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Facilitating College Readiness through Campus Life Experiences

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Abstract

In a program called "College Immersion," middle grades students spend up to one week on a local college campus, attending specially designed college classes and experiencing collegiate activities. This research study reports on findings related to two different college-middle school partnerships involved in a College Immersion program. Literature on college and career readiness suggests that the middle school years are critical for future academic success, especially for the kinds of vulnerable populations that are involved in this study. Taking middle grades students to college offers them authentic experiences that facilitate college readiness. After participation in a College Immersion program, students in both college-middle school partnerships demonstrated aspects of college readiness as outlined by Conley (2007). Following a weeklong experience of immersion in college life, students imagined a future that included post-secondary possibilities, developed college knowledge, and cultivated deeply positive feelings about college.

> *It's the first day of College Immersion; seventh graders arrive early looking nervous. They rotate around the principal and then around their English teacher. Some greet classmates with nervous squeals. In fifteen minutes they will enter the academic hall in front of them and take their very first college lecture course.*
>
> *The tension builds. Then a football appears. Several students move away to start throwing the ball around. Small clusters of students wander from their teachers and sit on the grass, talking and laughing. And just when it's really starting to look like "real" college, Colin finds a big stick and starts jabbing the air. "Look at me," he yells. "I'm a Ninja warrior!"* (Field notes, June 2008)

Imagine bringing middle grades students to college. What comes to mind? Some teachers and university colleagues raise an eyebrow. Other educators wonder about the relevance—after all, college is so far in the future. Some just shudder at the notion. This article aims to address these concerns and illustrate the kinds of college readiness behaviors middle grades students can explore, understand, and begin to develop when exposed to college life for a short period of time.

When middle grades students have the chance to experience college life, with activities that have been carefully planned and structured with their interests and needs in mind, they may begin to imagine a future that includes college and career opportunities. They participate in an educational setting that is challenging, relevant, exploratory, and integrative—all critical attributes of a meaningful education (National Middle School Association [NMSA], 2010). This article describes findings related to two different

collaborations involving a university, a college, and several middle schools: Both collaborations involved bringing high-need urban students in the seventh and eighth grades to college for four to five days to experience a developmentally responsive and imaginative approach to college readiness called "College Immersion."

Findings from two different College Immersion (CI) collaborations were synthesized, and the kinds of college knowledge and understandings middle grades students described and the behaviors they exhibited following their CI experiences are presented. The importance of this article lies in exploring ways in which middle grades students can develop and embrace the idea of pursuing a post-secondary education and begin to develop an understanding of what they must do now, in middle school, to create and achieve their post-high school dreams. An examination of what college readiness means and *why* college readiness must be addressed in middle school, especially for students in poverty and other high-need situations, is presented first, followed by a description of the CI programs and students' responses to their college experiences.

College Readiness in the Middle Grades

Before delving into the existing literature on college readiness and the critical role the middle grades play in students' life chances, it is helpful to define, explain, and operationalize what is meant by "college readiness." The idea of "readiness" has several facets that may be explored through themes conceptualized in Conley's (2007) analysis of the knowledge, strategies, dispositions, and behaviors possessed by the college-ready student. Although much of Conley's research and work (2005, 2007) focuses on high school students, his definitions of college readiness may be reconceptualized to reflect the nascent college readiness dispositions and attributes being developed among middle grades students who participate in College Immersion programs.

Conley's Facets of College Readiness

Conley (2007) identifies four key areas or "dimensions" of interactive knowledge and skills that offer a comprehensive way to identify and define college readiness. Conley depicts the dimensions in a nested model. Moving from the core to the outer rings, he identifies *key cognitive strategies, key content knowledge, academic behaviors, and contextual skills and awareness*. Conley explains that these facets "interact with and affect one another extensively" (p. 8), an assertion that underlines the importance of envisioning the idea of "college readiness" as integrated and relational. It also points to the importance of conceptualizing the idea of readiness as a process.

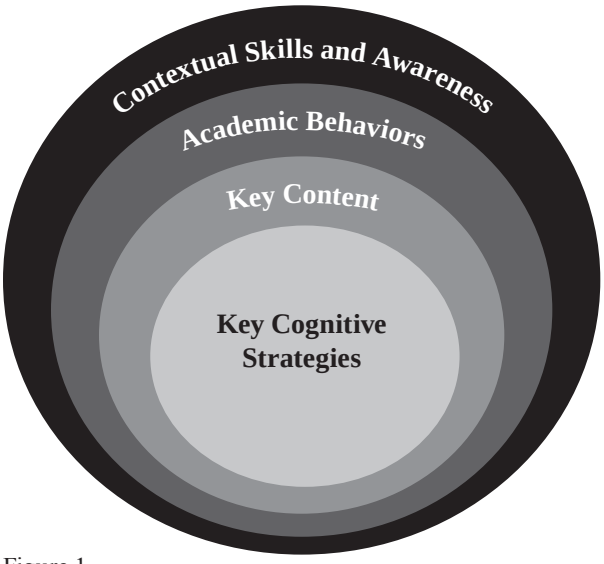

Figure 1
Facets of college readiness (Conley, 2007, p. 12)

Conley's (2007) notion of *key cognitive strategies* lies at the core of the nested circles. This concept refers to the higher-order thinking and analysis that college ready students engage in as they access understanding and create new ideas. Conley identifies seven cognitive strategies: intellectual openness, inquisitiveness, analysis, reasoning/argumentation/proof, interpretation, precision and accuracy, and problem solving. Moving outward from the core, the next concept presented is the idea of *key content knowledge*. This centers on what students need to know in different content areas to have a solid foundation for more advanced learning. *Key content knowledge* represents the "stuff" of learning—the knowledge that students may build upon by engaging with *key cognitive strategies*. *Academic behaviors* of college-ready students include self-monitoring and study skills. These three facets interact inside the outermost ring, *contextual skills and awareness*, a facet that refers to students' understanding of the systems and culture of college contexts; this facet highlights the importance of knowing the processes involved in college life, including admissions, tuition costs, and financial aid systems.

At what point in the PreK–12 experience should educators begin to focus on these facets to prepare students for college? As the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) begin to impact student learning, it is expected that the higher-order thinking strategies that anchor the standards will help students develop the kinds of *key cognitive strategies* discussed by Conley (2007). What, though, of the other facets? Can we wait for high school to begin introducing students, especially underrepresented students in our most vulnerable populations, to the process of college readiness? To address this question, it is helpful to examine the literature on the importance of the middle grades in the academic development of students.

Significance of Academic Achievement in the Middle Grades

Students' academic achievement during the middle grades has a profound and lasting impact on their future high school and post-high school success. A research report from ACT (American College Testing, 2008) found that, by the end of eighth grade, students lacking benchmark skills in reading and math were likely to continue to fall further behind; additionally, the kinds of accelerated, rigorous courses that might help prepare students for higher-level work, especially in math and science, were not readily available in high-poverty schools (Tierney, Colyar, & Corwin, 2003; Trusty, Spenser, & Carney, 2005; Venezia, Kirst, & Antonio, 2003), leaving some of our most vulnerable students unprepared for high school and college.

This lack of preparation, including a dearth of resources and current information about college and careers, begins to create a divide that launches some students toward success while others slide into what Balfanz (2009) described as "achievement chasms" that place students "on a path of frustration, failure, and, ultimately, early exit from … high school" (p. 13). In fact, many students who eventually drop out of high school begin disengaging from their educational experiences in the middle grades, and many of these students are students of color, English language learners, and low-income students (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2012; Balfanz, 2009; Balfanz, Bridgeland, Moore, & Fox, 2010). This disengagement is especially troubling in light of research findings that show students in the middle grades beginning to make decisions that impact high school (Trusty et al., 2005) and post-high school opportunities (Arrington, 2000; Osborn & Reardon, 2006; Trusty & Niles, 2003). Examples of these decisions include choosing a high school (i.e., in the area under study, there are more than 700 different high school programs in more than 400 schools), taking advantage of higher-level courses if available, participating in school and after-school activities, and choosing to meet with the school counselor to gain advice about college and careers (Trusty et al., 2005). During the middle grades, students who are engaged in imagining their future post-secondary and career choices tend to make more informed choices and better decisions (Akos, Konold, & Niles, 2004; Arrington, 2000; Osborn & Reardon, 2006; Trusty et al., 2005).

The capacity to imagine and think about the future provides a cognitively based source of motivation (Bandura, 1977). This conceptual link between motivation and cognition scaffolds a self-interested future gaze. As Markus and Nurius (1986) explained, "Individuals' self-knowledge of what is possible for them to achieve is motivation, as it is particularized and individualized; it serves to frame behavior and to guide its course" (p. 955). In experiencing college life in the middle grades, it is hoped that students begin to imagine a "possible self"—an identity as a confident student who can master challenging work (Finnan & Kombe, 2011) and find himself or herself beginning to prepare for college.

It is also essential to consider the learning environments most engaging for students in the middle grades. Active learning, for example, is considered the most successful and engaging pedagogical approach to instruction for students in the middle grades (NMSA, 2010), and this is supported by literature on engaged learning (Willis, 2006, 2007; Wilson & Smetana, 2009). In active learning, students are placed at the center of learning, and they generate information (Shore, Ray, & Goolkasian, 2013). Trends toward disengagement, however, (Venezia et al., 2003) along with evidence indicating that a responsive middle grades curriculum is seldom seen in practice (Brazee, 2000), suggest that an active learning approach may be lacking in school settings. Arranging for students to engage in real college experiences in the middle grades affords them the opportunity to generate understandings about college life and use those understandings to imagine a future that includes college or other post-secondary institutions.

Research on the critical nature of early adolescence, combined with what we know middle grades students need in their education, creates unique opportunities for universities and middle grades school partnerships. Indeed, one of the recommendations to emerge from research findings on the high school

dropout epidemic was the creation of partnerships between secondary schools and universities so that practitioners can both inform and take advantage of relevant literature (Balfanz et al., 2010). The present study describes two institutions of higher education that welcomed middle grades students to their campus for a week of college life; both are located in a densely populated urban area in the northeastern United States. Although one is a private university and the other a public college, both have a history of strong commitment to community outreach and avidly support local community service programs. Considering that the most developmentally appropriate and effective approach to middle grades learning occurs when students are actively engaged, it makes sense to actively engage them in college activities and classes. Providing college experiences in the middle grades may promote contextual awareness (Conley, 2007) and career awareness (Schaefer & Rivera, 2011; Schaefer, Rivera, & Ophals, 2010) as well as other facets of college readiness. This article shares research on a program for middle grades students called College Immersion.

Description of the College Immersion Program

The College Immersion (CI) program began in 2007. At the time, a small public, urban middle-secondary school was partnered with a local college. The students were 'non-traditional college-going' in that most were from low-income families who had recently immigrated to the United States, most came from families with no college experience, and many of them struggled academically. In an effort to build students' understanding of the importance of post-secondary education while building and fostering the partnership, the idea of CI was conceived. For one week in June, all seventh grade students from the partnered school were invited to attend college. The preparation for this first endeavor was challenging: Professors from the college were invited to design high-level, week-long courses in their field and compose course descriptions. The professors then visited the school and explained their course before a panel of 10 seventh grade students. The students voted on the most interesting and promising courses, and these became the first set of classes for College Immersion. The 10-student panel selected a lecture course for all students in CI and five small courses or "college majors" students would choose from for their week-long experience. The professors whose courses were selected returned to the school one evening for a dinner with the school's seventh grade teachers. During this gathering, professors gained some understandings about strategies to use while teaching middle grades students, including varying activities and assigning homework.

That first CI experience in 2007 proved both powerful and positive. The coordinator of the program and author of this article resolved to provide a yearly CI experience for every seventh grade student in the school, and when she left the school in 2010 to become a university professor at a different institution, she began a modified version of the CI program for a different set of local middle grades students. The first CI program continues to thrive at the original school and college (Site 1), and another version of the CI program continues at the author's current university (Site 2).

Although located on two different campuses and occurring at different times of the year, both CI programs shared basic similarities: They both involved bringing 50–80 middle grades students to college for four to five days. Students were responsible for getting themselves to and from the college campus. Participation was not mandatory but strongly recommended, especially for students who were struggling in school. Every student who expressed an interest in attending the CI program, even those regarded as "troublemakers" or seen as "disruptive," were encouraged to attend. In more than six years of program implementation at Site 1, only one student was asked to leave due to behavior issues. In the two years of the other program (Site 2), no student was asked to leave.

University professors taught all the middle grades students' college classes, and students traveled to their different classes in peer cohorts, escorted by teachers or counselors. Students began each day with a 50–minute college lecture to give them a feel for taking notes and sitting in a large, stadium-style classroom. Past week-long lecture topics included "Hurricanes and Natural Disasters," the "Psychology of Music," and "Toxicology." For their "major" courses, students chose smaller, seminar-style classes from a menu that included classes such as Shakespeare, Medieval Myths & Life, Neuropsychology, Computers, Art & Design, Toxicology, and Human Relations. Each of these "major" courses lasted two hours each day for the entire week. Following lunch, students' afternoon activities included hour-long sessions such as physical education, art classes, visiting with Greek Life students, information on financial aid, campus tours, and conversations with college students. Each day was carefully scripted so that students remained

together (with their regular classroom teacher or counselor in the background) and sampled a wide range of college life (See Appendices A and B for sample student schedules).

The purpose of this research study was to gain a broad understanding of middle grades students' experiences of the CI program and to examine if and how the CI program engaged middle grades students in active learning and facilitated understandings of college life related to facets of college readiness. The research questions posed were:

1. What understandings of college and college life do middle grades students produce and generate after participating in a college immersion program?
2. In what ways do middle grades students' understandings of college life and expectations reflect facets of college readiness?

Method

Participants and School Settings

This study focused on a public college, a private university, and a combined eight sets of middle grades students. Collaboration with the public college (Site 1) began in the spring of 2007—one year after college administration and faculty helped open a new small school with 81 sixth grade students. The school, launched in 2005 with a grant from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, was an "Early College High School" that strived to recruit struggling students, students in poverty, English language learners, and students with Individual Education Plans. College Immersion was created as a way to foster and deepen the bonds of the college-school partnership. The population of the school reflects its diverse, urban community: More than 50% of students attending the school speak another language at home. More than 25% of the student body qualifies for special educational services and resources, and 65% qualifies for free or reduced-price lunches.

At this site, all seventh grade students were invited to CI, regardless of grades and behavior. Students attended the program during the regular school year for one full week. Permission to study students' survey results was obtained through the district and affiliated university. In the first year of CI (2007), the students and professors at Site 1 gave such positive feedback on surveys (see Appendix C) that the program has now been institutionalized, with every seventh grade class at Site 1 enjoying a full week of college life, usually the second week of June.

The second CI collaboration (Site 2) was between a private university and two local public schools. It began in 2011 at the request of the director of a 21st Century Community Learning Center grant who worked on the university campus and learned about Site 1's College Immersion program at a research forum. The director wished to use grant money to fund a similar project. Due to grant restrictions, the CI could only be offered outside the regular school year, so the CI was instituted during winter break (five days off in February).

The two middle schools (Schools A and B) targeted for the CI program in Site 2 were in high-poverty areas with diverse populations. School A served 1,376 students in grades 6–8; 91% qualified for free or reduced-price lunches. School B served 705 students in grades 6–8; 81% qualified for free or reduced-price lunches. To recruit a wide swath of

Table 1
Site One: School partnered with the public college

	Diversity	Economic data	Grades served	Size
	Urban school: 38% Asian/South Asian; 26% Latino or Hispanic; 18% White; 17% Black	65% free or reduced-price lunches	6–12	587

Site Two: Schools partnered with the private university

School site	Diversity	Economic data	Grades served	Size
School A	Urban school: 42% Latino or Hispanic 38% Asian/South Asian; 15% Black; 5% White; 1% Native American.	91% free or reduced-price lunches	6–8	1,376
School B	Urban school; 92% Black; 6% Latino or Hispanic; 2% Asian	81% free or reduced lunch	6–8	705

Table 2
College Immersion Program Specifications

	Number enrolled	Pre-survey	Post-survey	Interviews	Field notes	Years of program studied
Site 1	81 (all seventh graders)	No	Yes	No	Yes	2007–2011
Site 2	50 total (25 seventh and eighth grade students from cach School A and School B)	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	2011–2012

students from these schools, during homeroom each student was given a flyer describing the CI program and announcing that an after-school assembly would provide more information. Additionally, the program developer and researcher set up a table at the entrance to each of the schools for parent-teacher conference days and evenings. Here, she gave parents and students information about the program and urged them to attend her information session. In an effort to identify students who were not in honors or accelerated classes, counselors and teachers working in after-school programs used their knowledge of students to encourage struggling and disengaged students to attend the information assembly. The first 25 students from each school to complete an information packet following the school assembly were recruited. The packet included signed letters of assent and consent as well as eight open-ended survey questions; students answered the same questions before and after their CI experiences (see Appendix D).

Researcher Role in Study

It is important to note that as program developer, this author was deeply involved in every aspect of the CI programs in both schools and strived to ensure that every student had a positive experience. This meant talking to parents; helping students find their way to the university; meeting with teachers, principals, and professors; and being highly visible before and during the CI program. It should also be noted that the program developer's intimate knowledge of the students and their experiences may have figured into her analysis of survey data, field notes, and interview results. To address issues of subjectivity, she included reflections on her subjectivity as part of the field notes; she also understood that the point of the research was not to understand whether the CI program was good or bad, rather, to add knowledge to the field (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). In the case of this program, that field was college readiness. Additionally, she strived to include all voices in this study and used purposeful sampling (Merriam, 2009) at Site 2 to interview students who seemed successful in the CI program as well as students who appeared disengaged. She assumed the role of a participant-observer researcher in the program and remained with students for the entire week.

Data Sources

At Site 1, each seventh grade student participating in CI took an exit survey on the last day of the program. For this study, 450 seventh grade surveys (Appendix C) were analyzed (2007–2011), along with daily field notes written by the program developer and researcher. From this site, four sets of surveys were analyzed (n. 450) spanning 2007–2011, along with more than 20 typed, single-spaced field notes taken by the researcher as a participant-observer during the program itself in the years 2007, 2008, and 2009.

At Site 2, two sets of pre- and post-survey data (n. 91) were analyzed (45 from 2011 and 46 from 2012), along with 24 open-ended interviews from 2012. Each interview lasted 15–35 minutes, and each was transcribed. Again, the researcher produced more than 20 pages of field notes and assumed the role of participant-observer for both years studied (2011 and 2012). Although survey data sets from Site 1 taken during years 2010 and 2011 were also analyzed, it must be noted that the researcher did not participate as an observer of CI during those years.

In the years that the program developer and researcher participated as an observer (2007, 2008, 2009 at Site 1 and 2011 and 2012 at Site 2) she remained with students from start to finish of the CI experience. As a way of gaining multiple perspectives on students' and professors' experiences in the program, she attended the lectures and each of the "major" two-hour classes at least once. She gave the welcome address to students before the first lecture of the week, ate lunch with students, accompanied them to their various afternoon activities, and gave closing remarks at students' final CI activity. As a participant-observer, she wrote detailed field notes about the students and rich descriptions of her own experiences. In 2012, she gained permission

from students, parents/guardians, and educational institutions to interview students from Site 2 to triangulate the growing categories that were emerging from a cross-case analysis of both sites. Twenty-five students were asked or volunteered to be interviewed. Of those, 24 allowed their interviews to be transcribed and analyzed (see Appendix E). One student had difficulty articulating her feelings and thoughts about the CI program and after the interview requested that the tape not be used in the study.

Data Analysis

This research study used naturalistic inquiry (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) and qualitative research methods to gain insights into the understandings of college and college life that middle grades students developed after participating in a CI program and ways these understandings did or did not figure into facets of college readiness. This study examined two sites, treating each site as a case study (Yin, 2008). Fieldwork and data collection were accomplished one site at a time (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). Data were analyzed using a two-stage approach: The within-case analysis and the cross-case analysis (Merriam, 2009). For within-case analysis, the data were coded for identification and development of categories, using constant comparative analysis (Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

The coding process began with open coding. In the open coding stage, field notes and students' articulations about their CI experiences were read carefully. Descriptions of students' experiences were generated during this process. The researcher's observations and field notes were also open coded. From the descriptions generated in the open coding process, preliminary categories were created. In axial coding, the codes were re-examined to merge redundant categories and conceptualize larger categories that captured students' experiences. At this stage, the researcher looked carefully for any expressions that did not fit with the developed categories. Finally, the researcher examined the data again to integrate categories and select representative pieces of the data.

After the data from each site were analyzed, the researcher began cross-case analysis of both sites, using Strauss and Corbin's (1998) constant comparative method to determine the patterns of experiences that intersected both cases. To develop categories and, ultimately, concepts (Charmaz, 2000), the researcher engaged in "thematic analysis," (Strauss & Corbin, 1998), looking across codes to locate common categories and to identify particular themes (Charmaz, 2000; Ely, 2002). This activity helped the researcher understand the categories about college life and college work that emerged from students' experiences. Three major categories were created: Following a weeklong experience of immersion in college life, students (a) imagined a future that included post-secondary possibilities, (b) developed college knowledge, and (c) cultivated deeply positive feelings about college.

Findings

Students Imagine a Future that Includes Post-Secondary Possibilities

> Now I'm thinking about which college I should go to, should I go here or should I go there. The only reason why I wouldn't come here is because I really like football. In college you're going to meet a whole bunch of new people. You can't just be quiet, and you have to start doing things. … This program teaches you about college, and before I came here I didn't know that much about college, and now I want to go to college. (Site 2, interview 2012)

Middle grades students experiencing college for the first time do not usually enjoy their first day on campus. As depicted in the field notes that introduced this article, on the first day of CI, students typically cling to their friends or teachers. By the second day, a shift has begun:

> In the second day of college, I feel more comfortable because I know where to go in the college. In the first day, it's totally different. I don't feel comfortable with everything. I feel struggle even with my friends [there]. (Site 1, 2007)

And by Friday, the scene is very different:

> As we stand waiting for students to arrive, they nod to us and keep walking … or just ignore their teachers completely. Most of them walk by reviewing notecards or reading papers. Sam stops to ask a question, but Ricky pulls him back: "Come on, we're going to be late for our Health final!" [Others] mill about, waiting for their final college lecture on hurricanes … sad it's their last day with their small, two-hour class. (Field notes Site 1, 2008)

This comfort with college was evident in how students spoke about how they might set goals and work hard now in middle school and then high school to achieve their future dreams of college. "Bob,"

(all students' names are self-selected pseudonyms) attended a financial aid session and asked specific, pointed questions such as, "How many classes can you take in one semester?" and "How many credits [do] you need to graduate?" and then, "How fast can you do it"? In this session, he also found out about Advanced Placement (AP) classes in high school and expressed interest in taking as many AP classes as possible to save time and money. During an interview with Bob (Site 2, 2012), it became clear that the impetus for his line of questioning came from his concern for taking care of his family. He said, "I have the experience [of college], but now I can have more experience and experience more college classes. Going to high school and taking a college course, I can go to a better college." When asked to explain, he said he wanted to go to college and get a great job, "because I want to be there to take care of my family so [that] my family doesn't have to worry about anything. I want to make sure I know what I'm doing [so that] when I get to the real college I can just go through." Bob confided that he was fairly certain that if he took AP classes in high school, he could finish in three years.

Bob's attitude differed from other students' in its single-minded focus, but his post-secondary planning stance was echoed by other middle grades students attending CI. "College was a fun learning experience that will help me in the future. … We got to work on the computer and also learn something new that may be useful in the future" (Site 1, 2007). The two-hour course, which students selected from a menu of choices, gave them their first taste of choosing a college major or focusing in on their interests: "They let us pick what we wanted to do. Also the courses we were able to take kind of helped us to see what direction we might want to go in life and the careers we want to choose" (Site 1, 2010).

Additionally, students often cited the content they learned in their small, two-hour classes as helpful for the future: "It help me learned [sic] interesting new things that probably new college students learning now. So if I remember these notes, I will, of course, use them for college if we're learning about it" (Site 1, 2008). The process of going to classes in different areas of the campus also helped students envision themselves as college students in the future: "Now when it is really time for me to go to college, I won't be afraid. … It was a lot of fun. I liked hearing the lectures every morning and going back to our small classes. … I saw what it would be like when I'm older and I have the chance to go to college" (Site 1, 2008).

Students began to envision themselves as college students, yet they spoke about how they might set goals and work hard now in middle school and then in high school to achieve their future dreams of college. As Sonya said in an interview,

> The most important thing that I saw was scholarships to go to school. … I'm more prepared now because before, I really didn't care, and now it got proved to me that you should really care about college because there's a lot of stuff ahead of you. (Site 2, 2012)

Melanie echoed this idea of working in school now to achieve later. In an interview she said, "To be prepared for it (college), to be an intern as well, [I need] to work hard in school right now. It'll help me to get a scholarship" (Site 2, 2012). The forward-looking stance held by students was a noticeable aspect of the interviews conducted with them:

> In these last four days, I've watched students who were not from the gifted classes learn drive, learn ambition, learn why and how they need to study and work hard. The growth in just four days has been exponential and amazing. In the interviews—and wow am I glad I did them—they are talking about their goals and ambitions, the fact that now they need to work harder to achieve their dreams. It's a conceptualization, a concrete look at the nuts and bolts of college life that gives them a specific vision to focus on and a realistic dream to achieve. (Field notes, Site 2, 2012)

Often, when students considered a future that included college, they also talked about what they learned in their college classes and *how* they learned in their college classes. This understanding of what and how students learn in college was subsumed under the theme *college knowledge*.

Students Develop College Knowledge

> [College Immersion] was able to let me know what a college campus is like, what it looks like and what it feels like. It did kind of change my perspective … it got to let me explore, and entirely see inside, what school was like. … I was able to see what type of professors they were and how they think and how they teach the students and connect to everyone, and how friends can become brothers and sisters on the campus and things like that. (Interview with "Ivan," Site 2, 2012)

As expressed by Ivan, there were two aspects of college that students especially appreciated: knowledge of the campus and knowledge of how courses and professors worked.

Knowledge of the Campus

A major theme to emerge from students' talk and writing about CI was their deep satisfaction in being able to navigate the college campus. The act of walking to and through the campus with purpose and knowledge afforded students a different perspective of the campus itself. Middle grades students connected this confidence of knowing the campus with feeling like a "real" college student: As Drose explained in an interview, "Now I have experience with college, I'm more ready. … I'm exposed to a different background, instead of just going to school, I'm going to class, and you're moving to different building after building" (Site 2, 2012). Another student wrote:

> I got to experience going around a college campus with a college schedule, and at the second day, we knew our way around the place without help. … It helped us see the college building[s] and what we will feel like in college so [that] we know what to expect when we actually get there. (Site 1, 2008)

Students connected confidence in their physical knowledge of the campus with imagining how that campus might feel to them in the future. As with Conley's (2007) interactive facets of college readiness, this category connects to the first theme, in which students imagine a future that includes college. The college classes themselves, especially the morning lecture and the longer daily two-hour classes, gave students a sense of how college classes work. A conversation with "Double A," in particular, articulated how college conversations differed from middle school conversations:

> Double A: [In my two-hour class] we learned about different stuff like sticking together and the worst case scenario, like, in the beginning, we learned what if there was a tsunami and we had to kill five of the people we didn't need, like, we learned how to settle that. Human Relations has been my kind of subject, I even tell my dad what we talk about.
>
> Researcher: Do you think you could have those conversations in middle school?
>
> Double A: Yes, but we really don't get as deep into it.

"David" gives another perspective on how students in CI valued the college discussions:

> David: Yes. I like that we were treated like real college kids, and we could talk about sexual relationships, but we can't do that in junior high school because everyone will start laughing.
>
> Researcher: Do you think that experience helps prepare you for college?
>
> David: Yes. Now I know when I go to college, I'm going to [university in Site 2], I'll know some of the teachers.
>
> Researcher: That would be great if you had the same professor. Do you think the College Immersion program helped prepare you for college?
>
> David: Yes. Now I know that in college, well in junior high school, the classes are right next to each other, but in college you have to go from building to building. I thought college was like junior high school, but the classes are all around.

David connects knowledge of the physical campus to his comfort with and knowledge of college and of professors. This knowledge of professors emerged as an important aspect of students' knowledge of college.

Professors

The most surprising part of CI for many students was the professors. One student wrote, "It surprised me that professors aren't boring. Before the college experience, I thought all professors are either mean or boring. I was expecting [Dr. G] to be an old, strict historian. He was really engaging and fun" (Site 1, 2007).

Students seemed pleased to know that college professors could and would go out of their way to help them understand complicated or dense topics. Prior to CI, students expressed fears such as, "[Professors] make you write fast and theirs [sic] no slow people in the … class. … They speak faster and don't show lesson on board, they are harder and expect more. They care less about your problems" (Site 2, 2011). Before attending CI, another student wrote, "College professors are more serious and demanding. In middle school, if you slip up, you get a second chance. In college theres [sic] no time to mess up. Collge [sic] porfessors [sic] proably [sic] have a no nonsense rule" (Site 2, 2012).

One of the most powerful understandings to emerge from the College Immersion experience was students'

changed perception of professors. Instead of the "serious and demanding" person imagined by students, after CI, students were expressing the idea that:

> The professors were very caring. … They … were nice and they are different from middle school teachers because they go fest [sic], but they make sure you are with [sic]. … We did not understand it at first, but the professors explain it to me, and we understood it when she was done understanding [sic] it." (Site 2, 2011)

The importance of this understanding was reflected in students' belief that, even if they had not acquired all of the content knowledge needed for the class, their professors might be willing to help them: "They [professors] weren't as mean as I thought. They cared for the well-being of our academics; [it] was pleasant to know I would not be left out in college" (Site 2, 2011). Professors also demonstrated willingness to respond to students' interests and needs, particularly the need of middle grades students for active learning; the following observation was taken from a course called Green Energy, Green Power:

> In Professor M's class on energy, the students were freezing in the air conditioning. So Professor M gave them a quick lesson on creating energy by taking them for an energetic jog up and down the stairs. Prof. M's class always seems to be somewhere interesting! Yesterday they walked around the science building measuring the temperature of various objects. When they got back to the classroom, there were formulas to study and equations to work on. Physically tired, the all-boy class quickly went to work on the complicated problems. I was impressed, and when one student had an issue converting volts into watts, Prof. M. took such time and care explaining the problem that they were all late for lunch. And not one student complained! (Site 1, Field notes, 2008)

The shifting perspective on professors was consistent in most of the data on how students began to feel more comfortable and more "like a college student" during the CI program.

Students Cultivate Deeply Positive Feelings about College

Students' positive experiences of college during CI emerged as a major theme This included a sense of wonderment, exploration, and forward-thinking. Enthusiasm for college was a salient feature of students' talk and writing:

> I thought this was an awesome week, and I loved it. I thought having a taste of college life was really cool. I wish it was longer and I didn't have to go back to school. I'm going to miss being able to have lunch outdoors and doing all this cool stuff. … I liked being able to be more on my own and being treated more like an adult, lunch, and just chilling. [Site 1, 2009]

Students frequently used the words "love" and "fun" to describe their experiences in the program. Many contextualized this idea of love and fun with the freedom they were given. For example, the college cafeteria provided a chance for students to choose their lunch. They exercised choice in selecting their two-hour "major" subject. Students appeared to value the opportunity to be treated as older and more mature. Students wrote comments like, "[Immersion] showed me how to behave as a college student and what to expect. It was an enjoyable experience [that] helped every student individually. I learned a lot here" (Site 1, 2011), and "I liked feeling older and how as a seventh grader, they treat me like a college kid. … I loved feeling like an adult" (Site 1, 2010). Students evinced a positive attitude toward college in general: "This program has made me become less shy, nervous, and scared about college. I can't wait to go to college. I just need to set my mind for it" (Site 2, 2012).

In analyzing seven sets of survey data, two students indicated they were not sure they would like to do the CI program again. Overwhelmingly, though, students indicated that the college experience helped them look toward the future with hope and enthusiasm, and many spoke about doing better now in middle school to improve their college options.

Discussion

Situating the findings of this study within Conley's (2007) framework allows us to see how the idea of college readiness might be re-imagined for middle grades students. Conley's four dimensions of readiness may be seen in this study's analysis of middle grades students' experiences following CI. Unlike Conley's representation, the dimensions of college readiness as exhibited by students did not appear neatly nested. Instead, their experiences moved in and out of the dimensions, reflecting a sampling of sorts. Conley's conceptual model, however, is useful as a guide to understanding how students' middle grades college experiences may provide a kind of context and foundation—a scaffold of sorts, for future college readiness development.

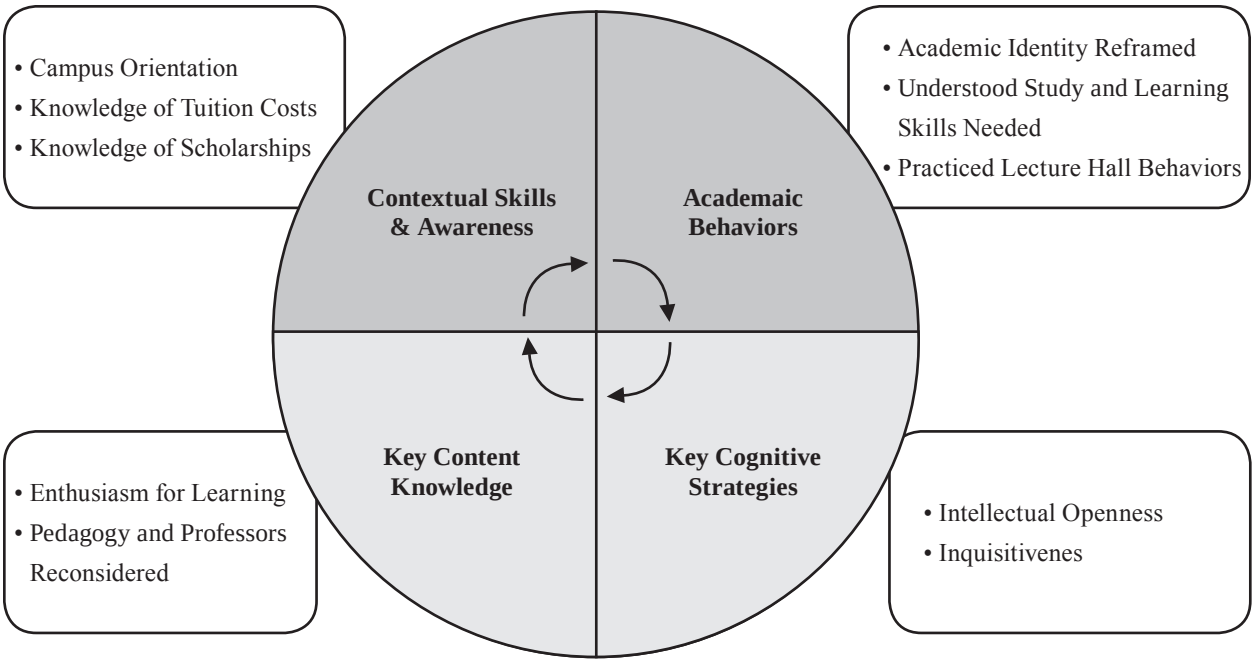

Figure 2
College readiness outcomes related to college immersion
(This figure reconceptualizes D. T. Conley's (2007) Four Dimensions of College and Career Readiness (p. 12)

Contextual Skills and Awareness

The idea of *contextual skills and awareness* was most prevalent in this study's finding that students developed college knowledge (Conley, 2007). Navigating the college campus with growing confidence was important to students and gave them a kind of experiential learning that is especially important for the middle grades student (NMSA, 2010; Shore et al., 2013; Willis, 2006). Physical knowledge of the campus supported students' evolving understandings of what it meant to be a college student. Students also talked about how their exposure to "real" college students, Greek Life activities, financial aid, scholarships, and opportunities for academic and sports scholarships helped create a more complex and realistic view of college. As "Melanie" explained in her interview, the most important thing she learned from the CI experience was "what we learned about internships and college life. It helped me learn, in the future, what they have, and it makes me want to learn more about it" (Site 2, 2012). Visiting with university students who received financial aid support elicited a plethora of questions during a class session with a financial aid counselor and college students.

Students were also surprised at the camaraderie and friendships they witnessed among college students. This more complex understanding of college life and culture was a powerful motivator for many. What had formerly been strange was now familiar, enabling many to imagine themselves on a college campus learning, walking from class to class, and making friends and enjoying campus life. Perhaps even more important, was the related finding that students cultivated deeply positive feelings about college after their CI experience.

Academic Behaviors

During CI, students cultivated college knowledge, and also observed and cultivated some of the *academic behaviors* they felt college students must possess. Prior to CI, students presented a somewhat idealized vision of how typical college students behaved: "They do good in all their classes, do good in all exams, get their notes, and listen to their professor. They pay attention in class and organize their workplace" (Site 2, 2011). Following CI, many students appeared to have a more nuanced understanding of the demands placed on college students. As one student (Site 2, 2011) wrote in her post-CI survey: "I think college students do their work, participate, and come on time to their classes. They volunteer and give back to their community. Successful college students try to put their best effort and actually enjoy their courses."

The experience of "acting college," as one student phrased it, helped them understand some of the

pressures of the college student. In an interview, "Omar" explained what he learned about self-monitoring in his two-hour class:

> One thing in Shakespeare class, we had to remember a little passage, and we didn't entirely have to memorize all of it. That day, I went home, I studied a little bit, but then the next day I didn't remember everything about it, so when I got home, I probably should have studied a little bit more, even though I thought I was sure of myself. (Site 2, 2012)

Engaging in a college class that required students to self-monitor and study helped some of them begin to reframe their academic identity and think about themselves as college students. This idea also related to the study's finding that following CI, students imagined a future that included post-secondary possibilities. This vision included strategies that are interesting in their specificity: "To have the best chances of success, I would take very good notes, pay attention in class, ask the teacher for help and actually good [sic] to class all the time" (Site 1, 2010). Students also wrote that the CI experience "showed me how a college student would act, taught me how a college student's life is and showed me how I have to be responsible for myself" (Site 2, 2011). Students described feeling like a college student, and although this experience manifested differently for each student, overall there was a deeply positive and satisfying sense of accomplishment. As one wrote, "It wasn't that serious, but you saw the identity of a college student … it built you another identity of a college student" (Site 2, 2012). Seeing, feeling, and experiencing the sensation of "acting college: encouraged some to try on this new academic identity and cultivate positive feelings about college.

Key Content Knowledge

While it is certainly not possible in one week for middle grades students to acquire the necessary understandings in math, science, social sciences, languages, and arts that Conley (2007) defined, they displayed pride and pleasure in the content knowledge they developed. In particular, the lecture class helped students feel like a college student, and the facts that they wrote in painstaking detail in their lecture notes and studied again at home were deeply satisfying. In fact, most students were eager for more and more challenging work. This may help explain why some expressed disappointment in the level and amount of work encountered in their two-hour classes. In fact, their enthusiasm for learning was interesting to observe and remark on, somewhat wryly, by the students' regular subject area teachers, who openly wondered why their students were so excited for more homework.

Key Cognitive Strategies

Some students in CI demonstrated a kind of hunger for learning that illustrated the *key cognitive strategies* of inquisitiveness and intellectual openness (Conley, 2007). This hunger was especially evident in their two-hour class. Most students said it was here that they learned the most and developed a rapport with their professor. Others expressed a desire for more work:

> I thought the work would be more, I thought I [sic] was going to be challenging in a way, but it turns out that I went on and beyond, giving myself more work that [sic] I'm supposed to. I think we should've done more work. (Site 1, 2009)

Some of this enthusiasm for learning may be due to the fact that most students received their first choice of "major," which was the two-hour course. Other enthusiasm for learning may be attributed to the many professors who allowed students to follow their interests—sometimes to such an extreme that when students were curious about how fire extinguishers worked, their physics professor encouraged them to disassemble it. This invitation to explore interests generated a great deal of excitement among students and provided opportunities for students to begin cultivating and using *key cognitive strategies* to develop college knowledge (Conley, 2007).

Conclusion

In reconceptualizing Conley's (2007) framework, we can begin to imagine ways to provide real and relatable scaffolds to college readiness while students are still in the middle grades. It is interesting to consider how Conley's framework might inform other middle grades programs. For example, Finnan and Kombe (2011) presented a school-university initiated intervention program for high-risk and overage middle grades students that accelerates learning to help students graduate on time. The accelerated program succeeds for the most part; students discuss their changed identity from poor students to capable students with abilities. The program contains many elements found in CI, including active learning, small learning environments, and support from the university. Reconceptualizing this program using Conley's facets of college readiness can add a dimension of college awareness that may enhance students' experiences in the accelerated program. For example, exposure to college classes and campus

life may help them develop an identity as a capable, college-bound student. Additionally, students might cultivate a love for college and ideas for future career paths. Perhaps they would make post-secondary learning a part of what they expect and hope for as they begin high school.

Collaborations between middle grades schools and universities may create opportunities for students to experience college life and develop positive memories of college activities. A strong recommendation to emerge from a review of the literature on college and career readiness was for educators to focus on programs that improve students' college and career readiness skills in the middle grades to improve post-high school educational and career opportunities. College Immersion helps students envision how college looks and feels, without the real stress of grades and trying to navigate the college campus alone. Partnerships between local colleges and middle grades schools may provide opportunities for professors to understand the joys and challenges of middle grades teaching and give students a glimpse of a possible future that includes some postsecondary education. Even if middle grades students go to a local college for just a day of college experiences, they may begin to develop a framework for thinking about college and college life. Universities and colleges with schools of education might be especially receptive to this kind of collaboration.

Middle grades students acquired important perceptions about college after participating in CI; they realized that professors were people with whom they could form collaborative, caring relationships. Also, because students' interest in the classes drove their selection of courses, choice and interest seemed to play a role in students' understanding of the course material and their enthusiasm for acquiring new subject area knowledge. Some students suggested that they were now more motivated to do well in middle and high school to increase their opportunities for college access and success. By actively engaging in college activities, students developed the beginnings of a framework for thinking about college or other post-secondary experiences in their future.

Students' participation in the CI program addresses President Obama's call to create a "new vision" to promote activities that build students' capacity for college and career readiness (February 22, 2010). Students' comments and experiences indicate that post CI they are beginning to "set their mind for college," and this idea is one of the most important outcomes of this program. As we see evidence that students from our most vulnerable populations, such as the populations that participated in this study, begin disengaging from school in the middle grades (Balfanz, 2009; Balfanz et al., 2010), programs such as this that engage students in thinking about and imagining their future become even more relevant and important. As students of color continue to be underrepresented at colleges, universities, and other post-secondary institutions, it is imperative that we create more programs for middle grades students that promote active learning and offer students choices that challenge their minds and imaginations.

Active learning for middle grades students is especially pertinent to this study; students are placed at the heart of the action. We can see how the idea of immersing students in activities, so that they engage with learning in ways that ask them to produce information, can be deeply positive and rewarding learning experiences. Providing students with similar experiences of active learning with higher-level work within classrooms (i.e., group work, authentic projects, field trips) may help students to engage with *key cognitive strategies* in ways that are meaningful and help prepare them for college level work. By "doing" college, students generate deeply positive understandings about college and college life . They are active participants in their learning about college. College is not frightening but familiar—no longer out of reach but a realistic goal for many.

While students' positive feelings toward college are encouraging, they are also troubling. Is it unrealistic to regard college as "fun?" Will students be ready to engage in the effort and invest the time needed to succeed in college? Or is it enough, in seventh and eighth grade, to feel confident and positive about college success in the future? It is hoped that by giving students the opportunity to experience life on a college campus, they will consider college as a serious part of their future plans and begin to see the relevance of their current school work.

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Appendix A
SAMPLE SCHEDULE, SITE 1

SEVENTH GRADE COLLEGE IMMERSION SCHEDULE: JUNE 8–12

	CLASS A	CLASS B	CLASS C
MONDAY	**(Ms. F)**	**(Mr. C)**	**(Ms. S)**
8:50–9:50	Lecture: K. 270*	Lecture: K. 270*	Lecture: K. 270*
10:00–12:00	Small Classes	Small Classes	Small Classes
12:00–12:55	Lunch (Cafeteria)	Lunch (Cafeteria)	Lunch (Cafeteria)
1:00–2:10	Physical Education	Art: **	Library
2:15–3:30	Library	Physical Education	Art: 433**
TUESDAY			
8:50–9:50	Lecture: K 270	Lecture: K 270	Lecture: K 270
10:00–12:00	Small Classes	Small Classes	Small Classes
12:00–1:00	Lunch (Cafeteria)	Lunch (Cafeteria)	Lunch (Cafeteria)
1:00–2:10	Art: 433**	Library	Physical Education
2:15–3:30	Physical Education	Art: 433	Library
WEDNESDAY			
8:50–9:50	Lecture: K 270	Lecture: K 270	Lecture: K 270
10:00–12:00	Small Classes	Small Classes	Small Classes
12:00–1:00	Lunch (Cafeteria)	Lunch (Cafeteria)	Lunch (Cafeteria)
1:00–2:10	Library	Physical Education	Art: 433
2:15–3:30	Art: 433	Library	Physical Education
THURSDAY			
8:50–9:50	Lecture: K 270	Lecture: K 270	Lecture: K 270
10:00–12:00	Small Classes	Small Classes	Small Classes
12:00–1:00	Lunch (Cafeteria)	Lunch (Cafeteria)	Lunch (Cafeteria)
1:00–2:10	Physical Education	Art: 433	Library
2:15–3:30	Library	Physical Education	Art: 433
FRIDAY			
8:50–9:50	Lecture: K 270	Lecture: K 270	Lecture: K 270
10:00–12:00	Small Classes	Small Classes	Small Classes
12:00–1:00	Lunch (Cafeteria)	Lunch (Cafeteria)	Lunch (Cafeteria)
1:00–2:10	Art: 433	Library	Physical Education
2:15–3:30	Physical Education	Classroom	Library

***Morning lecture course: How Many People can the Earth Support?** A series of lectures by Dr. B

****Sketching History: A Printmaking Workshop** Dr. R

Students will create drawings based on a series of prints featured in xxx museum. Students will analyze works featured in the exhibition and use them as inspiration for their own drawings and printing plates. Students will create cardboard relief prints and pull prints from the plate. No prior artistic experience is required.

Appendix B
SAMPLE SCHEDULE, SITE 2

COLLEGE IMMERSION SCHEDULE: FEBRUARY 19–22

	CLASS: Human Relations Professor W	**CLASS: Criminal Justice Professor C**	**CLASS: ART Professor D**	**CLASS: Sports Management Professor H**
TUESDAY				
8:45–8:55	Sign in: S. Café	Sign in: S. Café	Sign in: S. Café	Sign in: S. Café
9:00–9:55	Lecture: Toxicology: Bldg: S (Dr. H)	Lecture: Toxicology: Bldg: S (Dr. H)	Lecture: Toxicology: Bldg: S (Dr. H)	Lecture: Toxicology: Bldg: S (Dr. H)
10:00–11:55	Human Relations (P. Room, S. Hall)	Justice (Bldg. D. 301)	Art (S. Hall, Mezzanine Level)	Sports Management (Bldg. D. 311)
12:00–1:00	Lunch	Lunch	Lunch	Lunch
1:10–1:30	Public Safety: Bldg. S	Public Safety: Bldg. S	Public Safety: Bldg. S	Public Safety: Bldg. S
1:35–2:55	Campus Tour	Campus Tour	Campus Tour	Campus Tour
3:00	Dismissal	Dismissal	Dismissal	Dismissal
WEDNESDAY				
8:45–8:55	Sign in: S. Café	Sign in: S. Café	Sign in: S. Café	Sign in: S. Café
9:00–9:55	Lecture: Toxicology: Bldg: S (Dr. H)	Lecture: Toxicology: Bldg: S (Dr. H)	Lecture: Toxicology: Bldg: S (Dr. H)	Lecture: Toxicology: Bldg: S (Dr. H)
10:00–11:55	Human Relations (P. Room, S. Hall)	Justice (Bldg. D. 301)	Art (S. Hall, Mezzanine Level)	Sports Management (Bldg. D. 311)
12:00–1:10	Lunch with Greek Life Members (S. Café)	Lunch with Greek Life Members (S. Café)	Lunch with Greek Life Members (S. Café)	Lunch with Greek Life Members (S. Café)
1:00–1:30	Athletics Dept.	Athletics Dept.	Athletics Dept.	Athletics Dept.
1:20–2:00	Pharmacy Activity	Pharmacy Activity	Pharmacy Activity	Pharmacy Activity
2:00–2:55	Career Planning: S. Café	Career Planning: S. Café	Career Planning: S. Café	Career Planning: S. Café
3:00	Dismissal	Dismissal	Dismissal	Dismissal
THURSDAY				
8:45–8:55	Sign in: S. Café	Sign in: S. Café	Sign in: S. Café	Sign in: S. Café
9:00–9:55	Living on Campus S. Café	Living on Campus S. Café	Living on Campus S. Café	Living on Campus S. Café
10:00–11:55	Human Relations (P. Room, S. Hall)	Justice (Bldg. D. 301)	Art (S. Hall, Mezzanine Level)	Sports Management (Bldg. D. 311)
12:00–1:10	Lunch- M. Hall	Lunch- M. Hall	Lunch- M. Hall	Lunch- M. Hall
1:00–3:00	O. Scholars Academy	O. Scholars Academy	O. Scholars Academy	O. Scholars Academy
1:00–2:00	Career Lecture: D 301	Career Lecture: D 301	Career Lecture: D 301	Career Lecture: D 301
2:15–2:55	Community Building Room TBD	Community Buildin Room TBD	Community Building Room TBD	Community Building Room TBD
3:00	Dismissal	Dismissal	Dismissal	Dismissal
FRIDAY				
8:45–8:55	Sign in: S. Café	Sign in: S. Café	Sign in: S. Café	Sign in: S. Café
9:00–9:55	Lecture: Toxicology: Bldg: S (Dr. H)	Lecture: Toxicology: Bldg: S (Dr. H)	Lecture: Toxicology: Bldg: S (Dr. H)	Lecture: Toxicology: Bldg: S (Dr. H)
10:00–11:55	Human Relations (P. Room, S. Hall)	Justice (Bldg. D. 301)	Art (S. Hall, Mezzanine Level)	Sports Management (Bldg. D. 311)
12:00–1:15	Lunch	Lunch	Lunch	Lunch
1:30–2:55	Closing Ceremony (Presidents Room, C. Arena)	Closing Ceremony (Presidents Room, C. Arena)	Closing Ceremony (Presidents Room, C. Arena)	Closing Ceremony (Presidents Room, C. Arena)
3:00	Dismissal	Dismissal	Dismissal	Dismissal

Appendix C
SURVEY, SITE 1

What part of the College Immersion program did you like the most?

What part of the College Immersion program could have been better?

In which part of the College Immersion program did you *learn* the most?
Please describe what you learned (generally).

What part of the college experience surprised you the most?

In your opinion, was this College Immersion week a valuable experience? Why or why not?

Please describe your overall opinion and view of the College Immersion program.

Do you think the College Immersion program helped prepare you for college? Why or why not?

Would you like to do this again? (circle one) Yes No Maybe

Appendix D

SURVEY, SITE 2

Pre-College Immersion Student Survey

1. How would you describe your academic preparation for college classes?
2. How do you think college classes compare to your middle school classes?
3. What do you think successful college students do to earn high grades?
4. If you were to enroll in a college course now, what would you do so that you have the best chances for success? (i.e., time management, organization, note-taking, concentrating, etc.)
5. How do you think college professors are similar to and different from your middle school teachers? Please describe.
6. Describe how you think college assignments differ from your middle school assignments.
7. What do you think it takes to succeed in college? Please describe.
8. Do you expect to go to college after high school? Why? Why not?

Post-College Immersion Student Survey

1. How would you now describe your academic preparation for college classes?
2. How did the college classes compare to your middle school classes? Please explain
3. What do you think successful college students do to earn high grades?
4. If you were to enroll in a college course now, what would you do so that you have the best chances for success?
5. How were your college professors similar to and different from your middle school teachers? Please describe.
6. Describe how you did on your college homework assignments. How did they differ from your middle school assignments?
7. What do you think it takes to succeed in college? Please describe.
8. Do you expect to go to college after high school? Why? Why not?

Appendix E

COLLEGE IMMERSION INTERVIEW PROTOCOL, SITE 2

College Immersion Interview Protocol

Say to students before interviewing: I'm here to find out about your experiences at College Immersion so far. This interview will be recorded. You may decide to stop answering the questions at any time and ask for the tape not to be used. This is an interview, but it is also a conversation about your experiences here at xxx University. Do I have your permission to ask you a few questions?

1. Tell me about your experience at College Immersion so far. Do you think this experience prepares you for college? How?

2. Do you expect to go to college? Why?

3. What have you learned so far this week? Will that prepare you for college? How?

4. How prepared do you feel about going to college now?