin, 1988; Taylor, 2004). An educator's interpretation and response to policies determines the discourse of application. Recent studies have found the same policies can be demonstrated differently at multiple sites due to the interpretation of individuals responsible for implementation (James P Spillane, Reiser, & Reimer, 2002). Researchers have argued the effectiveness of educational policies and programs depends on how educators interpret and implement them. School personnel interpret policies in terms of their own experiences, interests, and motivation to enact policy (Elmore & McLaughlin, 1988; Fairclough, 2001b; McLaughlin, 1987). Milward, Denhardt, Rucker, and Thomas' (1983) study emphasized the implementer's interest, attitude, and beliefs had the greatest impact on how policies were translated into practice. A critical analysis of policy implementation provides insights into how personal experiences and educational practices of educators impact the effectiveness of application of policies.

Prunty (1985) indicated when policy implementation is critically analyzed in regard to pedagogy, curriculum, and evaluation, it is essential to give careful attention to the process of what and whom is included and excluded from the practice. Discourse analysis of policy implementation investigates the language of equity policies in relation to the practices occurring in educational systems, especially since racial segregation is still present in some school programs and classrooms (Taliaferro DeVance & DeCuir-Gunby, 2008).

Education is often thought of as an equalizer emphasizing that all students, regardless of their zip code, ethnicity, or gender have equal access to educational programs. It is generally believed if students work hard and have the motivation to do well; their school experience will be successful. In fact, there are some educators who do not believe equity policies are necessary because they believe all students already have a fair opportunity to succeed in school. The concept of everyone having an equal playing field is based upon the belief that everyone is treated equitably. However, research has shown that class placement is given to some students based on educators' experiences and motivation, historical beliefs, traditional enrollment practices, and privilege (Taliaferro DeVance & DeCuir-Gunby, 2008). A critical analysis approach to make meaning of a phenomenon challenges educators to consider how current institutional structures empower one group while oppressing the interests of another group.

A critical analysis of educational policy implementation can provide a school with the opportunity to learn if there is a gap between the intent of the policy and how the policy has been implemented. The analysis process provides an understanding of current organizational practices and the impact they have on students, specifically where inequities are present. Minority and low-income students are not equally represented in AP classrooms. A critical inquiry of schools' interpretation and implementation of policy and structures for course enrollment can provide information on how high school students access AP programs. A critical analyst is committed to bridging educational theory and practice. In this respect, the process of analyzing policy implementation often reveals inequities between dominant groups and individuals with less power. The exploration of discourse theory in school systems can result in a critical awareness of practices that occur from the implementation of policies.

### **Purpose of Study**

All students can benefit from the completion of rigorous curriculum and high learning expectations (Attewell & Thurston, 2008; Oakes, 2000). Advanced Placement courses are one example of challenging academic classrooms with high learning outcomes. The purpose of this study was to examine school personnel's perceptions of policies and practices that determine minority and low-income student enrollment in Advanced Placement programs.

### **Research Questions**

The research questions that guided this study were as follows:

1. What is the school's policy for enrollment into AP courses?
2. How do high school personnel implement policies on assigning poor and minority students to AP courses?
3. How do high school personnel describe school practices for poor and minority students to access AP courses?

## **Chapter 2**

### **Review of Literature**

College preparatory coursework for high school students has been available in schools for decades. Although once considered an option mainly for middle and upper class students, several theorists and educational researchers (Auerbach, 2002; Gamoran, 1996; Klopfenstein, 2004b) have argued it is an educational resource that should be afforded to all students with the potential to succeed. Reviewing empirical studies provided an opportunity to deepen my understanding of minority representation in Advanced Placement Programs, educational policies, and school practices.

#### **Minority Representation in Advanced Placement Courses**

There are positive implications for all students enrolled in academically challenging coursework (Gamoran & Mare, 1989; Taliaferro DeVance & DeCuir-Gunby, 2008). Exposure to rigorous curriculum and high classroom expectations is an academic recipe to help all children excel (Oakes, 1995). It has been well documented that minority and low-income students are under enrolled in AP courses (Gamoran, 1992; Gamoran & Hannigan, 2000; Geiser & Santelices, 2004). Klopfenstein's (2004b) study revealed poor minority students are enrolled in AP courses at less than half the rate of other students. Solórzano and Ornelas (2004) examined public high schools in California and Texas and found Latinos represented 52% of the student population, but comprised only 31% of students enrolled in AP courses. Their study also revealed African Americans represented 38% of the student population and comprised 18% of AP enrollees. Whites were 6% of the student population and represented 45% of all AP students. In another example, Ndura, Robinson, and Ochs (2003) studied a diverse school district with 58,000 students. Their findings from the district's eight high schools showed that while minority

students made up 30% of the school's population they only represented 17% of the students in Advanced Placement courses. Ideally, Advanced Placement classrooms should reflect the demographic composition of the student body, but as these studies have revealed, it is often the case they do not. Instead, a disparity exists in who is enrolled in AP courses; creating predominately one race, middle income classrooms.

The division of ethnic groups increases educational inequality and widens the achievement gap (Gamoran, Nystrand, Berends, & LePore, 1995; Morgan & McPartland, 1981). Students assigned to lower track courses do not have the opportunity to be introduced to content and instructional strategies that are incorporated in rigorous and challenging courses and thus become trapped in less challenging classes, creating "course gaps" (Oakes et al., 1998; Thompson & O'Quinn III, 2001). Course gaps are reinforced when students become stuck in low academic tracks and never receive the opportunity to be challenged academically (Eyler, Cook, & Ward, 1982; Oakes, 1995, 2000).

Challenging classes such as AP courses can be used to close the achievement gap (Oakes et al., 1998). While there may be students not performing at grade level, there are many students of color academically achieving who are not afforded the opportunity to be enrolled in the best course offerings provided in challenging, rigorous, college preparatory classes (Taliaferro DeVance & DeCuir-Gunby, 2008). There is a misconception that poor minority students lack the prerequisite skills to participate in advanced coursework (Oakes, 2005). However, according to the College Board (2012a), "four out of five African American graduates were either left out of an AP subject for which they had potential or attended a school that did not offer the subject" (p. 17).



Some scholars (Klopfenstein, 2004b; Santoli, 2002) have contended that minority student enrollment has increased in AP courses during recent years. However, data continues to support that African American and Latino students remain the two most underrepresented student groups enrolled in AP classes (Klopfenstein, 2004b; The College Board, 2012a). Despite the creation of policies intended to promote equity, the AP program is still underrepresented by students from minorities and low socioeconomic levels (G. W. Moore & Slate, 2008).

### **AP Enrollment Practices**

High school course placements are determined by gatekeepers who define the processes for student access. AP enrollment practices vary from school to school, however teachers, counselors, and administrators are constant enrollment gatekeepers in determining student placements. Teachers, counselors and administrators all use a variety of practices to make determinations about which students should be considered for AP courses. These range from seemingly objective assessment results to judgments about students' parents and background, behavior, and motivation (Finley, 1984; Oakes, 2005).

Teachers often use high stakes assessments to label students' intellectual capabilities. They separate students into hierarchy groups for instruction and course assignments. Teachers consider standardized assessments and discipline reports when recommending student course placements. Oakes (2000) contended that the public process of grouping students by a seemingly objective assessment becomes subjective as teachers advocate for students they have had positive experiences with or whom they believe will have parental support. Therefore, teachers' judgments have more of an influence on placement decisions than assessment and achievement data (Larson C. & Ovando, 2001; Oakes & Guiton, 1995). Teachers are highly influential in determining high school course placement for students and their recommendations are often in

favor of students from professional and middle class backgrounds. Students whose parents have attained education post high school, have professional careers, and are considered to have middle class status are the most likely to be assigned to advanced courses (Auerbach, 2002; Desimone, 1999). Teachers often base their decisions on students' background rather than their ability (Finley, 1984). According to Gamoran's (1987) study, teachers also tended to favor students according to which colleges students are considering and applying to.

Teachers are also less likely to recommend students with a history of behavior problems for placement to advanced level coursework. Compliant students without discipline issues are often identified as the "best kids" whereas students with behavior incidents are perceived as lacking motivation to learn (Finley, 1984; Lynn, Bacon, Totten, Bridges III, & Jennings, 2010). Students who come from low income families, have a history of behavior problems, or are perceived to lack motivation in school are less likely to be recommended by teachers for assignment to advanced coursework (Finley, 1984; Lynn et al., 2010).

Finley's (1984) study noted that teachers stressed ability and motivation were the two characteristics they considered when recommending students for advanced coursework. Teachers of honors courses desired to have students in their classrooms with a high enthusiasm for learning, with advanced knowledge in subject areas, and with very few absences. The study concluded that students were recommended for courses primarily based on teachers' perceptions of their motivation. The teachers viewed motivation as an important factor for college readiness, whereas students who lacked self-initiative to keep up with homework and the intrinsic motivation to work above the minimum academic expectations were often not recommended for advanced courses. It was not unusual for a high potential student to be assigned to lower track

courses because the student was perceived as lacking motivation as defined by the recommending teachers (Finley, 1984; Lynn et al., 2010; Oakes & Guiton, 1995).

High school counselors and administrators are enrollment gatekeepers who consider recommendations from teachers, student academic performance, and student behavior when making decisions on what courses are best for which students (Oakes & Guiton, 1995; Oakes et al., 1998). High school counselors are extremely influential in determining course assignments for high school students (House & Martin, 1998). They are responsible for scheduling and selecting courses for students and have the authority to screen out students they do not believe are appropriate for college preparatory courses (Rosenbaum, 1976). Counselors monitor transcripts and counsel students on career tracks and courses necessary for graduation and prerequisites needed for college admission. This is not a new occurrence of their support of course placement. In the 1960s and 1970s, Cicourel and Kituse (1963; 1971) critiqued the high school counselor's role in determining which students had potential for success in a college preparatory track based on their personal judgment of students' character, maturity, and motivation. According to Rosenbaum, Miller, and Keri's (1996) research, counselors held the power in deciding course assignments for students citing their decisions were based upon a student's work habits, motivation, and potential to be successful in college. When asked about their influence in determining students' academic future, high school counselors did not view their role as powerful, but instead explained course placement was just another component of their job responsibilities (Calery, 1969). House and Martin (1998) argued school counselors are in perfect positions to advocate to remove system barriers that prevent access to school programs. School counselors have access to all student data. They know which teachers and courses provide rigorous learning and they have the knowledge to connect students with needed

resources for academic success. According to House's (1998) research, school counselors can be the catalyst in promoting reform to provide more equitable course access to all students.

Administration gatekeeping encompasses more than just the high school principals, but includes the administrative organization, the structures, and the processes put in place by school leadership. Rosenbaum (1976) referred to the administrative organization as the leadership and their decision for the system, such as hiring practices, courses offered, content to be taught, and the practices for enrollment and course assignments. The administrative organization is responsible for establishing the procedures for selecting and assigning students to courses, which determines if equity is present in a school (Rosenbaum, 1976). The processes implemented by high school administration controls student access to honors and college preparatory classrooms. Scholars have agreed school personnel have directly impacted the school's organization by decisions made regarding master schedules, teacher assignments, and the implementation of guidelines (W.K. Hoy, Tarter, & Bliss, 1990; Oakes et al., 1998; Rosenbaum, 1976). Enrollment practices and course assignments as determined by school administrators directly influence which students have access to advanced coursework. School administrators are challenged with the logistics of creating an efficient master schedule, often with limited qualified staff and resources. High school master schedules have traditionally determined the structure of the school day and school year for students and teachers (Kruse & Kruse, 1995). However, according to Oakes (1998) school administrators establish the guidelines which are followed by school personnel to determine the processes by which AP courses are available to some students and not to others. Traditional structures of enrollment, course assignments, and placements reinforce patterns of oppression that create access barriers that keep some students from participating in AP courses (Lee & Smith, 2001; Oakes, 2005).

## **Educational Policies Related to AP Courses**

During the 1980s, the surge of equity policies established by the federal government, state legislators, and local boards of education was intended to redress past educational inequities. During the same time, The College Board established equity guidelines for its AP program.

**Education equity policies.** Advocates for equal rights have influenced policymakers to create education equity policies. Educational equity policies are intended to promote equal access to quality teaching and a challenging curriculum for all students (Elam, 1993). Scholars (Goldring & Smrekar, 2000) have agreed education equity policies were controversial when implemented and continue to be a divisive topic. Gillborn and Youdell (2000) argued equity policies are necessary because perception and implementation of school structures, processes, and opportunity for student access to rigorous, high quality courses varies. They further stated individuals view phenomena from different lenses and even when power inequities are present, some educators will not view the situation as unjust. Instead, they are quick to blame it on other factors, such as the parents, poor performance on high stakes (often biased) assessments, or lack of motivation by students. It is difficult for educators to recognize their own privileges which play out in school decisions, whether intentional or not. Oakes' (1998) found high school processes for assigning students to college preparatory programs and honors courses are often based on traditions, on how it has always been conducted in the past. As a result of their habits of continuous practices, educators seldom critically question where the practices originally came from and what beliefs they have about these practices. Oakes and her colleagues (1998) found school personnel most often did not recognize the connection between their beliefs, the school's organization, and students lack of access to programs. As one teacher in their study noted, there

was not a relationship between ethnicity and course recommendation or if there was a linkage, it was not deliberate.

The 1954 landmark court ruling, *Brown vs. Board of Education, Topeka, Kansas*, forced school districts to examine equitable access and opportunity for all students (Armor, 1995; R. K. Blank & Archbald, 1992; R. K. Blank, R. A. Dentler, D. C. Baltzell, K. Chabotar, 1983; McAuliffe Straus, 2010; Rossell & Armor, 1996). The creation of equity policies after Brown was intended to provide financial equity in schools, ensure challenging curriculum and instruction for all students, and to establish organizational and boundary changes for schools located in predominately one race and economically segregated neighborhoods (Gold, 2007). All students deserve to receive the resources and support necessary to succeed academically and equity policies were intended to provide equal opportunity for all students (Education Trust, 2001). Data from state and local educational agencies have shown repeatedly that economically disadvantaged students and students of color are systematically denied the kind of education that leads to success in the marketplace (The Education Trust, 1999).

**The College Board's policies.** The College Board, owner of the Advanced Placement program, determines the guidelines schools with AP courses should follow to ensure students receive rigorous curriculum, are taught study skills, and are prepared for college level assessments. Through the Board's ongoing collection of student data, there has been an emphasis placed on the disproportionately low number of minority and poor students enrolling in AP courses. The College Board (2013) stated it was imperative for all students regardless of ethnicity or income status to achieve their full potential. Furthermore, AP classrooms provide intense instruction for students to develop critical thinking skills. Access to AP programs allows

students to maximize their potential and develop the knowledge for college and career success (Ndura et al., 2003; The College Board, 2012a).

AP guidelines recommend schools develop policies to provide rigorous instruction for all students. New core standards focusing on college and career readiness challenge school systems to provide rigorous curriculum and instruction to prepare students for the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The College Board contends a positive AP experience is one way to prepare students for college coursework. Their policy documents insist all students that have the potential deserve to experience the highest quality of education that prepares them for success beyond high school. Despite the goals of their guidelines to promote equal access and opportunity for students to experience the rigor and benefits of their program, there remains a gap of who is represented in AP programs.

The College Board has acknowledged while many schools have attempted to increase AP access, poor, minority students continue to be underserved in participating in the college preparatory program. The annual *AP Report* (The College Board, 2012a, 2013) acknowledged poor African American and Hispanic students are the least represented student groups enrolled in AP courses and among exam takers. The data collected shows each state's measurement in increasing the participation of all student groups in attending AP courses and taking AP exams. According to the report, access and diversity is an educational benefit for society and the Board is committed to helping schools. The report concluded with recommendations for school districts to target underrepresented students by 1) providing them with a support system to include peer mentors, tutors, and guidance counselors; and 2) providing informational sessions for students and their parents on high school graduation requirements and course offerings

available. In order to close the opportunity gap, The College Board encourages schools to identify students with potential that were not enrolled in AP courses.

Historically, some researchers have questioned The College Board's efforts to strongly support schools' efforts to promote AP equity (Klopfenstein, 2004a, 2004b). The guidelines explain the Board's desire to help schools to increase accessibility of the AP program to poor, minority students. Annually, the Board's Report (The College Board, 2013) provides suggestions for schools to promote equity; however Klopfenstein (2004b) argued The College Board's recommendations are vague at best and emphasis is placed on the need for further research to understand the underrepresentation of poor, minority students participation in the AP program. The recommendations for action provide little guidance on how schools can change the historical patterns of overlooking poor minorities for AP placement. The College Board's solution in identifying previously overlooked students is to utilize their free, web based program titled *AP Potential* to identify potential candidates for the AP program. The website states a student's GPA in prerequisite coursework should not be the only or the most emphasized criteria in identifying potential students since the GPA has low correlations to AP success.



## **CHAPTER 3**

### **Research Design and Methodology**

A qualitative case study of a high school with a diverse student population was conducted in order to examine policies and school practices that determine student enrollment in its Advanced Placement programs. Stake (2010) explained qualitative studies as research that relies mainly on perceptions and understanding of a phenomenon of its participants. Qualitative design was appropriate for this research because it was conducted in the field where participants with firsthand knowledge provided their perspectives of the implementation of AP program policies and enrollment practices. Data collection for the study focused on answering these three research questions:

1. What is the school's policy for enrollment into AP courses?
2. How do high school personnel implement policies on assigning poor and minority students to AP courses?
3. How do high school personnel describe school practices for poor and minority students to access AP courses?

### **Methodology**

Research methodology is a blueprint that guides a study and refers to the strategies used to investigate, interpret, and make meaning of the data collected from perspectives of the participants (Schensul, 2012). In order to further understand the underrepresentation of poor, minority students enrolled in AP classrooms, I conducted a qualitative case study using a critical discourse inquiry approach. I collected a variety of data types using multiple techniques in order to critically explore the relationship between policies and school practices that provide opportunity and access to valuable school programs.

Education case studies often focus on people and programs because of their uniqueness and researchers desire to understand them (R.E. Stake, 1995). Many of us are intrigued by how people and programs function. Case studies appease our interest in people and programs through seeking to understand a particular focus. A particular study focuses on a specific event, phenomenon or problem. Research questions are carefully designed to provide an insight on what is occurring within a particular case (R.E. Stake, 1995). Related to this study, the particular focus was the problem of access to the Advanced Placement program. I examined student access particularly at a predominately minority, low income high school. The research included examination of data to determine who is enrolled in AP programs and the process for participants' selection. I also looked at who is not enrolled in AP courses at the urban high school and identified the trends and patterns that might reveal the presence of inequities.

In addition, qualitative case studies are characterized as descriptive and heuristic (Merriam, 1998). Descriptive language was used in order to make meaning of this study. Chapters four and five include descriptive characteristics of the study that have been organized to explain the findings, conclusions, and implications based upon the variety of data collected and analyzed. A heuristic study aims to reveal new insights into a problem. Analyzing the discourse both verbal and written as well as school practices provided a deeper understanding on which student groups' accessed AP classrooms and which student groups do not. This case study focused specifically on student access to AP courses offered at an urban high school located in the Midwest. Multiple types of data were collected in order to examine, summarize, and make meaning. Instead of reporting the findings in numerical data, I conducted a qualitative study by providing literal descriptions of the data collected.

## **Critical Inquiry**

Critical researchers are concerned with identifying patterns of power differences, cultural inequalities, and injustices in policies and structures that may limit options for some groups of people (S. Merriam, 2009). This type of research is focused on the structural determinants of disparities and how these factors differentially affect people (Schensul, 2012). A critical discourse inquiry was used as a lens to examine College Board and school equality policies and how the policies were interpreted and implemented into practice in a school organization. As a critical researcher, methods of a qualitative case study allowed me to make meaning of the school's structures by interviewing administrators, counselors and teachers on their perceptions of policies and practices for student identification and enrollment into AP courses. The data collected from participants' interviews and the collection of artifacts allowed me to critically analyze discourse in the form of spoken and written text to identify inequalities that created barriers for some students' opportunity to access educational resources. Schensul (2012) suggested that critical researchers assume there are some groups of people who are not equally positioned within society and are not afforded equal access to power and resources as other groups. Critical researchers design in-depth interview questions to reveal ways inequities are present in behaviors, accessibility to programs, and organizational structures. Access and opportunity to enroll in AP courses were examined in this study.

## **Research Site and Participants**

The study site, Lincoln High School (a pseudonym), was located in Midwestern United States. The school district was selected because of its demographic diversity and the increased likelihood of offering AP courses of various topics to address the multiple interests of the student body. Lincoln High School is a large campus located in an economically disadvantaged

neighborhood of the city. The school served nearly 1700 students. The school received a new building that was built in 2007. The school site had a 229,000 square footage campus, situated on 24 acres of land. There were 116 certified staff with 17% of the staff identified as minority. The administrative team consisted of five administrators. There were 5 counselors. Thirty-two percent of the staff held a master's degree or above. A full description of the school site is provided in chapter four.

### **Participant Selection**

I selected research participants that through their experiences and roles at Lincoln could best inform the research questions. A nonprobability selection process called purposeful sampling was used to identify research participants. S. Merriam (2009) described purposeful sampling as the selection of participants whom will be able to provide information to gain a deeper understanding of the phenomenon being studied. Patton (1990) also maintained that a goal in purposeful sampling is to collect data from information rich participants. Participants related to this study were purposefully sampled because of their rich knowledge and perspective on the student selection and enrollment process of college preparatory courses at their high school.

I shared with administration the criteria for interview participants should include 1) two groups of Advanced Placement teachers; 2) four to six groups of teachers that taught core subject areas to students in grades 11 and 12; 3) High school counselors involved in student course assignments for junior and senior students; and 4) Administrators responsible for implementation of policies and practices at Lincoln High School. A diversity of teaching experiences and ethnic backgrounds was preferred. Administration was able to purposefully select participants based upon the criteria.

There were a total of 35 participants interviewed for this study including two administrators and two counselors. The administrators and counselors were considered school leaders and were selected to participate in the research because of their role with enrollment and course placement. This was the first year at Lincoln for the entire administrative team and the first year of administration for one of the administrators. Another participant was completing his administrative internship this academic year.

Other participants included groups of teachers. There were a total of 30 teachers interviewed. An administrator assisted with selecting teachers that likely had knowledge of enrollment practices at the school. Two focus groups of AP teachers were interviewed for a total of eight Advanced Placement teachers. The AP teachers taught English, Literature, Chemistry, History, Government, Mathematics, and Art. The AP staff had teaching experiences ranging from one to eight years. These teachers were asked to participate because AP teachers define a profile of students they believe will likely be successful in their classrooms. These AP teachers also had rich knowledge of the students involved in the AP Program at Lincoln and the practices of how the students were assigned to their courses as well as a rich knowledge of criteria that may prevent students from participating in the AP program.

Other teacher groups purposefully selected for interviews were the English, Math, History and Geography, Science, Government, and Visual Arts Departments. Groups were comprised of three to five teachers that taught regular education courses from within the department. The teachers were invited to participate in the focus groups because of their vast experiences in making recommendations for future course placements for students. A total of 22 regular education teachers participated in the department focus group interviews. The sampling of teachers provided insights to enrollment practices and student identification into the AP

program at Lincoln. Each focus group comprised of teachers from their department only. I chose not to combine disciplines in order to have rich conversations from teachers on their experiences of student enrollment policies and practices within their department. All participants were asked to sign a consent form prior to their involvement in the study (see Appendix A for consent form). Table 1 contains a profile of the teacher participants.

Table 1

*Lincoln Teacher Participants*

Characteristics	AP	Art	English	Government	History	Math	Science
Number of Teachers	8	2	4	2	3	4	7
Gender	4 Female 4 Male	0 Female 2 Male	4 Female 0 Male	0 Female 2 Male	0 Female 3 Male	4 Female 0 Male	6 Female 1 Male
Ethnic Minority Participants	3	0	0	0	1	1	1

Lincoln High School has had a high rate of mobility among its staff. Many of the staff responsible for preparing students for the rigor of AP courses and for implementing school policies had less than five years of teaching experience. Table 2 includes the years of teaching experience for teacher participants.

Table 2

*Teaching Experience of Participants*

Number of Years' Experience	AP	Art	English	Government	History	Math	Science
1	2	0	1	0	0	1	2
2-3	2	0	2	2	1	0	2
4-5	1	0	0	0	1	1	0
More than 5	3	2	1	0	1	2	3

**Data Collection Plan**

Data collection for this study included semi-structured individual interviews, focus group interviews, and analysis of artifacts. The semi-structured individual interviews were meant to collect perceptual data from multiple individuals with expert knowledge and experiences with the school's college preparatory program and the enrollment process. My goal was to conduct focus group interviews that promoted group dialogue focused on college preparatory programs and the school's enrollment practices. As interviews were conducted and data collected, emerging data identified the need to analyze additional artifacts in order to triangulate the data. In addition, follow up individual interviews occurred with two participants as information they shared during their initial interviews was insightful and I believed they would be able to provide additional information to answer the study's questions.

**Individual interviews.** This study included individual interviews with four of the school's administrators and counselors, as they were responsible for scheduling courses and enrolling students. An interview was also conducted with an administrative intern. These individuals were selected because of their inside knowledge of school structures and practices on how students were selected for AP courses. They were aware of class selections, program tracks, and the enrollment process for their students. They interpreted policies and determined how guidelines were to be implemented. Open-ended interview questions were carefully designed to gain their perceptions of AP course accessibility for all students and how policies and the school practices influence student assignment to the program. I elected to conduct individual interviews with administrators and counselors because it provided flexibility to empower the participants to shape the interview (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). Each individual interview took place at the high school, and lasted approximately 45-60 minutes. The interview protocol and questions can be found in Appendix B.

**Focus group interviews.** The focus groups were semi-structured interviews with eight small groups of teachers. I interviewed teachers because they often make course placement recommendations that influence academic tracks for students. I conducted six focus group interviews comprised of regular education teachers from core subject areas. Each group consisted of 3-6 participants. The teacher groups included art, English, government, history, math, and science. Each group was comprised of teachers from only the content area taught. Often, these participants were actively involved in making student course placement recommendations. The other two focus groups were comprised of teachers who teach AP courses, with one group comprised of five teachers and the other group included three teachers. Critical questions were designed to gain an understanding of how teachers perceived policies and



the school's practices in assigning students to AP courses. Focus groups can be useful when participants have an opportunity to listen to the experiences of other participants and are able to make comments beyond their own original responses (Patton, 1990). Teachers at Lincoln discussed in collaborative department team settings student data and other criteria to determine course recommendations. I selected focus groups for the teachers because I wanted their dialogue to be interactive on their range of experiences with recommending students for enrollment into AP courses. The focus groups interviews were held at the high school, were digitally recorded, and lasted approximately 45-60 minutes. The focus group protocol and questions can be found in Appendix C.

**Document review.** Prior to conducting interviews, I collected documents about Lincoln High School, the school district, and The College Board. Some of the documents included the school's handbook, staff rosters, the school fact sheet, grant documents, state assessment scores, the district handbook and several reports conducted annually by The College Board on its AP program. A Lincoln administrator assisted me in providing school artifacts, which included the school fact sheet, staff roster, and the school report card.

Documents proved to be a valuable source of data in this qualitative study. Glaser and Strauss (1967) indicated document review is no different than qualitative interviews. Unanswered questions, emerging data, and educated hunches guided the type of documents I needed for analysis. The documents provided another opportunity to triangulate the data. Policies and enrollment guidelines were some of the artifacts analyzed to identify "reinforcing patterns of privilege and oppression" (Schensul, 2012, p. 76) of the equity of advanced academic course accessibility.

## **Data Analysis and Interpretation**

Data analysis for this study started immediately with the collection of artifacts and while in the field conducting interviews. Interpretation of the data is the process for making meaning and understanding the phenomenon being explored (Kea, Trent, & Davis, 2002). A systematic, ongoing process of analyzing the data occurred with this study.

All artifacts collected were read thoroughly multiple times and I highlighted pertinent information related to enrollment, student demographic and points of pride of the school. While reading and highlighting facts, I took copious notes. Next I highlighted reoccurring themes in my notes. The highlighted themes were transferred to an Excel spreadsheet and I organized my handwritten notes under each theme.

As an effort to provide accurate documentation in this study, all individual and focus group interviews were audio recorded and notes taken to ensure transcription accuracy. All recordings from focus groups and individual interviews were transcribed verbatim. Data analysis occurred during transcription of audio recordings. The process of listening attentively and thinking interpretively about the information being transcribed is an integral step in qualitative analysis (Merriam, 1998). While listening attentively to each transcription, I listened to reoccurring themes and jotted the information down in a notebook.

I thoroughly read all of my notes, transcriptions, and documents through the lens of my theoretical framework, CDA, highlighting information that provided insights into the participants' perceptions related to equity and accessibility to the AP program. The data was unitized by chunking the information into small units. Erlandson (2000) described unitizing as disaggregating information so it can stand alone as independent information from the broader context that may be present in the data. The individual units of information were then entered

into an Excel spreadsheet. The unitized data was organized on three separate pages within the spreadsheet. The excel pages were labeled individual interviews, focus group interviews, and artifact data.

Next, the process of analyzing all unitized data occurred by thoroughly reading all of the information in the excel spreadsheet. I identified common themes that were classified into categories related to the questions asked in the protocol. Classification of the data according to themes allowed future opportunities for comparing the data. Ryan and Bernard (1999) suggested themes are discovered through an inductive approach of scrutinizing the data and from the researchers understanding of the phenomenon being studied. Another way I identified themes was to look for reoccurring topics. Next, identified themes were narrowed to the few most important categories. I then connected the categories to CDA, the theoretical framework. The themes connected to the analysis of policies, practices, and power and dominance within the high school. Next, codes were assigned to the categories that were identified. The features of the excel spreadsheet allowed me to filter and sort data according to codes. I sorted data according to the reoccurring themes related to school personnel's perspectives of equity policies, policy implementation, and students' access to AP programs. The sorting process allowed me to compare the similar and different comments of participants and triangulate with data collected from artifacts. As I compared and contrasted the unitized data, I took copious notes and reflected on the meaning of the data and what occurred at Lincoln. I created a listing of direct quotes that were pertinent to the important themes identified and organized the quotes in a matrix table. The intentional thought process of reviewing the data to identify the reoccurring themes was the process of interpreting and analyzing the data. The interpretation and analysis of data lead to identifying findings and developing conclusions. Codes were necessary for analysis in order to

write the findings. I was able to identify emerging data during the analysis process and it required me to follow up with additional interviews with participants and the collection of additional documents for review. The interpretation of data revealed if there were gaps in policies and school practices that provide access to AP classrooms.

### **Research Positionality**

Lather (2004) stated an open ideological study provides the opportunity to gain an understanding of a phenomenon by challenging inequalities, yet aiming for transformation. The validity of value-based studies is often critiqued by scholars skeptical of the accuracy of ideological studies because of the perceived influences of the researcher's personal biases and the belief of lack of data credibility (LeCompte & Goetz, 1982; Madaus & Clarke, 2001).

Although a positivist approach would include the collection of neutral and objective quantitative data, critical ethnographers validate their data through the implementation of self-correcting techniques (Garcia & Guerra, 2004; James P. Spillane, Halverson, & Diamond, 2001).

Researchers who adopt an openly ideological approach make meaning of the phenomenon through the revelation of participants' perception of reality. I strengthened the validity of the findings by employing systematic steps to analyze and interpret the data (Correa, Blanes-Reyes, & Rapport, 1996; Garcia & Guerra, 2004). I recognized my assumptions related to inequities in student access to rigorous education programs inspired my desire to research this topic further.

This study had personal significance to me because of the multiple positions I hold, who I am, and what I believe. I am an educator, an administrator, and an educational researcher. I'm also an African American mother of a high school student and I'm extremely passionate in providing fair opportunities for all students to succeed in education. Due to the multiple positions I've held and my personal experiences, there were some assumptions that I had related

to educational equality. I have encountered challenges as a parent with my child having the opportunity to access advanced curriculum and programs. As an educator, I have witnessed traditional enrollment and placement practices that excluded some student groups from receiving the course prerequisites and the information needed in order to be able to enroll in rigorous, advanced academic programs. I elected to conduct a critical study because I had some assumptions that there was a presence of power and dominance in our society. While conducting an ideological study, it was critical to be consciously aware of my subjectivity. My experiences should provide insight to the study and not hinder it. Strauss and Corbin (1967) described personal experiences brought to a study as experiential data and stated this type of data can be valuable because of the insights and hypothesis brought to the study. Yet it's important to be aware of personal biases so they did not obstruct the validity of the study. Reflexivity was a strategy I employed to enhance the trustworthiness of the data collected. Erlandson (2000) described reflexivity occurs when the researcher is consciously aware of their beliefs and experiences related to the study and extremely intent in not allowing their personal biases to influence the research findings.

It was critical that I recognized my subjectivity based on my own experiences, professionally and personally, and that I was not presumptive in what I believed the data would reveal. The incorporation of self-correcting techniques was crucial in order to enhance the creditability of the data collected and lessen the influence of any personal bias (Garcia & Guerra, 2004). Some steps I enacted in order to guard against my personal subjectivity included examination of multiple samples, self-examination, and peer debriefing. Some of the data examples examined included interview transcripts, enrollment data, and policies. As data was reviewed, emerging data guided what additional data samples should be collected and analyzed.

A collection of my thoughts, findings, and action steps were kept in a reflexive journal. I requested a peer to read and reflect with me on the information written in my journal. In addition, I participated in debriefing conversations on two separate occasions. The first conversation occurred immediately after completing the initial round of interviews and then next after I interpreted all data examples. The reflective conversations with a certified cognitive coach allowed me to process data with someone not involved in study and begin to identify themes, sort out data analysis steps. The written journal and debriefing conversations guided me to analyze my own thinking and assisted me in staying focused on what the data told me.

Self-reflecting was helpful for me to determine if my actions as a researcher were consistent with where the study should go and not based upon my directives of trying to guide the study. Then lastly, my role in this study was to critically analyze the data and be open to what it revealed. I entered this study with presumptions and some of them were present in the data collected and analyzed, however the interpretation of the data presented information that I did not expect. A critical ethnographer attempts to explain, yet advocate for equitable alternatives to the problem (Castagno, 2012). Although I was the instrument in my research, I wanted the findings to truly reflect the perspectives of the participants in the study and for the study to contribute to solutions based on the findings.

### **Research Quality**

A goal of mine was to report credible and valid findings of this study. Maxwell (2004) suggested the implementation of a variety of validity strategies to address plausible interpretations and credibility threats to the study's results and conclusions. I employed several strategies to ensure research quality, including member checking, triangulation of the data, and internal reliability. Internal reliability is strengthened when specific vocabulary is used to

describe data and using direct quotes when possible (Kruse & Kruse, 1995). Using rich description to explain the data collected, findings, and conclusions are procedures to increase the reliability of the investigation (Creswell & Miller, 2000).

I used member checking to increase credibility and validity to this study. Member checking occurs when the researcher provides the participant an opportunity to review the transcript to provide clarification and the necessary corrections if warranted. Also, during individual and focus group interviews, I summarized the overall discussion and notes taken and provided participants an opportunity to clarify any responses. The purpose of this process was to ensure that I accurately understood the information gathered from the participants and the data collected adequately represented the views of the participants (S. Merriam, 2009).

Research quality also occurred through the process of triangulation of data and methods (Schensul, 2012). In this study individual and group interviews with a variety of participants and the review of various artifacts increased the trustworthiness of the study. The multiple data sources allowed me to make meaning of the phenomenon by analyzing the similarities and contrasts of the data. Lather (2004) stated seeking to establish counter-patterns as well as convergences in data analysis provides reliability to the data. I triangulated data by comparing and contrasting multiple sources of data including interviews with administrators, counselors, AP teachers and regular education teachers, as well analysis of multiple types of documents to identify emerging findings. The process of triangulating data revealed how the different information from data complemented one another in order to deepen the understanding of the phenomenon being studied.

The findings guided me toward needed follow up interviews with two participants and the collection of additional district artifacts related college preparatory guidelines in order to

further triangulate the data and increase trustworthiness of the study. Bogdan and Biklen (1998) explained follow up data collection occurs because additional interviews are necessary due to emerging data or when individuals with different perspectives are interviewed. Sometimes the findings will converge together, however sometimes the data collected from interviews and artifact analysis reveals contradictions.

The research design, including the type of protocols and methods used, impacts the quality of the research. Interview protocols were designed and used with all participants. Protocols provided consistency and stability to the interviews. Ongoing comparative methods of the data occurred because of the dependability of following protocols during each interview with participants. Moore, Lapan, and Quartaroli (2012) have recommended field testing protocols and questions prior to conducting the study. I piloted my questions with a school leader not associated with this study in order to evaluate the questions effectiveness. Peer reviews and departmental faculty were able to assist in reviewing the study design and providing feedback to increase the trustworthiness of the study.

This study received approval from the Institution Review Board (IRB) to provide an independent review to ensure protection of all participants and the study was ethically appropriate. I reviewed the consent form and provided a copy of the form to each participant prior to the interview. Recordings, transcripts, and notes are secured in an online, password-protected program. Consent forms will be stored in the office of the Principal Investigator on the campus of WSU and kept for three years. Involvement in the research was voluntary and all participants were promised confidentiality.



## **CHAPTER 4**

### **Findings**

This chapter highlights findings derived from the analysis of data collected during the study, which were individual and focus group interviews; and the review of AP policies, enrollment and program documents. The data was organized according to categories and themes (S. B. Merriam, 2009). The findings focused on three themes: 1) enrollment, 2) criteria for student placement and 3) implementation practices. The enrollment findings encompassed policies established by the College Board, the state department of education, the local school district, Lincoln High School. Lincoln's school personnel determined criteria they perceived essential for student placement and the school's implementation practices of student identification and enrollment practices were also described by the staff's perception.

#### **Lincoln High School**

Lincoln High School is located in an urban school district in the Midwest. According to the state department of education's website, the district's student demographic population is comprised of 34% White, 33% Hispanic and 18% African American. Over 75% of their students were identified as economically disadvantaged. In August 2013, Lincoln High School had nearly 1,700 students enrolled and was comprised of, 62% Hispanic, 18% White, 11% African American, 7% American Indian, and 1% are identified as other, which included Asian and multiracial. The school was comprised of 49% female students and 51% male students. Over eighty percent of Lincoln High School students were identified as economically disadvantaged, which means they qualify for free or reduced school fees. English Language Learners (ELL) services were provided for the 31% of the students who meet the criteria for support. Nearly 16% of the students received special education services and 7% were identified as gifted and

talented. The high mobility of Lincoln's student population resulted in over 52% of the students exiting the school each year. The school offered a variety of career and college preparatory courses, including Junior Reserve Officers' Training Corps (JROTC), honors classes and 14 AP courses offered in six content areas. According to the school's fact sheet, in 2012 seniors qualified for \$153,000 in scholarships for post-secondary education. The average ACT composite score was 15.9.

### **Policies for Student Enrollment into AP Courses**

The College Board created equity guidelines to promote equal opportunity for all students to access the Advanced Placement program. Additionally, state and local policies and programs were established to align with AP guidelines. This section includes the findings from analysis of policy documents from The College Board, state board of education, the local school district, and Lincoln High School related to student opportunity to participate in AP.

#### **The College Board**

Policies and documents reviewed for this analysis were the 10<sup>th</sup> Annual AP Report to the Nation, published in 2014, The 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> Annual AP Reports to the Nation published in 2013, the 2011-2014 Advanced Placement Exam-Taking and Performance report, and the College Board website.

The Board proclaimed the Advanced Placement Program's success is in part because of the collaborative partnership between universities, school districts, and the College Board; and the partnership develops, delivers and evaluates AP. According to the College Board, the rigorous, college level coursework provides myriad positive outcomes. The College Board claimed when comparing AP students to their peers, typically students scoring three or higher on the exam, have

- Higher college GPAs
- Perform as well or better in college courses in the discipline than non AP students who took the introductory college course
- Are more likely to graduate from college within five years
- Have higher college graduation rates

**Annual reports.** The College Board published its 10<sup>th</sup> Annual Report in 2014 and it was comprised of multiple data on student AP participation and exams taken. The 10<sup>th</sup> Annual Report indicated, “All students who are academically ready for the rigor of AP- no matter their location, background, or socioeconomic status – have the right to fulfill that potential.” Ten years of data were compiled in the 10<sup>th</sup> Annual Report and it concluded initiatives across the nation to increase access for underrepresented groups have nearly quadrupled the number of students from poverty having an opportunity to participate in the AP program. The 10<sup>th</sup> Annual Report included testimonies from high school administrators and staff that have implemented initiatives to identify and recruit students from underrepresented groups with potential into the program. Despite the celebrations of minority and poor students accessing AP more than ever before, the College Board website admitted there continues to be an opportunity gap in all students with the potential to be successful accessing the program. The organization indicated the ongoing efforts to increase opportunities for access must be addressed through policymakers, educators, and the College Board working collaboratively.

**Opportunity gaps.** The 10<sup>th</sup> Annual Report highlighted the opportunity gap that African American and economically disadvantaged high school students were the most underrepresented groups of AP enrollees. Hispanic and American Indian students who have the same AP readiness as Asian and White students are also significantly less likely to participate in the AP

program. The Equity and Access Policy includes a weak statement related to access by stating “We encourage the elimination of barriers that restrict access to AP for students from ethnic, racial and socioeconomic groups that have been traditionally underserved.” However there were only very generic suggestions on how to eliminate these barriers.

Students enrolled in AP courses have the option of taking an AP exam for the course completed. Data from the 10<sup>th</sup> Annual Report showed an accessibility gap in who is taking AP exams. The 2013 high school graduation class of AP exam takers was comprised of 9% African American students, 19% were Hispanic students and 56% of all exam takers were White students. Although over 48% of all U.S. public school students met the qualification for free or reduced lunch and fees, they made up only 27% of all AP exam takers.

The AP Equity and Access Policy stated “all schools should make every effort to ensure their AP classes reflect the diversity of their student population,” but it also pointed out that all schools should prepare students for the academically challenging course work prior to enrollment into Advanced Placement. The College Board contended there was an increase in the diversity of students participating in AP, however there continued to be an equity gap between the College Board guidelines and the reality of who was accessing the AP program. According to the equity policy, “Promoting equity and excellence in education is the cornerstone of the College Board’s mission.” In 2013, the annual report stated the number of students accessing AP had doubled. The report further indicated African American students remained the most underrepresented student group participating in AP and were the least successful group of exam takers. Less than one-half of African American students that qualified for free and reduced lunch fees took AP exams. Middle class and White students were the most represented AP exam takers. Disproportionately, White students accessed AP coursework and benefited from exams in

comparison to all other student groups. According to the College Board's data, in most subject areas, African American, Hispanic, and Native students who had the same AP readiness as their white peers were significantly less likely to participate in the AP program in comparison to White students.

### **State Policies**

The state department of education's website provided access to 2013 Annual Report to Governor, school report cards, and Advanced Placement Incentive Program documents. These documents were reviewed to gain insight on state policies related to student access to the AP program. The policies were accompanied by an Advanced Placement resource page which contained documents for school districts to consider when determining AP placement, grant applications, professional development documents, and links to the College Board's website.

According to AP Incentive documents, the policy on student placement in AP courses indicated that schools should create a listing of students with potential to succeed in Advanced Placements. It further provided guidelines school districts should use to predict students' likelihood of success in AP by analysis of standardized assessment scores. The state was in agreement with the College Board that Preliminary SAT/National Merit Scholarship Qualifying Test PSAT/ NMSQT scores are an excellent predictor of a student's likelihood to be successful in AP. The College Board maintained the PSAT/ NMSQT scores are more strongly correlated predictors of AP success (The College Board, 2012b). The PSAT/ NMSQT, perhaps not coincidentally, are exams also owned by The College Board. The state also recommended schools use the 10<sup>th</sup> Grade ACT Plan to predict success of students likely to do well in AP. The Plan is an assessment owned by American College Testing (ACT) and its purpose is to provide guidance for college readiness and college entrance exams. According to the ACT website, the Plan

assessment identifies areas of strength and weakness, and is a predictor of how students may perform on the ACT exam and plan for the future. The ACT college entrance exam is a competitor for the SAT exam owned by the College Board. High school students in the state taking the ACT outnumber those who take the SAT. The state policy included a chart that can be used by schools to predict AP scores based upon 10<sup>th</sup> grade students Plan scores. The state department's mission statement on AP indicated school districts should provide the rigorous course offerings to prepare students for admission to higher education.

According to the state department of education's Advanced Placement Incentive Program school districts were expected to submit an annual report to the state department of education. The report is to include 1) the number of students taking AP, 2) the number of exams taken by students, 3) the number of exams that receive a score of 3 or better, 4) the number of sites offering AP, 5) the number of students who received financial assistance for exams, and 6) an evaluation of the cost of AP versus the benefits of the program. The state department awarded schools annual grants to assist with the financial costs of AP exams, trainings, materials and equipment, and AP vertical team planning, which is intentional planning and development that takes place with high school AP teachers and middle school honors and pre AP teachers. The state grants ranged from \$1000 to \$25,000 each. During the 2012-2013 academic year a total of 93 grants were awarded. Some schools received individual grants for student exam fees, staff trainings, materials, or funding for team planning. Other schools received a combination of grants to support their AP programs. There was an application process to be considered for the annual grants. Lincoln had not received state grant funds in recent years. It was unknown if Lincoln had applied for the grant during the tenure of previous administrators.

**State grade card.** Annually, students in grades 3 through high school were required to complete standardized assessments provided by the state department of education. Each public school and school district received letter grades in areas to rate students' performance in meeting and exceeding academic standards, students' attendance rate, high school graduation percentages and the percentage of students' making continuous academic progress. In 2012 Lincoln High School received a Final Grade of C. The school received its highest rating of an A in the area of Advanced Coursework Participation, while receiving failing grades in the areas of IB/AP Exam Participation and College Entrance Exam Performance. While in 2012, the overall student achievement growth increased 17% from 2011. The overall student performance grade for 2011 was rated a D, 69%, due to only 33% of the students' assessed performing proficient or above in reading and math. Lincoln's low performance on state standardized assessments resulted in the school receiving academic sanctions and identified as a Turnaround school. After three years of state imposed sanctions, the school improved students' academic performance on the assessments and was no longer a Turnaround school. The 2013 final school grade according to the state department of education was a B+. The school received their highest grades in the areas of English and Algebra. Their lowest grades were in the areas of biology and college preparation.

### **District Policies**

Documents and policies reviewed were found in the Parent and Student Handbook, published in 2013, the district Fact Sheet, published in 2013, the District Grade Card, published in 2013, the 2013-2014 District Strategic Plan, and the district website. The documents were analyzed to identify the district's position on enrollment and placement into college preparatory

programs, specifically any guidelines that promoted equity access to programs that traditionally have been controlled by middle class white students.

**College and career readiness.** The district’s strategic plan emphasized schools shall create a college or career path for all students. The district’s strategic plan stated “All students will graduate prepared for success in college and/or their chosen career path.” The district website included several guidelines to support college preparedness to include implementing mandatory college and ACT preparatory courses. One guideline stated parents/guardians will be involved in the academic planning for students. Another guideline was all high schools will transition to a career academy concept.

The 2013-2014 Student-Parent Handbook described career academies offered by the school district. The academies were designed for students entering high school to be able to select a career path of engineering, health sciences, hospitality and tourism, finance, information technology, or law and public safety. The different career paths were offered at various high schools within the district. If the career path program of student interest was not offered at the high school in their attendance area, the student may apply for a transfer to attend the high school with the desired career path. Attendance transfers were reviewed annually and approved by district administration based upon students’ attendance and academic performance. Schools with career paths offered specialty and college preparatory courses to support the career focus. Lincoln High School, one of the poorest schools in the school district, did not offer a career path program. It is unknown when a career academy may be added to Lincoln High School.

**Graduation requirements.** The school district developed a Degree Flow chart to determine which classes students should be assigned to for graduation requirements. The Degree Flow was a district wide policy that allowed students to select from three separate diploma



tracks, one titled Core Curriculum Requirement and two different tracks titled College Preparatory Curriculum. Counselors referred to the Degree Flow as a checklist that they followed when assigning students to courses. Most teachers were aware there was a Degree Flow but knew very little about any course requirements outside of their content department. Several teachers were not aware the Degree Flow included separate tracks and that college preparatory diplomas were even an option for their students. One English teacher noted “my kid attends another high school in our district and they have choices on getting different types of diplomas depending on if they are college bound. I don’t think we offer that here at Lincoln.” The Degree Flow tracks impacted students’ post high school decisions.

The Core Curriculum Requirement provided a listing of all high school courses that students must successfully complete in order to obtain a standard diploma. There were a total of 23 units or 46 credits needed in order to receive the diploma. Successful completion of coursework for the standard diploma fulfilled the requirements to receive a diploma and graduate; however, not all courses included in this curriculum track were aligned with requirements for college admission. Students that earned a standard diploma, likely would lack some courses required for admission to state universities. Parents, guardians, or students at the age of 18 could opt out the pursuit of the other type of diplomas in order to complete a standard diploma. A student not planning to attend college, yet wanting to earn a high school diploma could take the basic high school required courses to receive a standard diploma. The standard diploma was completed by students with plans to enter the work force after high school graduation.

The second and third tracks were both titled College Preparatory Curriculum. Both diplomas were aligned with the requirements for admission to state colleges and universities.

The first, College Preparatory Curriculum was sometimes referred to as a work or technical ready track diploma. This high school diploma track built on the State Regents' curricular admission requirements and included a few honors and advanced coursework. This track had 23 units or 46 credits for completion and was intended for students considering technical or local colleges upon graduation.

The other College Preparatory Curriculum allowed students to earn a certificate of distinction. Students that completed this track successfully earned 24 units or 48 credits. Several of the core subjects included honors, International Baccalaureate (IB), AP, or dual credit coursework and additional electives in the area of fine arts, technology, or humanities. Students earned a 3.25 grade point average (GPA) on a 4.0 scale on the required core coursework (English, math, science and history). The second College Preparatory Curriculum was intended for students that sought to earn several college credit hours while in high school and presented their high school transcript as a competitive collegiate candidate.

The Lincoln High School Counselors mainly discussed using the Core Curriculum Requirement for the standard diploma as the checklist used for their students. Due to students' backgrounds, counselors' perceived success occurred when students were able to obtain the standard diploma and graduate from high school. "Most of our kids will be first generation graduates. Most of their parents not only didn't graduate, but they didn't even go to high school," shared a counselor. For these students, earning the standard diploma was seen as an accomplishment. A counselor mentioned that Lincoln's highest performing students often earned the college preparatory diplomas instead of the standard diploma. It was also perceived that other high schools in the district, especially schools that offered career academies, were more likely to have students graduate with a college preparatory diploma.

## **College and Career Preparedness Grant**

In 2013-2014, Lincoln High School was awarded \$450,000 in grant funds from a private foundation to expand and enhance their Advanced Placement Program. An expectation of the three-year career and college preparedness grant was to increase the number of underrepresented students enrolled in AP courses and passing AP exams. During the first year of implementation, it was expected that Lincoln High School would increase the number of AP courses offered by at least 164% and result in a significant increase in the number of students receiving qualifying scores on the AP exam.

The career and college preparation grant source credited their organization in helping schools expand AP access to underprivileged students. According to the grant application, “There’s a huge bias that assumes kids in inner-city schools can’t handle AP courses, but this program shows you can triple or quadruple the high school students taking AP courses in one year.” These career and college preparation grants have been awarded to six other high schools across this Midwestern state. Prior to the six schools partnering with the grant organization, African American, Hispanic, and female students accounted for 15.9% of passing scores on AP English, math, and science exams in the state. At the end of the implementation year, the state department of education reported a 24% increase in the number of minorities and females received passing scores on Advanced Placement exams. The education commissioner attributed the significant increase of underrepresented students enrolled into AP programs to the grant schools’ intentional focus on identifying African American and Hispanic students with potential and assigning them to the program.

Most teacher participants were not aware of specific requirements of the grant. Many shared they believed the main expectations of the grant were 1) to increase the enrollment of

minority and poor students, 2) require teachers to attend summer training, 3) to increase the number of AP classes offered at their school. In addition to the expectation of expanding the number of AP courses offered, the grant paid for all staff teaching AP courses in the areas of science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM) to attend a summer institute to prepare them for the required rigorous instruction for their courses. The College Board required all AP teachers to complete the summer training in order to teach an AP course. Several teachers expressed a desire to attend the rigorous summer institute even though they did not teach an AP course. “I hear you walk away [from the summer institute] really knowing how to really challenge students,” noted a regular education English teacher. Other regular education teachers commented they had a desire to attend AP trainings in order to increase the rigor in their classrooms. AP teachers concurred that the summer institutes could be beneficial for all teachers. “Attending the [AP] training is a great learning experience and it will definitely help all of the kids” noted an AP teacher. Teachers that had attended the training commented the intense learning deepened their understanding of the meaning of rigor. “You understand how rigorous it really is when you go to those classes for yourself” commented a science AP teacher. Regular education teachers acknowledged that there was a higher level of rigor expected in AP classrooms in comparison to most regular education rooms. Yet, several teachers agreed academic rigor could be increased in their classrooms if they had the same type of resources and trainings as AP teachers. “I think AP training should be mandatory for all teachers. I hear what AP is doing in their classes and it’s something we could be doing in our rooms” stated a social studies teacher.

Other grant requirements included giving Advanced Placement STEM students access to tutoring; and ensuring underrepresented students were accessing AP courses significantly more

in comparison to the numbers accessing the program in the past. Teachers from the STEM content areas were financially compensated for providing tutoring services and attending the summer training. Some teachers were aware that the grant teachers were paid to provide tutoring to students. The career and college preparation grant was STEM focused, and teachers that taught content areas other than science, technology, engineering and technology did not receive financial compensation or trainings paid through the grant.

**Lincoln's grant participation.** There has been a significant increase in the number of poor and minority students taking AP courses at Lincoln since the implementation of the grant. In 2012, a total of 94 students were enrolled in the six AP courses offered at Lincoln. Since receiving the grant, in one year, the AP program was expanded dramatically to 14 courses. A requirement of the national grant awarded to the school was to expand the AP courses in the areas of science, technology, engineering and mathematical (STEM). Staff were hired to support the additional eight STEM classrooms. All AP teachers that had not previously completed the summer institute attended the training. The explosion in the number of AP courses offered during the 2013-14 school year can be partially attributed to the vision of the current principal, but mainly because the school received the career preparation grant.

According to school data, during the 2012-2013 school year, 19% of the students at Lincoln High School participated in the AP program and 20% of the AP students had passing scores on the Advanced Placement exam. During 2013-14, enrollment in the AP program increased to 29%. Although exam taking was not a requirement of students who participated in the AP program, teachers shared they highly encouraged all of their students to take the AP exams. In addition, the grant provided test fee assistance for students enrolled in AP STEM courses. All AP STEM students that qualified for free lunch had exam fees waived. Students

that qualified for reduced lunch qualified for reduced exam fees and were responsible for \$15 of the regular \$89 cost for each exam. The school retained an \$8 rebate for each exam taken.

### **Lincoln High School Policies**

Lincoln High School does not have a formal school-wide policy for identifying and assigning students to the AP program; however school personnel described the unwritten enrollment guideline as open enrollment. Staff defined open enrollment as unrestricted access for all students with interest to participate in the AP program. “If a student shows interest [in AP courses] and if it fits in their schedule; they are placed in the class” explained a language arts teacher. All staff interviewed perceived the AP program was accessible to all students. A government teacher commented, “If the student has interest and they are willing to work for it, we explain the guidelines and we recommend them into the class regardless of the guidelines.” Guidelines were subjective and varied according to different staff members. School administrators indicated written policies were not in place because students who had a desire to be in the AP program could access it, that is, “Any student who wants to be a part of AP can take a class” asserted an administrator.

Although the enrollment process has been labeled as open, participants agreed there were exceptions to the open enrollment policy. Many teachers perceived there was not clear communication of how students were selected for the AP program. Some teachers believed it was counselor driven. For example, one science teacher noted, “The process is being handled more by the counselors than the teachers.” The criteria counselors used to make placement decisions were unclear to teachers. A history teacher commented, “I don’t know how counselors determine who belongs in which class. At times it just feels like counselors were assigning kids to class.” Several teachers perceived counselors’ course assignment decisions were arbitrary and

not based on internal and external factors that influence student success. Other teachers shared their belief that counselors were the gatekeepers for student assignments and the criteria for AP placement relied mainly on counselors' review of the student's previous assessment scores and the school's master schedule. Teachers from other departments discussed specific experiences of student placement that was determined by counselors sometimes but did not always include teacher recommendations.

At times, school administrators asked teachers for recommendations. Advanced Placement teachers also relied on other teachers to make recommendations related to student placement. "When I have students speak to me about being in my class, I often go to their teachers from last year to see if they would recommend them," expressed an AP teacher. AP teachers also taught core content courses. They met as a content department, often discussed student performance as a team, and made recommendations for placement.

### **Staff Perceptions about Criteria for Student Placement into AP Program**

School personnel perceptions about criteria for student placement into the AP program were similar amongst those in common positions such as the teachers from all content departments had common criteria they perceived were the best guidelines to determine student success for course assignments. Counselors were similar in their perceptions related to enrollment guidelines and the administrators were supportive in placement decisions made by the counselors. Teachers often discussed student placement recommendations at their content department meetings. Although the specifics of student placement processes varied slightly with each department, there were themes that were very consistent with all teachers. Counselors perceived making student course placements was an integral component of their position and the criterion they considered differed from other stakeholders. Administrators were the gatekeepers

that held the most power, yet their criteria for student placement were dependent on the practices of the counselors and teachers.

### **Core Teachers' Perceptions**

Although several teachers mentioned counselors were the primary decision makers in determining AP enrollment, all teacher groups believed their recommendations for student placement should be the core criteria when determining student assignment into the AP program. Teachers strongly felt their recommendations were vital in the AP enrollment process because they knew their students better than any other enrollment decision makers. Their recommendations were based upon their knowledge of students' intrinsic motivation as well as external factors that influenced student success. Teachers often described students' motivation and grades were the greatest influences in their recommendation for student placement into the AP program.

**Motivation.** Student motivation and willingness to commit to the rigorous demands of an AP course were the main criteria teachers considered when identifying students for the program. All teacher groups believed there was a direct correlation between academic success and student motivation. "Students, who are motivated, do their homework, make good grades and can take on new challenges, benefit the most from AP courses" shared a math teacher. Each teacher focus group described the motivated learner as the student that goes above and beyond what is expected. According to teachers, students that lack motivation will struggle in AP courses because they were not driven to take on the new challenge. An English teacher stated, "If a student is not a motivated learner, they should not be placed in AP." Motivation clearly was one of the most important criterion teachers considered when making AP recommendations. Another teacher commented, "Motivation is the greatest factor for AP success." The motivated



learner was described as the student who was focused on attaining the best grades possible, had an idea of a career path, and was driven to achieve it. Teachers stated students expressed motivation in their learning through active engagement in class, asking questions, showing interest in topics learned, and completing their homework.

**Academic achievement.** Good grades and a history of performing well on high stakes and other standardized assessments were other criteria teachers considered when recommending students for placement into AP. According to several teachers, many of the students that struggled in AP courses were students who did not have high grade point averages (GPAs) or high performance on high stakes standardized tests before being placed in the course. School personnel noted students with a history of good grades were more likely to be successful in AP than other students. “Students with good grades are usually the students with good study habits and study habits are essential in AP success” said a teacher. Another teacher noted, “I jokingly refer to those students I recommend as the nerd herd. These children are focused on getting the best grades possible.” Furthermore, teachers were aware of students’ performance on the high stakes state assessment. Teachers perceived students that had not passed the state assessments or had not performed extremely well on the assessment were not likely to be candidates they would recommend for the AP program.

**Home life.** Teachers reported being aware of factors outside of school that could impede students’ academic success. They believed other enrollment gatekeepers may not always have an awareness of the home life influences that impacted students’ academic performance. Teachers believed they were aware when home life challenges interfered with students being successful at school. This was noted by an English teacher,

AP classes, it really needs to hinge on the teacher's recommendation because the teacher is going to be the one that has worked with the student all year long. And as teachers we're the ones that recognize why students are not living up to their fullest potential. Teachers typically discussed students' home life as a potential barrier for AP success. AP participation requires nightly homework and teachers perceived students' home life responsibilities interfered with the time needed to complete rigorous course requirements. It was a common perception amongst teachers that many of their students had home responsibilities that would hinder their ability to participate in AP. "Those kids have too much going on to do well in AP," remarked a math teacher. Teachers perceived they were able to identify students with busy home life responsibilities because of their interactions with students. A teacher expounded upon being aware of students' personal issues that affected their success in AP classes,

I know what their home life is like. Do they have siblings to take care of? Do they work in the evenings? Is their home life stable or chaotic? All of these situations factor whether a student will be able to handle the additional workload of AP classes.

The other teacher participants in the focus group nodded in agreement. Teachers unanimously conveyed their daily interaction with students provided them with the information needed to determine if a student was likely to be successful in AP. They perceived their role in recommending students as instrumental in identifying students who could be successful in the program.

### **Advanced Placement Teachers' Perceptions**

AP teachers described characteristics of students they believed would be successful in their classrooms. They also relied on the recommendations of students' previous teachers to identify the best students for the program. They defined their ideal AP student as confident and

self-driven. The student “does well because they want to do well and they want to please their teachers,” answered an AP teacher. Other AP teachers agreed with the characterization that ideal AP students were confident learners eager to impress their teachers with their performance. One teacher concurred, “The ones that seem to do the best are the ones that, you know, are the ones you can convince to, like, run through a brick wall for you.” AP teachers agreed the successful student in their classroom entered the AP program with intrinsic motivation to excel academically and took responsibility for their learning. Although intrinsic motivation was a common criterion for all teachers, clearly, AP teachers wanted students that were academically prepared for the rigor of AP coursework and who did not require explicit instruction of skills. AP teachers desired students that were self-directed learners capable of taking previous skills learned and applying them to new and more challenging context. “I would say the ideal AP student is the one that enters my classroom with a strong academic background. They just need me to stretch them,” shared an AP teacher. Advanced Placement teachers concurred their ideal student was an independent learner, an advanced critical thinker, and had good study habits.

### **Counselors’ Perceptions**

School counselors explained their role as multifaceted in the enrollment process at Lincoln High School. Counselors were aware of the push to increase AP enrollment due to the grant and have assigned almost all students that have expressed an interest to participate in the program. Yet, counselors’ descriptions of the student enrollment process differed from the perception of teachers. School counselors explained criteria they considered for student placement hinged on 1) graduation requirements, 2) master schedules 3) and career and college counseling.

**Graduation requirements.** High school counselors were solely responsible for monitoring each student's course credits. High school graduation requirements have been established by state and district policies and Lincoln counselors monitored students' successful completion of courses to ensure they were on track for graduation. The counselors referred to the Core Curriculum Requirement document provided by the school district as their guide in assigning student courses. The Core Curriculum Requirement provided an outline of course names and numbers that were required for a high school diploma. "The district form is a basic checklist that we follow to make sure students receive all the credits needed for graduation," noted a counselor. High school students were also required to score at the proficient level on at least four out of seven state assessments taken in ninth through twelfth grades. The assessments were administered at the completion of English, math, and science courses. If a student did not pass one of the high stakes assessments, a counselor stated "I am responsible for getting him in the right courses so when he takes the next test at the end of the course, he's ready." Counselors commented teachers may not always understand the reasoning behind student placement. "There are many factors we take in account when placing a student in a class and teachers may not always understand why we've assigned a student to their class," shared a counselor.

The master schedule, state assessments, and courses needed for graduation were among the factors counselors considered for student course assignment. According to counselors, monitoring successful completion of required high school courses and proficiency outcomes on state assessments determined which courses they selected to assign students to each semester. Students who had not earned the needed credits or had not passed the high stakes assessments were often assigned to intervention coursework in order to master skills.

**Master schedules.** Counselors discussed the master schedule at times created challenges with student placement. At Lincoln, the master schedule may include as many as 600 courses offered each semester. Although several courses were duplicates, there was still a domino effect when even one student needed a schedule change. When it is determined that a student needed to change one class, according to counselors, it was extremely challenging to place the students in all of the needed courses according to when the master schedule offered classes. “There have been times when we did multiple, multiple, multiple schedule adjustments, pulling them out of electives to get them in intervention classes in order to help them pass the assessments” noted a counselor. Although teachers made student placement recommendations, the counselors made the final enrollment decision after considering whether the placement aligns with the master schedule and other courses the counselor determined were needed. “Student assignments are determined upon student need and how it can fit within the master schedule,” stated a counselor. According to Lincoln’s counselors, course placement can be a scheduling nightmare due to the number of students they served, having qualified staff to teach courses, and the diverse needs of the student population. “It takes time to put together a schedule for a school this size,” acknowledged a counselor. Counselors shared they start working on the master schedule for the following school year as early as January of the previous year.

**Career and college counseling.** Another responsibility for Lincoln’s counselors was to provide career and college counseling to students. Counselors met with individual students and discussed career paths. A Lincoln High School counselor stated, “We are promoting college and career readiness more so -or maybe we’re just putting more of an emphasis on it.” Lincoln counselors noted when they assisted students with class selections; they talked about ACT exams and the benefits of having honors and AP courses on a student’s transcripts. Last year, they

invited Lincoln graduates, who now attend college, to return to speak to current high school seniors about their college experiences. There were college posters posted on the walls outside of the counselors' offices. Despite their efforts to promote college, counselors' perceived high achieving students with potential for success in college preparatory coursework elected to attend other high schools within the district. One counselor explained how Lincoln was put at a disadvantage,

We have so many at-risk kids that we have very few honor kids. And I say that because we have other high schools that are application schools [career academies]. Those schools have classes where if you have an aspiring student, then they apply to go to that school.

Counselors also perceived aspiring, high achieving students were more likely to earn college preparatory diplomas at other high schools in the district in comparison to the standard diploma that many of Lincoln students opted to receive. Moreover, Lincoln did not have any career academies that might attract students with academic potential.

### **Administrators' Perceptions**

Lincoln's administration reported that although they were ultimately responsible for the Advanced Placement program at their building, they were not involved in the day-to-day decisions related to student placement. School administrators who participated in the study were not aware of specificities of enrollment policies, either formal or informal. "Our counselors will be able to answer specific questions you have about the structure and student assignments," stated a school administrator. In addition, the administrator responsible for supervision of the AP program was unable to articulate any specificities regarding practices of the program or grant requirements. The administrator was helpful in providing names of other staff that may have

knowledge of the program and its requirements. The administrator indicated this was her first year at Lincoln and she also was learning about the program while supervising it and relied on counselors' enrollment decisions regarding placement of students. All administrators agreed the grant had provided the school the opportunity to increase student access to AP courses and better prepare students for career decisions. Yet, they wanted students in the program who had the desire to be a part of AP and not just forced into it to inflate enrollment numbers. School administrators recognized formal enrollment processes had not truly been established or communicated to all staff. "The grant has provided us the finances to increase course offerings but we still need to work out the kinks so that it is working," admitted an administrator.

### **Implementation of AP Placement Policies and School Practices**

School personnel consistently described the current enrollment process as open, with students having unrestricted access to the AP program, yet multiple groups shared different exceptions that applied to the open enrollment process. Teachers described the enrollment procedures on student access into AP as inconsistent and evolving. They attributed the varying implementation practices to several factors, including change of leadership, mobility of staff, academic sanctions, students' being ill prepared in their previous schools, and varied school practices. In addition, staff perceived a support network for students was important for AP success.

### **Changes in Leadership**

Lincoln High school had had three different principals in the last four years. One change occurred mid-year. Although staff supported initiatives with each administrator, they perceived the frequent changes in leadership had impacted how policies and practices have been implemented at Lincoln High School. Each leader had a different philosophy on how to prepare

students for post high school, which affected the implementation of AP course enrollment practices. Teachers compared the school's practices for giving students access to AP courses to a swinging pendulum. "Just a few years ago we had just a few AP classes and very few kids were placed because of the stringent criteria, trying to compare our kids to national [test] averages," observed a teacher. She went on to note, "Now we let anyone in that wants to be in it." Almost all school personnel shared the viewpoint that this year's administrative vision had been to assign more underrepresented students to AP than enrollment practices from other years.

According to staff, one previous principal promoted concurrent enrollment with local colleges as a way for students to access college coursework. School personnel reported there was limited AP enrollment during this principal's tenure and student access was primarily based upon their success in honors coursework and teachers' recommendations. There were only a couple of AP courses offered at that time. The school did not have a formal written policy on enrollment, however the criteria of reviewing grades in previous coursework, especially honors classes and recommendations by teachers, were the school practices to determine student placement.

The next administrator implemented "self-identify" as the primary placement process. There was not a specific focus on AP, but students were able to request to be in AP and were assigned regardless of previous academic performance. A counselor explained, "With self-identify, if a student said they wanted AP, I had to allow that." When administrative changes occurred, so did the vision of how to prepare students for college and career. With the current principal, "AP access has become our focus," commented a counselor. The counselor further noted, "since receiving the grant we have had to add AP classes, but we're still trying to figure out processes on assigning students."



School personnel were aware of the significant increase in AP classes offered during this school year. This year, initial practices to identify students included AP teachers speaking to regular core classes and encouraging students to consider taking an AP class. Teachers also identified specific students they felt could be successful and encouraged those students to take AP classes. As a result, enrollment into AP increased dramatically. “We increased from 4-5 AP classes to 14 classes all in one year” shared a counselor. Some AP classrooms had extremely large numbers and it became a “scheduling nightmare” according to the administration. Although staff indicated they were aware a requirement of the grant was to increase the number of AP courses and minority students enrolled in the program, almost all reported they believed additional criteria should be enacted to determine which students should be assigned to AP. Teachers and counselors felt supported by their principal in designing a structure for their AP program. A teacher noted, “I believe our current principal is trying to add structure to AP placement. He wants the students to be successful.”

### **Highly Mobile Teaching Force**

There has been a high rate of mobility amongst Lincoln’s teaching staff, resulting in a largely inexperienced teaching staff. “So many of our teachers with years of experience and expertise are no longer here and it takes time to get new teachers caught up on what’s been happening and how to support our students” expressed a staff member. Nearly one half of the teachers were in their first or second year of teaching. School personnel perceived the ongoing turnover of staff has contributed to students not being prepared to be successful in AP courses. A government teacher commented “this is not an easy school and right when we feel like we’re making progress, we have an influx of new staff. I don’t have the data, but this has to have an impact on our kids learning.” It was a common perception among school personnel that new

staff had brought new perspectives and energy, but the lack of experience also brought challenges. A first year English teacher remarked the mobility of staff has been difficult because there were content departments that had all first year teachers. A history teacher indicated, “The lack of veteran teachers doesn’t allow mentorship or sharing of resources that have been effective in the past.” Experience in staff can support the sustainability of school initiatives. Another teacher noted staff consistency “absolutely plays a role in student enrollment and also plays a role in our growth in the future for the AP program.” Teachers perceived that leadership and pedagogy experience was lost when staff mobility occurred. It was perceived the consistency of staff brought experience to the department and promoted learning communities where staff learned from one another. Teachers from different departments concurred that the success of the expansion of their AP program was contingent on staff consistency. A history teacher reflected, “The areas where we have had more consistency with staff, the more successful our AP students have been.” The dialogue related to the mobility of staff in each teacher focus group revealed a consensus among the staff that the high frequency of staff turnover has had a negative impact on their ability to maintain progress with all programs at Lincoln following academic sanctions.

### **Academic Sanctions**

Lincoln has had its own challenges related to student academic performance and was considered a school at risk. “Students called us the dropout factory,” responded a counselor. In 2009, Lincoln was identified as a Turnaround School due to consistently poor outcomes on state assessments for students. As a Turnaround School, the state’s department of education imposed sanctions and required the school to make drastic changes to impact student achievement. Over 50% of staff were removed from the school. The school day was extended with an extra

instructional period. Intervention courses were added to the schedule to provide students with targeted instruction to address learning gaps and data driven professional development occurred with staff. “We’ve been so focused on assessments and getting through our Turnaround” commented a teacher, which meant AP courses were pushed to the background. Other teachers agreed that the school’s instructional initiatives had been driven by urgent needs to improve high stakes assessment scores in order to no longer be identified as a school on improvement. “Our PD has been spent at looking at data and trying to get kids on level. AP just wasn’t a priority,” said a math teacher. In the 2013-2014 school year, Lincoln was no longer a Turnaround School. Staff expressed pride with their improved assessment scores and no longer being identified as an improvement school. Stated by a science teacher, “It feels good. We have taken ourselves from being far below AYP to actually meeting AYP.” Counselors communicated the huge improvements had decreased the number of students assigned to intervention courses and who were at risk of not graduating. The school had met minimum standards to no longer be considered a Turnaround School. The 2013-2014 rating assigned to the school by the state department of education was a B+. Lincoln’s highest rating was in the area of moving students from the lowest performing quartile to a higher quartile in the subjects of English and algebra. The school’s lowest ranking was in the area of biology, earning them an F grade. The school also received a one out of 10 possible points for the effectiveness of its AP program.

### **Lack of Preparation**

School personnel often associated Lincoln students’ academic challenges to the lack of preparation prior to coming to Lincoln. They felt many of their students were not adequately prepared to handle the rigorous content and pacing in an AP course because schools that students attended prior to Lincoln had fallen short in sufficient academic preparation. Although Lincoln

had received academic sanctions for their poor student performance outcomes, several teachers and counselors blamed other schools for Lincoln's lower assessments grade. An English staff noted, "Our middle schools are promoting and sending kids to high school that can't read and then we're supposed to fix it." Several staff including a counselor and teachers referred to students as "those kids" when describing students entering Lincoln with academic gaps. Staff expressed frustration about having to close achievement gaps that began long before the students came to Lincoln. "I'm well aware of one of the middle schools that feeds into our school is not preparing kids. As a matter of fact, the state took them over last year because of lack of performance," reported a science teacher. Lincoln High School also has a large demographic of English as a Second Language students. Staff commented that their students enter high school with low language development and since language and vocabulary were precursors for reading comprehension; many of their students were not prepared to take AP courses.

### **Perceptions of AP Success: Peer and Parent Support Network**

All teacher groups frequently stated the motivated student had a support system of like-minded peers as well as engaged parents who encouraged them to stay attentive to succeed. Students who surrounded themselves with a network of peers involved in positive school and extracurricular activities and do well academically were considered strong candidates for AP. "Positive leaders tend to hang out with other positive students. They are able to support each other with school work and staying on the right track," shared a history teacher. A student system of support was described by staff as needed to assist students with the transition to the challenging, additional workload of AP coursework. Students who had peers and family support were likely to be more successful than students without a support system.

Parental support was described as parents or guardians attendance at school events, encouragement of students, ensuring that students turned in homework, and being involved in the enrollment process. Study participants perceived student success and parental support as direct correlations. “Parents have got to be involved in this because if they are not then the student does not have an adequate support system. And there is nothing there to drive them along,” noted a teacher. At Lincoln, this type of parental support was often perceived as lacking due to cultural differences and language barriers. A counselor shared,

We don’t have a lot [engaged parents] because so many of our parents don’t speak English and culture of the Hispanic population is, particularly with the mother, that I’ve noticed, will allow the student to do what they want to do, but we have a few that are involved in helping kids pick out the right classes.

Teachers, however, perceived that overall; parents at Lincoln were not engaged in the learning process of students. The lack of support was associated with parents’ low education attainment and their lack of English language proficiency. According to one English teacher “our demographics really hurt us because these students don’t have the parent support like the students at West (pseudonym).” Other teachers noted a majority of their parents do not attend parent teacher conferences or other school events.

School counselors agreed with the perception that parents of Lincoln students had not provided the needed support for students to be successful in rigorous AP classes. One counselor shared that many of their students worked in order to assist their families financially, and they lacked the support to be successful in challenging coursework.

We have these kids that live with single moms, divorced mothers, and have little sisters and brothers and their job is the only one that’s supporting the family. They are

supporting the family. The family isn't supporting them. And there's just not enough parental support and time in the day for the amount of work in AP classes.

Administrators, counselors and teachers concurred that students could be successful in AP if parents were more engaged in students' learning, yet the students most likely to be successful were the students that have parental and peer support.

### **Varied AP Guidelines**

The school had not established school-wide, formal written policies on AP access, thus teacher interpretation of enrollment guidelines varied according to the perceptions of the different teacher groups. The different content departments each had its own criteria they had either implemented or were in the process of implementing as policy for student placement into AP classes.

**Art department.** The art department described the acceptance into their AP classroom was not dependent on any recommendations or assessment scores. "Our AP course allows us to connect with that kid that other teachers might not recommend for other AP courses," commented a visual arts teacher. The visual arts AP and other art teachers discussed students in their classrooms often excelled even when they were not strong in other content areas. Teachers in the art department stated they established a scope and sequence guide of student courses for their department. "The guide was initially created a few years ago to help all of the new folks coming in to understand what we wanted kids to take as they progressed through the classes, but now we use it to help kids understand our prerequisites." The art department noted they welcomed diverse learners into their classes. An art AP teacher shared that visual arts allowed students to be successful and showcase other talents that may be overlooked in other courses.

**English department.** The English Department reported they do not have formal policies in place. The placement process included a combination of students who requested AP; teachers who provided recommendations and counselors who finalized assignments. The English department noted they met as a department and discussed students' performance. During the collaborative department meetings, student recommendations took place. AP teachers also came to regular education classrooms and discussed courses as a way to recruit students.

Teachers in the English department indicated they have considered having students interested in AP to complete summer projects prior to fall placements. According to one English teacher, "We're going to have them do a summer assignment in order to be in the program." Specifics of the summer project had not been decided, yet teachers agreed it should be some type of reading and writing response assignment. Another English teacher shared, "If they don't do the summer assignment by the end of the first month then they will be moved to the regular [class]."

**Government department.** Study participants from the government department said their guidelines for student placement in AP courses relied highly on the recommendations of other teachers. Some regular education teachers were not knowledgeable about the AP enrollment practices but indicated there had been some discussion this year on how to improve the process so it was a rigorous selection of students. It was perceived that counselors had been assigning students without much consideration of the student skills needed that teachers believed were needed for success in an AP course. A regular education government teacher wryly commented the only placement criteria he was aware of was "...be a senior and vaccination. Other than that I don't know what kids need to get into classes. I just take the kids they give me." Several of the regular core teachers seemed to not be engaged in the enrollment process

and the AP government and history teachers perceived the enrollment process for their department was a work in progress. They described teacher recommendations has had some part but believed it should be weighted more heavily in the counselors' assignment decisions. One teacher shared,

You can look at test scores all day long and that score doesn't necessarily mean the child is going to be successful. It's going to be whether or not the student actually has the desire, the drive, and the interest necessary to pursue that path. That is something teachers are going to recognize far quicker than anybody else.

Another teacher shared, "we're going to try to change it to make it a little more rigorous and to make it where kids will have to get approved to get into through approval from teachers."

Teachers in this department believed non-academic factors, such as drive and motivation, should be considered along with performance on assessments.

**History department.** Study participants from the history department perceived student placements for their department were subjective and guidelines varied from teacher to teacher. A history teacher stated enrollment practices were inconsistent within the department due to the "revolving door of teachers throughout the year, so there is never any consistency." One teacher commented he felt teacher recommendations were guided by which students teachers strongly felt would be successful because of their experiences with the students. Other history teachers concurred, noting there were not set guidelines for student recommendation into AP and teachers' recommendations were subjective based upon what each individual teacher perceived to be the successful student. One history teacher stated his recommendations were for students that had maintained an A in his class throughout the year. Whereas another history teacher explained he made student recommendations into AP based upon their overall body of work



from the beginning of the semester until the end of the semester to see their progress and if they can handle it in AP. The history teachers discussed they believed the counselors had started a course guide on what classes students should take when they entered high school. However, no one was aware if this has been completed or implemented. “We’ve been talking about this for at least 3 years but I don’t know if they are using it yet,” observed one history teacher.

**Science department.** Teachers in the science department indicated they met during the year and began outlining student requirements to be considered for an AP science course. A teacher explained their dilemma, “Right now we do not have a scope and sequence, so we have kids enrolling into AP that are not prepared.” Science teachers explained the absence of a course guide allowed students to be assigned to courses where they lacked the background knowledge they would have received in a prerequisite course. A science teacher shared an example of a student that was assigned to her AP science course when she had failed the state biology assessment and was enrolled in the biology intervention course. The AP teacher believed this was not the appropriate course for the student because the student lacked prerequisite knowledge needed for AP chemistry. Another science teacher commented, “We shouldn’t be letting kids skip the base class to get into the AP class.” Science department teachers shared they are in the process of creating a scope and sequence so students and others will know what prerequisites were required in order to take an AP class in their department.

**AP teachers.** AP teachers were team members of their respective departments. They met during professional learning community (PLC) time with their content departments and discussed student data and information pertaining to their department. AP teachers learned about potential future AP students while collaborating with their respective department teachers. AP teachers noted the enrollment policy into their classrooms includes recommendations from a

previous teacher and from the Advanced Placement teacher, and confirmation from the counselor that they have completed the required courses to likely be successful in the rigorous college preparatory courses. The AP teachers shared the policy was not a formal policy and was not consistently followed, “but it should be” remarked an AP teacher. A science AP teacher stressed she felt it was important for counselors to listen to the recommendations from teachers because counselors may not always understand the skills needed for student success. She commented,

For example, we had a student transferred from another state or another school, I don’t remember but she was in honors chemistry, but we don’t have honors chemistry so they put her in my AP chemistry and honors and AP are two completely different courses. The kid struggled. I had to tell them because the counselors didn’t understand the difference between the two courses and had just placed the student.

Since there was not a formal school-wide policy on how students were selected and assigned to the AP program, each content department had created its own informal guidelines for student placement.

**Administrators.** An administrator proposed another consideration for student placement guidelines could include students and parents signing a code of conduct. The signed document would serve as a contract that students understood the rigorous instruction and expectations of the AP program and they were willing to commit to the additional homework and study requirements. Students that do not uphold their obligations according to the code of conduct would no longer be allowed in the class. “I think it would be great to have a code of conduct paper, an agreement where students are saying they want to be a part of the class,” stated an administrator. The code of conduct would explain to students and their family the rigorous expectations of AP courses. Administrators stated there were not any school-wide AP

enrollment policies but were aware that the code of conduct and other program enrollment guidelines were being discussed within the different departments led by department chairs.

### **Gatekeeping Limits Student Access**

Discourse spoken amongst school personnel about Lincoln's open enrollment policy was all students had access to the AP program, yet some practices limited AP access or created barriers for student participation. Although not a formal written policy, all study participants perceived the school's enrollment policy into AP was an open and unrestricted process for all students with interest. There were some school practices, however, that did not align with the open enrollment policy.

**Enrollment excessing.** It was described that students who were perceived not to have potential for success were often weeded out of the AP program. An example shared was the expectation for teachers to begin their AP courses each semester with heightened rigor and accelerated pace. Students who were unlikely to be successful in the course were then expected to request to change classes. Student elected course changes occurred during the first few weeks of the semester. If students elected to remain in the course, they were given the opportunity to participate in the AP course for the semester. If a student received a grade F for their final semester grade, counselors would reassign the student to a less challenging course for the following semester. An AP teacher said,

At the beginning we're really supposed to punch them in the gut. This is going to be a hard course. Drill it. Like really make it hard during the first month and then I had a lot of students drop out the first month that they're like, "Nope, this is not going to work for me."

Another AP teacher shared that this past fall she had a class with 29 students enrolled in her course and after identifying students that maybe were “over their head,” her enrollment numbers decreased to 22. Other AP teachers shared examples of how students that selected AP were transferred out of their classrooms after the start of the year because they perceived the students were not able to handle the rigorous coursework. Teachers were in consensus that the current placement process allowed some students that were not qualified to be in AP were in the program and there was a need for change. “We’re talking as a department. We’re going to try to change it to make it a little more rigorous and for kids to get in” commented a government teacher.

**English Language Learners (ELL).** School personnel reported access to AP is open and available to any student with interest, but current school practices excluded some student groups for consideration for AP. Students that were English Language Learners (ELL) with limited English speaking skills were not considered viable AP candidates. The exclusion of some ELL students was not a formal policy but it was a practice understood and exercised by school personnel. “I don’t know if that is an official guideline or not but I know that is the practice. Students that are in the ELL program are not allowed in AP,” reported an English teacher. The perception of this gatekeeping rule was echoed by several teachers. Staff explained the exclusion of ELL students from the AP program is a school practice and was expressed by a science teacher as “those kids don’t know enough English yet.” Administrators, counselors, and teachers shared although it was not a formal policy, proficiency of English language skills was a prerequisite for participation in the AP program for any content area. A counselor confirmed that students who were in the ELL program were not AP candidates, “until students exit the ELL program and catch up language skills, we don’t place them in AP classes.” Several staff

explained students that do not speak English as their primary language lack vocabulary and an understanding of the figurative language needed for success in rigorous, high level courses.

**Lack of initiatives to identify potential.** There were not any specific initiatives in place at Lincoln to target the not typical AP student. During enrollment, students requested to be assigned to the AP program through presumed open access. Teachers concurred that if a strong academic student did not enroll in AP courses, they encouraged the student to sign up. This practice was explained by an AP teacher, who also taught sophomore history,

So what I did was I just walked around to my kids and those kind of students that I thought might not enroll but that were intelligent enough and could, maybe had the skills to do it, I just went to them and said you ought to think about doing it [enrolling in AP].

There were several examples shared of teachers' recruitment of high performing students to enroll in AP, yet there were no school-wide practices in place to identify students who had potential for success, but were overlooked. Staff acknowledged some students were not volunteering to enroll in AP and if they did not fit the criteria that the different departments and counselors had established, and then they were not encouraged to enroll.

Study participants described services available to support students. Some students participated in mentorship programs and tutoring services. "We have stores in the community that provide mentors and it targets students that are maybe from a broken home or have drugs and alcohol and monetary issues in the home" remarked a teacher. Saturday School is offered on Saturday mornings and it provided tutoring services for students struggling in core classes or who have failed a state assessment. In addition, some teachers volunteered to meet with students who requested a need before or after school for tutoring and homework assistance. These

programs do not have structures in place to identify student potential and processes to refer students for AP consideration.

**Lack of advocacy.** One Advanced Placement teacher believed AP assignment often occurred for students who have a network of teachers and family members that advocate for them or they are self-advocates. Unfortunately, when a student did not fit the mold of a typical AP student and the network of advocacy was absent, teachers admitted the student was likely to be passed over. During a focus group discussion, a science teacher posed a rhetorical question to her colleagues, “Is it the kids you think that have the ability to advocate for themselves, go and talk to their counselor, and know where to go ask questions and navigate the system?” This question created dialogue amongst the group of teachers and various responses were shared, including this one from another science teacher, who acknowledged that well-connected students knew how to “work the system.”

Yes, the kids that are assigned the best classes and with the strongest teachers are the ones that know how to work the system. They know who to ask for help, who to go to get their questions answered and how to get into classes of choice. I agree. They have to be self-advocates. They have to know how to go get help. They are not going to sit there and wonder why, they are going to go find out why, because they want to find out and they will. They will not take no for answer. Those are the students that will have teachers go to bat for them and recommend they get into AP.

The presence of power and dominance at Lincoln was echoed by teachers from other departments. Students that knew how to maneuver within the traditional practices of the school were backed by a support system to access AP. Unfortunately, less educated or non-native English speakers lacked social and cultural capital to advocate for enrollment. In this case, the

dominate group that benefitted from educational resources were students that were recognized by staff as those deserving to receive college preparatory courses because of their ability to advocate or had others advocate for them.

## **Chapter 5**

### **Conclusions and Implications**

This study focused on the perceptions of administrators, counselors, and classroom teachers related to policies and school enrollment practices when assigning students to the AP program at a predominately minority, high poverty high school. This chapter presents the conclusions derived from analysis of the findings presented in chapter four and then discusses implications of this study for AP enrollment practices for poor, minority students. The conclusions were derived from the analysis of these findings through the theoretical framework of Critical Discourse Theory. I made meaning of policy and enrollment practices at Lincoln High School by using CDA as a lens to view the data.

#### **Vague Policies**

Policies from the College Board, the state department of education, and the local school district indicated AP courses should be available and accessible to all students that demonstrated desire to be in the program and have potential for success. The subjective, commonly used term “potential” was interpreted differently by stakeholders. Student performance on high stakes assessments, previous grades, and intrinsic motivation, were some criteria stakeholders considered when identifying student potential. Scholars have found that traditional high school enrollment practices were influenced by staff biases, master schedules, and high stakes assessments, often creating barriers and establishing low academic tracks for some student groups (Taliaferro DeVance & DeCuir-Gunby, 2008) and these enrollment practices were typical at Lincoln High School.

The College Board data indicated poor African American and Hispanic students were less likely to participate in the AP program in comparison to similarly academic performing White



students. Scholars have also found that minority and poor students disproportionately were assigned to AP in comparison to White and middle class students (Ndura et al., 2003; Solorzano & Ornelas, 2004). Furthermore, when high schools were located in low socio-economic neighborhoods and attended by predominately minority students, the number of AP courses were typically not available in comparison to high schools located in middle class neighborhoods (Rossell, 1988). In this study, Lincoln was a school located in an economically disadvantaged neighborhood attended primarily by poor African American and Hispanic students. In the past, AP had not been a focus area for the school and students were not being prepared for the academic challenges of the program. Although the school was a recipient of a large financial grant that required the increase of AP course offerings, they lacked a vision for their AP program. In addition, they had not established equitable or any other type of processes to identify academically talented students for the Advanced Placement program. Not surprising, considering guidelines to promote equity created by the College Board, the state board of education and the local school district each lacked explicit strategies to identify talented underrepresented students and information on how to prepare students for success in the AP program. The policies were vague and encouraged school personnel to use standardized assessments as a predictor for AP success. Traditionally, students from poverty and students that speak a language other than English as their primary language do not perform well on standardized assessments (Oakes, 2005) and if these assessments were used as the main predictor for AP success, the potential academic talents of disadvantaged students could be overlooked. The analysis of school personnel's discourse revealed there was a gap in the intent of policies and the implementation of practices.

However, Lincoln, a high school attended predominately by minority and poor students should be commended for increasing substantially the number of AP courses offered at their site. As a recipient of a STEM, college preparatory grant, Lincoln was able to expand its AP program by over 100 percent in only one academic year. They were able to offer more AP courses in more content areas than the school had ever had available for students. Despite the increase, school personnel purposefully excluded poor minority students from accessing the program.

**Grant.** In 2013, the school was assigned an all new administration team and was the recipient of a \$450,000 grant. Prior to the grant, Lincoln High School offered few AP courses and there was not an emphasis on Advanced Placement coursework. The grant provided the school the financial resources to expand its STEM AP course offerings which allowed an influx of student participation. Student enrollment in AP in 2013-2014 was the largest number of student participation ever at Lincoln High School. The school was able to hire staff to address the increased courses offered. Formal policies and enrollment processes had not been established prior to the significant expansion of the AP program at Lincoln and implementation of the courses occurred prior to the school being prepared for it.

**Enrollment policy.** Lincoln's enrollment policy for poor students accessing the AP program was described as an unrestricted, open access policy. Policy discourse was not formally written, but was described by every study participant. Due to the lack of formal policies and lack of preparation for the expansion of the AP program, there was an absence of guidelines to prepare, identify, and support poor minority students' participation and success in AP. The school responded to the lack of policies by implementing traditional practices of the master schedule and staff perceptions of students to determine course placement decisions.

## **Discourse of Practices**

As reflected in the findings, Lincoln High School personnel perceived all students that desired participation in the Advanced Placement program had the opportunity to access courses. However, the traditional practices of tracking minority and poor students into low academic tracks instead of rigorous college preparatory classrooms influenced which students were assigned to AP programs (Oakes, 2000). It is critical that school practitioners monitor the process of how high school gatekeepers used their power to interpret policy and determine which students should be assigned to college preparatory courses. As related to this study, school personnel targeted specific students for AP consideration. Specific profiled students were not considered appropriate AP candidates due to their language spoken and/or their families' background. Although discourse was described by participants as unrestricted enrollment, school practices purposefully excluded poor minority students that were not able to advocate for the opportunity to participate in the program. The contradiction in rhetoric and reality at Lincoln was consistent with previous research related to the gap between policies and organization practices which create inequitable access to school programs (Taylor, 2004). Staff's discourses on enrollment practices were inconsistent with school practices. Ongoing analysis of policy and practices is necessary in order to close the gap of course accessibility for minority students from poverty. Lincoln excluded ELL students and poor, Hispanic students based upon perceived lack of family engagement, their lack of knowledge on how to maneuver through the educational system, and students that lacked voices to advocate for equitable access to educational programs. Although Lincoln students had demonstrated academic success and were no longer identified as a Turnaround School, the school continued to have deficit views of the academic ability of student groups, creating a social hierarchy of which students had access to AP. Despite the

discourse by staff that AP was offered to all students, the school practices excluded poor and minority students based upon presumptions and beliefs by school personnel of who should have access to rigorous college preparatory programs and which students should not be entitled to the educational resource (Larson C. & Ovando, 2001).

### **Exceptions to Open Enrollment**

There were exceptions to the open enrollment policy that prevented some students from accessing AP. Some of the enrollment practices and beliefs created barriers for students with potential to have the opportunity to participate and have success in the program. Some students were encouraged to enroll in AP coursework because they fit the criteria that gatekeepers had identified as a successful candidate. School personnel had deficit views of students and felt as if they were doing them a favor by not including them in college preparatory coursework. Critical discourse studies have concluded students that are less dominant or perceived as lacking power are often not afforded the same access to the best curriculum and programs (Auerbach, 2002). Lincoln created a hierarchy of which students they perceived to be appropriate candidates for Advanced Placement. A majority of Lincoln's students qualified for free and reduced fees, yet it was the students with limited language acquisition and those with the inability to advocate for themselves that were not afforded the same educational opportunities as other students.

### **College Readiness**

The school and district emphasized career and college paths were to be provided for all students. Lincoln had not implemented career path programs similar to other schools in the district. School staff perceived high academic performing students opted out attending Lincoln in order to attend other high schools that offered the college preparatory tracks; yet there were no immediate plans to establish the career paths at Lincoln. The perception that high performing

students elected not to attend Lincoln, leaving the school with low academic achieving students, contributed to a school wide culture of staff having low expectations for their students.

The school's career readiness promotion occurred mainly during counseling sessions with the school counselors and through presentations. There also was a significant increase of AP courses offered at Lincoln High School. This was in part because of the philosophy of the new administration as well as a grant requirement to increase the number of underrepresented students accessing the AP program. Although more students were enrolled in AP, the school had not established an organizational plan on how minority students from poverty would be prepared for rigorous, college preparatory coursework and how to sustain students' success in the AP program. School administrators were proud that the AP program had expanded under their leadership, but lacked a vision for the program and how it would be sustained.

Data findings indicated because Lincoln was a Turnaround school, educators had been focused on improving academic achievement for the lowest performing students. The standard high school diploma was an acceptable path for Lincoln students even though it limited their college readiness. Moreover, school-wide initiatives were not in place to support students' preparation for rigorous courses and to obtain college preparatory curriculum diplomas. The discourse was all students should be afforded opportunities for college and career paths, but the practices revealed there were no structures in the school to support students that may have the academic potential, but never had the opportunity to prepare for college preparatory coursework. Furthermore, although the school had increased its AP offerings, school personnel continued to have deficit views and low expectations of their students and continued to consider the standard high school diploma an acceptable graduation path for their students. It can be concluded that

although more college preparatory courses were offered at Lincoln than in the past, staff perceived students were not capable of earning college preparatory diplomas.

In addition to lack of student preparation for college preparatory programs, the staff had not been prepared for the expansion. The grant required Advanced Placement STEM teachers to attend AP training offered during the summer. Other AP teachers were only required to attend training if they had not previously attended the College Board's summer institute. The College Board offered several online workshops; including free courses for counselors, yet staff had not taken advantage of the offerings. Regular content teachers were aware some of their courses did offer the same rigor as AP, but there had not been professional development offered at Lincoln specifically to learn how to increase academic challenge in all course types.

### **Deficit Thinking Meant Lack of Initiatives to Identify Potential**

Study participants held deficit views of students and their families that they did not perceive as having potential. Lincoln school personnel perceived some students were not appropriate candidates for AP due to their cultural and ethnic backgrounds. Deficit thinking posits students have poor performance in school because of social and family shortcomings (Skrla & Scheurich, 2004). However, Lincoln students had academic talent for success. The combination of the hard work of the Lincoln staff and the academic skills of students allowed the school to meet their Turnaround goals within only a few years. Yet, the school had not implemented programs to attract, support, or develop students for Advanced Placement courses. Although the school's discourse was all students had the opportunity to participate in AP's open enrollment process, school practices suffused deficit views of some poor and minority students accessing the rigorous college course.

Students that could potentially be successful in rigorous college preparatory coursework were not involved in any specific services to prepare and place them in AP. Students in the ELL program and students that lacked a network of support and confidence to advocate were dismissed by staff as potential candidates for AP. Lincoln's findings were consistent with other studies that found student class assignments are highly influenced at the building level by gatekeepers and when they have been excluded, poor and minority students are less likely to advocate for their rights to participate in the most rigorous courses (Klugman, 2013). Study participants acknowledged there were not any initiatives in place to prepare underrepresented students who had potential for success in AP. Academic services available were not targeted for students that were potentially talented. Instead, services were systematically geared toward the lowest performing students.

Saturday School was a program available for struggling students to attend to receive tutoring services to address academic deficits. The service was voluntary and targeted the most struggling academic achieving students. Additionally, students who sought out help and made arrangements were able to meet with individual teachers before or after school in their classrooms to assist with homework. The master schedule included intervention courses for core content areas. The intervention course was required of students who had not passed the state assessment for the respective content. Although the school had had a history of low performance on state assessments, the growth on the standardized assessments indicated students had academic talent and were successful when there was a school-wide focus on an initiative. Tutoring services and intervention courses had been helpful with improving academic skills for the lowest performing students and passing state exams, however there was not a systematic

approach for identifying underrepresented students and provided the needed support for AP success for those who were not struggling academically.

As a school on improvement, Lincoln had focused its resources on the lowest performing students but had not established a plan to identify potentially talented students and prepare them for the rigor of the AP program. Instead many staff were content with students passing the state exam and receiving standard high school diplomas. The staff's deficit viewpoint created a school culture of low expectations for students ability to successful prepare and participate in a rigorous college preparatory path, including enrollment in the AP program.

### **Inconsistent Implementation**

School-wide initiatives and practices were inconsistently implemented. School personnel changed frequently at the high school and it impacted the effectiveness of programs. Inconsistent implementation of student placement practices could also be contributed to the varied perceptions of enrollment gatekeepers. Despite the intent of equity policies; inconsistent implementation can be problematic for the sustainability of effective programs (Cohen & Ball, 1990). The varied practices of identifying and assigning students into the AP program at Lincoln High School created a system where some student groups were never considered for AP. The gap between the intent of equity policies and inconsistent school practices to identify and assign minority and poor students into rigorous academic programs is problematic because all students do not have the opportunity to access to AP classrooms (Oakes, 2000).

### **Mobility of Staff**

Lincoln's administration and teaching staff had changed consistently every year. In recent years, the entire teaching staff had a 50% turnover rate and annually a high number of teachers leave the school. There have been three principals in four years and this year's



administrative staffs were all new to Lincoln. There continued to be continuous staff turnover even though the school was no longer identified as a Turnaround School. The constant change in staff made it difficult for teaching staff to learn and implement consistent initiatives. The frequent change of administration brought new philosophy of programs and made it difficult for consistent implementation in programs.

### **Varied Enrollment Processes**

Enrollment gatekeepers viewed student identification and course placements as traditional high school practices, driven by schedules and stakeholders' perceptions of students. Perceptions and practices of student enrollment varied among different stakeholders. The primary gatekeepers in the enrollment process included core regular education teachers, AP teachers, counselors and administration.

**Enrollment gatekeepers.** The counselors' role as an enrollment gatekeeper was the most powerful in determining course assignments. Although Lincoln counselors considered teacher recommendations, the counselors made final placement decisions based on graduation requirements, career counseling and master schedules. As with prior research, Lincoln's counselors did not view their gatekeeping role as powerful; however reality was the decisions made by the high school counselors had implications on student preparation for future courses and the track for the type of high school diploma that students would earn (Cicourel & Kitsuse, 1971). School counselors have the potential to influence changes in high school traditional practices that have created barriers from students accessing school programs (House & Martin, 1998).

The administration was an important gatekeeper who was ultimately responsible for all decisions made at the high school and they relied on school counselors to make enrollment

decisions regarding student placements. Administration was challenged with designing and implementing policies to balance students' access to AP courses with enforcing criteria that is communicated and understood by the school community. Yet, Lincoln's administration had not established clear expectations of the enrollment processes, including how to prepare students for academically challenging coursework and policies for identifying underrepresented student groups and supporting them through college preparatory tracks. The administration was responsible in fulfilling the grant requirement of increasing AP courses but there was not a vision for the program including assignment practices and how to measure success of the AP program at Lincoln.

Lincoln core teachers believed their recommendations should determine student assignments. Finley's (1984) research noted teachers considered motivation and grades for criteria for course recommendations. At Lincoln, teachers were extremely confident that they were able to identify students with potential because of their experiences and knowledge of students' motivation, academic performance, and home life. Furthermore, teachers perceived they were the best qualified enrollment gatekeeper to make course recommendations because of their knowledge of their students, but at times were left out of the process.

### **Implications of the Research**

The following section includes study implications for researchers, state and local school districts, and teachers that have similar settings and the desire to provide equitable access and preparation for AP to low income and minority students. Implications were derived from empirical research and this study's findings and conclusions; and are intended to support the continued implementation and sustainability of minority and low-income students' access to the Advanced Placement program. The implications include development of policies, strong

leadership, culturally competent learning environments, preparation initiatives, and monitor and accountability of implementation. The examination of Lincoln's written, spoken, and abstract communication showed power relations between discourse and organizational practices. It is critical to bring attention to the opportunity gap in who is accessing college preparatory courses in hope that schools will implement the necessary reforms to prepare and support poor and minority students for advanced academic coursework.

### **Establish Student Placement Policies**

The findings in this study indicated the absence of enrollment policies that provided poor, minority students' access to AP. Lincoln High School had been able to expand its AP program, which allowed for an increase in student enrollment. Yet, vague and absent policies supported inconsistent and traditional practices that marginalized some student groups and kept them from the opportunity to experience success in AP. Traditional high school practices that benefit some students while alienating others will not change without intentional efforts to reform. Shifts in traditional beliefs and practices are difficult and a plan to identify and prepare underrepresented students for college preparatory coursework is necessary for equitable access to AP. Prior research has found educators perceive all students have equal access to educational programs, therefore there is not a need for written equity policies (Giroux, 1980). However, the absence of policies provides enrollment gatekeepers an excuse to continue to implement enrollment procedures as they have always been conducted. The establishment of policies will not fully fix the injustices that are prohibiting all students accessing the best courses to prepare for high academic classes, yet it is a start in establishing expectations for enrollment gatekeepers. The creation of policies allows practitioners to analyze the gaps between the intent to provide

equitable access to programs and school practices. The reform initiatives can be implemented to address inequities and close the gap between policies and practices.

As an effort to implement and sustain minority and low income students' enrollment into the Advanced Placement program, school-wide policies must be established and led by strong leadership. Lincoln had been operating by vague and abstract policies and varied practices defined by stakeholders. Inconsistent practices were also influenced by varied interpretations of enrollment practices by the different gatekeepers. Subjective and multiple interpretations make it difficult to implement and sustain an initiative (Fullan, 2007). School practices were driven by staff biases and beliefs that poor, minority students were not appropriate for rigorous college preparatory programs. Establishing clear policies for enrollment processes is a start. However, policies alone are not enough and will not change behavior and beliefs of staff, but it can begin the processes and expectations of program implementation for all gatekeepers.

It is also crucial that a communication plan is established so staff, students, and families are well informed of enrollment policies. Effective communication between leadership, staff, and students has implications on consistent implementation of initiatives and contributes to a positive school climate (W.K. Hoy & Hannum, 1997). The absence of a communication plan encourages the various enrollment gatekeepers to implement their own criteria of which students belong in AP classrooms resulting in the continued practice of purposely excluding some student groups from having access to academically challenging courses and curriculum. The historical practice of staff's beliefs and biases determining student placement creates opportunity gaps for poor and minority students accessing high level academic coursework (Giroux, 1980). School leadership should create a communication plan of the policies and expectations for implementation to include a plan to inform all stakeholders.

## **Gatekeepers Promote a Culture of High Expectations and College Paths**

High school principals are responsible for decisions to operate the school organization. In addition to budget decisions, hiring practices, student discipline and personnel matters, they are responsible for implementing structures that will have a positive influence on school culture. Due to the many tasks to maintain a large high school, administrators are encouraged to build leadership capacity through distributive leadership (James P. Spillane et al., 2001). At Lincoln High School, administrators entrusted student course placement decisions to their counselors. Although distributive leadership promotes buy in by staff through their participation in decision making processes, administrators are the catalyst in setting the tone for the culture of the school. The school environment is complex; still administration is responsible for the establishment of a positive school culture focused on providing college career paths for all students. A college preparatory path for all students is based on the premise that staff believes all students are capable of high academic achievement. Discourse that all students can succeed is simply a rhetorical phrase unless schools are structured to provide accessible college course paths for all students. Administrators and school leaders should work together to identify core values that are important in establishing a positive culture that has high learning expectations for all students. Clear processes on how to embed the core values into the daily work are essential if change in the school culture is going to occur and be sustained (Fullan, 2007).

This can be challenging, especially at a school where low expectations of students has been engrained in the culture for some time. Administration and key building leaders should work with school personnel to develop mission, vision, and goals for a school focused on preparing all students for college and create a roadmap on how to establish it. Clear mission statements can be a tool for “shaping practice and communicating core values” (Stemler, Bebell,

& Sonnabend, 2010, p. 384). School leaders must lead this initiative and their behaviors should model the belief that all students, regardless of ethnicity, languages spoken, and zip code of residence have the ability to be academically successful when school personnel believe in them and provide the structures and support for them to succeed.

At Lincoln, it was difficult for staff to establish momentum with initiatives in part because of the mobility of teachers. However, discourse by veteran teachers at the school indicated they did not believe their students were capable of performing at high academic levels. Discourse that sabotages the efforts of the school's mission to provide a college preparatory culture cannot be ignored. School practices that align with deficit viewpoints of students and their families should be addressed. Negative beliefs and practices will not change if staffs are not held accountable for the behaviors. Furthermore, Lincoln had had three principals in four years. It is important that district leadership allow administrators the opportunity to implement reforms to improve school culture and the opportunity to monitor policies for change. Principals are responsible for hiring and personnel decisions. It is critical that new staff hired desire to be at a school of diversity. Schools like Lincoln need staffs who wishes to work with students with diverse backgrounds because they believe in students' abilities. Administrators are instrumental in leading staff during the shift of expectations and implementing policies to promote college preparation for their students, and through distributive leadership, staff can work collaboratively to implement reforms.

High school counselors are powerful gatekeepers who can influence the career trajectory of students (Rosenbaum et al., 1996). Lincoln High School counselors were typical of what was found in other studies in that they lacked awareness of the implications their placement decisions, career counseling with students, and contact with parents had on students' academic

tracks and post high school options (House & Martin, 1998). A study conducted at a low income high school noted students did not feel supported by school counselors because they were not encouraged to take AP classes and had to advocate for academically challenging coursework for college preparation (Hallett & Venegas, 2011). Counselors have a responsibility to assign course placements not because it fits the master schedule, but to place students, regardless of students' language, ethnicity, or families' social economic status in to academically challenging coursework to prepare them for college and careers (Rosenbaum et al., 1996). According to House's (1998) research, school counselors could be the catalyst in promoting reform to provide course access to all students.

### **Create a Culturally Competent Learning Environment**

Initiatives to improve the learning environment for all students stall when educators fail to take responsibility for the state of the school and direct blame on students and their families (Garcia & Guerra, 2004). Schools must take ownership of lack of student preparation, especially when school personnel do not believe students are capable of performing at high academic levels. Arguably, students from disadvantaged backgrounds, especially minority and poor students have not been afforded the same opportunities as higher socio-economic White students to participate in rigorous academic courses in earlier grades AP (Klugman, 2013). Garcia and Guerra's (2004) research suggested school reforms to create culturally relevant teaching environments fail when staffs are unwilling to examine root causes for underachieving poor, minority students because it would require educators to accept their responsibility for not preparing students instead of placing blame on students and their families. Students must be afforded equitable access to quality, high level instruction if they are going to be prepared for AP or other college preparatory coursework. In this study, staff had low expectations that all

students could be successful in college track programs. Kea, Trent and Davis asserted (2002) students from ethnically and linguistically diverse backgrounds will continue to be underserved until schools and staff acknowledge the need for culturally competent teachers.

Schools should provide ongoing professional development related to cultural competence and working with minority students from poverty. An understanding of students' culture and language can be a bridge in closing academic gaps and increase learning for all students (G.J. Ladson-Billings, 1999). In this study, the lack of understanding of students' and their cultures perpetuated stereotypes and the belief that some students lacked the academic talent to participate in college preparatory tracks. Staffs either were not aware or they did not acknowledge that their biases had determined which students they perceived were worthy candidates for the AP program and which students they intentionally left out of the program. Correa, Blanes-Reyes and Rapport (1996) noted educators' unawareness of their personal biases and lack of cultural competency limit their ability to be effective in the classroom and when working with minority students and their families. Professional development related to cultural competency would provide staff the needed trainings to gain an understanding of the cultures of minority and poor students in order to support their academic success and to create a school that respects and values diversity. In order to create a culturally competent learning environment, strong leadership must identify the desired state of the school and establish core beliefs to guide their work. Staff will need support from trainings, coaching, and modeling from their leaders. Changes in staff beliefs, relationships with students, and school practices will not occur instantaneously, yet gradual shifts can occur through focused implementation of strategies to improve the school culture. Leadership must be committed to cultural changes and their



discourse should align with programs and practices. Evidence of implementation should be monitored to ensure success of initiatives.

Additionally, ongoing professional development related to rigorous instructional strategies and challenging pedagogy will support staff in creating academically rigorous classrooms for all students. Quality teaching and high learning expectations should be present in all classrooms and not reserved for only students in the highest academic level courses. Ladson-Billings (1999) asserted that teachers with a high efficacy of their practice and pedagogy had a fundamental belief that all of their students, including those from poverty, could and must succeed. Professional development for culturally responsive teaching that includes rigorous learning standards is important for academic success for all students from diverse backgrounds.

### **Implementation of Student Support Initiatives**

Students with social and cultural capital are often assigned the best classrooms, often taught by the strongest teachers (Auerbach, 2002). This study found the staff recognized support systems were essential for students to be able to navigate the school system successfully. Despite this understanding, the Lincoln staff had not implemented structures to assist students that did not have social and cultural capital. Students that have access to social and cultural capital, including knowledge of network, institutional discourses, bureaucratic operations, and relationships with gatekeepers benefit from the academic opportunities available within the school (Hallett & Venegas, 2011). Unfortunately, students who are not afforded access encounter barriers to education, which limits their future career paths. Hallett and Venegas (2011) asserted traditionally, minority children from poverty have had limited access to the capital needed in order to navigate the school system which then hindered their opportunity for success in high academic level courses and college preparation paths. It is critical for schools to

have an explicit emphasis to support student groups that traditionally have not had equitable access to college preparatory coursework.

If schools do not intentionally develop and implement school-wide processes to identify academic talent, students with potential will continue to be excluded. Lincoln did not have a vision to support underrepresented student groups in the AP program. If intentional focus is not directed to supporting minority and poor students' opportunity to succeed in the program, then it is not going to occur. Lincoln had very intentional practices and services in place to support the needs of the lowest performing students. It can be concluded that the focus on the initiatives were successful because the school made significant academic gains and is no longer identified as a Turnaround School. The same type of intentional planning to design and implement support structures are needed to sustain the implementation of AP in order for underrepresented student groups to be identified, prepared and succeed in the program. Even through access to AP, students must have the opportunity to participate in coursework and support structures in order to be prepared for advanced coursework. Access without rigorous course preparation will only set students up for failure in AP. Academically challenging instruction and learning expectations must occur in earlier grades and all courses if all students are going to be prepared in later grades for college preparation programs. Unfortunately, once students are assigned to low academic tracks, they become trapped into low academic courses and do not have the opportunity for AP success (Oakes & Guiton, 1995).

The College Board acknowledged in its 10<sup>th</sup> Annual Report that minority and poor students with academic potential were not being assigned to the AP program. Lincoln often based student selection practices on staffs' individually defined criteria and lacked a system-wide vision on how academic talented could be identified. Policies from the College Board, state and

local school board encouraged schools to utilize high stakes assessments to identify AP candidates. Schools should identify talent beyond scores on high stakes assessments. The vocabulary on exams, question format, and testing anxiety prevents some students from performing well on the tests and the scores do not reflect fully the academic potential of students from diverse backgrounds (Madaus & Clarke, 2001). School personnel should examine other indicators that would assist in identifying hidden academic talent in students who have not had the opportunity to excel but could be successful in AP with appropriate support available.

Poor and minority students identified for AP placement are likely to need ongoing support for continued success. There is a need to establish student support services for average and high academic performing students. Study sessions, student support clubs, access to study materials, mentorship, and counseling were a few of the examples low income students from a predominately minority high school identified as support needed for AP success (Hallett & Venegas, 2011). Especially when academic sanctions have been imposed, these types of services are in place for struggling students; yet schools lack the services to attract and sustain success for minority and low income students with potential. In addition, it is necessary to provide ongoing communication to students and their families of services available to support their preparation for advanced, academic coursework. Due to a long history of racism and deficit thinking, many minority and poor parents are not going to seek out communication from schools (Auerbach, 2002). It is critical that schools reach out and communicate with families the services available to support poor, minority students to be successful in college preparation courses.

### **Monitor Expectations of Advanced Placement Initiatives**

The long history of traditional high school practices is difficult to overcome. Oakes (1998) found educators rarely questioned the origin of schools' continuous practices of

placement decisions. Lincoln's enrollment practices were similar to studies that found course assignments were influenced by staff biases, master schedules, and high stakes assessments (Taliaferro DeVance & DeCuir-Gunby, 2008). Simply adding more courses will not resolve the injustices of student access to academic success in an AP program. In order for students to have opportunities to experience success in college preparatory courses, they must have had previous opportunities to participate in academically challenging classrooms (Hallett & Venegas, 2011). In this study, there was progress in promoting the educational value of college preparatory coursework by increasing significantly AP offerings; yet, there was not a plan on how to monitor the effectiveness of the program and students' success. If shifts from old practices to new practices are to occur, clear expectations of student enrollment processes must be communicated to staff with an understanding that all gatekeepers are accountable to practices and these practices will be monitored. This begins with strong leadership. Administration's discourse of creating a college preparatory focus did not align with staff's practices. It is critical that administration has a vision of the program outcomes and have identified processes on how to monitor the effectiveness of initiatives. Sustained implementation of programs occurs when policies and school practices are monitored and supported (W. K. Hoy & Ferguson, 1985). Administration should have identified the necessary structures to support programs and hold all stakeholders accountable for implementation.

Additional research should occur on nontraditional processes to create master schedules. High schools create course schedules based on the premise of how they have always been designed. Structural barriers can prohibit students from accessing desired courses because it does not fit within the master schedule or staff not available to teach the course. High school

schedules drive the structure of the school day (Kruse & Kruse, 1995). Instead, students' needs and courses for college preparation should guide how school structures are organized.

An important element in sustaining change in schools is the regular collection and analysis of school data (W. K. Hoy & Ferguson, 1985). Ongoing review of AP enrollment data, including student demographics and successful completion of courses will guide future needs for sustaining the program. True reform of inequitable practices occur when schools evaluate the link between school practices and student success and then are intentional in changing ineffective and unfair practices (Garcia & Guerra, 2004). Sugai and Horner (2006) contend it is important to utilize data to determine program effectiveness and make appropriate adjustments as needed to improve quality.

Equity policies are established to provide guidelines for equal accessibility to pedagogy and programs. Despite school personnel's discourse that all students have the opportunity to participate in Advanced Placement programs, high school traditional practices excluded access for poor and minority students. Enrollment gatekeepers' biases, deficit viewpoints, and high school master schedules influence their decision making of which students should be assigned to the AP program. Staff's low expectations of poor and minority students creates a culture where all students do not have the opportunity to participate in academically challenging programs supported by staff that believe they have the potential to succeed. There was a gap in the verbal, written and abstract discourse of policies and school personnel and the actual practices of the school. Staff perceived they were providing academic support for all students to prepare for college, whereas in actuality, school practices intentionally excluded access for some student groups. It is crucial that school personnel and researchers analyze the gaps in enrollment discourse and school practices so the appropriate support can be provided and a healthy school

climate can be established and sustained. In order to create a positive school climate, administration should lead staff in establishing systemic policies to identify, assign and support underrepresented student groups in to Advanced Placement. Professional development is needed for staffs to become culturally aware of students and families they serve, as well as how to prepare and deliver rigorous instruction to meet the needs of all students. The implementation of policies and professional development will not be enough to change the culture of deficit viewpoints and low expectations. It will be critical that the expectations of practices are clearly communicated to stakeholders and there is a plan to monitor implementation, as well as holding all staff, including administration accountable.

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## **APPENDIXES**



## Appendix A

### Consent Form



*Department of Counseling, Educational Leadership, Educational and School Psychology  
Box 142, Wichita, KS 67260-0142*

Wichita State University  
Institutional Review Board Approval 2/27/14 – 2/26/15

**Purpose:** You are invited to participate in a study to examine school personnel's perceptions of guidelines and policies that determine student enrollment in Advanced Placement programs.

**Participant Selection:** You were selected from amongst high school administrators, counselors and core content and AP teachers. Approximately 20-25 individuals are sought to participate in a focus group or an individual interview. There will be 3-4 groups of teachers to participate in focus groups interviews. Each group will have 4-6 participants. One group will be teachers that teach Advanced Placement courses. The other groups will be comprised of teachers that teach core content subjects. The focus group interviews will be structured and questions will be designed to gain an understanding of how teachers perceive policies and the school's practices in assigning students to AP courses. There may be follow up individual interviews with selected teachers. The assistant principal who is responsible for the high school's AP program will assist me in identifying potential participants for the teach focus groups. Individual interviews will occur with school administrators and counselors. You were selected as a possible participant in this study because of your knowledge and experiences with student enrollment in Advanced Placement courses. Your participation will consist of an interview or focus group with me and recorded for data analysis utilized towards the findings of the study.

**Explanation of Procedures:** If you are building administrator or counselor your participation will consist of one individual interview that will take no more than 45 minutes. With your permission, I will audio-record the interview. If you are a core content teacher or an AP teacher, your participation will consist of a focus group with other high school core content or AP teachers. The focus group interview will take no more than 45 minutes. If you are a teacher that participates in a focus group interview, you could be contacted by telephone or email and invited to participate in a follow up individual interview. The purpose of a follow up individual interview is to provide participants to expand on responses shared during the focus group interview or because the participant may have additional insights and information to share related to emerging data that has been collected. Follow up interviews will take no more than 30 minutes. With your permission, I will audio-record the focus groups and individual interviews.

**Discomfort/Risks:** During data collection, you are encouraged to be open in your responses. I will keep all responses confidential. There is a risk of disclosure of statements from focus group

participants. All participation is voluntary. You may skip a question(s) or stop at any time if you feel uncomfortable. There could be a possible inconvenience of your time by meeting to participate in the interview.

**Benefits:** If you participate, you may benefit from a deeper understanding of which students are accessing AP courses and school structures that promote access and opportunity to participate in AP courses. Additionally, all participants may benefit from having an opportunity to be heard regarding their views on student access to the AP program. So that others might benefit from what is learned in this study, I plan to disseminate the results of this study through presentations at state and national conferences and publications in scholarly journals.

**Confidentiality:** Any identifiable information obtained in this study will remain confidential and will be disclosed only with your permission. In order to ensure confidentiality of all interview participants, it is requested that focus group participants do not discuss the names of any participants, questions or any responses given outside of the focus group interview. The identity and interview discussions should remain confidential to the group. Raw data will be maintained in a secure location, and no identifying information will be used in the final dissertation or subsequent publications. Digital audio recordings will be secured in a password protected file on my computer and deleted at the conclusion of the study. No one other than me and my advisor at Wichita State University will have access to the raw data.

**Refusal/Withdrawal:** Participation in this study is entirely voluntary. Your decision whether or not to participate will not affect your future relations with your school, Wichita State University or myself. If you agree to participate in this study, you are free to withdraw from the study at any time without penalty. You will be provided with a copy of this consent form for your records.

**Contact:** If you have any questions about this study, please contact Tiffinie Irving, 316-210-2789 (cell phone) or my advisor Dr. Jean Patterson, (316) 978-6392 (office phone). If you have questions pertaining to your rights as a subject, or about research-related injury, you can contact the Office of Research and Technology Transfer at Wichita State University, Wichita, KS 67260-0007 at (316) 978-3285.

You are under no obligation to participate in this study. Your signature indicates that you have read the information provided above and have voluntarily decided to participate.

You will be given a copy of this consent form to keep.

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Signature of Subject Date

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Witness Signature Date

## Appendix B

### Building Administrator and Counselor Interview Protocol

Hello, my name is Tiffinie Irving, and I represent Wichita State University as a doctoral student in the field of educational leadership. I appreciate your willingness to assist me in my dissertation research. This study is to examine school personnel's perceptions of policies and practices that determine which students should be considered for and enrolled in Advanced Placement programs. You were selected because of your knowledge of the enrollment process for students at your school. Please keep in mind that I am interested in your perceptions of who is accessing AP courses and school policies and practices that promote access and opportunity to participate in AP courses.

Before we begin, I would like to share a few procedures for our conversation. Although we will be on a first name basis, no names will be used when we report the results of this session. **With your permission I would like to audio-record our session** for response clarity towards accurate data analysis to report findings. I will also be taking written notes during the interview. I assure this audio recording will be destroyed after the completion of this study. This session will last approximately 45 minutes.

(Review consent form with participant.)

1. Please tell me your name, title, and years of experience in your current role.
2. What Advanced Placement Courses are offered at your school?
3. Describe the student enrollment process into Advanced Placement courses?
  - a. Who is involved in the enrollment process?
  - b. What guidelines are considered for student placement?
4. In what ways does the master schedule influence student assignments?
  - a. What are other influencers that could impact student assignments?
5. How is course availability determined?
6. What criteria are considered when making course assignment placement for students?
7. Describe any initiatives that are in place to identify students from an underrepresented group for AP consideration?

8. In what ways are you preparing students to take AP courses/exams?
9. Describe your knowledge about policies or guidelines related to student enrollment.
  - a. Policies or guidelines related to AP placement.
  - b. Policies or guidelines related to equitable access.
10. How would you describe the student most likely to succeed to an AP course?
11. How are your decisions influenced to make student placement?
12. In what ways have identified the not “typical” student for AP consideration?
13. What policies are considered when deciding student placements in courses?
  - a. Describe how the policies are used?
14. What do you think are barriers for some students not enrolling in AP courses?
15. Is there any other information you would like to share about placement process and accessibility of AP courses to students?

## Appendix C

### Teacher Focus Group Protocol

Hello, my name is Tiffinie Irving, and I represent Wichita State University as a doctoral student in the field of educational leadership. I appreciate your willingness to assist me in my dissertation research. This study is to examine school personnel's perceptions of policies and practices that determine which students should be considered for and enrolled in Advanced Placement programs. You were selected because of your position as a high school teacher. Please keep in mind that I am interested in your perceptions of who is accessing AP courses and school policies and practices that promote access and opportunity to participate in AP courses.

Before we begin, I would like to share a few procedures for our conversation. Although we will be on a first name basis, no names will be used when we report the results of this session. **With your permission I would like to audio-record our session** for response clarity towards accurate data analysis to report findings. I will also be taking written notes during the interview. I assure this audio recording will be destroyed after the completion of this study. This session will last approximately 45 minutes.

(Review consent form with participant.)

### Questions for Teacher Focus Groups

1. Please tell me your name, courses you teach and years of experience as an educator.
2. Describe your knowledge of the AP program at your school.
3. What do you know about the student enrollment process into Advanced Placement courses?
  - a. Who is typically included in making enrollment decisions?
4. What criteria do you consider when making course assignment recommendations for students?
5. How does the master schedule influence student assignments?
  - a. What are other influencers that could impact student assignments?

6. How would you describe the student most likely to succeed to an AP course?
7. What are examples of how you have identified the not “typical” student for AP consideration?
8. Describe your knowledge about policies or guidelines related to student enrollment.
  - a. Policies or guidelines related to AP placement.
  - b. Policies or guidelines related to equitable access.
9. How are you preparing students to take AP courses/exams?
10. What influences your recommendations for student placements?
11. What do you think are barriers for some students not enrolling in AP courses?
12. Is there any other information you would like to share about placement process and accessibility of AP courses to students?

## Appendix D

### Member Check Form



*Department of Counseling, Educational Leadership, Educational and School Psychology  
Box 142, Wichita, KS 67260-0142*

Dear \_\_\_\_\_,

Thank you for volunteering your time to provide me with an insightful interview. Attached, please find a copy of the transcript of the interview. Please review the transcription for accuracy and completeness of responses. Please contact me at [tiffinie4@att.net](mailto:tiffinie4@att.net) should you have any questions or additional comments for me to include. If I do not hear from you within two weeks, I will assume that you agree with the attached draft of the transcription.

Thank you again for your willingness to participate in this study.

Sincerely,

Tiffinie Irving,  
Wichita State University Doctorate Student