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Meeting Needs or Exacerbating Barriers: The Role of Ohio's Early College Policy in Rural Students' College Enrollment and Persistence

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Early College programs aim to increase postsecondary credential attainment, often among traditionally underrepresented populations. Despite a rise in college enrollment of students from rural communities, these students continue to complete college at rates lower than their nonrural peers. I assess the degree to which Ohio's Early College policy addresses factors that impact rural students' college enrollment and persistence by examining factors at both the school and family/community levels. Finally, I conclude with a discussion of the ways in which Ohio's Early College policy could be improved to better address many of these factors as well as considerations for future research.

A driving force in current federal educational policy is the need to ensure that all students are “college and career ready” when they graduate high school (Education Commission of the States, 2014). Amidst this priority, there has been an increase in the percentage of rural students who enroll in college (Marré, 2014). However, while enrollment rates have increased, rural students continue to obtain bachelor's degrees at rates significantly lower than their nonrural peers (Marré, 2014).

Despite the discrepancy between rural and nonrural students' rates of college persistence, there is little research on factors that affect rural students' college completion. Although nearly one-quarter of our nation's students attend schools in rural school districts (Schafft & Biddle, 2014), researchers and policymakers alike often do not adequately explore or consider the unique needs of these students (Sipple & Brent, 2015). As a result, policymakers create policies that are meant to address these needs but often fall short of their goals or, worse still, exacerbate the very problems they are attempting to solve. With over 9 million rural school children in the country (United States Department of Education, 2015) and over 1.1 million high school students enrolled in dual enrollment or Early College programs (Wright & Gogotch, 2006, as cited in Howley, Howley, Howley, & Duncan, 2013), attention needs to be paid to the impact of these programs on rural students.

This paper serves to address the gap in the existing body of literature on the relationship between educational policy and the unique needs of rural students and the impact of said policy on college enrollment and persistence by analyzing Ohio's Early College policy. This policy analysis will serve to explore the degree to which Ohio's Early College policy addresses the unique needs of rural students that impact these students' rates of college enrollment and persistence by exploring two areas: school factors and family/community factors. To conduct this analysis, I will first examine Ohio's Early College policy in order to provide the reader with a foundation for understanding the policy. Next, I will explore the degree to which the policy addresses the school factors and family/community factors that create a unique set of needs for rural students that impact their college enrollment and persistence. In this exploration, I will provide a discussion of the strengths and weaknesses of Ohio's Early College policy's alignment with the needs of rural students as well as ways in which the policy could be improved. Finally,

I will conclude by discussing the need for additional research to better explore some of the topics included in this paper.

Ohio's Early College Policy

The logistics of Early College programs vary, but essential to Early College programs are the partnerships between high schools and colleges that afford high school students the opportunity to take college-level classes for which they can earn college credit. Often, Early College programs do not charge students enrolled in these programs (or their families) additional fees to enroll in these college-level classes (Jobs for the Future, n.d.). Eliminating this financial barrier is especially crucial for underserved student populations, which is often a target demographic for Early College programs (American Institutes for Research, 2014). By providing students with more rigorous courses for which they can earn college credit at no additional expense to the students or their families, Early College programs aim to increase rates of postsecondary credential attainment by increasing students' academic readiness for college and decreasing the overall cost of college to students and their families (American Institutes for Research, 2014; Jobs for the Future, n.d.).

Early College policies differ from state to state. For the purpose of this paper, I focus on the state of Ohio's Early College policy. Early College is one of four ways in Ohio that a high school student may earn college credit while enrolled in high school (Advanced Standing Programs for College Credit, 2014). Every school district in Ohio is required to offer at least one of these four options to their students (Advanced Standing Programs for College Credit, 2014). Ohio's Early College policy stipulates that these programs should assist particularly students in the following groups: "students who are underrepresented in regard to completing post-secondary education; students who are economically disadvantaged, as defined by the [state] department of education; students whose parents did not earn a college degree" (Advanced Standing Programs for College Credit, 2014, Section 3313.6013).

As previously mentioned, Early College programs often aim to increase postsecondary credential attainment for students from underrepresented populations (American Institutes for Research, 2014). Although each state varies in the degree to which they support postsecondary opportunities for these students (Bragg, Kim, & Barnett, 2006), Ohio is one state that promotes Early College programs as a way to assist students from underrepresented populations. Because many of the Early College programs in Ohio do not charge students a fee to participate in these programs (Ohio Department of Education, 2014), students are able to earn up to two years of college credit while still in high school, thus allowing them to reduce the number of college credits they must pay for as well as decrease the amount of time that is needed to complete their college degree once they graduate high school.

Early College Policy and School Factors

Rural students attend schools that are financially burdened. Williams and Nierengarten (2011) found that Minnesota's rural school districts educate their students with significantly less per-student funding than the state's nonrural districts. Budget deficits significantly impact rural schools' abilities to provide specialized courses as well as accelerated or remedial coursework and opportunities (Howley, Rhodes, & Beall, 2009; Khattri, Riley & Kane, 1997; Williams &

Nierengarten, 2011). The lack of curricular offerings not only limits the academic skills rural students need to be successful in college, but it impacts their perceptions of their college readiness, causing rural students to doubt that they are prepared to pursue postsecondary education (Doyle, Kleinfeld, & Reyes, 2009).

Early College programs in Ohio do attempt to ameliorate the restricted course options offered to rural students in several ways. School districts that offer Early College programs need to ensure that their students have completed the required curriculum prior to their junior year in high school so they can devote their junior and senior years to completing classes for college credit. To ensure their students are finished with the high school coursework, teachers compact curriculum by teaching more than one year's worth of material in one academic year (Ohio Department of Education, 2012). This curriculum compacting, which often begins in middle school, frees up teachers at the high school level to teach additional classes. Whether these classes are part of the Early College program or are simply additional courses offered as high school electives, the result is the same: increased course offerings to students.

Early College programs also attempt to increase course offerings through their partnerships with colleges. While some Early College programs rely on high school teachers to teach college classes, others allow their students to travel to a nearby college campus to take college classes. Since it is the college faculty who are teaching these courses, this partnership with local colleges significantly increases the course options afforded to students without necessitating an increase in high school faculty, which could serve to alleviate some of the financial strain faced by rural school districts.

Due to their rural nature, however, some rural school districts are not close enough to a college to make student travel to college campuses a viable option. To compensate for this lack of proximity, some rural districts are creating virtual Early College programs for their students. One example of using a virtual platform to deliver Early College programming in Ohio is the Rural Ohio College High School (ROCHS), which was created by the Ohio Appalachian Collaborative (OAC) (Ohio Department of Education, 2012). Focused on transforming rural education, the OAC is a partnership of 21 rural school districts in Ohio's Appalachian region (Battelle for Kids, 2014a), serving 44,00 students, 52% of which are living in poverty (Battelle for Kids, 2014b). This region of Ohio has a historically underserved population of students; only 30% of students in Appalachian Ohio go to college, which is less than half of the national average for college enrollment (Battelle for Kids, 2014b). ROCHS' goal is to bring college courses to underserved students using a combination of interactive video and internet resources to deliver college content to students without leaving their high school buildings (Ohio Department of Education, 2012). The use of a virtual platform illustrates how rural schools can implement Early College policies, regardless of their proximity to a college campus. By allowing schools flexibility in how they deliver their Early College programming, Ohio's Early College policy allows rural school districts to be responsive to their local context and make choices for their Early College programs that take these factors into consideration.

Although the flexibility in how schools deliver their Early College programming is a strength of Ohio's Early College policy, one weakness of this policy would be its failure to address the barriers often imposed by other education policies. Rural students attend small schools with small staff sizes that are significantly impacted by increased administrative and staff demands reflected in education policies (Yettick, Baker, Wickersham, & Hupfeld, 2014). For example, compliance under the former mandate, which required teachers to be "highly

qualified” was particularly difficult for rural districts where teachers are often required to teach multiple subjects (Eppley, 2009). In order for students to be ready to participate in Early College programs, they must finish their kindergarten through twelfth grade curriculum by the end of their tenth grade year. As discussed previously, schools that want to prepare their students for Early College programs achieve this goal by compacting the curriculum. In other words, teachers teach more than one year’s worth of curriculum in one academic year. This curriculum compacting is restricted by ESEA’s highly qualified teacher provision, however. Under this legislation, “a teacher is highly qualified in a core academic area if she holds a bachelor’s degree, a teaching license, and demonstrates knowledge in every subject area in which she teachers” (Eppley, 2009, p. 2). Due to this legislation, teachers cannot teach across subjects as they were previously able to do. One can see how this poses a problem for curriculum compacting if a student needs to study, for example, one year of biology as well as part of a year of chemistry in one academic year. The highly qualified teacher provision also restricts the grade level material a teacher can teach meaning that, teachers cannot compact curriculum if the span of the compacted curriculum extends below or above the grade span in which they are licensed to teach.

In addition to employing “highly qualified” teachers, districts are also required to provide their teachers with professional development opportunities, which are particularly difficult for remote rural districts to fulfill (Yettick et al., 2014). However, Ohio’s Early College policy does not provide additional funding to schools for the additional professional development needs that come along with implementing an Early College program in their districts. For example, additional professional development might be needed to learn how to teach a college level course at the high school level or to learn how to navigate the new technology tools implemented in schools that want to provide an Early College program using a virtual platform. Providing this additional professional development may pose an insurmountable barrier to offering an Early College program for rural districts that already have great difficulty in providing adequate professional development to their staff for existing programs.

Encompassing the constraints in employing highly qualified teachers and providing professional development opportunities to those teachers is an overarching deficit in funds that rural districts often face. ESEA funding formulae are particularly problematic for schools with low student enrollment (Yettick et al., 2014), as is common in many rural schools. Although there are federal funds and grants that are directed specifically to rural schools (Arnold, Biscoe, Farmer, Robertson, & Shapley, 2007), there continues to be a gap between per pupil funding of rural and nonrural schools (Yettick et al., 2014). Funding issues are compounded by rural districts’ inability to capitalize on corporate partnerships like their urban counterparts are able to do (Williams & Nierengarten, 2011). Without a surplus in the existing budget or corporate partnerships to rely on, rural districts are often forced to find state or federal grants to fund new initiatives like Early College programs. However, these grants only provide funds for a specific time period and when the money runs out, districts are forced again to look elsewhere for funds if they are to continue these initiatives. The aforementioned ROCHS Early College program, for example, received a Race to the Top Innovation Grant for \$561,000 but capped the length of the funding at four years. At the end of that four years, ROCHS will need to seek funding sources elsewhere. This funding instability may impede schools from seeking the initial funding to start an Early College program. This may be especially true for rural schools that already struggle to meet their budgetary needs each year.

Along with attending schools that face budgetary and staffing constraints, rural students often face college enrollment barriers due to access to school guidance counselors. By providing information about college and helping students choose which high school classes to take, school guidance counselors impact students' postsecondary options in significant ways. A report by the Commission on Precollege Guidance and Counseling reported that students from rural areas have the least access to guidance counseling services that would prepare them for college (Lee & Ekstrom, 1987). A study on students' access to guidance counseling services by Lee and Ekstrom (1987) provide additional support for this finding. They looked at which students reported receiving contact with their high school guidance counselor when selecting their academic courses. They found that approximately half of students (50.4%) reported not having contact with their guidance counselors during this process. They found that rural students were significantly less likely than this to receive counseling on course selection (Lee & Ekstrom, 1987).

These findings indicate that the impact of Early College programs on the preparation of rural students for college likely could be quite varied. On one hand, if high schools are committed to preparing their students for participation in Early College programs, they are likely to encourage the school guidance counselors to increase their attention to students' course selection in order to ensure they will have completed the required curriculum prior to their junior year in high school, thus permitting them to take courses for college credit in the Early College programs. For these students, it seems as if Early College programs would encourage both students' access to school guidance counselors during course selection and input from these counselors as to which courses they should take. For students who do not intend to enroll in their high school's Early College program, however, Ohio's Early College policy is unlikely to increase their access to school guidance counselors and the resulting knowledge that comes from that access. Additionally, there is the possibility that Ohio's Early College policy will have the unintended consequence that school guidance counselors would prioritize students who intend to enroll in Early College programs over those who do not, thereby further decreasing the amount of access some rural students' have to these school guidance counseling services.

Early College Policy and Family/Community Factors

Due to out-migration of those with college degrees as well as lower overall rates of college persistence, rural students lack college-educated role models (Grimard & Maddaus, 2004). National averages for the percent of adults 25 and older who have a bachelor's degree or higher is 18% in nonmetro areas, compared with 32% in metro areas (United States Department of Agriculture (USDA), 2015). Unfortunately, the educational attainment gap between these areas is widening with only a 3% increase in those holding bachelor's degrees or higher in nonmetro areas from 2000 to 2013, but a 6% increase for those holding these degrees in metro areas (USDA, 2015). The widening of the educational attainment gap between metro and nonmetro areas is not a new trend; it has been documented since the 1960's (Herzog & Pittman, 1995). Low rates of college degree attainment is seen in Appalachian Ohio, as well, where only 12% of adults have a four-year degree (Battelle for Kids, 2014b). Ohio's Early College policy aims to increase the number of students who earn college degrees. If the policy helps facilitate this goal, there may be more students from rural areas with at least a bachelor's degree, but there is no guarantee that these students would return to their rural

communities after college. For this reason, Early College programs may not increase the number of college-educated role models in rural areas so they do not necessarily address this need. To better address the need for college-educated role models, Early College programs could facilitate mentoring partnerships between their high school students and existing college-educated adults in the community.

For many rural students, the choice to attend college necessitates moving far away from home (Elder, King, & Conger, 1996; Glendinning, Nuttal, Hendry, Kloep, & Wood, 2003; Rojewski, 1999, as cited in Demi, Coleman-Jensen, & Snyder, 2010). This move may add stress to a student who desires the autonomy that living away from home provides but also wants to preserve close family ties (Hektner, 1995, as cited in Grimard & Maddaus, 2004). Unlike previous studies that did not study rural youth specifically, a study by Demi and colleagues (2010) found that close bonds with parents were not a strong predictor of college enrollment. In other words, children who had close bonds with their parents were no more likely to enroll in college than children who did not have this kind of relationship with their parents. The researchers interpreted this finding as support for the theory that rural youth who have close emotional bonds with their parents may experience difficulty choosing to move far from home to attend college (Demi et al., 2010).

The desire to increase rates of postsecondary credential attainment is largely a result of the coupling of a college degree and personal success. Language from the Early College initiative itself states that “every young person needs a postsecondary credential to thrive in today’s world” (Jobs for the Future, n.d.). This connection underscores a widely held belief in American culture that formal education is crucial for personal and societal gains (Tyack, 1991). The underlying assumption of Early College programs is that all students benefit from going to college and, therefore all students should desire to go to college. It posits the decision to attend college as a purely rational one, rather than acknowledging that there are many reasons why a student would decide not to attend college, even if it truly is in their best academic and economic interest. In order to be most effective, programs like Early College that emphasize college attendance need to consider the factors that affect a students’ decision to attend college. The aforementioned mentoring by college-educated adults might help provide students with information about college but may not alleviate the uncertainty these students may feel about leaving home. Being able to visit colleges that are close enough to their home to come home on a regular basis may help alleviate some of this anxiety. Burney and Cross (2006) found support for the role that college visits can play in reducing rural students’ anxiety about the college process. In her study of students in rural Appalachian counties in Mississippi, King (2012) also found support for the role of college visits on rural students’ college enrollment. In addition, offering students the opportunity to talk with current college students from rural areas who have found ways to continue their existing relationships with those at home may also serve to reduce the high school students’ uncertainty of how to do this. If Early College policy encouraged or mandated the incorporation of these elements into Early College programs, they may be more effective in encouraging rural high school students to enroll in college.

In addition to facing internal pressure to stay closer to home, rural students may experience pressure from their parents and communities, as well. Many rural regions have experienced “brain drain”, a phenomenon characterized by the departure of the most highly educated persons from the rural community (Artz, 2003, as cited in Howley, Rhodes, & Beall,

2009). Aware of this pattern, some rural communities and families discourage their young people from leaving the area to attend college (Corbett, 2007).

As mentioned previously, Early College programs assume that all rural students should desire to go to college. For the same reasons, it is assumed that these students' parents, communities, and schools will also support their children attending college. Ohio's Early College policy makes no attempt to address local preferences in postsecondary options; instead, it espouses a "college for all" mentality that it expects local actors to endorse, as well. In order for Early College programs to succeed in their goal of increasing the number of college-going students, they need to garner the support of local actors including school personnel, parents, and community members. This is particularly important in rural areas where schools often serve as an integral part of the community (Khatti et al., 1997; Schafft & Biddle, 2014), where school actors must balance local interests with state and federal policy demands (Budge, 2010), and where schools are seen by community members as a continuation of community rather than as distinctly separate entities (Wallin & Reimer, 2008). Rural community members are often highly invested in local schools, viewing them as a means through which to communicate and perpetuate local values (Wright, 2004). In her ethnographic studies of several rural towns in the Midwest, Sonya Salamon (2007) demonstrates the depths to which rural communities' support of the local school can serve as a rich resource for school programming. Additionally, Jenkins' (2007) case study of a rural superintendent in Oklahoma demonstrates the necessity of school administrators to respond to local community values if they are to lead effectively. If community goals do not align with the goals of the program, there will be little support for the continuation of an Early College program and it is unlikely to persist through budget cuts, administrative turnover, and shifting priorities. Additionally, the lack of alignment between school's curriculum and community values may serve to further exacerbate the "brain drain" phenomenon (Shamah & MacTavish, 2009).

Additionally, students from rural areas often do not have parents who earned college degrees (Provasnik et al., 2007, as cited in Byun, Meece, Irvin, & Hutchins, 2012). Being a first-generation college student comes with many barriers. First generation college students perceive less support from their families for attending college (Bowman, 1991, as cited in Grimard & Maddaus, 2004) and often experience a less welcoming college campus environment (Terenzini, 1996, as cited in Grimard & Maddaus, 2004) that exacerbates their feelings that they do not belong in college. In their study of first-generation college students from Appalachian Ohio, Bradbury and Mather (2009) found that family obligations are often sacrosanct and the college retention of these college students required them to learn how to effectively manage these obligations.

As mentioned above, the support of families is important for the success of an Early College program, especially if it encourages postsecondary options that differ from the preferences of students' families. In gaining this support, it is imperative that high schools include parents in the decision-making process about their child's course selection and postsecondary choices. Ohio's Early College policy does not address parents as key stakeholders in their children's educational choices, however. It relies on the aforementioned assumption that parents will encourage their child to go to college and, by extension, to participate in programs like Early College that make college-going a more affordable option that requires fewer years to complete. Research of first-generation college students like the cited 1991 study conducted by Bowman, however, demonstrate how erroneous this assumption can be. Parent influence is one

of the strongest factors that influences a student's predisposition to attending college (Sharp, Johnson, Kurotsuchi, & Waltman, 1996) and eventual college enrollment (Smith, Beaulieu, & Seraphine, 1995) and, unlike teacher influence, it continues to be a significant factor during the college search and choice process (Sharp et al., 1996). Even after enrolling in college, rural students continue to feel the effects of their parents' influence, whether the effects push them toward college or pull them away from it (Hlinka, Mobelini, & Giltner, 2015). Early College programs should work to facilitate parents' support of college enrollment since this support will likely serve to encourage students to pursue college as their postsecondary option. Additionally, the aforementioned connections between college-educated adults as well as current college students may help Early College students navigate the pressures from home while they are in high school as well as those felt on campus once they begin college.

Early College Policy and College Persistence

Thus far I have discussed several weaknesses of Ohio's Early College policy, but the most significant weakness of the policy is its sole focus on college enrollment and lack of attention to college persistence. Students who enroll in Early College programs are asked to complete thirteen years' worth of curriculum (kindergarten through twelfth grade) in eleven years. This compacting of curriculum requires students to learn even more each year than is required by the standard curriculum, which is already quite demanding. The message of Early College programs is that this hard work will pay off when the students are able to complete their college degree in less time at a lower cost.

For many rural students, the end result of this hard work may not be a college degree. Despite an increase in college enrollment of rural students, these students continue to obtain bachelor's degrees at rates significantly lower than their nonrural peers (Marré, 2014). Additionally, students from rural areas with a high percentage of economically disadvantaged students had even lower rates of college enrollment and persistence than their rural peers from areas with a smaller percentage of economically disadvantaged students (Howley, Johnson, Passa, & Uekawa, 2014).

Research has demonstrated that rural students face greater challenges adjusting to college life than do urban or suburban students (Guiffrida, 2008). These challenges contribute the differences in retention between the first and second year of college. A study conducted in Oregon found that 83% of students from nonrural areas persisted to the second year of enrollment, compared with 78% of students of students from rural areas (Pierson & Hanson, 2015). If this pattern holds true in Ohio, these numbers are likely to be even more troubling due to overall first to second year retention rates of 77% (Ohio Board of Regents, 2008), which is lower than the rates found in Oregon.

I question the social justice of a policy that encourages students who are statistically unlikely to complete a degree to pursue college without providing them any support when they get there. Some might argue that this is beyond the scope of Early College policies, but I argue that if schools fund and encourage enrollment in Early College programs that are just as likely to produce college dropouts as college degree holders, then they are contributing to an already troubling national pattern. Nationally, fewer than 60% of college freshmen who attend four-year colleges full-time graduate with a bachelor's degree within six years (United States Department of Education, 2011).

The numbers in Ohio are similar; 60% of full-time students enrolled in four-year colleges complete a bachelor's degree within six years (Ohio Board of Regents, 2008). Those students who enroll in college but do not complete their degree have not only spent time and energy pursuing career options that they are not qualified for, but have also often accrued student debt that they must pay back. They are essentially paying on an economic investment that will never return dividends for them.

Some would say that we need to drop the "college for all" mentality that Early College programs espouse because increased college attendance is a poor solution to the current levels of income inequality in our nation (Weissman, 2014) or because encouraging all students to attend college has adverse impacts on our ability to fill technical or trade jobs (Samuelson, 2012). The argument of whether or not "college is for everyone" is beyond the scope of this paper. However, we must consider how a student's academic achievement impacts the likelihood that they will graduate college. In Ohio, colleges whose incoming students averaged over 24 on the ACT had significantly higher rates of bachelor's degree attainment within six years (rates ranging from 74% to 84%) than did colleges whose incoming students averaged less than 21 on the ACT (rates ranging from 29% to 52%) (Ohio Board of Regents, 2008). Ohio does not provide breakdowns of this data for rural versus nonrural students, so we do not know whether these patterns are exacerbated for rural students as the overall national rates of college completion are.

Regardless of whether or not one agrees with the arguments against increased college enrollment, national data continues to show increased earning potentials for individuals with college degrees in comparison to individuals without college degrees in both metro and nonmetro areas. As of 2013, the median earnings for the employed population of those age 25 and older with a high school diploma in metro areas was \$27,718 while the median earnings for those with a bachelor's degree was \$50,740, resulting in a difference in earnings of \$23,022 (USDA, 2015). In nonmetro areas, the median earnings for the employed population of those age 25 and older with a high school diploma was \$26,220 while the median earnings for those with a bachelor's degree was \$40,253 resulting in a difference in earnings of \$14,033 (USDA, 2015). Although the income gap between those with a college degree and those with a high school degree is much smaller in rural areas than in metro areas, it is still a significant gap, even when one considers that rural areas often have a lower cost of living (USDA, 2015).

The impact of a college degree in rural areas can also be seen in the correlation between educational attainment and poverty. Although the correlation between rural areas' low levels of educational attainment and poverty rates declined during the 2000s, it remains high today; the average poverty rate for nonmetro low education counties is 23.9% while the average poverty rate for all other nonmetro counties is 16.4%

This information indicates that earning a college degree can be economically beneficial. While a college degree alone does not guarantee better economic prospects, it certainly is one factor that can increase one's standard of living. This is true both in urban and in rural areas. So while I can, and do, fault Ohio's Early College policy for its lack of support once students enroll in college, the policy itself has a laudable goal of increasing postsecondary credentials, especially among students who historically are underserved.

Need for Future Research

This paper serves to explore the alignment of Ohio's Early College policy with the unique needs of rural students that impact their college enrollment and persistence. This paper is theoretical and due to the lack of research that has been conducted on the implementation of Early College policies, particularly in the state of Ohio, research has yet to determine the effect of Ohio's Early College policy's strengths and weaknesses on rural students' rates of college enrollment or completion. Research on Early College and dual enrollment programs has called for increased research on these programs. In particular, one group of researchers studying these programs in a Midwestern state, which is perhaps the closest research to what I call for, assert that there is a need for two types of studies on these programs: "efficacy studies providing definitive evidence of the benefits of such arrangements and feasibility studies describing implementation challenges and promising practices for addressing them" (Howley et al., 2013, p. 78).

I echo the call for further studies on both the efficacy of Early College programs and the feasibility of their implementation. I would add two additional criteria for these studies. First, that they be conducted with rural student populations to determine if Early College programs are helping rural students enroll and persist in college. Second, that implementation studies would take a holistic perspective and consider the impact of the broader policy demands of schools to determine how Early College policies work with or against policy demands to address the needs of rural students that impact their college enrollment and persistence.

Conclusion

There are several troubling weaknesses with respect to Ohio's Early College policy's ability to address the needs of rural students, but as mentioned previously, the most concerning weakness is these programs' exclusive focus on student college enrollment and lack of attention to college persistence. This paper demonstrates the need for research on Early College programs' impact on college completion rates for rural students. As discussed above, I view this as a social justice issue and one that should be addressed through the amendment of current educational policy. Until such research is conducted, we cannot be sure of the degree to which Ohio's Early College policy is addressing the needs of rural students and, worse still, we cannot be certain that this policy is not exacerbating the existing barriers often faced by rural students who desire to attend college and complete their degree.

This paper served to address the gap in the existing body of literature on the relationship between educational policy and the unique needs of rural students that impact their college enrollment and persistence by analyzing Ohio's Early College policy. This policy analysis discussed the degree to which this policy addresses the unique needs of rural students by exploring its alignment with school factors and family/community factors. As this paper is theoretical and little research exists on Early College policies' effectiveness and implementation issues, this paper served to support the call for additional research to better explore these topics. It is only through conducting this research that we will be able to understand the effects of Ohio's current Early College policy and amend this policy to better meet the needs of rural students.

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