Student Perception of College Readiness

Setting:
This pilot study will focus on seniors in each of the four high schools of the Bellingham Public School District, located in Bellingham, WA. The school district serves over 10,000 students yearly; together the high schools serve approximately 3,500 students. The three high schools in the district, Bellingham, Sehome & Squalicum, serve students from within Bellingham city limits, from mainly suburban areas. Both Bellingham and Sehome have approximately 1,100 students enrolled in a given year, while Squalicum has about 1,300. These high schools all offer AP courses, enrollment at Skills Centers for technical trades, and partner with local community and technical colleges for Running Start.

Participants:
The participants will consist of ten current high school juniors who are on-track for graduation at the end of their junior year from each of the three high schools in the district. The students participating would be selected using typical sampling, looking to represent the typical high school junior from each school, and the school district itself.

Based on demographic information from the 2010-11 school year, each high school is close to a 50/50 proportion of male and female students. They are all predominately white, with Bellingham and Sehome high schools at approximately 83% Caucasian, while Squalicum is at 73% Caucasian. Bellingham, Sehome, and Squalicum high school students are 10%, 7% and 15% Hispanic, respectively. African American students represented about 3% of the population at each high school. Bellingham high school had 3% Asian or Pacific Islander students, while Sehome and Squalicum were at 6% and 8% respectively. American Indian or Alaskan Native enrollment at each of the schools was approximately 1% of the student body. ("Washington state report," 2011)

Socioeconomic status varies for each school. Bellingham high school had 31% of its students on either Free or Reduced Priced Meals while Sehome had 27% and Squalicum had 39%. Squalicum high school also has a much larger population of English Language Learner students, at 5% compared to 1% for Bellingham and 2% for Sehome. This is most likely due to the fact that Squalicum is the only high school with a structured ESL program. Squalicum high school also has a larger population of Special Education students, which is approximately 12%, where the other two high schools were both at 9%. ("Washington state report," 2011)

Care will be taken in sampling to select students who are typical representations of students from each high school based on the demographic information. I will also collect input from school administrators and instructors on what characteristics make a “typical” student at each high school.
Background:
Research in the past decade has shown that across the nation high school graduates are starting college, be it at a university or community/technical college, under-prepared for college-level coursework. In the state of Washington, approximately 57% of students who graduated from high school in June of 2009 and enrolled in a community or technical college needed to take at least one remedial course (below college-level) in the 2009-2010 school year, be it in math or English. The rate for Whatcom Community College, located in Bellingham, WA, where this study will take place, is even higher at 61% (“Role of pre-college,” 2011).

While it’s important to look at whether or not students are actually academically prepared for college once they’ve left high school, it is also important to address whether they perceive themselves of being academically able to handle college-level coursework and why. “Students’ perceived preparedness for university is expected to be a motivational factor for good performance.” (Jansen & Van der Meer, 2012) As is the case with visualization, if you can picture yourself doing something, you are more likely to actually carry it out successfully.

Purpose:
The purpose of this pilot study is to examine the experience of high school students entering their senior year and approaching graduation to discover their perception of whether or not they are academically ready for college. They will be asked to describe how academically ready they are for college based on their own opinion and to explain why they believe that they are or are not based on their experiences.

Research Questions:
- How do graduating seniors view their academic readiness for college-level work?

Initial Assumptions:
From my review of the literature and prior knowledge on the subject, my initial assumptions are somewhat limited. My assumption is that a majority of students may not feel that they are academically prepared for college, and this may be why they begin college having to take remedial courses. It could be that they did not picture themselves going to college and therefore did not put in effort to take courses that would prepare them for it. I also think that the students who are more likely to feel that they are ready for college would be those who have had good grades and have possibly taken course for college-credit through a program such as Advanced Placement or a dual-enrollment program with a college, such as Running Start.

Research Design, Data-Collection & Analysis Procedures:
This will be a qualitative Grounded Theory study focusing on the perception of the student participants, which is therefore emic and naturalistic in nature. The data will be collected through individual interviews with students following an interview protocol. The interview protocol will focus on academic preparedness for college to help exclude responses from students...
that do not pertain to academics. The students’ behavior during the interviews will also be included as observational data. The interviews will be approximately one hour in length and held in a classroom in their high school during the week after school gets out after their junior year. Interviews will be recorded and transcribed verbatim. The transcripts of the interviews will be coded and analyzed, looking for emergent themes. Because this study will be inductive and emic in nature, in-vivo coding will be used, using the actual words of the students to code and re-code the data. I anticipate going through the transcriptions several times moving from various small concepts to larger, recurrent themes.

**Required Materials and Resources:**
To carry out this study, I will require:
- A location and time in which to conduct interviews.
- A quality recording device.
- A transcriptionist or time in which to transcribe the recorded interviews.
- Time to analyze the collected data.

**Rationale**
Wanting to focus on student’s own perceptions of academic readiness for college, I chose a qualitative approach. While this could be studied using a quantitative methodology, such as a survey asking students to rank their readiness on a scale, I felt that the results would be much more meaningful and provide a deeper view if the study was done qualitatively. As a qualitative study, it also allows me to gather data in the words of the participants themselves, which is important in re-constructing and understanding their viewpoint.

Because the need for high schools graduates to enroll in pre-college courses right after graduation is so high in Washington State, it would be best to analyze the perception of the typical Washington state high school student. In order to construct a theory encompassing such a large population, one would need a larger-scale study than what I am proposing. For this reason I have decided to conduct a pilot study in Bellingham, WA where I would interview a sample of typical high school students from the largest school district in the county. This would give valuable insight into how to conduct a state-wide study and increase the chance of success. It would also allow me to test my interview schedule and data analysis procedures.

I decided to conduct individual interviews with each student in order to collect data. This was an appropriate decision given my research question, the setting and the participants for the study. My research question asks specifically “How do graduating seniors view their academic readiness for college-level work?” This is a research question that will require responses directly from the students in order to be best answered.

Instead of using a questionnaire to gather this information, it is best to use an interview as not only will I be able to gather more descriptive responses from participants verbally, but I will be exposed to observational data as well. This is especially important as it will allow for me to use both sources to triangulate my data; this is generally the data collection methods used in Grounded Theory (Creswell, 2012). I will be conducting a Grounded Theory study, as I am
looking to formulate a theory as to how high school students preparing to graduate view their academic readiness for college coursework.

Instead of a full-fledged study, I decided to start with a pilot study within Whatcom County. The ideal study would be to

Individual interviews are the best choice in this scenario. Although they may be “the most time-consuming and costly approach” (Creswell, 2012, pg. 219), I decided that they work best for my purposes, as I want students to be completely honest about their feelings of whether they are ready for college or not. If I were to use focus groups, students are likely not to admit they feel that they’re not ready, as they may not want other students, or their friends, to know that they feel that way. Students are more likely to share their true thoughts in a one-on-one interview.

For this study, I determined that it would be best to interview juniors at the end of the school year, as this is before students would have taken any college entrance exams, applied for admission or received a response from any colleges. Those factors would likely deeply influence whether or not a student felt they were academically ready for college or not. If someone scored low on the SAT or got a rejection letter, they may feel unprepared when they thought they were a week prior to that happening. For these reasons I decided not to interview high school seniors approaching graduation, as I want to gather data on how the students perceive their readiness with the least influence from external factors as possible.

Because these students are still minors, I would need to gain not only their informed consent, but that of their parents as well. I would also want to gain approval from high school and school district administrators. In order to protect participants, I will gather their consent, along with that of the parties just mentioned, and give them full disclosure of the study before they take part in it. I will assign students a random number to identify them and will protect their anonymity by not referring to any names or any identifiable characteristics when reporting my findings.
References


